

# On the Narrative Potential of Depiction

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**Abstract** The aim of this article is to defend the narrative potential of depiction against different strands of skepticism that proceed from the lack of temporal order in a single static image: such images, it has been argued, cannot represent the temporal components of narratives – i.e. action(s) and/or causal relations between temporally ordered actions or events. Contemporary philosophers of depiction have strongly challenged the strand of skepticism that focuses on the representation of action(s), but the strand which focuses on the representation of causal relations may seem to be intractable. Yet, I will argue, it rests on a rather partial conception of causation that unduly directs attention to the dimension of time rather than to the dimension of space – the untested domain of depiction.

**Keywords** Narration. Depiction. Causation. Pictorial narratives. Narrative images. Narrative media.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Two Strands of Skepticism. – 3 Facing Skepticism (I): Depicting Action. – 3.1 On the Representation of Action. – 3.2 On the Representation of Causal Relations. – 4 Facing Skepticism (II): Depicting the Narrative Connection. – 4.1 Causation and Time. – 4.2 Causation and Perception. – 4.3 The Challenge of Social Causation.



## Peer review

Submitted	2021-02-10
Accepted	2021-04-02
Published	2021-06-30

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**Citation** Bantinaki, K. (2021). "On the Narrative Potential of Depiction". *JoLMA. The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts*, 2(1), 73-90.

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to defend the narrative potential of depiction against two strands of skepticism that proceed from the lack of temporal order in the “monophase” image.<sup>1</sup> I will thus not be concerned with two, relatively uncontroversial, modes of pictorial narration: the narration through a *series* of images, as can be the case in triptychs or comic strips; and the narration through “polyphase” images, which depict temporally distinct events in different parts of pictorial space.

A note is merited on the theoretical framework of my analysis. Skepticism about the narrative potential of depiction commonly departs from a rather narrow – and distinctively Platonic – conception of depiction, according to which it is delimited to how things look: anything that exceeds the domain of visual properties is considered to be mere implication or the recipient’s own imaginative construct. As this is not the place to argue against this conception, in my analysis I will just operate with the understanding of the medium that contemporary philosophers of depiction widely endorse. From this standpoint, pictures represent the objects, scenes and happenings that can be identified in their design by a suitable spectator, i.e. a spectator that possesses appropriate recognitional capacities as well as the kinds of knowledge that are instrumental to the function of representation *in any medium*, in the domain of art and beyond: common knowledge of the world and of human affairs; knowledge specifically about the historical, socio-cultural and artistic context in which the representation was produced, including knowledge of the norms and conventions that pertain to the medium. I will also assume with C. Abell (2005) and D. Lopes (2005, 140) that, as in much linguistic communication, pictorial interpretation attends to norms of pragmatic inference as well as contextual relevance. As will be confirmed further on, this is rather important when we scrutinize depiction’s narrative potential; as G. Currie notes (2010, 12-13):

The distinction [between the explicit content of narrative and that which is implicit] needs careful handling; indeed, it can mislead us badly. It suggests a division between content that is unambiguous – written into the text, visible on the stage or screen, etc. – and content which is a matter of interpretation. In fact, it is all a matter of interpretation [...] [I]f it is written into the story that Watson, the narrator, declares ‘by this time I had had breakfast’, what

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<sup>1</sup> “Monophase” and “polyphase” are terms commonly used in narratology in order to distinguish between types of pictorial storytelling: unlike the polyphase image, the monophase image depicts a *single scene*, which can involve different *but synchronous* happenings or events. For the use of these terms in narratology, see, e.g., Wolf 2003; Ryan 2014; Ranta 2017.

is explicit? That at some point in his life Watson had had breakfast? That would be to adopt a very restricted sense of 'what is made explicit'.

In line with Currie (2010, 13), I take a picture's *explicit* content to extend to what the picture is "naturally interpretable" as conveying, by a recipient that meets the conditions and attends to the norms of interpretation that have been specified above.

