How Imagery Can Directly Model the Reader's Construction of Narrative
(*Including an Extraordinary Medieval Illustration*)

Matthew Peterson

Abstract

Certain images perform upon and with their readers. Among the performative capabilities of imagery is narrative function, where the reader actively constructs a sense of time from an otherwise inert surface. Narrative imagery can be classified according to five fundamental strategies, all of which have long been explored. At its most conventionalized, the passage of time can be implied through a framed sequential strategy, where distinct moments are sectioned off from one another graphically, across which figures and spaces are repeated. The reader performs closure across and between frames. In graphic repetition and natural repetition strategies, figures are repeated in space without frame-based separations. Here the reader must recognize repeated figures as representing a single figure's change over time, and not a set of independently acting twins, triplets or quadruplets. With the intrafigural strategy, the reader is not faced with any repeated figures. Here the passage of time is implied through changes internal to a figure or interacting figures. A final evidentiary strategy provides the reader with clues to past events in a single captured moment in time. The active reader must make a series of deductions. An evidentiary narrative image is entirely natural, and is as such far removed from the conventions of a comic strip.

How Imagery Can Directly Model the Reader's Construction of Narrative (*Including an Extraordinary Medieval Illustration*)

Matthew Peterson, Ph.D.

mop@illinois.edu

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

(*at time of original publication*)

QUESTIONING THE IMAGE AS A TEMPORAL ARTIFACT

Images, like all other forms of experience, occur as structures in time. The temporal production of imagery can engage the reader in making comparisons, processing metaphor, generating corresponding mental imagery, and much more. Such production is temporal simply because this interpretational work is not instantaneous.

In some cases the temporal production of imagery doesn't merely occur in time, but rather concerns time itself; that is, what the reader produces is a sense of events unfolding. While at first this may not seem remarkable, it should be noted that it is usually inert imagery that produces the most involving narrative. Video, for instance, though it is inherently temporal, quite often promotes passive viewership. Images in video come in quick succession, at pace, and the viewer is largely left to receive them.

NARRATIVE IMAGERY

What are the boundary conditions of narrative imagery?

The designation of imagery as narrative—in a performative sense—indicates that the raw material for narrative construction is embedded therein. It is not enough for an image

to reference a known story by exhibiting one representative moment. In such a case, the image merely activates a memory trace, and thus its function is referential to something that just happens to be temporally concerned.

Narrative imagery must engender *significant* construction activities by the reader. There is a performative threshold that must be met.

What is the most direct means by which to engage the reader in narrative construction?

The degree to which any given narrative image strategy is straightforward or problematic is contingent upon cultural training. For many contemporary cultures, the *framed sequential strategy* is ubiquitous and especially direct. This strategy, embodied in but not limited to the comic strip, sections off discrete moments in time (Figure 1). Figures (humans, animals, objects) are repeated across framed moments. The frames delimit relatively natural spaces. The reader's implicit task is to fill in the gaps between frames, thereby creating seamless continuity where once there were individual scenes. But before the reader can do so, she must recognize the task before her. This is aided by familiarity with conventions. The repetition of figures internal to the narrative imagery is suggestive as well.

How is narrative function maintained with diminished conventions?

Readers have little difficulty perceiving narrative with the removal of frames and the corresponding loss of natural spaces. The *graphic repetition strategy* repeats silhouetted figures. In the case of the prototypical "evolution of man" diagram, change within a figure is implied by relatively subtle stepwise alterations to his appearance (Figure 2). An unchanging figure can also suggest narrative through action.

Figure 1. Framed sequential narrative strategy. Unknown designer, four-panel "Rage comic," a combination of "rage face," "sweet Jesus," and "feels good" internet memes, emergent on discussion boards.

More demanding of the reader is a *natural repetition strategy,* where the repetition of figures occurs in an otherwise natural setting. In Figure 3, if interpreted as displaying a single figure and read from left to right, a woman appears to break down in a jail cell. The establishment of a natural setting alone would suggest that any repeated figures are twins, triplets, quadruplets, *et cetera.* The graphic repetition strategy appears more gestural, where the absence of any natural space appears as a clear communication from the illustrator. The natural repetition strategy requires more yet of the reader, as the illustrator's gesture is more subtle. Contextual factors of the image's rhetoric help the reader to conceive of repeated figures as an individual changing through time.

Figure 2. Graphic repetition narrative strategy. Rudolph Franz Zallinger, "The Road to Homo Sapiens," in F. Clark Howell's *Early Man* (Time-Life Books, 1965). Image taken from The Boston Globe website.
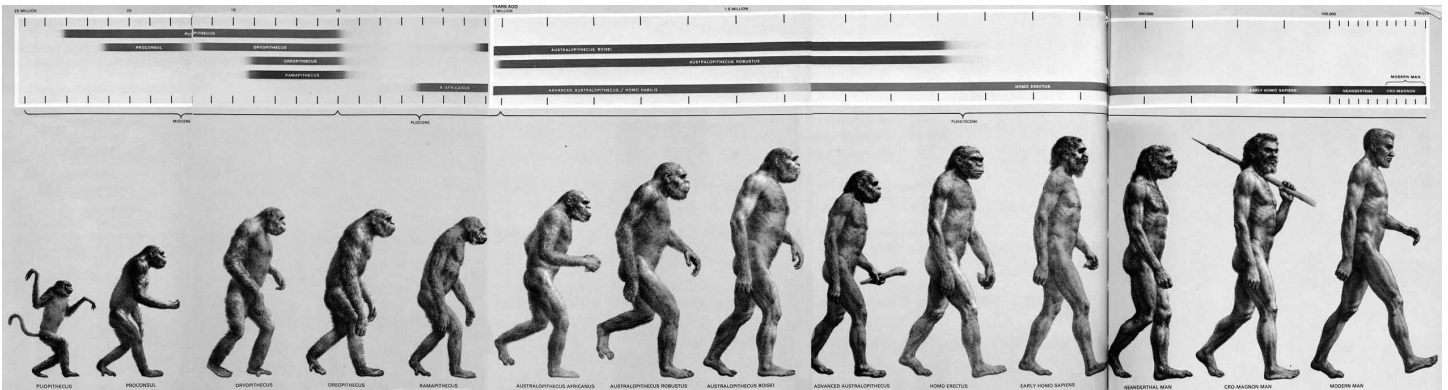

