Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan

Published by

European Society for Aesthetics

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics
Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch
Internet: http://proceedings.eurosa.org
Email: proceedings@eurosa.org
ISSN: 1664 – 5278

Publisher
The European Society for Aesthetics

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European Society for Aesthetics

Different Levels of Narrative Pictorial Content

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ABSTRACT. There seems to be a puzzle: all three of the following sentences appear to be true: (1) Single pictures can be narrative; (2) Time sequences are an integral part of narratives; (3) Single pictures cannot represent time sequences. To solve the puzzle, one of the sentences has to be wrong and in need of adaptation. In this paper I argue that sentence (3) is wrong, and I argue that single pictures can represent sequences of time and therefore can be narrative.

But if pictures can be narrative, *how* can they be narrative? How is it possible that single pictures, without words, can transport a narrative content? There are three options: (a) the narrative content is depicted; (b) the narrative content is represented; or (c) the narrative content is conveyed by (using) pictures in some other way. For sentence (1) to be true, either option (a) or option (b) must be possible. With the help of examples, I show that it is possible to formulate semantic rules that take us from a depicted content to a represented narrative content and thereby offer an account that provides a solution to the puzzle and the subsequent *how*-question.

1. Introduction

Most people may intuitively agree that even single pictures can transport narrative contents. Advertisements, cartoons, istoria paintings, or war photographs are just some of the very different categories to which—depending on the specific example—some level of narrativity is attributed.

But when one looks more closely, there seems to be a paradox: the following three propositions all seem equally true, but they are mutually inconsistent:

1. Single pictures can be narrative.

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2. Time sequences are an integral part of narratives.
3. Single pictures cannot represent time sequences.

Which of the three propositions is wrong and needs to be adapted?

The first option is to tackle the first proposition: either there are no narrative single pictures, or it is not the picture that represents stories, but rather image viewers who associate and co-narrate on the basis of a given picture. If either of these possibilities are correct, then the first sentence is wrong and in need of adaptation. The conclusion would be that single pictures cannot tell stories. This is not uncommon. Lessing (2016) [1766] famously claimed that the difference between a painter (or sculptor) and a poet is that the latter has a medium at hand that is useful for telling stories, and they can describe actions and developments, while the former cannot. The painter (or sculptor) needs to choose the most fruitful moment of a scene. They can make a moment of a scene visible but are not qualified to represent a story that develops over time.[97]

The second option is to confront proposition (2): Is time really an integral part of stories? Can't there be a narrative without the representation of time sequences? If this attack is successful, the conclusion would be that definitions of narrative should exclude the temporal aspect. Time sequences would not be an integral part of stories.

The third option is to challenge the third proposition. Even though static pictures are arguably atemporal, it might be possible that they *somehow* represent some element of time. The common approach would be to give up proposition (1).[98] In this paper, I take a different route. I argue that propositions (1) and (2) are true, and that proposition (3) is wrong and stands in need of adaptation. This goes against what could be called "the traditional view" (see (Gombrich, 1964) and (Marchetti, 2022).

I think it is possible for single pictures to be narrative. I think that narratives necessarily include the aspect of time sequences. And I think that there can be content *of the picture* that represents time sequences. This paper can therefore be seen as an argument in favour of the ability of single pictures to be narrative and to represent this narrativity in a semantic way.

[97] Compare (Marchetti, 2022, p. 353) and the introduction to (Speidel, 2020). See for example (Titzmann, 1990) for a similar stance to Lessing.
[98] For an overview of some prominent positions that move in this direction and a discussion thereof, see (Marchetti, 2022, pp. 353–54).

2. *What* makes pictures narrative?

