The Narrative Characteristics of Images

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While much has been written about verbal narratives, we still lack a clear account of what makes images narrative. I argue that there are narrative characteristics of images and show this with examples of single images. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I propose that from a semantic perspective, the following two characteristics are necessary for an image to be narrative: a representation of an event and a representation of time. Second, I argue that there are paradigmatic characteristics, such as at least two events, bridging connections, and unifying subjects between these events, characters with intentions, and the representation of goal-directed actions. Third, I show that it is possible to differentiate between narrative and non-narrative images while also accounting for the idea that narrativity is a matter of degree. While I do not provide a full definition of narrative images, my account constitutes a necessary first step in this direction.

1. The Need for an Account of Narrative Images

If we take two famous images from art history—Monet's water lilies on the one hand and 'The Triumph of Death' by Pieter Bruegel on the other—what makes the second image narrative, but the first one not? Or what makes the second one higher in narrativity than the first one? In this paper, I argue that images can be narrative and propose an account of what makes certain images narrative and others not. Since I want to find out about the minimally necessary and paradigmatic characteristics of narrative images, I will use examples that are as basic as possible. To that end, I will only look at single images, leaving the specifics of sequential images and moving images unaddressed.[1] If there are such characteristics—and I argue that there are—then they have to be detectable in the very basic narrative forms of single images as well. Narratives exist in different forms and media, such as texts, movies, comics, and images. And while defining 'narrative' in general has proven to be difficult,[2] the following should suffice here as a starting point: A representation of temporality, change, event(s), and some meaningful connection between them.

1 Throughout this paper I will work with examples. Some are single images such as paintings, while others are single images that were originally part of a sequence, like a graphic novel. Despite originally forming part of a sequence, I use these latter images as if they were single pictures. When I use these images as examples, they stand for themselves, not as a part of a whole.

2 See, for example, Ryan (2007) and Rimmon-Kenan (2006) for a critical overview of some of the most influential accounts of what 'narrative' is and the difficulties in arriving at an uncontroversial definition; and Speidel (2018b) on how common intuition and the core elements of so-called expert definitions nevertheless often overlap when categorizing a book or an image as either narrative or non-narrative.

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This is similar to the following account: *'A narrative is a text that presents two (or more) events as temporally ordered and meaningfully connected'* (Köppe, 2014).

I argue that images can be narrative, even still single pictures. But how can this be? A definition of 'narrative images' with necessary and sufficient conditions expands the scope of this paper. I will argue for a far more limited point: first, that single images can be narrative, and, second, that to be so from a semantic perspective, the picture needs to represent certain narrative characteristics.

This paper does not amount to a definition of narrative or of narrative images per se.[3] Rather, the account that is presented in the following can be seen as a necessary first step toward this end.

I will proceed as follows: after introducing what I understand to be narrative images and providing a sketch of how images can convey information—a prerequisite for images to be narrative—I lay out the necessary and paradigmatic narrative characteristics of images and provide a qualification, taking into account that narrativity comes in degrees.

To date, the question of what characteristics are necessary for an image to be narrative has been largely neglected in philosophical aesthetics. For verbal narratives, key characteristics have been proposed, although they remain contested.[4] For images, research into their narrative character remains embryonic. But the narration through and with images has been the subject of substantial research in other disciplines, such as cinema studies (Anderson and Anderson, 2009), art history (Kemp, 1994, 2011; Kafalenos, 1996; Schaeffer, 2001; Ranta, 2013; Harris, 2016), and image theory and neuroscience (Zeman, MacKisack and Onians, 2018).

Recent trends are striving to connect the various methods, disciplines, and insights. Examples of this are multimodal approaches (Page, 2009), which include visual pictorial narration (Herman, 2009), connections between semiotics and art history (Bal and Bryson, 1991), connections between philosophy and cinema studies (Gaut, 2009), research that connects elements from neuroscience and art history (Horváth, 2018), or papers mixing art historical elements with new experimental and empirical research (Speidel, 2018b). If a generalization from these different strands is possible, I would take it to be something along the following lines: pictorial narration depends largely on the spectator and their visual literacy, imagination, and ability to infer from visual clues.

Two authors have applied or developed the characteristics found in literary theory and narratology to images. Klaus Speidel (2013, 2018a) has applied the characteristic of time to single images to show how certain pictures can represent time.[5] Bence Nanay (2009)

3 For such a theory about narrative images, the role of the illustrator and recipient should be addressed as well, and possibly additional elements too, such as the difference between verbal and visual narratives, the differences between single, sequential, and moving images, or narrative structures independent of any semantic content—none of which I will discuss here.

4 Some of the most influential contributions in philosophical aesthetics about narratives include Carroll (2001, 2007, 2008) Currie (2006, 2007, 2008) and Velleman (2003).

5 Speidel also provides an overview of the research and disputes in recent decades (mainly in art history) about whether or not single pictures can be narrative (Speidel, 2013, pp. 173–177, 2018a). Whether and how images can represent time has been a contested subject as well. See, for example, Abusch (2014).

has argued that the crucial element for the recipient's narrative engagement with single pictures is the representation of a goal-oriented action.[6] These scholars focus on the narrative *understanding* of images, on the perspective of the recipient and their narrative engagement. These are important contributions to narrative theory and image theory, and they mark the first steps toward gaining an understanding of how the recipient's narrative engagement with pictures works. Still, something critical is missing from these accounts.