Figure 3. Natural repetition narrative strategy. Promotional image for 1964 motion picture *Lady in a Cage* (featuring Olivia de Havilland), in Mark A. Vieira's *Hollywood Horror: From Gothic to Cosmic* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003).
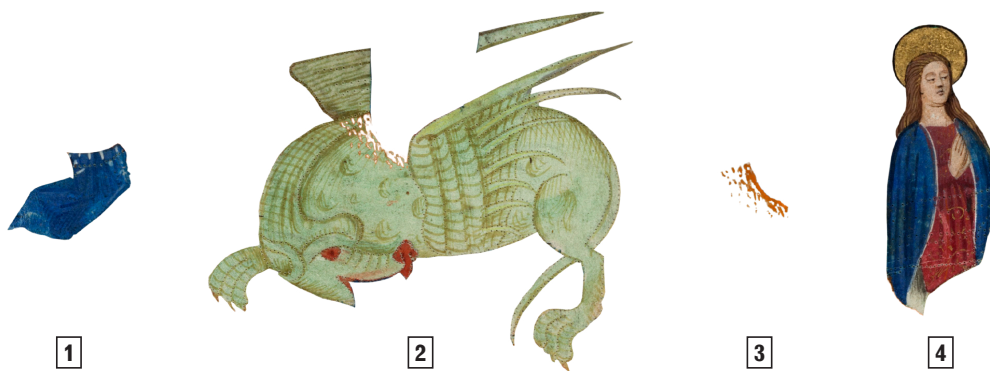
How might narrative be suggested without the repetition of figures?

A peculiar medieval illustration demonstrates a means by which to suggest narrative without any repetition whatsoever, through an *intrafigural strategy*. St. Margaret, pictured in Figure 4, was said to have burst forth from the belly of a dragon, which had just devoured her. Here the dragon and Margaret form a single figure through their intimate interaction. But if attended to carefully, different parts of the shared representation appear as evidence of as many as four discrete moments in time (Figure 5):

Figure 4. Intrafigural narrative strategy. St. Margaret's emergence from the dragon, in *Lyte Book of Hours* manuscript (c. 1390?), courtesy of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, designated "Pre-1650 MS 76" in the holdings.

Figure 5. Four moments in time in the illuminated St. Margaret emergence.

1. The robe trailing from the dragon's mouth is too long to truly extend beyond Margaret's feet and through the dragon's throat. To resolve this seeming impossibility, the robe becomes an index (a causal reference) for the violent moment of consumption.

2. The dragon appears in repose, a bearing inconsistent with the violence of either consumption of live "food" or Margaret's forceful emergence. It is also not the pose of a corpse. This is the moment in time between consumption and eruption, and its dragon is a satisfied dragon.

3. The blood that rings Margaret's waist represents the violent moment of her emergence, however...

4. Margaret's pose is inconsistent with her violent emergence. She appears more reflective. The distinction between moments 3 and 4 is understated where the other stages are more evident.

These features are ultimately gestural, as was the repetition of a figure within a natural space, though the gesture is remarkably subtle. The reader must be deeply invested in order to detect and resolve the impossibility of the image.

How can a purely natural and "possible" image function narratively?

When a capable detective comes upon a crime scene, she witnesses (or constructs) a narrative. The tableau in Figure 6 inspires detective work in its more invested readers. A story (more immediate if the sticky notes in the foreground were legible at this scale) is embed-

Figure 6. Evidentiary narrative strategy. Jeremy Purser, tableau photograph (from a graphic design studio course in 2008).

ded in this image. The laptop, representative of work when placed on a desk, is closed and beneath two coffee cups. The coffee cups signify a passage of time, and the implication is that work has been postponed for something else. That something else is the solution of a Rubik's cube, which the sticky notes document as a methodical process. The apparent careless deconstruction of the Rubik's cube is the culmination of earlier signified events, and appears to indicate frustration and renouncement of the task.

Though certainly this image was necessarily "designed," its is an entirely natural depiction. There is no impossibility for the reader to resolve. As such, this fifth and final narrative image strategy, the *evidentiary strategy,* completes the trend of decreasing convention-dependence and increasing naturalism.

HOW AN IMAGE MODELS INTERPRETATION

Imagery models interpretation in myriad ways; see the author's "How Imagery Models Interpretation: The Classification of Image Function" elsewhere in these conference proceedings for a cursory explanation.