What exactly a narrative is remains contested and there are many different definitions around. But there seems to be a consensus that time sequences are an integral part of narratives. Now, there have been different labels proposed for this. Klaus Speidel, for example, called it a "temporal relationship"(Speidel, 2013). And there are more demanding accounts on narrativity (about which there is almost a consensus). So, here is just one representative of narrativity: "A narrative is a text that presents two (or more) events as temporally ordered and meaningfully connected." (Köppe, 2014, p. 103)

I think it is not possible to have a definition with necessary and sufficient criteria. But I have proposed elsewhere that for a picture to be narrative, it necessarily needs to represent an event and a time sequence (Fasnacht, 2023). I also think that there are paradigmatic cases of narrative pictures, and that for these paradigmatic cases, the following narrative characteristics can be detected[99]:

- At least two events (or one event and one situation)
- Time sequence
- Unifying subject between the events
- Bridging connections between the events (causality, etc.)
- Display of intentions (of a character)

3. *How* Can Pictures Be Narrative?

Now, if single pictures can be narrative, which is what I want to show, how can single pictures transport so many things?

There seem to be three options:

(a) The narrative content is depicted.
(b) The narrative content is represented.
(c) The narrative content is conveyed by (using) pictures in some other way.

[99] Compare (Fasnacht, 2023) for the relevant discussion and argument.

Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* depict sunflowers. An image depicting a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales in certain contexts represents justice. And we can use pictures to convey a meaning. For example, when I see a bird, the picture of the same kind of bird in a field guide can help me decide what kind of bird it is that I see. Or the picture can be used as evidence when I say that I see an eagle.

Now, for narratives, one can imagine countless stories on the basis of some picture. One could imagine how Van Gogh's sunflowers were picked and put on the table, who arranged them, etc. But the picture does not give any evidence for such a story.

So, for *pictures* to be narrative, either (a) or (b) must be true. The narrative content either needs to be depicted or represented by the picture through some depicted things. For only then is it a semantic content of a picture, and not just circumstantial meaning or pure imagination on the part of an image viewer.

So, how can one show that pictures can represent time sequences and narrative contents? I think there are at least two ways to do this: either to look for meaning that is context-independent; or to see whether certain semantic rules could be formulated that establish the content of time sequences. Both these options allow us to attribute the content to the picture. A certain content is then not just imagined on the basis of a picture, but rather the picture transports such a content via pictorial means.

John Kulvicki has done something similar. In his book *Modeling the meaning of pictures* (Kulvicki, 2020), he argues that one could formulate semantic rules that get us from a depicted content to all different kinds of contents, metaphoric or iconic ones, for example. So, to stay with the example from before, Kulvicki proposes that if a picture depicts a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales and a sword, then the picture represents justice.

Now, narrative content does not concern Kulvicki. But his suggestion about semantic rules that govern certain pictures might be useful to explain how pictures can represent narrative contents and how they can represent time sequences. So, the basic model of a semantic rule that can be generalized from this is: If a picture depicts X, then the picture represents Y in a certain context.

Is a similar thing possible for *narrative* contents? And for the contents of *time sequences*? I think so. And in the following I will propose how such semantic rules might look.

4. Semantic Rules

I do not suggest that the rules I propose are universal and apply to every picture tradition everywhere in the world. Not at all. But I suggest that for many picture traditions, such rules could be formulated.

There seem to be three steps to undertake when looking at examples:

1. Does the rule apply? Is this particular picture from a picture tradition where such rules or this specific rule applies?

2. Is the antecedent met? Does the picture depict what is the input of a specific rule?

Now, if the answer to the previous two questions is yes, one can go on to ask:

3. Is the generated output content correct? This last step is the evaluative process if one wants to consider whether the rule is formulated correctly or whether it is in need of adaptation.

5. Semantic Rule R1: "Emotional Reaction"

A first option of what such a semantic rule could look like is Rule R1, which I call "emotional reaction":

- R1: If a picture depicts a subject as feeling an emotion E, then it represents the subject as reacting with E to some occurrence.

When looking at examples, we ask: Does this rule apply? Is it from a picture tradition where such rules govern? And is the antecedent met?