For instance, while Speidel convincingly argues that time can be represented in a single image, this alone does not suffice to differentiate between narrative and non-narrative images or to take time as the distinguishing narrative characteristic, otherwise a time-lapse shot of a house over the course of a day could be classed as narrative, which seems counter-intuitive. He also mainly looks at special cases of single images where a character X is presented several times in a frame—for example, at several stages throughout their life. It is true that these kinds of single images can represent time, but I think even classical single images featuring a single scene and in which a character is not depicted several times—the latter would make it similar to narration in sequential images—can be narrative.

Nanay, on the other hand, does not specify whether the representation of a goal-directed action is necessary or sufficient. He merely says that it is crucial. This lack of specificity offers an apt starting point for my own account. Further, Nanay does not explicitly say what he means by 'action'. From the examples he provides, it seems that he means actions that involve (human) agents, not just events that occur in nature. That is, it involves a goal-directed action X by someone. This may prove too strong a conception of 'narrative' if it is understood as a necessary characteristic as there are examples showing that one need not have a person represented for an image to be narrative, see for example Figure 2. Another example would be an image of a volcanic eruption that buries the surrounding landscape. This seems to be narrative, at least more narrative than an image of a mountain with nothing else happening. But how can we explain why there is more narrativity in the volcano than in the mountain example if 'goal-directed action' involves human agents, and neither of the examples involves them?

Nanay could specify his account and say that 'action' includes events in nature, that the volcanic eruption is a goal-directed action, since it has a goal, namely the eruption. So perhaps Nanay does not mean that a goal-directed action involves people with intentions to act after all. But what does it mean then? Are all goal-directed processes included? For example, a flower growing over time? This would be a much weaker understanding of a goal-directed action, and since all his examples involve human actions, I do not think that this is what Nanay has in mind. But even if, how can we explain that narrativity comes in degrees?

6 There are, of course, more who have contributed important ideas and accounts that can be related to narrative pictures, for example Chatman (1974); Steiner (2004); Wolf (2003, 2011) and Ryan (2004, 2014). Or, in comics studies, different specific aspects of narration with sequential images have been highlighted, such as the importance of frames, the gutter between the images, or word-image relations. See, for example, Cohn (2012, 2013, 2020, 2021); Groensteen (2007); Mikkonen (2019); Postema (2013, 2014).

While accounts like that of Nanay and Speidel provide great starting points, as both argue that single images can be narrative (in accordance with art historical understanding), and they both provide an account on why single images can be narrative, several questions remain open. And several things about narrative images have yet to be addressed at all in philosophical aesthetics. Namely, what are the necessary or paradigmatic characteristics that distinguish narrative from non-narrative images, and how can such narrative characteristics account for different levels of narrativity? I will address both questions in this paper, as they are equally important for an understanding of pictorial storytelling.[7]

In ordinary language, there are (at least) four ways in which we say that an image is narrative or that an image tells us something. Therefore, a disambiguation of the different senses in which we use the term 'narrative images' is helpful:

(1) The image transmits some feelings; it evokes emotions or provokes the imagination of stories in the recipient on the basis of some details in the image. For example, the depiction of a beach activates the recipient's imagination about what kinds of things could happen there, or the colour red in a Rothko painting could 'speak' to a recipient by evoking emotions. While some would call this narrative, I would say this is just a depiction, on the basis of which all kinds of narratives could be imagined, but the image itself is not narrative.

(2) The image tells us something about the painter or about the circumstances of the time in which it was painted. For example, we could speculate that the usage of grim colours tells us about how popular the usage of oil paint was in England in a given year, or that it tells us about the artist's depressed state of mind. Some archaeologists, for example, look at cave paintings to learn about how people lived in prehistoric times. These images are 'telling' insofar as recipients can learn something *about* the image or its surrounding, but the image itself does not necessarily narrate a story independently.

(3) The image illustrates a widely known story (like an old religious tale or a fable); without this preknowledge, the image could be understood quite differently. For example, an image that only represents a snake, an apple, a man, and a woman could mean a lot of things to someone who does not know the story of Adam and Eve.[8] Images of this kind refer to pre-existing stories and illustrate rather than tell the story. Images of this kind have a plot, but it is so vague as to require preknowledge of this specific story on the part of the recipient.

(4) An image tells a story through certain elements such as colours and shapes, and this story is evident from the visual language alone. For example, a wordless picture book like *The Clown* by Quentin Blake does not depend on a pre-existing

7 I use 'narrative' to describe the specific way an image tells a story, like a single image showing events in a distinctive way, and 'story' as the content, irrespective of the way it is expressed (Abbott, 2009). See Kukkonen (2014) for a similar differentiation between 'discourse' vs 'story'.

8 It could be the starting point for many associated stories. When the recipient does not have background knowledge, it could also be read as a story of, for example, a woman feeding a snake, and so on. See Speidel (2013, p. 174).

story. But this does not mean that the images do not refer to the real world—for example, that there is gravity in the story-world if not otherwise indicated—or to conventions of visual language. While the recipient still needs to interpolate them, the images are the ones narrating and guiding us through the story. The recipient can understand the story through the image, through the plot. No preknowledge about the story is needed. Images of this kind provide the plot and the story clearly.