Admittedly, even if one shares this conception of depiction, the defence of its narrative potential is a challenge. Depiction may have a wider representational scope than is acknowledged in narratology but, being static and non-discursive, it is by no means evident how it can support especially the *temporal* components of narratives.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Two Strands of Skepticism

The earliest structured depreciation of depiction's narrative potential is expressed in G.E. Lessing's *Laocoön* ([1766] 1853). Defending the division between the arts of space and the arts of time, Lessing described painting as being essentially bounded to space at the exclusion of time and thus of action: painting's representational means are shapes and colours located in space, so painting is deemed appropriate to the representation "of objects whose wholes or parts exist near one another"; these objects "are called bodies. Consequently bodies, with their visible properties, are the peculiar objects of painting" (Lessing [1766] 1853, 101). Being essentially bounded to space, and thus to the appearance of the objects it represents, painting, according to Lessing, is not suited to the representation of *actions* that are the brute materials of stories: it is the art of *instantaneous appearance*, it can only represent "a single instant" (102), be it of objects in motion or at rest.

Contemporary narrative theory supports a skeptical stance on depiction that differs from Lessing's in both focus and strength. On

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<sup>2</sup> There are numberless accounts of narratives and some raise conditions that only discursive media can meet. The topic of this article merits a focus on the domain of transmedial narratology. According to Ryan (2007), the conception of narrative that is merited in this domain involves – apart from the temporal dimension – the representation of characters and the representation of their relevant mental states (Ryan 2007, 29; also Ryan 2004). These functions can be supported depictively. Given that characters in narratives are commonly *cultural stereotypes* (see e.g. Culler 1975, 230-7), depiction, as literature often does, can specify character by means of appearance and dress (see also Lopes 2005, 80). Further, depiction has the powerful tool of expression that can allow the connection of depicted events to the internal states of depicted subjects. It is thus the temporal dimension of a narrative that can seem to transcend the capacities of a static medium.

the one hand, some contemporary accounts of narratives acknowledge *events* rather than actions as central elements of narratives and pictures can certainly represent events.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, most contemporary accounts of narratives acknowledge that the representation of any number of actions or events – even in temporal order – does not suffice for narrative representation (see e.g. Carroll 2010, 121-2): the representational function that is rather acknowledged as being a *sine qua non* of narrativehood is the representation of *causal relations* – or “narrative connections”, in N. Carroll’s terms – between *temporally ordered* events or actions.<sup>4</sup> It is this twofold function that depiction (i.e. the still monophase image) has been deemed unable to support to any degree. For instance, M.L. Ryan argues that, lacking words and a temporal dimension, monophase images just cannot “express causality”: being “limited to the representation of visual properties”, they need to be excluded from the domain of narratives (Ryan 2014, § 3.3.1).

Such skepticism has lineage in pictorial theory: it has been expressed, for instance, by Susan Sontag (1979), Stephanie Ross (1982) and Linda Nochlin (1991), as part of their wider concern with the cognitive value of (realist) images – specifically, with their capacity to afford us moral understanding. This kind of understanding, it is conceded, presupposes narrative representation, i.e. the representational medium needs to convey “a sense of events, causally linked, unfolding in time”, (Ross 1982, 11; also Sontag 1979, 23) but this is precisely what depiction cannot afford us: the image, it is argued, can only present us with a “disjointed temporal fragment”, which thus becomes “the basic unit of perceived experience” (Nochlin 1991, 31). From this perspective, any correlation with *a story* that may be part of our experience can only come about *via allusion* or *implication* and always it will be the work of the recipient rather than the image, which by itself is *narratively mute*: the image, it is conceded, can illustrate a pre-existing narrative, but it cannot itself be narrative – it cannot guide *by design* the retrieval of the temporal and causal relations of represented events, as narrative representation demands.

Is either strand of skepticism justified?

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**3** Some events are anyway static (e.g. resting under a tree) but depiction can also represent dynamic events, as will be argued further on.

**4** See e.g. Bal 1985; Carroll 2010; Richardson 1997.

### 3 Facing Skepticism (I): Depicting Action

Given that depiction is a visual form of representation – one that activates and relies on processes of visual recognition, – the skeptic proceeds from the information that the pictorial design provides to the content of the perceptual experience that the design can support, assuming a *strict* correspondence between them. It is under this assumption that Lessing took the pictorial perceptual act to be stranded in the *instant*; and it is under this assumption that Nochlin took the “basic unit of perceived experience” in response to the image to be the temporal fragment that the design presents. Any sense of procession or temporality that may be part of pictorial experience is thus deemed to be a *product of our imagination* and not part of *what we perceive* on the grounds of the image. As Lessing ([1766] 1853, 17) notes, “The longer we gaze [at the image], the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see”. From this perspective, in responding to the image, *we can imagine* but *we cannot perceive* any component of narrative that has a temporal dimension.