Figure 1. Quentin Blake, 2017, "Musicians in March", detail from *All the Year Round*, by John Yeoman.

In Figure 1, emotions are depicted. The adults are depicted as feeling an emotion. How can we be sure about this? The facial expression and the body posture indicate so.

Now, there is some empirical research on how to detect emotions or which facial expressions correspond to which kinds of emotions, most famously by Paul Ekman (1970). So, I just take it that if one can see that a person is feeling a certain emotion in real life, one can in theory also see a subject depicted as feeling an emotion (if the right moment is chosen).

The easiest cases where this rule applies are pictures where the occurrence, to which the depicted emotion is a reaction, is visible – both visible for the image viewer and visible for the depicted subjects. In this example, the occurrence is the children's band performance.

Another example is a painting by Goya (Figure 2). We see a focal subject, highlighted through the white shirt and the composition, depicted as feeling an emotion. We can also infer what occurrence triggered the emotional reaction, namely the execution of the people on the left and the possible execution of the subject himself.

Figure 2. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, 1814, "Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo".

This example shows that the rule can govern more than once in the same picture. The man in the white shirt is not the only one who is depicted as feeling an emotion. The facial expressions and body postures of some other subjects also support the judgment that several people are depicted as feeling emotions. Now, in this example, the different subjects are represented as having emotional reactions because of the same occurrences or events.

But this does not have to be so. In the much lighter example by Ali Mitgutsch (Figure 3), the rule applies too, and the antecedent is met several times as different subjects are depicted as having an emotion. But the represented emotional reaction is about different occurrences here. Happy, because they are being put on a shoulder; angry or startled, because some water

is being poured over them; frightened, because they are being pushed over; contempt, because they are being covered with sand.

Figure 3. Ali Mitgutsch, double spread of "Mein grosses Wimmelbuch", 2019.

But there are complications for the rule.

First, what about examples where the occurrence is not specified? When the image viewer does more work in interpreting a certain picture? In Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (Figure 4) one cannot be sure whether the depicted subject, who is depicted as feeling an emotion, is feeling this way because of something it sees that is not visible for the image viewer because it is outside of the frame, or whether it is the fear of walking over bridges or the general state of the world that triggered such emotions.

So, is this a picture that represents a subject having an emotional reaction towards some occurrence, which is just not clearly specified? If so, then it would not pose too big a problem for the rule. But if it is a painting that represents someone as feeling a certain emotion just so, not as a reaction towards some occurrence, no matter how big or small, then the rule may need

adaptation.