(1)–(3) are somehow *relating a story to* the image, whereas (4) is *telling a story through* a narrative image. One could further say that (4) is directly *narrating* a story, whereas (3) is merely *illustrating* a story. For my purposes here, I am interested only in (4) and will set aside the other three notions. As a rule of thumb, one could say that in order to be narrative, the story needs to be understandable through the image itself, without any specific background knowledge of the story. Images that are narrative in this sense do not depend excessively on the interpretation or imagination of the recipient. But of course, for the understanding of the story, the image needs a recipient, and we can make certain assumptions about who should count as a recipient. To be a recipient requires one to pay attention, to see the relevant narrative cues, and to draw reasonable conclusions. The recipient further needs to be aware of certain conventions of visual language, like the concept of speech- and thought-bubbles or other conventions such as a blurry frame when a scene is meant to be a flashback or dream. This can be understood as pictorial literacy. Symbols, visual metaphors, and conventions are part of the ingredients an illustrator uses to convey a certain story.[9] The recipients need to interpolate and close gaps, but they always have to do so in relation to the image, not by means of free association, so that one could dispute the correct reading by pointing to elements depicted by the image (like facial expressions, body language, even the use of colour, perspective, composition, shapes, light, etc.).

To be narrative, an image needs to be able to transport some kind of information. How do images do this? While this paper is concerned with the narrative characteristics—the *what* that images need to represent in order to be narrative—and not with an account on *how* these characteristics can be deciphered, it may nevertheless be useful to give a rough sketch of the premise that images are capable of conveying information and being narrative.

I believe the following to be true: An artefact is an image if it has an image carrier and an image content.[10] An image is capable of representing something when the image content has an image reference. As images do not use words or sentences, images convey information through colours and shapes.[11]

9 For a detailed account of the communicative aspect of depiction, see Hopkins (2006).

10 I do not want to provide an exact definition here. What an image is has been a contested topic. But a basic understanding of an image carrier and an image content seems to be an accepted notion, even though different authors have used different terms to refer to it. See for example Pichler and Ubl (2018), and Pichler (2018).

11 Be it occlusion shape (Hyman, 2006) or outline shape (Hopkins, 1998). How exactly these colours and shapes can convey information has been the subject of discussion for many years. See also Abell and Bantinaki (2010); Gombrich (1960); Hyman and Bantinaki (2017); Lopes (2005); Steenhagen (2021b).

Some accounts (in the tradition of Gombrich) argue along cognitive lines that images can show information. This is based on the premise that one is capable of recognizing certain patterns and similarities of familiar objects when looking at images that depict them.[12] Other accounts argue that images can represent information through geometric semantics. This means that through forms, shapes, linear, and curvilinear perspective and placement of elements on the image carrier, meaning, and information references can be evoked.[13] This does not have to be made through accurate depiction[14] and not even necessarily through resemblance[15]. However, the ability to represent something and to refer to things like events is the basis for an image to be narrative.

Regardless of which specific account on the information content of depiction one finds most plausible—and no specific argument about this will be developed here—they all show that images are capable of conveying information only through pictorial means. This lays the foundation for what follows.

2. The Narrative Characteristics of Images

For the semantic content of an image to be narrative, it seems crucial that it consists of the representation of narrative characteristics. I think these narrative characteristics of images are twofold. Some seem necessary, some paradigmatic. While the necessary characteristics look like the minimum that every narrative image needs to represent, and while there are cases where they suffice for an image to be narrative, they do not do so in every case. The paradigmatic combination of narrative characteristics, on the other hand, seems to make an image narrative, irrespective of other factors.

2.1. The Necessary Narrative Characteristics

From a semantic point of view,[16] these are the narrative characteristics that seem necessary for an image to be narrative: a representation of an *event*, and the representation of *the passing of time*.

12 Some argue that stereotypical images are necessary for the understanding of image-information. This is also the case for images that represent abstract things such as 'justice' as a blindfolded woman with a scale (Hyman and Bantinaki, 2017).

13 Abusch (2021) has developed a possible-world semantics based on propositions and perspective to explain the information content of images in sequential narrative images.

14 For an account of how an image can accurately depict something and how to differentiate depiction from reference, see Greenberg (2013).

15 For an account of representation, see Haight (1976) and Steenhagen (2021a).

16 There is experimental evidence where it has been shown that narrative structures seem to exist independent of any meaning, at least in sequential images (Cohn *et al.*, 2012). I thank the reviewer for pressing me on the existence of narrative structure irrespective of semantic content and think it is important to note that such narrative structures could exist even for single still images. If this is so, it shows that the importance of narrative characteristics is limited to the semantic content.

2.1.1 An Event

A narrative image needs to represent at least an event. An event is something temporal; it happens to a subject (someone or something) or is acted out by a subject (e.g. lightning strikes a mountain).[17] A situation, by contrast, does not need an acting subject and can endure over time and thus be a-temporal (e.g. a lake in moonlight). Admittedly, there is some dispute over what exactly characterizes an event and how to differentiate it from facts, objects, situations, states of affairs, etc., and there are metaphysical problems around how to individuate an event, for example the action itself from the fulfilled action (e.g. X's killing Caesar vs Caesar's death) (Davidson, 1969; Anscombe, 1979; Casati and Varzi, 2020). Further, it is unclear where one event begins and ends. If an image does not represent an event, it is a mere representation of objects or simple situations, for example an image of a flower on its own.

