

Understanding Narrative Painting as Implied Narrative

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Throughout history, images and stories have been involved in a tenuous relationship. At their best they support each other. At their worst they are undifferentiated. History argues that each has different characteristics and qualities allowing them to communicate different aspects of reality. However, over time the distinction between story and image has been blurred. This blurring of definitions and characteristics was foreshadowed by Plutarch who said "painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture" as well as by Horace who said that "as a picture, so a poem." The blurring of lines between image and story reached a pinnacle when twentieth century poststructuralists began interpreting visual images with linguistic methods. This misunderstanding of static images is evinced in today's culture every time a painting is referred to as a narrative.

In a recent article, published by the Huffington post, Julio Reyes and other artists working in a similar style were referred to as "representational narrative painters."¹ For a specific example, Reyes's painting titled *The Barrens* (Fig. 1) is likely to be described as a narrative painting. In *The Barrens*, Reyes depicts a young man standing alone, lost in a moment of contemplation. He is standing in front of an oil refinery or some kind of power plant during what appears to be the early morning hours. When viewing this painting one can't help but imagine the events that came before as well as the events that might follow. The viewer will likely come to conclusions

¹ Brandon Kralik, Nerdrum Pictures Chronicles the New Golden Age of Painting, Huffpost Arts & Culture, Posted: 05/08/2014 4:46 pm EDT Updated: 07/08/2014 5:59 am EDT

about where the young man came from or where he is going. The narrative implications of paintings like *The Barrens* as well as others like it are so strong that the viewer naturally thinks the narrative lies within the painting itself. However, this conclusion is a misunderstanding of the concept of narrative as well as the limitations and qualities of painting.

There is a solution. In fact, categorizing paintings like *The Barrens* as implied narrative rather than narrative is more aligned with the characteristics of painting. This distinction is important because how painters describe and categorize their work suggests a set of standards, values and beliefs not only about their work, but also about themselves and the culture they participate with. Categories and definitions silently guide the paths of artists and viewers whether they are aware of them or not. For example, Odd Nerdrum recognized the connection between fine art labels and the values they represent when he decided to separate himself from the fine art world by categorizing himself as a kitsch painter rather than as an artist. By using the word narrative to categorize themselves, painters are unintentionally positing a progandic view of painting. This elevates subjectivity over objectivity. In fact it conflates the two making it hard to distinguish where the narrative is coming from. This unintentional move has helped facilitate the diminishing of aesthetic standards and ultimately the value of representational painting. Categorizing representational paintings that suggest the presence of narrative as implied narratives provides a more accurate understanding of the interaction between the viewer, the artwork and the artist. Using the label implied narrative makes the artist the stimulant and the viewer the decision maker. Making this distinction will re-establish representational painting as a more relevant art form in today's fine art culture.

To make an argument for using implied narrative to categorize and describe paintings we must first try and understand what is meant by the word narrative and why it is not an accurate label. Generally understood, a narrative is a story-form that represents a series of events in a whole and complete way. They are groupings of events in a comprehensive pattern. Narratives are conclusive or resolved stories. They are inherently conclusive because they always demonstrate a causal relationship between events (Barwell, 49). In other words, narratives state how one thing leads to another. The connections are made by the narrator that frames the story by pointing out the causal relationships. The majority of narrative scholars trace the conclusivity of narrative back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the structure of a dramatic tragedy. In *Poetics*, tragedy is generally understood as analogous to narrative. Seymour Chatman, in his book *Story and Discourse*, states that poetics "is a reasoned account of the structure of narrative" (Chatman, 15). The key concept addressed in Aristotle's *Poetics* is that narratives consist of a beginning, middle and an end. Aristotle wrote that a plot, which every tragedy has one of, has "for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, middle, and an end, it will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity" (Aristotle, 47). This idea is reiterated by several scholars describing narrative as a combination of a question, the resolving intermediates, and finally the answer. Ismay Barwell argued that narratives reveal the connecting links between past, present and future events presenting the entire sequence as a purposeful and ordered whole (Barwell, 49). An example of this can be found in most movies in which the protagonist is presented with a dilemma, which he/she struggles to understand and resolve, ultimately providing a conclusive answer to the originating question, demonstrating conclusion through the choices made. It is important to point out that conclusion is determined

by the narrator, not the viewer. In summary a narrative is a story framed by a narrator that is “whole and complete” or “lacking nothing else.” (Carroll)