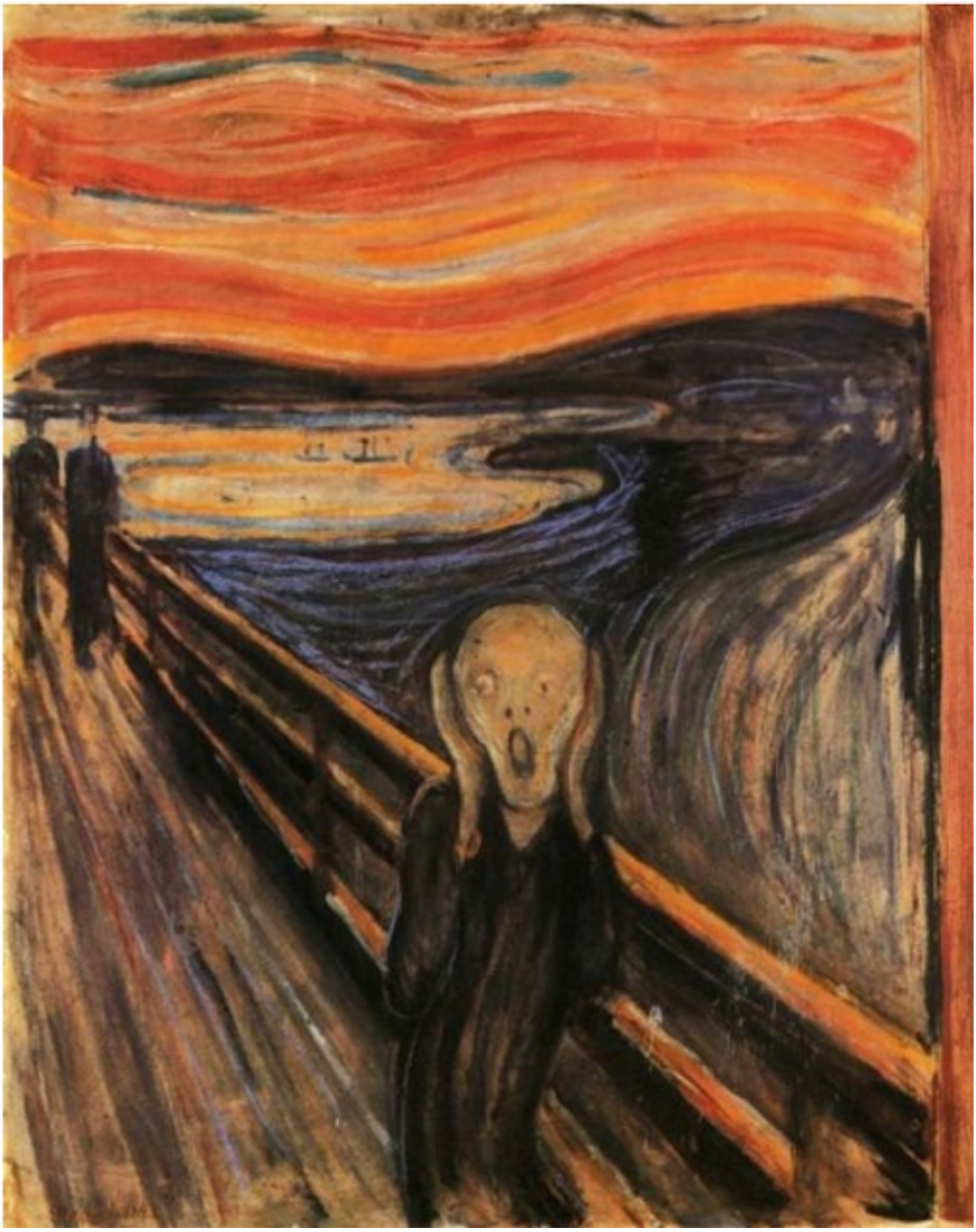

Figure 4. Edvard Munch, 1893, "The Scream".

A second complication for the rule arises from cases like the drawing below by Charles Le Brun (Figure 5), where the intention was to find out what it looks like to have certain emotions – what muscles are activated in the face, for example. The subject is here not represented as having an emotional reaction to something, probably, or if so, it is towards something rather unspecified.

Figure 5. Charles Le Brun, 1727, "Fear".

I will set these worries or complications aside for the moment but will return to them after presenting the other rules. This is because these worries can be systematized into more general complications that apply to more than just this rule.

These complications aside, R1, stated as is, seems to govern in quite different kinds of examples and seems to be correct.

So, a next question is: does the output content of the rule – in this case a subject having an emotional reaction because of some occurrence – does this content establish a narrative content? Does it get us to the narrative content of time sequences?

It certainly establishes the content of time sequences. So, the rule establishes an order of what happened before and what happens after, for example, being pushed over in Figure 3 being the reason for the emotional reaction; it orders the two states into a sequence.

Now, does the generated output content of R1 establish a narrative content in the more demanding way? This depends on the specific example. But an occurrence and an emotional reaction towards this occurrence can be seen as at least one event, if not two events. And there is some causal connection between the two states. So, the consensus view on narrativity can be secured through the output of the rule, and the near-consensus view, that a narrative consists of two meaningfully connected events that are temporally ordered, can be secured in many examples too.