Without an event, there is no narrative, and at least one event or event-oriented situation needs to be represented. An event can be depicted or only be indicated as the logical next step or the element that leads up to the depicted event-oriented situation. For both options—the indication and the depiction—one could say that they are *represented*. So, to say that an image represents an event does not specify whether the event is depicted or whether the event is only indicated.[18] Figure 1 *a)* shows a preparatory event that is going to happen (slipping on the banana peel), *b)* shows the event happening, where the coda can be inferred, *c)* shows the coda, where the event has already occurred.[19]

But how to differentiate an event from an action? Events can happen to someone or something or be acted out by someone or something. An action, on the other hand, needs someone who acts. I argue that the representation of human subjects with agency is not necessary for images to be narrative. Consider the following picture in Figure 2. In my

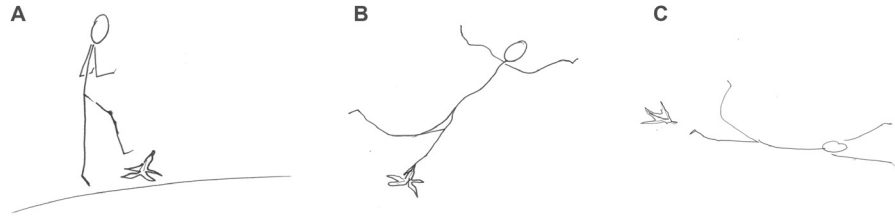

Fig. 1: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration A*, 2022. Pen on paper.

17 See, for example, Hacker (1982) and Casati and Varzi (2020).

18 But *indicated* should not be confused with *freely associated*, otherwise it is the recipient who tells the story, not the image.

19 See also Lessing's (2016 [1766]) discussion of the most 'fruitful moment' in depicting events; Jackendoff (2007) for formalizations of different kinds of events and actions, especially Chapter 8; and research in cognitive science on inference and narrative comprehension from visual cues, for example, Magliano *et al.* (2016) and Hutson, Magliano and Loschky (2018), and work on inference in event completion by Cohn (2019) and Strickland and Keil (2011).

view, this is a narrative image, because it represents an event and an aspect of time and change. It does not involve any character that is humanized and does not need to, as the event represented is dramatic enough.

2.1.2. Passing of time

The second characteristic can be called the 'passing of time'. This characteristic has three elements. First, for an image to be narrative, it needs to represent an amount of time. A minimal form could be a single image that depicts a moment during an event. The full extension of time in which this event occurs does not have to be depicted. But the expansion in time needs to be represented. The recipient then 'sees' more than what is depicted, namely what happened before and what will happen after the depicted event. Second, the gap between the different events functions as a temporal in-between; it marks the space between the different events or situations represented, an in-between where things can happen and change. This gap needs closing and also needs interpolation from the recipient through imagination and inference. Third, the story told is always moving in some (temporal) direction; one thing follows the other.[20]

Figure 3 illustrates this second characteristic. Through visual means, we can see a temporal dimension (for example, through the three lines next to the stone and the body language of the depicted person, which lets us infer that the person was upright before and will fall to the floor soon). The dog walking out of the frame additionally adds a temporal aspect. We can imagine what happened before and interpolate what will happen next. The factor of time explains the importance of gaps for some stories, and it sheds

Fig. 2: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled Illustration B*, 2022. Pen on paper.

20 'Time' is sometimes also used to differentiate between the time used for telling and the time told. For a differentiation between the story-time and the time of the narrative discourse, especially in moving images, see Chatman (1974).

light on the different time axes that work in pictorial narratives—such as that the story-time is always linear. However, the arrangement of the images may not necessarily be in this order, and especially in single images there is often not a clear succession or order of events indicated. But the most important factor is this: the 'passing of time' needs to be understood as the driving force that keeps the story moving in a particular direction and requires change.

2.2. *The* Paradigmatic *Narrative Characteristics*

Paradigmatic cases of narrative images can be explained in two ways: either as representing a goal-directed action, or, and this is more detailed, as the representation of at least two events or event states, the display of time, a unifying subject between the events, bridging connections that connect the events, and the representation of a character's intentions. These paradigmatic descriptions have been influenced by prominent accounts on narratives. The first, a goal-directed action, is what Nanay proposed to be the crucial element for a recipient's narrative engagement with pictures. The second is influenced by the work of Noël Carroll and others, who claim that for something to be a narrative, there needs to be at least two events, a unifying subject, and bridging connections. But, in addition to Carroll's account, the display of intentions and the characteristic 'passing of time' are also necessary for paradigmatic cases of pictorial narratives, or so I argue.

The image of a woodpecker (Figure 4) has all paradigmatic characteristics: two events (or a moment in time from which two event states can be inferred) are represented; there is a representation of time and change; a unifying subject; a causal bridging connection between the events; and the display of intention (to peck on the tree). Similarly, we could also describe the scene as a goal-directed action where an accident happened.

What do the single characteristics mean in detail? And why do I think that all these are important? I will consider each of the new characteristics in turn. The characteristic 'events' remains the same as described in the previous part; to be paradigmatic, the image just needs to represent at least two events. To have two events represented in the same

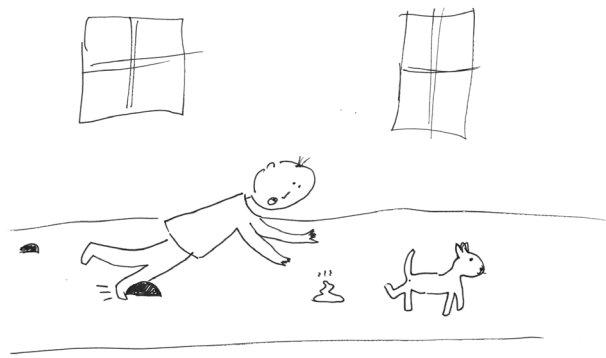

Fig. 3: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration C*, 2022. Pen on paper. Inspired by a sketch by Marta Altés (c. 2015).

