the changing profession

Figuration

MIEKE BAL

TRAINED AND WORKING IN LITERARY STUDIES, I BEGAN TO ANALYZE VISUAL ARTIFACTS SUCH AS PAINTINGS SOMETIME IN the late 1980s. My interest in visual aspects has grown out of the realization that subjectivity is formed by a perpetual adjustment of images passing before the subject, who, as focalizer, makes them into a whole that is comprehensible because it is continuous. Having a certain continuity in one's thought depends, at a level more subliminal than conscious, on having a certain continuity in one's images.

But continuity is not the same thing as coherence. This distinction is another source of interest that informs work on visual narrativity. In such historically and sociologically varied texts and images as modern novels, the ancient and incomplete fragments that make up the Hebrew bible, and Rembrandt's paintings, I constantly came up against that which eludes the coherence of these artifacts. My attention was systematically arrested by the detail that seems out of place, the contradiction that tears open the work, the monstrous element that reveals flaws and disparities and, because it provokes astonishment, offers never-ending possibilities for the understanding of these works. Such experiences led me to consider those dimensions of literature that classical narratology has tended to think marginal and that pictorial narratology, unbounded by the presumption of linearity, would promote to the forefront or, at least, deploy as heuristic instruments with which to grasp structure outside linear plots.

In the case of the narrativity in images, a long tradition of iconographic reading has trained viewers, including art historians, to consider images as illustrations of classical texts. The founder of contemporary iconographic reading, Erwin Panofsky, developed a "thicker" method, meant to account for the visual equivalent of the history of mentalities. He called this method "iconology," and iconographic reading was a preparatory procedure for it. But his following has largely relied on iconography, thus making specifically visual narrativity all but invisible.

While I was working out these questions of interdisciplinary crossover, film theory began to focus on the spectatorial attitudes encouraged or discouraged by visual representation (e.g., Mulvey; Silverman).

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The position of the viewer endorsing visuality as a mode of reading can shift back and forth in variable degrees from textual focalizer to erotic voyeur. I wanted to examine how these two interact. But to avoid terminological confusion, methodological eclecticism, and ideological miasma, I felt compelled first to assess the *visual* status of the narrative focalizer. Arguably, this concept offers the key to a pictorial narratology that acknowledges the ontological gap between literary and visual imagery without reifying it.

The concept of focalization pertains to narrative as a discursive genre but also yields insights into discourse itself as a semiotic system. In fact, it relates those two aspects, the narrative represented and its representation, by acting as the perspective that directs the representation of the events (or fabula) that is verbalized in the text by the narrator. Although its basis in the notion of perspective seems to make its transposition to the realm of the visual simple, such a transposition is not unproblematic (Bal, *Reading*, ch. 4).

Why is the crossover between visuality and narrativity important as an area of study? The often alleged predominance of visuality in contemporary culture does not convince me entirely. There are many cultural situations in which images are called on to do the work of narrative. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian devoted a study to a body of paintings made in Zaire in which the artist presented his work as "The History of Zaire as Painted and Told by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu." The prelude to the study is a dialogue in which the artist tells the story of his story. His paintings offer an alternative to the official history, and image offers a more adequate medium to tell Zaire's history in. Imaging is taken up as a language the authorities cannot quite understand. Pictorial narrative, then, becomes a secret code, a subcultural language that facilitates the production of subversive narratives.

If in such cases political agency requires imagery to be able to tell stories, this is because the official political authorities rely on linguistic narrative to instill the "proper" stories in their citizens. The law before which the telling of forbidden stories will be punished is largely verbal, as is the practice of jurisdiction. Pictorial narrative, in such circumstances, is a counterdiscourse. But this antagonism is in the end untenable. Although legal practice continues to have more difficulty dealing with contested visual material than with written texts, the distinction between language and imagery as two (formally) different media for storytelling has never been easy and is, for that reason, replete with ideological and political meaning.

The political implications of the belief in a strong ontological difference, even opposition, between the two media become especially clear in the face of cultural objects that cannot be isolated as either verbal or visual. Films do not only consist of images as well as texts (and, of course, sound). As is most obvious in silent films, the moving image is a narrative object that is nevertheless completely visual (Verhoeff). But there is an element of film that offers a beautiful metaphor for the relation between language and visuality in the constitution of pictorial narratives such as films.

In her analysis of Stephen Frears's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Gayatri Spivak ends with a paragraph on montage. Here, she says, the social text is made, and made up. Montage becomes a locus of intermediality. Spivak recalls Theodor Adorno's critique of montage as manipulative. Montage is indeed a manipulation. But narrative, presenting "facts" and time together so that they become pictorially potent stories, is also primarily a manipulation. Montage between images is the joint where the image is not but without which it cannot be.

As W. J. T. Mitchell has pointed out, the question of the relation between text and image—hence also between narrative in textual and in visual representation—is one not simply of media but of interests (*Iconology* and *Picture*). Besides being a formal issue, the division between the two modes is also an issue of "the

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forms that sociability and subjectivity take, . . . the kinds of individuals and institutions formed by a culture" (*Picture* 3). People who fear that television and the computer have made the novel obsolete hold a view of social life very different from that of eager students of the forms of narrativity that emerge with the hypertextual organization of the Internet (Ryan). These forms cannot be cast as either textual or visual; hence, if the Internet makes anything obsolete, it is the divide itself and the protectionist attitudes toward visual or literary "purity" (Rodowick).

Many scholars have been seeking alternative analytic concepts to account more adequately for artifacts that can be considered pictorial narratives. Margaret Morse uses the concept of the performative to analyze the news qua pictorial narrative. This notion clarifies the (virtual) relation between speaker and addressee, or narrator and narratee, and allows her to focus on the way narrative turns on that relation. Thus, narrativity is shifted from the events in the image to the event *of* the image: the pragmatic effect of verbal-cum-pictorial storytelling.

In the interdisciplinary field of "cultural memory," the idea expressed in the phrase "pictorial narrative" is so pervasive that it is not even mentioned, only practiced. One of this area's leading scholars, Marianne Hirsch, devoted a book to the various ways family snapshots contribute to shape subjects through the narratives they tell. Memory, like dreams, operates largely by means of the kind of visualizations Mitchell would call mental images, yet we tend to see memory as profoundly narrative, since it plots out the temporality of our lives. And when Hirsch develops the concept of postmemory to describe memories, often visual ones, transmitted by parents to children, who conceive of the stories as their own memories, both narrativity and visuality are key to the memories' functioning.

Narrativity and visuality do not always harmoniously cooperate in memory, though. The branch of memory studies devoted to (collective) trauma theorizes the tensions, even the incompatibility, between the two. Far from being rivals for cultural distinction, however, as they are in the television-makes-books-obsolete argument, vision and narrative distinguish the traumatized subject's inability to have memories—the subject instead is assaulted from outside consciousness by visual and other sense-based images—from the nontraumatized subject's ability to have narrative memories, according to Ernst van Alphen (*Caught*). In a later article, Alphen systematically analyzes the specific narrative incapacitations that afflict the traumatized subject ("Symptoms").

Pictorial narrative is culturally pervasive. Also, reading itself requires constant visualization. It is not the novel that is obsolete but the idea that narrative and imagery are essentially different cultural expressions. This "visual essentialism" (Bal, "Visual Essentialism"), as well as the literary elitism that is its counterpart, only encourages the repressions that constitute cultural, intrapsychic, and political forms of censorship. Narrative and image need each other as much as cultures need them. For in a culture of figuration, the figural (Lyotard; Rodowick) is the privileged site of contestation.

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