5.1. Semantic Rule R2: "Goal-directed Actions"

Here is another possible semantic rule, R2:

- R2: If a subject S is depicted in a posture characteristic of (i.e. distinctive to) the goal-directed action A, S is represented as performing A.

When looking at examples, again the questions are: Does the rule apply to this example? Is the antecedent met?

Figure 6. Rembrandt, 1625, "The Stoning of Saint Stephen".

In the above Rembrandt painting (Figure 6), the rule applies and the antecedent is met. The different men are depicted in a posture that is characteristic of throwing. This example shows that a posture that is characteristic of a certain goal-directed action can look different in each depiction.

Again, the clearest examples are cases where the goal is visible for the depicted subjects and for the image viewer. And if certain tools or objects are necessary to reach a goal, then the depiction of these things makes it even clearer.

Figure 7. Quentin Blake, 1984, detail of "The Story of the Dancing Frog".

In Figure 7, the frog is depicted in a posture characteristic of jumping (at least for frogs). If it were a kangaroo, then the posture would need to be different. So, the rule is general enough to allow for all these different ways of how a certain posture that is characteristic of a certain action looks for a certain subject. Again, here, the goal, the water, is depicted and visible both for the subject and for the image viewer.

Figure 8. Quentin Blake, 2009, "Slightly Foxed", Cover of Slightly Foxed Issue 24, 2009.

In another example by Quentin Blake, Figure 8, we see two different rules at play. R1, the emotional reaction, governs because of the subject in the blue top, and R2, the goal-directed action rule, governs because of the fox.

Figure 9. (Source unknown)

A worry could be that this rule only addresses human or animal subjects. But this need not be so. This Pacman figure in Figure 9 can be seen as depicted in a posture characteristic of the goal-directed action of hunting the little dot. The position of the object in relation to the little dot can be seen as a posture characteristic of the former hunting the latter.

Now, does the generated output content establish the content of a time sequence? Yes. It establishes the sequence from aiming to reach a goal until some moment (short of) either missing or reaching a goal.

Does the generated content by R2 also establish a narrative content understood in the more demanding way? This depends on how meaningfully connected the events that are connected have to be. And it depends on how actions and events relate. If a goal-directed action

is represented, an event is represented at the same time. Indeed, according to some authors, actions (and also goal-directed actions) are a sub-category of events (Casati and Varzi, 2020). Therefore, the generated content of this rule does secure the narrative content of an event. It may even secure the narrative content of two events in some examples.

It seems possible to say that at least two events or states are generated: the moment depicted, and the moment of reaching or failing to reach the goal. There is a unifying subject between these events; there is some bridging connection between these events, for example a causal one; and intentions are represented too. So, it seems that even paradigmatic cases of narrative content are established through the output of this rule.

5.2. Semantic Rule R3: "Same Subject"

A third rule is the following:

- R3: If a subject S is depicted more than once, then the picture represents S at different moments in time.

Now, again, the two questions: Does the rule apply? Is the antecedent met? Paradigmatic cases of where this rule applies are pictures that represent holy figures in Western medieval art.

How to decide whether one is correct in taking subject A to be the same as subject B? It helps to look for cues like clothing, hair, and other bodily features that distinguish one from another. In Figure 10, the halos and the gowns of the kings indicate that the three kings are depicted four times. So, the output of the rule is that the kings are represented at different moments in time. This seems to be correct.