The conception of perception that underlies the skeptic’s reasoning is rather simplistic. Perception for the skeptic is mere *sensing* – a straightforward causal process in the course of which the subject is a passive recipient of stimulation from her environment. This conception has been heavily challenged in both Philosophy and Psychology of Perception. It is now widely acknowledged that, even though there may be a part of perception that is cognitively impenetrable, perception is insulated neither from memory nor from cognition: the representational content of perception can thus be conjointly determined by both bottom-up and top-down processes, so it can exceed the information provided by a given pattern of stimulation.<sup>5</sup>

Operating with this wider conception of perception, philosophers of depiction have argued for the temporal dimension of perception and thus for our capacity to perceive time-extended objects (such as actions) in an image, even when we are exposed to just one of their temporal parts. Commenting on Henri Cartier-Bresson’s *Behind Saint-Lazare Station* (1932), B. Nanay (2009, 122) notes:<sup>6</sup>

When one sees a tomato we do not say that one sees one part of it (the front) and imagines another (the back). One sees the entire tomato [...] But if this is true for the spatial dimension of perception, what reason do we have to suppose that things are different when it comes to the temporal dimension? Rather than saying that

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<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the relevant issues, but also to the relevant debates, see, e.g., Bar, Bubic 2013; Zeimbekis, Raftopoulos 2015; Silins 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See also Gombrich 1982a; Lopes 2005, 166-8.

we see the man in the air and imagine him landing in the puddle, we should rather say that we see him jumping (although we only set eyes on one temporal part of this action).

Still: even if a skeptic were to endorse this more nuanced understanding of perception, as she should, further concerns would prevent an unqualified endorsement of depiction's capacity to represent the temporal components of narratives – actions and causal relations between temporally ordered actions or events.

### 3.1 On the Representation of Action

The actions that are commonly regarded in narratology as proper narrative material are not mundane or routine actions, such as jumping, that could be easily recognized in an image by means of contextual cues: it is significant actions that manifest one's character – one's values, life-goals and desires – that, since Aristotle, are thought to be proper to narratives (e.g. “not baking bread but stealing a loaf” is true narrative material, as Ryan 2014 [§ 3.3.1] notes). This is admittedly a qualitative rather than a logical requirement of narration that we may well choose to ignore, but this would not be a fair rebuttal of skepticism: it is precisely depiction's capacity to represent the significant actions of poetry that Lessing undermined and it is on such actions that also Sontag, Ross and Nochlin focus, given their concern for a picture's moral import. And from their shared perspective, the static image can present neither what guides a depicted movement nor its temporal unfolding, so it just cannot convey an evaluatively significant action unambiguously: any movement that can be captured depictively will be compatible with different action-patterns.

Consider, for instance, an example that Ross (1982) provides along these lines. Suppose, she says, that we see a man in a picture with a raised arm in front of a child: does the picture give us adequate information on the basis of which a morally significant action can be recognized? The man may indeed be about to hit the child or they may be practicing judo or the man may be dancing in front of the child: the presented instant is consistent with too many actions and so can only serve as fertile ground for our imaginative projections.

To affirm depiction's capacity to represent actions even of the sort that the skeptic regards as proper to narratives – actions that are evaluatively significant – we need to affirm its capacity to provide the sort of information that could allow us to perceptually proceed from indeterminate movement to determinate action, in the lack of temporal procession. In a quick reference to the Renaissance conception of 'istoria' in painting, Dominic Lopes (2005, 167) targets the issue:

Wittgenstein said that ‘the human body is the best picture of the human soul’. He is thinking not only of movements but of expressive gestures and postures. Since emotions are not mere reactions to happenings, but also motivate actions, expression is a route to understanding events as actions. Pictures that depict gestures and facial expressions reveal the mental states of depicted figures and thereby represent their actions as actions – the raising of an arm is made intelligible as action by the expression of fear with which it is done.