The leading contemporary narrative scholar, Noel Carroll, takes this a step further by arguing that a story-form must meet a set of conditions he calls a “narrative connection” in order for it to be considered a true narrative. Carroll argues that narrative connection is made only if “(1) the discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs (2) in a globally forward-looking manner (3) concerning the career of at least one unified subject (4) where the temporal relations between the events and/ or states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and (5) where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events and/or states of affairs.” (Carroll 2001, 126) To sum this up a narrative is a distinct story-form in that it depicts at least two events that are causally linked in a way that seems complete and whole. A narrative provides resolution and conclusion for the questions it asks by presenting events in an ordered and reasonable way.

Using Carroll’s narrative connection conditions as a guideline is it accurate to categorize Reyes’s painting as a narrative? Does Reyes’s *The Barrens* provide resolution and conclusion? Does it depict a series of events or just one? Hopefully it is obvious that it does not depict more than one event, neither is it resolved and conclusive. This reveals the limitations of painting in its inability to depict more than a single event. Gotthold Lessing, in his book *Laocoon*, stated that the “material limits of art confine all its imitations. The artist, out of ever-changing nature, can only make use of a single moment, and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view.” (Lessing, 16) According to Lessing, painting is confined to a

single moment. Unlike other art forms like literature or film, that can depict several events, painting is only capable of depicting one single moment.

Despite the obvious limitations of painting's static nature, the view that it cannot depict more than one event is opposed by some. Scholars like Bence Nanay, the author of an essay titled *Narrative Pictures*, presents an argument that is built on making a distinction between the terms depict and represent. Whereas depict suggests the inherent characteristics of an object, the term represent suggests the participation of a viewing subject. Nanay argues that a picture can represent more than it depicts (Nanay 121). In other words, a painting may depict a single moment, but represent many. Nanay argues that paintings can depict actions and actions represent more than one event. For instance, the action of jumping may be depicted in a painting. For Nanay, jumping represents several events which include the taking off, the event of flight and the event of landing, thereby representing a sequence of events. However, does a painting that depicts jumping actually depict a series of events? Or does the viewer, knowing what jumping entails, project the beginning, middle, and ending onto the image in order to complete what is incomplete? Nanay argues that representational narrative paintings are in fact narrative because representing a sequence of events meets the conditions of a narrative condition. If this is true, then the perception of the viewer is given precedence over the objective characteristics of the painting.

The distinction made between the terms represent and depict may be better understood by looking at a painting by Jeremy Lipking titled *Adrift* (fig. 2). In *Adrift* a young girl is seen floating in a pool of water. Nanay would argue that the image is a narrative painting because floating is

an action that represents a prior and subsequent event. However, does the painting depict more than one event or simply suggest them? If the viewer's imagination is responsible for completing the narrative, then the painting itself is not narrative. Mark Curry argued that the narrative connection originates in the subject perceiving the narrative not in the object itself. Currie wrote that "narrativity judgments depend on our perception (including our misperception) of relations of dependence of some kind between the events described" (Curry 316).

Seymour Chapman in his book titled *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* argues that any discussion seeking to understand the underlying structure of something naturally assumes an autonomous object of which to discover the structure. Chapman clarifies this idea by pointing out the difference between a "real object" and an "aesthetic object." Chapman pulls from phenomenological aesthetics and writes that a "real object is the thing in the outside world, (a piece of marble). An aesthetic object is that which comes into existence when the observer experiences the real object aesthetically. – thus it is a construction (or reconstruction) in the observer's mind. - aesthetic objects can exist in the absence of the real object." (Chapman) If the narrativity of a painting is determined from an "aesthetic object" viewpoint then a painting can be a narrative. This is because the viewer's perception of the "real object" is taken into consideration to determine if a narrative connection is made. However, this also means that any object is capable of being a narrative as long as the subject perceives a narrative in an object. It may seem obvious to many that this fundamental understanding of reality has already been applied in the fine art world where anything and everything is art, for example Duchamp's urinal.