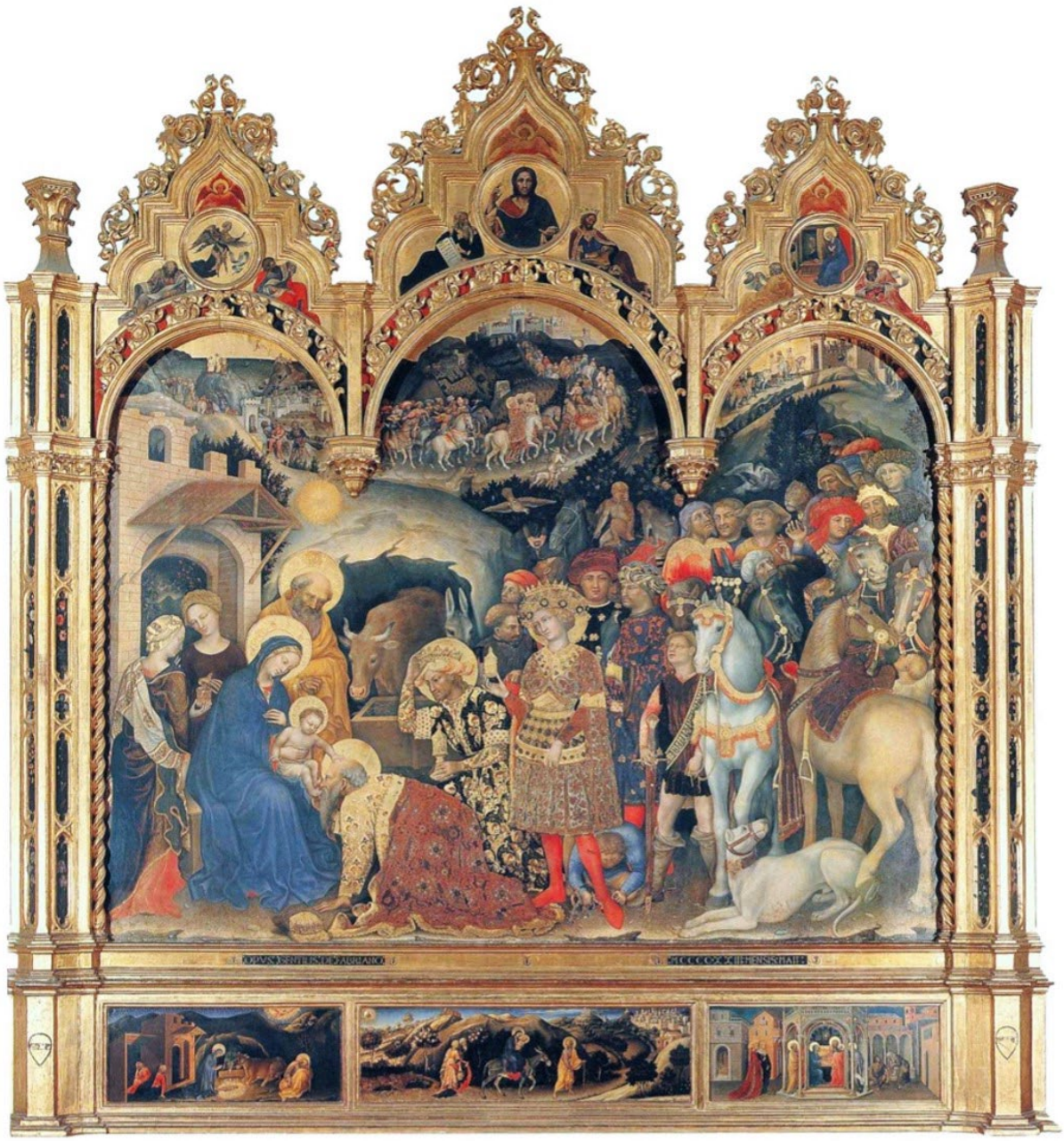

Figure 10. Gentile da Fabriano, 1423, "L'Adorazione dei Magi" (Strozzi altarpiece).

If no background knowledge about a pre-existing story is available, it can sometimes be tricky to judge whether the input condition is met. For example, in this picture by Bartholomäus (Figure 11), there are two possible and valid readings. First, that it depicts the same subject seven times; second, that it depicts seven different subjects. In one reading, according to this rule, it is the same subject at different points in time. One can then also find an additional

metaphoric meaning of the different stages of a life. In the other reading, it is a representation of different subjects at the same time, for example a family with grandfather, father, and sons of different ages. Thus, sometimes it is difficult to decide whether the input condition is met. But if one thinks that it is met, then, at least in this example, it can be said that the rule governs and that the output that is generated is correct.