This aspect of depiction, its capacity to convey the emotions of its subjects through their bodily manifestations, has been well rehearsed in the theories of the visual arts at least since the Renaissance, when it was highlighted as a precious device for the depiction of determinate actions. Consider, for instance, George Cruikshank’s engraving *February, – Cutting Weather – Squally* (1839).<sup>7</sup> We would all agree, I presume, that the work represents an evaluatively significant action quite explicitly, despite the fact that it captures a single instance of that action (as in Ross’s example): the emotions facially expressed by the two principal figures – the anger of the adult and the desperation of the child – leave no space for the recognition of any action other than beating.

So we have good reasons to deny that the “basic unit of perceived experience” in response to a still image is the temporal fragment; and we have good reasons to deny that depiction is not suited to the representation of action – even of evaluatively significant action. If we acknowledge, on the one hand, that perception has a temporal dimension that allows its content to extend beyond the presented instant; and, on the other hand, depiction’s power to convey the inner states of its subjects – i.e. the information that is needed for us to perceptually proceed from indeterminate movement to determinate action – it follows that temporally extended action (routine or significant) falls within the limits of depiction.

### 3.2 On the Representation of Causal Relations

Contemporary skeptics do not merely doubt, as Lessing, that pictures can represent action(s); what they predominantly doubt is that they can allow us to retrieve *causal connections* between *temporally ordered* events or actions. So, even if a contemporary skeptic were to acknowledge that the image can represent time-extended action, it would not follow for her that it can narrate – i.e. that it can convey an action as well as *what preceded or what followed that action by way of causal determination*.

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<sup>7</sup> George Cruikshank, *February, – Cutting Weather – Squally*. 1839. Held by the British Library, London. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/12459406524>.

To appreciate the force of this objection, we should properly delimit its scope. The skeptic would need to concede that, once we recognize in a picture a given action scene, relevant prior knowledge of the world can and is *expected* to inform our interpretation but it can also inform the content of pictorial experience – granting the latter’s permeability to thought (Wollheim 1998, 224). Such knowledge can include likely causal connections to past events or actions, thus allowing us some degree of narrative engagement, as Nanay (2009) has argued. Consider for instance Francisco Goya’s painting *The Third of May 1808* (1814).<sup>8</sup> In the image we can recognize the military execution of civilians; as history instructs, such an act of violence commonly follows for reasons of retaliation or to deter resistance or as a punishment for one’s actions or beliefs, which have been considered by an authority (often enforced, always ruthless) as against its interests. This is all a matter of collective knowledge that *we are relied upon* to activate in our appreciative response. Thus, for the competent spectator, the very recognition of the action scene depicted in Goya’s painting extends (in her interpretation and experience) an *abstract causal nexus* that connects it, however abstractly, to the past – and gives the picture, we should stress, its evaluative punch.

The skeptic perhaps would not deny this; but she would still insist, and rightly so, that Goya’s painting *does not thereby ‘tell’ the story* of that dreadful night: it simply conveys no information that would allow us to get a grounded sense of the specific events *that led* to the execution or of the specific repercussions *that followed* the execution. The picture is silent in that regard and so can only serve as fertile ground for our imaginative engagement. But then *it is us* who fill-in the details of the missing temporal-cum-causal structure – it is us, rather than the picture, that *tell* the story.

This strand of skepticism seems intractable. Yet, it rests on a rather partial conception of causation that unduly directs attention to the dimension of time rather than to the dimension of space – the untested domain of depiction.

#### 4 Facing Skepticism (II): Depicting the Narrative Connection

A specific conception of causation seems to ground the depreciation of depiction’s narrative potential: pertinent aspects of this concep-

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<sup>8</sup> Francisco de Goya y Lucientes. *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid, or “the Executions”*. 1814. Museo del Prado, Madrid. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-3rd-of-may-1808-in-madrid-or-the-executions/5e177409-2993-4240-97fb-847a02c6496c>.



tion concern causation's relation to time and causation's relation to perception. Both aspects are quite crucial when it comes to a medium that is both static and visual.