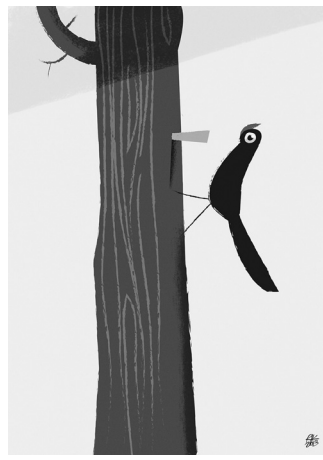

Fig. 4: Riccardo Guasco, Picchio duro, 2013. Digital illustration. © Riccardo Guasco, permissions granted.

image often means that one event is only indicated while one is depicted. The characteristic 'passing of time' also remains the same.

2.2.1. A Unifying Subject

If there is more than one event represented in images, then a third characteristic becomes important: a unifying subject. The unifying subject connects the different events or event-oriented situations and holds the story together. It could be a certain character or even a topic.

What qualifies a character as the unifying subject? The subject needs to be present in some of the central events, perhaps as someone acting or being otherwise affected by the event. This cannot be defined too strictly, but a subject that acts and has intentions that are evident in central events is a good candidate. What about a unifying subject that is a topic rather than a character? If the crucial events of the story have the same theme or topic, then this can also serve as the unifying subject; items such as the clouds in the background of images, by contrast, normally cannot. As a rough guide, a foreground/background differentiation is of use here.

In single images, there may be several events happening at the same time—for example, in Bruegel's painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). They may all in and of themselves have a narrative capacity, but there is not something that connects them except that they are happening at the same time. One may argue that the knowledge that these are all proverbs connects them, but this is not something that is transported through the picture but rather brought to the picture via the recipient's knowledge about the picture.

In the following example (Figure 5) though, there are two events: the first just happened, namely the kicking of the ball; the second will probably happen, namely the ball hitting and shattering the glass. The unifying subject is the ball that connects the two events. This example further shows that a unifying subject does not necessarily have to be a character.

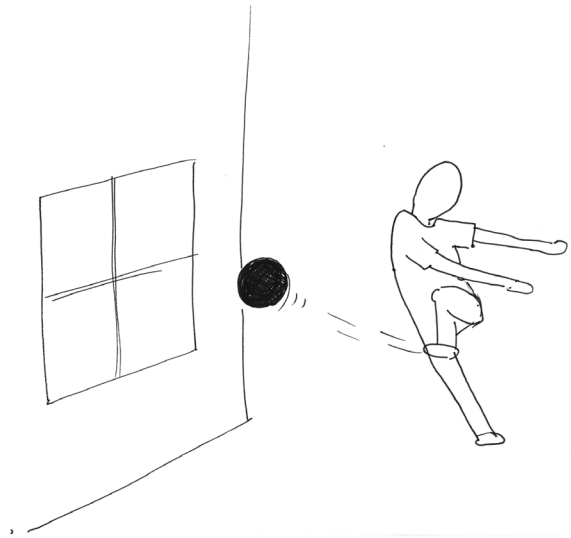

Fig. 5: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration D*, 2022. Pen on paper.

2.2.2. Bridging Connections

In addition, there needs to be a 'bridging connection' between the depicted or indicated events. This connection can take many forms. Different scholars have discussed this in the case of verbal narratives. One proposal is that causal relations between the different events are the important bridging connections.[21] These causal connections may not take the form of physical causation; some have proposed there could also be mental causation.[22] Another possibility is a connection between the events that leads to some kind of closure Aristotle (1997), Hume (1757). A yet different idea is an emotional cadence, where some emotions lead to other emotions, for example fear to relief, or suspense to sadness.[23] Some have also proposed a kind of psychological connection (Feagin, 2007), while others have claimed that it is a matter of questions raised and answers given throughout the narrative, and that the narrative arrives at an end when all the important questions raised have been answered.[24]

I do not think one needs to decide which kind of connection is the right one. All of them are possible and valid as bridging connections. It often seems more a matter of what to focus on when one searches for the connecting factors. If we focus on the question/answer connections, we start to see questions and answers in a story where we might otherwise see causal links between the events. Sometimes they are quite similar and often one can identify several of the different connections between the same two events. But at

21 See, for example, Carroll (2007, 2008), who proposed that causal connections are the relevant bridging connection (he calls bridging connections 'narrative connections').

22 See, for example, Currie (2006).

23 Velleman (2003). Velleman does not really define what he means by emotional cadence, but it could be understood as a kind of emotional arc of tension.

24 For example, Hume (1757).

least one sort of bridging connection needs to be present for an image to be narrative in the paradigmatic sense.[25]

2.2.3. Intentions

The last characteristic is that of intentions, which are possessed by some character in the story. In order to see an intention (not only to imagine it or speculate about it), we need to see something in the image that indicates what the intention might be. This is a characteristic that requires the recipient to 'work together' with the image. For my purposes, an intention can be something simple that is based on or explainable by reasons. Having intentions need not be something one is aware of, but there are both more and less probable ways of attributing intentions to single characters. As such, the recipient must have reasons to believe that a relevant character in the story has certain intentions. Things visible in the image that could be pointed to—such as body language, facial expressions, some cues or details, or the composition and arrangement of different objects and characters in the image—are all indicators that help the recipient to decide how reasonable it is to ascribe a particular intention to a specific character.