Figure 11. Bartholomeus Anglicus, 1486, "Stages of Life".

There are cases that complicate this rule. I want to mention three: First, "impossible" stories; second, nested images through reflections like mirrors and "pictures inside pictures"; and third, triple portraits. Let me take each in turn.

1. Impossible stories. Stories where the same subject can be at two different

locations at the same time. (Think of Hermione in *Harry Potter*, when she has the watch.) I will get back to this complication at the end.

2. Nested images. Either in a mirror, some other reflection, or through a picture in a picture:

Here, in Figure 12, one could argue that there are two different pictorial spaces represented. One is only a reflection. So, one might either want to adapt the rule to exclude such cases or one could say that the rule only applies in cases where the subjects are present in the same pictorial space.

Figure 12. Fernand Toussaint, 1952, "Devant Le Miroir".

3. Triple portraits. The third case of potential counterexamples are portraits where a subject is depicted more than once but where it seems at least questionable that the subject is represented at different moments in time (for example, Figure 13). At first, it looks as if these portraits act similarly to mirror-scenes, as they show a subject from different perspectives. But they have a crucial difference, namely that all subjects are part of the main pictorial space.

Figure 13. Philippe de Champaigne, 1640, "Triple Portrait of Cardinal de Richelieu".

There are different ways to address these potential counterexamples. One could explicitly exclude cases like triple portraits in the formulation of the rule, or one could argue that these are cases where the intention of the image was not to depict the same subject at different times,

but rather at the same time (or in a rather timeless way).

Leaving the complications aside for the moment: Does the output content of the rule establish sequences of time? Yes, it certainly does.[100]

Does the output of this rule establish a more demanding narrative content? Not necessarily, as it is not specified that these two moments in time are events. But in cases where there are two events represented, the rule provides at least the narrative characteristic of a unifying subject and time sequences.

I think we are now getting the hang of it, that is, of what such semantic rules could look like. But it seems important to note that different rules could be formulated to get to the same or similar output, and that there can be more general and more specific rules. For example: To get to the represented output of "movement", or of a subject/object moving from A to B, at least two different rules could be formulated. Here is a suggestion:

5.3. Semantic Rule R4: "In the Air"

One of these rules could be:

- R4: If an object is depicted as being in the air (with no attachment to something stable), then the picture represents this object as moving from A to B.

[100] A note of caution might be due, as one might want to question whether it is really a single picture, if the same subject is represented twice. But for the ones who would define a single picture with the help of "syntactic" features, like one vehicle, or one canvas, or one piece of paper, or one frame, the rule provides further evidence that single pictures can represent sequences of time (and that they can be narrative).

Figure 14. Quentin Blake, 1965, detail of "The Clown".

In Figure 14, for example, the papers are going to fall down at some point.

Exceptions to this rule are fictional stories where gravity does not apply.

But in general, the rule establishes a time sequence and can, in certain cases, represent an event.

5.4. Semantic Rule R5: "Traces"

Another rule to get to the same output could be R5:

- R5: If a picture depicts traces next to an object that match (i.e., that are consistent with) part of the object's shape, then the picture represents the movement of this object from A to B.

Such traces can be rather conventional or artificial. For example, in Figure 15 we see a line behind the arrow. But one does not normally see such lines behind objects that are moving (perhaps with the exception of airplanes). So, these, like three lines (sometimes called moving lines), are conventional ways for traces.

Figure 15. Johann Wilhelm Baur, ca. 1639, "Chione", engraving for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

But there are also more natural ways that are similar to how we see things in real life. In Figure 16, we see footsteps in the snow that indicate a movement from one point to another.

Figure 16. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1565, "Hunters in the Snow (Winter)".