#### 4.1 Causation and Time

In the skeptic's reasoning, the narrative potential of a medium is identified with its capacity for sequentiality: that is, the skeptic regards sequential structure as essential to the representation of causal connections, as if causally related events could only be temporally *discrete* (as is indeed the case in the strong paradigm of linear narrative media). The skeptic's reasoning is not without theoretical support: it reflects the sequential conception of causation that has its roots in the work of David Hume. In the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume argued that an event deemed as cause has to occur prior to the effect event, thus asserting an internal link between causation and temporal order (Book I, part III, sect. XIV, 170); but he also made the stronger claim that the two *cannot in any case be co-temporary* (Book I, part III, sect. II, 76). If Hume were right in both these claims, it would indeed follow that the representation of causal connections between temporally ordered events demands a sequential structure and so that a medium which is limited to simultaneity lacks a narrative potential.

Hume's sequential conception of causation, however, was rather partial, as Kant noted in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Book II.3, "Second Analogy"), citing what seemed to be a clear case of a cause being *simultaneous* with its effect: an iron ball impressing a hollow on a cushion. In such a case, Kant argues,

[t]he time between the causality of the cause and its immediate effect may be [a] vanishing [quantity], and they may thus be simultaneous but the relation of the one to the other will always remain determinable in time [...] I still distinguish the two through the time-relation of their dynamical connection. (Book II.3, "Second Analogy", A 203, B 248-9)

That is, we "reckon with temporal order", as Kant notes, by taking the cushion's state as the dynamical outcome of a certain process, despite the fact that we have not witnessed that process in its temporal unfolding.<sup>9</sup>

Embracing Kant's insight, contemporary philosophical accounts of causation minimally acknowledge that causation can be *staggered* and

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<sup>9</sup> See discussion in Fogelin 1992, 111.

thus active in synchronous rather than just sequential events.<sup>10</sup> Under this more precise view of causation, successive or sequential ordering is not necessary to the representation of causal connections *tout court*. A medium that lacks a sequential structure, could still have, in principle, the capacity to convey causal connections between *temporally overlapping* events (and, following Kant, to thereby “allow us to reckon with [the] temporal order” of their dynamical connection), even if it lacks the capacity to represent causal relations between *temporally discrete* events. The skeptic’s reasoning rightly tracks the limits of the narrative potential of depiction but *it does not disprove* this potential. It then follows that, to affirm the narrative potential of depiction, we need to evidence its capacity to convey the causal relations that may hold between temporally overlapping events, thus guiding our narrative engagement in a determinate and prescribed manner.

## 4.2 Causation and Perception

One of the skeptic’s convictions about depiction might seem to undercut the noted project from the outset. According to Ryan (2014, § 3.2), for instance:

Only words can say ‘the king died and then the queen died of grief’<sup>11</sup> because only language is able to make relations of causality *explicit*. In a [static image], causal relations between events must be left to the spectator’s interpretation, and without a voice-over narration, we can never be completely sure that it was grief and not illness that killed the queen.

Let us note first that the causal relation that Ryan regards as being *explicitly* conveyed through language is still a matter of interpretation – a cause is asserted in Forster’s description but not a *causal relation* between the described events: the narrator’s statement could be ironic; or the Queen’s grief could have been for some other loss or happening. So explicitness is not tied to completeness or to unambiguity or to the sheer lack of an interpretative process: as Currie has argued, it is rather tied to the capacity of a medium to convey by design a specific thought in the mind of the recipient, in a manner that is relatively direct and/or unwavering, *given* stereotypical knowledge of the world and *given* the norms of pragmatic in-

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Brandt 1980; Huemer, Kovitz 2003; Tooley 1987. A matter of debate, irrelevant to our purposes, is whether temporal overlap entails absolute temporal coincidence under a sound metaphysics of time.

<sup>11</sup> This is E.M. Forster’s much quoted example of a minimal narrative.

ference and contextual relevance. Still, the gist of Ryan's remark is clear: causal relations *can be told* but *they cannot be shown*, even if we were to allow that both 'telling' and 'showing' are subject to standard norms of interpretation.