Who can be the bearer of intentions? It cannot be just any kind of protagonist—for example, some ordinary tree in the background. But we could imagine a tree as a character and subject, of course. Intentions are not always indicated clearly, and characters may have several intentions at the same time—some basic, some more complex. An example of how simple the character can be to which we ascribe intentions is depicted below (Figure 6). The important point is that we can infer intentions, either by a painted subject acting in certain ways, or by it expressing frustration or contentment, for example.

The five characteristics presented throughout this paper—the representation of at least two events, the passing of time, a unifying subject, bridging connections, and the display of intentions—are, in my view, together paradigmatic characteristics for images to be narrative. Of course, the recipient needs to interpolate and connect the different things the image

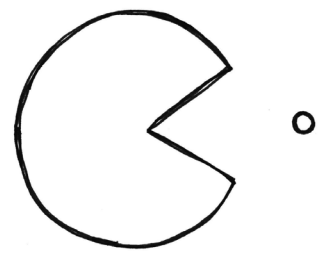

Fig. 6: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration E*, 2022. Pen on paper.

25 Bridging connections show that narratives are more than just events. E. M. Forsters' distinction between (1) 'the king died and then the queen died' and (2) 'the king died and then the queen died of grief' can be used here to support the distinction between (1) a series of events, and (2) the exact same events, but meaningfully connected through bridging connections, and therefore more narrative. But bridging connections alone and the inference used for it do not make events narrative per se, as inference is equally used for event comprehension (see Cohn (2019) and Strickland & Keil (2011)).

represents. But when all five characteristics are present, there are arguably both more and less valid readings of the image for which one can argue by pointing to elements depicted in the image.

But why the fuss about setting out five characteristics? Why not just call the paradigmatic characteristics of narrative images goal-directed actions? Because this would need a lot of explanation as well. A goal-directed action is only a paradigmatic characteristic of narrative images when 'action' is understood as being acted out by *someone*, and when goal-directedness involves something like the intention to act by the character who acts. By laying out the five characteristics, we can now differentiate: the first two characteristics seem necessary; in some cases, one might want to call these images narrative, but not always. But the first two characteristics alone cannot be called sufficient or even paradigmatic in general, because there can be examples given—like the ticking of a clock—which fulfil the first two characteristics but do not seem to be narrative images. Therefore, I have also tried to establish paradigmatic characteristics. If an image possesses these five characteristics, it is a prototypical narrative image. In contrast, if an image represents none of the presented characteristics, then it is clearly non-narrative—at least from a semantic point of view.

3. Different Levels of Narrativity

How can this narrative/non-narrative differentiation be combined with the intuition that images can possess different levels of narrativity?[26] In answering this question, I proceed in two steps. First, I address how it is possible that even after detecting all the characteristics I have elaborated here, some images seem to be more narrative than others. I argue that the paradigmatic case of the five characteristics does not diminish the possibility that there are degrees of narrativity in images. This could also be seen as a defence against the possible objection that my characteristics are too loose, that they lump many different things together. Second, I examine how it is possible that some images that do not fulfil all of my proposed paradigmatic characteristics still feel somehow narrative. I argue not only that we can distinguish between narrative and non-narrative images and degrees of narrativity between different narrative images, but also that there is graduation among non-narrative images. I propose the term 'narrative-inducing' to capture a range of images that meet some, but not all, of the five characteristics. This can be seen as a reply to the possible objection that my characteristics are too strict, that they ignore too many things that still feel somehow narrative.

3.1. Are the Five Characteristics Too Loose?

One possible objection could be that the five characteristics are too loose. Quite a range of images now qualify as narrative, not all of which seem to have the same amount of narrativity. How can I explain that some narrative images seem more narrative than others?

26 Currie (2006), for example, states that every attempt to characterize narratives should take into account the matter of degree of narrativity.

Is this an indicator that my account is too loose and that it does not really help to differentiate between degrees of narrativity, at least once all five characteristics are fulfilled? It does not seem so. If there are no counterexamples of images where all five characteristics are present, but still we have the intuition that they are not narrative in the sense proposed at the outset, then the proposal that there are characteristics that make images narrative works. However, this does not mean that there cannot be different levels of narrativity in images that are narrative according to my proposal.

But what makes some narrative images that fulfil all five paradigmatic characteristics even more narrative than other paradigmatic narrative images? There are several options.

(1) **It is a matter of quantity.** For a narrative image to be more narrative than another, it needs to have *more* of the narrative characteristics—more represented events, more subjects, more bridging connections, more time passing, more changes, more intentions.

(2) **It is a matter of quality.** In the more narrative images, events have a higher degree of complexity; they are richer; there are bigger timespans covered; the gaps are at exactly the right places; the unifying subjects are the most central ones of the story; the bridging connections are strong; and there are complex intentions represented (e.g. not just the intention to stand up or sit down).

(3) **It is a matter of interrelations.** The level of narrativity rises when there is a high degree of interrelations between the specific characteristics. For example, a narrative could become more interesting; the more the intentions are connected to the events, the more the bridging connections involve the unifying subject, and so on.

(4) **It is a matter of suspense, conflict, and complication.** The more hurdles to overcome, the bigger the uncertainty of an outcome, and the more conflict and complications there are in a story, the more narrative are the images.

(5) **It is a matter of prominence and framing.** The relation between the narrative elements and the picture as a whole—whether the narrative part of a single image expands over the whole canvas or whether it is just a small element between many other things depicted; this affects how narrative the image is.