So, does the output establish time sequences? Yes. Does it establish the more demanding narrative characteristics? Not necessarily.

5.5.

To recap and for convenience, here are the five proposed rules again in one place:

> **R1:** If a picture depicts a subject as feeling an emotion E, then it represents the subject as reacting with E to some occurrence.

R2: If a subject S is depicted in a posture characteristic of (i.e. distinctive to) the goal-directed action A, S is represented as performing A.

R3: If a subject S is depicted more than once, then the picture represents S at different moments in time.

R4: If an object is depicted as being in the air (with no attachment to something stable), then the picture represents this object as moving from A to B.

R5: If a picture depicts traces next to an object that match (i.e. that are consistent with) part of the object's shape, then the picture represents the movement of this object from A to B.

Now, this list is not complete; there are surely countless others that could be formulated. But already the fact that it is possible to formulate these rules – that get us from a depicted thing to a represented sequence of time – supports my claim that single pictures can be narrative and that single pictures can represent sequences of time.

6. Exception Groups

Throughout this paper, I mentioned some exceptions or complications to certain rules. It seems possible to generalize and systematize these cases of complication into two groups: first, cases of fictionality and impossibility; second, cases where it is important to appeal to the image maker's intention.

A first group of cases are problematic because the represented content involves story elements that are fictional or impossible. When such stories are represented by pictures, it seems at first to pose a threat to all rules. Here are some examples:

•For R1: Cases where facial and bodily expressions mean something entirely different. There could be a story world where someone smiling means that that they are angry or sad, or where the smile is entirely decoupled from emotional states, or where subjects do not have emotions, etc.

• R2: Cases where certain actions are performed differently or where bodies work differently when performing something.
• R3: Cases where people can be at different places at the same time.
• R4: Cases where there is no gravity in the story world.
• R5: Cases where there is no causality or time works differently.

In general: cases where some element in the story world does not behave as it should according to the rules. In such cases the reality assumption that everything in the story world behaves the same way as in the real world is not correct, as things behave differently.[101]

A second group of exceptions can be formulated as cases where the intention of the image maker contradicts what the rules prescribe the picture to convey. Through appeal to the image maker's intention, the best sense we can make of what a specific picture represents is not what the rule prescribes, even though the picture is from a system where the rule applies and the antecedent is met.

This can be seen as a threat to all rules too:

- R1: Cases where the intention was to study how facial muscles behave when one feels a certain emotion.
- R2: Cases where the intention was to show how bodily features look when performing a certain action, or when one is in such and such a position characteristic of a certain action.
- R3: Triple portraits, where the intention was to portray someone from different perspectives or angles.
- R4: Where the intention was to show something in the process of falling.
- R5: Where the intention was to study how a footprint (in the snow) looks, what shapes it has, etc.

So, to formulate it more generally: cases where the picture maker wanted to either study, show,

[101] When we encounter narrative representations, we are guided by the "reality assumption" (Friend, 2017). If there are no elements that suggest otherwise, we think that gravity holds or that people can only be at one place at a time.

or illustrate how certain things (have to) look if they represent X.

In both exception groups, the best sense we can make of a given picture is not what R1–R5 prescribe the picture to represent. The difference between these groups is that in the first case, the image maker wants to transport some kind of narratively relevant content, whereas in the second case, they do not. In both cases, the intention of the image maker is relevant: in one case, it is because the aim is not to tell a story; in the other, the aim is to tell a story, just a really strange one.

7. Summary

All the semantic rules I have developed here secure the narrative characteristic of time sequence. This is essential. It shows that single pictures are able to represent time sequences, and that proposition 3 from the beginning needs alteration. It also shows that single pictures can be narrative. The narrative content can be represented through pictures, when certain semantic rules, like R1–R5 are governing. All the rules establish the crucial narrative content on which all narratologists agree: the representation of a time sequence. Some establish even more narrative characteristics.

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