Ryan's reasoning rests on a latent hypothesis about causation that again reflects Hume. According to this hypothesis, we can perceive the spatial or temporal relations of objects or events but we cannot further perceive their causal relations; and if causal relations cannot be perceived, they cannot be depicted. That is, there could be no principled way of marking a surface so as to allow a spectator to perceive a determinate causal relation between depicted objects or events: any causal relation that would be part of the spectator's experience would thus be her own imaginative construct, rather than a product of the picture's design.

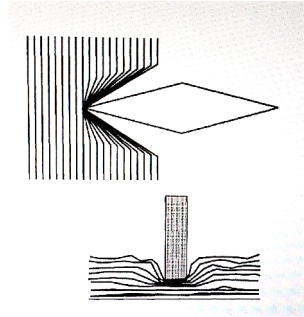
The hypothesis that underlies Ryan's objection has been discredited in both philosophy and psychology, at least from a phenomenal perspective: a long body of research foregrounds causal perception as a distinct path of causal learning, confirming Michotte's (1963) seminal study on the experience of causation.<sup>12</sup> Causal perception – or phenomenal causation – can be minimally understood as the “relatively automatic, relatively irresistible perception of certain sequences of events as involving causation” (Danks 2009, 447). As the relevant research indicates, in both the physical and the social realm this perceptual response is elicited by particular cues, subject to contextual as well as attentional factors; such cues include, for instance, the spatial properties of objects, their temporal and spatial relations, their respective dynamic properties, or various asymmetries in force.<sup>13</sup> In their majority, studies on causal perception focus on events that include moving targets and are experienced in sequential order, but they further indicate that we can have a direct impression of causality even in the lack of actual movement or of an experienced temporal sequence. If this is the case in face-to-face seeing, we have no reason to assume that things are different when it comes to pictorial seeing. Indeed, it has already been acknowledged that we can have a direct impression of causality in response to simple graphic designs, as can be illustrated in the following images (extracted from Masironi 2002, 205-8 [fig. 1]).

The two patterns function, in R. Arnheim's (1974) terms, as *diagrams of forces*: the formal dynamics of the design trigger an *auto-*

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Wolff 2008; Danks 2009; Hecht, Kerzel 2010; White 2014.

<sup>13</sup> For our purposes it does not matter whether such perception is a mere impression or rather an indirect access to a real dynamic event through observable force properties: a directed visual impression is all that is required for the representation of a causal relation. See Curry (2010) for a relevant perspective in relation to literary narratives.



**Figure 1** Manfredo Massironi, Two representations of causal relationships: texture deformed by a diamond and texture deformed by a rectangle. In Massironi 2002, 207

*matic impression* of causality, i.e. they allow us to see each shape (the rhomboid / the rectangle) as responsible for deforming the texture of the lines. So Ryan’s general claim regarding depiction’s representational scope is unwarranted: a static monophase image can convey explicitly *at least* instances of physical causation between temporally overlapping events, recruiting the dynamics of the design in order to elicit a patterned perceptual response: in order to elicit, that is, a *direct* impression of a causal relation.

### 4.3 The Challenge of Social Causation

A qualitative criterion of narrative representation again undermines depiction’s narrative potential. Narratives represent characters in interaction: the causal relations proper to narratives are thus far more complex than instances of physical causation, as they are tied to human agency. Ryan’s depreciation of pictorial narratives seems to retain its force, even if the wider claim she makes about depiction is unwarranted. But we have good reasons to resist this negative stance, even with regard to instances of social causation.

On the one hand, as cognitivist and reception theories of narratives acknowledge (and as Ryan’s own example makes evident), narratives “draw on an immense accumulation of frames and scripts that arise from the experience of life itself” (Abbott 2014, § 3.3.4): that is, they are designed from within a shared space of knowledge and experience, including such that is relevant to causal relations in the domain of human agency. And when they are thus designed, the recipient’s retrieval of intended causal relations can be fairly direct or unwavering, despite some incompleteness and even in the absence of causal clauses, as can be the case in both literature and film. Given the earlier remarks on explicitness, that should be enough for us to regard the causal relations thus retrieved as part of a narrative’s *explicit* content - and this applies to pictorial narratives as much as