(6) **It depends on the recipient.** The level of narrativity is influenced by the state of mind of the recipient, their interpolation and imagination to fill story-gaps, their background knowledge, personal preferences, cultural conventions, emotionality, previous experiences, and moral compass. The greater the recipient's narrative engagement, the higher the level of narrativity feels.

A mixture of all of these options probably makes an already narrative image more or less narrative. Whether it is a matter of quality, quantity, or interrelations, whether it depends on the amount of conflict and suspense, the framing or the recipient, the question of what makes the most narrative image or what is necessary to have the highest level in narrativity remains unanswered here. The goal of this paper has not been to define different levels of narrativity in all its specificities but rather to demonstrate that there are certain characteristics that help to determine whether an image is narrative.

3.2. Are the Five Characteristics Too Strict?

Another possible objection could be that the proposed account is too strict. I have argued so far that only images that fulfil the proposed five characteristics can be called 'narrative' with certainty. One could argue that the characteristics are too strong and that more images should rightly be called narrative. If so, one needs to identify why a certain characteristic is not necessary. But perhaps one does not really know which characteristic is unnecessary, but still feels that a lot of images that do not qualify immediately as narrative in my account are somehow narrative, even while granting that they are less narrative. Someone who holds this view could say that a distinction between narrative and non-narrative images is just not helpful. As there seems to be graduality among the images that are narrative and graduality among the ones now excluded, why use the distinction "narrative / non-narrative" at all? Wouldn't it be easier to just say that narrativity is a matter of degree?

While I grant that there are different levels of narrativity, it is still useful to differentiate between narrative and non-narrative images. Of what use is the term 'narrative images' if we have no set of characteristics and everything is gradual? One could say that, in this case, one should just cease using this term, but that does not seem to be a satisfactory solution. We use 'narrative' in relation to images to differentiate, for example, images in wordless picture books from images in a travel guide; to differentiate a slapstick movie from a slow-motion shot of the sea; to differentiate an image where a person falls over a fruit basket from a still-life of a fruit basket. It is not just a matter of degree; narrative images constitute a category with clear distinctions as to what belongs in it and what does not. That being said, there are, of course, different levels of narrativity even in the images that do not fulfil all five characteristics. So how can we now uphold this category, since I already granted that the five characteristics are not always necessary? On what factors can we decide whether an image belongs in the category 'narrative' or 'non-narrative', when narrativity comes in various degrees? For this, it would be helpful to introduce the term 'narrative-inducing'.

Images that are narrative-inducing are not complete narratives, but the images themselves have *some* narrative capacity; they somehow start a narrative. There are some indicators visible in the image, on the basis of which the recipient could imagine how a story proceeds. But in contrast to narrative images, they are not capable of narrating independently. So, narrative-inducing images are those that have the capacity to activate the imagination—on the basis of cues in the image, a whole story could be created by the recipient. This means that the interpretation depends much more on the interpolation of the recipient. Narrative-inducing images are able to induce a certain story, but there could be dispute about whether it is really this story or another, and the dispute could not be resolved simply by pointing to a certain characteristic in the image that indicates clearly how the story proceeds. Does this mean that if we can argue for an interpretation of the image by pointing to certain things in the image, this indicates that the image is narrative? And if we cannot, and if several interpretations are equally possible, is this an indicator that it is merely narrative-inducing? This is a tempting proposal, but there is also the possibility that an image is narrative but leaves room for two interpretations—two different narratives, for instance, because (especially in single images) so much depends on the interpolation and inference of the recipient. This means that the possibility of different interpretations alone is not an indicator that the image

is not narrative.[27] What could be an indicator is that, for narrative images, the plausible stories do not significantly diverge. This could be a rule of thumb for identifying narrative-inducing images, which I see as a form of non-narrative images—not just if there are other plausible readings, but whether there is no plausible reading indicated at all.

In the following, I consider examples where one or several of the paradigmatic characteristics proposed are missing—either an event, time, unifying subject, bridging connections or intentions. I thereby want to show that all of them are necessary for paradigmatic cases, but only some of them need to be there for an image to be narrative-inducing. Let us look at some examples:

I would say that Figures 10 and 11 are neither narrative nor narrative-inducing. Both depict simple situations and do not possess any of the five characteristics. It seems impossible to 'read' a story from these images without too much subjective imagination from the image viewer. Through the absence of all narrative characteristics, there is no guidance on how to infer what happened before or what will happen next; there is equally no indication of something changing or time passing. Reading a story into these images would equal a speculative and subjective reading—something I excluded in my categorization of narrative images in the first part. If the absence of all narrative characteristics means that an image is non-narrative from a semantic perspective, as I argue throughout this paper, a lot of famous paintings are not narrative, such as Van Gogh's 'Vue de l'asile' or his sunflower paintings.

Figures 7, 8 and 9, on the other hand, are narrative-inducing in a rather minimal way. Figure 7 depicts an event-oriented situation because of the footsteps on the ground. There is an indication of time passing, but no indications of what happened, who could have walked from the boat to the house. We could imagine countless stories, so the story then would not really be told by the image, but by the recipient. Similarly, Figures 8 and 9 each depict an event-oriented situation and have an element of time, but other characteristics are missing. They are not narrative, but in contrast to Figures 10 and 11, they are narrative-inducing—they have some narrative capacity because there are visible indicators in the image on the basis of which the recipient could imagine how the story proceeds.

Finally, Figures 12, 13 and 14 are also narrative-inducing, but in a more complex way. The main difference is that, in these examples, intentions are quite clearly represented: in Figure 12, the child's intention to watch the clown; in Figure 13, the intention of someone not depicted in the image, the intention to find the culpable bear; in Figure 14 the intention to look in/outside. Still, these are, arguably, not narrative images because we only have one event or event-oriented situation, not two, and because it is unclear how the story would develop.

These examples demonstrate why images that may feel narrative are still non-narrative on the proposed account. The reason being that they cannot narrate 'independently', and—because there is no story direction indicated—they depend too much on the interpretation and imagination of the recipient. This also brings out the main benefits of this new classification: it helps to distinguish between justified and

27 This is also the case in verbal narratives such as novels or crime stories. Sometimes there is a gap in the telling of the narrative and the recipient needs to interpolate more. This alone does not indicate that the story is not a narrative.

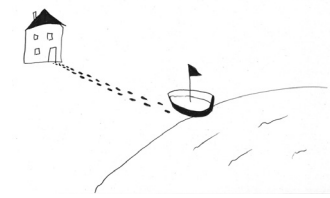

Fig. 7: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration F*, 2022. Pen on paper.

Fig. 8: Pam Smy, Detail from *Thornhill*, Fickling 2007. Digital Illustration. © Pam Smy, permissions granted.

Fig. 9: Hannah Fasnacht, Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration G*, 2022. Pen on paper. Inspired by Jon Klassen (2016).

Fig. 10: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration H*, 2022. Pen on paper.

unjustified intuitions about the narrativity of images. It explains why there are different degrees of narrativity in non-narrative images: in general, the more characteristics they fulfil, the greater the level of narrativity. It clarifies why the images that are close to

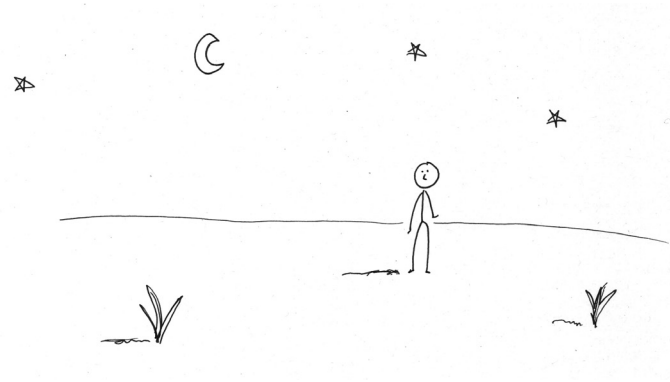

Fig. 11: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration I*, 2022. Pen on paper.

Fig. 12: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration J*, 2022. Pen on paper.

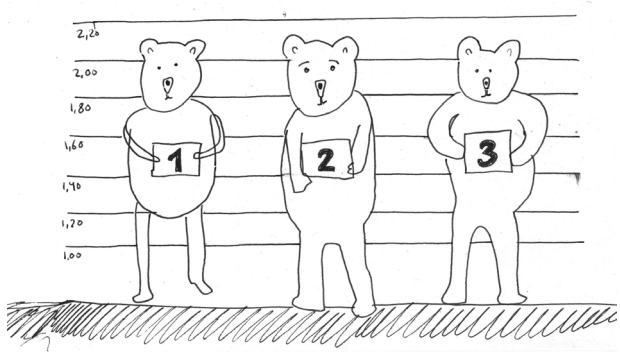

Fig. 13: Hannah Fasnacht, *Untitled illustration K*, 2022. Pen on Paper. Inspired by Oliver Jeffers (2008).

being narrative are not full narratives. At the same time, the term *narrative images* has an important, distinct meaning.

4. Conclusion

This paper fulfilled three main objectives. First, it showed there is a lack of research in aesthetics about what makes images narrative. As such, it proved necessary to address this gap by drawing on accounts of narrativity in literary theory, so as to identify characteristics that are required for images to be narrative from a semantic perspective. Second,

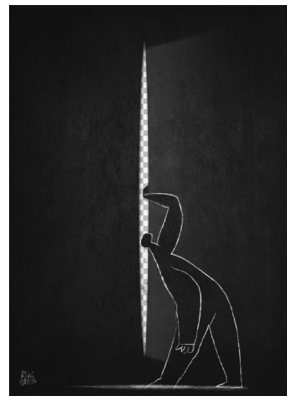

Fig. 14: Riccardo Guasco, *Taglio sug Jpg*, 2013. Digital Illustration. © Riccardo Guasco, permissions granted.

I developed necessary and paradigmatic narrative characteristics of images. The necessary characteristics are the representation of an event and the passing of time. The paradigmatic narrative characteristics are the representation of at least two events or event states; the passing of time and change; a unifying subject that connects the events; a bridging connection between the events; and finally, the depiction or indication of intentions. Third, I argued that many different degrees of narrativity are possible among images that fulfil all these characteristics, and are therefore clearly narrative, as well as between images that do not do so. But the variety of narrativity levels does not diminish the need for a clear set of characteristics that help to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative images, such as the Bruegel and Monet examples mentioned at the outset.

More generally, the above proposal can serve as a starting point for a definition about narrative images per se and may even form part of an explanation about how to process information without linguistic cues, relying only on sensory impulses. It shows at which point such visual, sensory impulses start to have a narrative meaning and how basic stories can be formed even with the most minimal means.[28]

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