it applies to narratives in any medium. In Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814), for instance, we can regard as part of the image's explicit content that what makes the onlookers hide their eyes is their certainty of an imminent execution, foreshadowed by the corpses at the lower part of the painting, rather than the mere threat of gunshot right in front of them. It is only implicit, however, that they will be next. Although I have no space to expand on this point, it is important to acknowledge the role that *empathy* plays in this case - and thus again the importance of bodily expression: empathy can allow us to follow through the experience of depicted subjects from a first-person perspective that activates our own life experience in the retrieval of causal connections.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, and importantly, apart from enlisting the spectator's causal scripts, depiction can recruit the dynamics of the design in order to direct the retrieval of causal connections, even with regard to instances of social causation. As the history and theory of visual art instructs, specific principles of composition are historically and canonically tied to the representation of causal connections in narrative images and the function of these principles is precisely to *direct* the spectator's recognitional response. The relevant principles concern (a) the strategic use of directionality; and (b) visual techniques of focalization.

A principle of the former type can be traced in Alberti's treatise *On Painting* [1435] (1991). For Alberti the great work of the painter is *istoria* and *istoria* can only be conveyed through composition: all the bodies in *istoria*, he instructs, must conform in function (appearance, posture and facial expression) to the subject of the *istoria*, but they also "should move in relation to one another [...] in accordance with the action [...] Everything the people in the painting do among themselves [...] must fit together to represent and explain the *istoria*" (77-8) - and explanation obviously requires that causal connections between their respective states are clearly conveyed. Alberti's insight is articulated more succinctly in contemporary visual semiotics. According to Kress, van Leeuwen's (2006) influential semiotic analysis of visual media, the signification of causal connections consistently attends to the codes of a vector-based semantics applicable to the doings of depicted subjects: that is, the direction of the gaze of depicted subjects or the direction of their movement or the direction of their gestures or posture, form oblique lines - or "vectors", in Arnheim's (1974) terms - and these lines are strategically and persistently employed by image makers (at least in the Western tradition) to perceptually connect depicted subjects to salient parts of their environment: parts towards which they act or which act upon them.

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<sup>14</sup> I owe this point to Fotini Vassiliou.

We can witness the operation of vectors in Cruikshank's engraving, discussed earlier: the directionalities of gaze and movement connect depicted subjects to those parts of their environment that are salient to their expressed state. These connections support the recognition of the depicted action; they indicate the agent and the patient of that action among the three subjects centrally depicted; and they further indicate the cause of the boy's dread or of the alarm or amusement of the subjects in the periphery and so on. If we were to change the directionalities of movement or gaze further to the left or to the right, all such connections would break: the connections that are part of pictorial experience, including all causal connections, are thus *a product of the picture's design* rather than the recipient's imaginative construct.

Further principles of composition, auxiliary to the above, can be traced again in the early modern treatises on painting: under the influence of the classical rhetorical tradition, their authors thematise the explanatory significance of focalization devices in the representation of *istoria*. For Alberti [1435] (1991), for instance, the project of explanation merits that there is "someone in the *istoria* who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look [...] or points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture" (77-8). For Lomazzo (1584), on the other hand, the main character in *istoria* "is the principal cause and the principal subject from which all the other parts stem" and so "the main figures must be placed in the middle and all the other parts must be placed around them". While for Armenini (1586) "the characters that serve as the ground for the entire work" should shine above all others, i.e. "should be composed with colors that are naturally more beautiful, more attractive and brighter", while the rest of the figures "should dim little by little" and they should be "of a lesser size in accordance with the configuration of the pictorial plane".<sup>15</sup> Such compositional techniques aim to manipulate the recipient's gaze and thought: that is, they aim to focus her attention on aspects of content that are explanatorily salient or to guide her to approach the depicted *istoria* from a definite angle or viewpoint. This insight is reflected in contemporary narrative theory: for instance, M. Bal (1997, 144-6) highlights focalization as the formal semiotic device that can mediate the extraction of causal relations in a static relief.<sup>16</sup>

From the perspective of semiotic analysis, note, the formal devices that can allow the retrieval of causal relations in an image are structural units of a historically and socially developed visual lan-

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<sup>15</sup> Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (1584); Giovan Battista Armenini, *De' veri precetti della pittura* (1586), as quoted in Pericolo 2011, 97-8.

<sup>16</sup> For the wider narrative significance of focalization in a still image, see Speidel 2013.

guage – they are *signs*; and the ability to respond appropriately to these signs is deemed part of a culturally embedded visual literacy. But perhaps we should resist the thought that the operation of these devices – canonical as it may be – just rests on *learned* signifying norms, as the idea of ‘visual language’ or ‘visual literacy’ may suggest. On the one hand, these devices can be witnessed even in the complex scenes of cave-paintings and it is doubtful that there was already in place a developed ‘visual language’ like ours that their makers could exploit (Dobrez 2013, § 21). On the other hand, these devices manage to convey directionality, to create asymmetries in force, to direct attention – i.e. they manage to create precisely that ‘pattern of forces’ that is deemed to be operative in causal perception. So it is perhaps a merited hypothesis that the formal devices that are (historically and canonically) recruited to the indication of causal connections rest upon our perceptual inclinations and are not just learned or culturally specific depictive codes. Whatever the case might be, when an artist recruits these devices but also takes care to arrange the overall composition according to shared causal scripts, it is fair to say that his or her image is *naturally interpretable* by a suitable spectator as representing causal connections – and so that such connections are part of the image’s *explicit* content.

This is the case, for instance, in Haynes King’s painting *Jealousy and Flirtation* (1874) that Gombrich (1982b) cites as a clear case of pictorial narration.<sup>17</sup> The mode of presentation of the depicted subjects conforms to traditional focalization techniques, while the directionalities of their gaze and bodies, seen in relation to their overall expression, indicate particular transactional and reactional processes: considered conjointly – and given common knowledge of the world – the choices of composition convey rather clearly that the one woman is emotionally affected by the other woman’s open flirtation with the young workman. A causal connection is thus retrievable from the exposition: the state of the one woman is explained by the attitude of the other woman, to whom her gaze is directed – an attitude understood to have preceded and inflicted that state. To the extent that salient character traits and dispositions of the dominant subjects are also conveyed quite clearly – through dress, posture, expression – given operative cultural stereotypes, a suitable spectator can retrieve the elements of a minimal story, in a manner that is relatively direct and unwavering.

A final note is merited on the vexed issue of temporal order. In § 2 I conceded with the skeptic that pictures lack a temporal order but it should be clear now that this claim demands revision: pictures in-

<sup>17</sup> Haynes King, *Jealousy and Flirtation*. 1874. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17367/jealousy-and-flirtation-oil-painting-king-haynes/>.

deed lack the capacity to convey what specific events *preceded* or *followed* those depicted but they do not lack the capacity to convey the temporal order of *depicted* events. As Kant suggests, when a causal relation is ascribed to simultaneous events, we “still distinguish the two through the time-relation of their dynamical connection” – that is “we reckon” with temporal order in taking one of these events as the dynamical outcome of a certain process that we have not witnessed in its unfolding (Book II.3, “Second Analogy”, A 203/B248-9). Kant’s insight is corroborated by a number of studies on the relation between the experience of time and phenomenal causation: as Buehner (2014, 2) notes in a relevant overview,

there is now a clear recognition that Time and Causality mutually constrain each other in human experience. Not only do temporal parameters influence our causal experience, but the construal of causal relations in the mind also affects the way we perceive and experience time.

From this perspective, a picture’s capacity to convey causal connections between events can be said to impose a temporal order on those events in our experience – even if the picture cannot track this order by means of temporal unfolding.<sup>18</sup> The reverse, note, can be observed in linear narrative media: whereas in depiction it is the causal connections that we can extract that convey temporal order, in linear narrative media (certainly in film but also in literature) it is often temporal order that indicates causal connections – even if only by the widespread application of the “*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*” fallacy that, as R. Barthes (1975, 10) pointed out, rules over narration. The internal link between time and causation can thus be instrumental in the development of narrative structure both in linear media and in depiction. Of course, the former can further exploit devices that the latter lacks – i.e. words. My aim was not to persuade that depiction can achieve what other media can achieve, in the way that they can achieve it.

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**18** There is in such a case the *double temporality* that e.g. Rimmon-Kenan (2006) regards as essential to narratives.



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