The distinction Chapman makes between a real object and an aesthetic object provides an explanation for why paintings are often thought of as narrative. In today's culture the "aesthetic object" worldview is privileged over the "real object" worldview. In fact in today's academic art world the idea of a "real object" is dismissed as foolish and naïve. This points out why it is important to use the category implied narrative instead of narrative. Understanding representational narrative paintings as implied narratives counters the contemporary fine art worldview that supports and encourages the despotic reign of the "aesthetic object" worldview. The category of implied narrative supports a worldview that recognizes the existence of a "real object". In other words, using implied narrative instead of narrative supports the idea that paintings have qualities and characteristics separate from the perception of a viewing subject. This is a pre-modern, pre-Kantian viewpoint that denies totalitarian rule of relativism. Implied narrative recognizes that the narrative is implied, meaning the representational painting does not depict a complete narrative. Instead the narrative is completed by the viewer who interacts with the inherent characteristics of a representational painting that encourages narrative thinking. Implied narrative as a category recognizes the participatory role of both the "aesthetic object" and "real object" viewpoint.

A more in-depth understanding of the relationship between viewers and paintings is further explained by Emma Kafalenos in her essay titled *Reading Visual Art, Making, and Forgetting, Fabulas*. Kafalenos argues that "a visual representation of a single scene is not a narrative" (Kafalenos). Kafalenos explains that a viewer of a painting interprets the isolated moment by imagining or recalling prior and subsequent moments. She refers to this imagining of moments that surround the isolated moment depicted by a painting as a fabula. A fabula is "a

chronologically ordered sequence of events that a perceiver constructs in response to a representation (a story, film, painting, or ballet) or to events perceived in the world” (Kafalenos). She continues to explain that “constructing a fabula is a hermeneutic procedure that enables viewers to explore temporal and causal relations among events, and between an isolated moment and prior and subsequent events.” (Kafalenos) Constructing a fabula allows viewers to make sense of the isolated moments they perceive. Implied narrative paintings encourage viewers to use their imagination to construct a fabula that brings order and understanding to their experiences.

In this way the implied narrative category emphasizes a more imaginative experience for the viewer as well as the artist. Kafalenos continues to explain that it is not just static images that are perceived as single moments, but all of reality. This means that the concept of a narrative is never fully manifested in any artwork, but is actually always the result of the viewer’s projected perception of a narrative onto a single moment. She continues by explaining that even though no art form depicts a true narrative, static images are often thought of as more open ended than other media, like film and literature. The author states that “a visually depicted scene can be conceived as a junction point--a crossroads--through which a number of narrative paths can pass, each of which includes the represented moment” (Kafalenos). This idea was also examined by Walter Benjamin in his essay titled *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In his essay, Benjamin makes a distinction between painting and film by showing painting to be static and film to be temporal. He points out that the static nature of paintings allows viewers the opportunity to contemplate and draw their own conclusions, whereas film distracts the viewer by presenting consecutive images. Benjamin might have argued that film is narrative,

while paintings are not because film can depict several events and provide a more complete and whole story. Because painting is incapable of depicting more than one event it is more open ended, therefore it leaves more room for the viewer's imagination. Implied narrative supports a view of representational painting that is inherently open ended. The ambiguous nature of many of today's representational paintings like *The Barrens* (fig.1) and *Adrift* (fig. 2) provides evidence that a true narrative is not being communicated. In fact the viewer and the painter are both free to construct fabulas in order to complete the story.

If representational paintings like Reyes's *The Barrens* (fig.1) and Lipking's *Adrift* (fig. 2) are better served by categorizing them as implied narratives, what are the implications for artists, viewers and the art world? First it is necessary to provide a general definition of an implied narrative. An implied narrative is an object that can only depict a single moment while at the same time suggesting the presence of several. An implied narrative does not provide a conclusive view or statement. Instead, it encourages the imagination of viewers to form fabulas and draw their own conclusions. The first implication of categorizing certain paintings as implied narratives is that the art object, as a "real object", is given equal authority with the viewer's subjective perception. This is because in order to come to the conclusion that these paintings are implied narratives instead of narratives, one must make a distinction between a "real object" and an "aesthetic object". Those on the side of implied narrative recognize the "real object" as having qualities and characteristics distinct from the viewer's perception or "aesthetic object". The contemporary academic art world does not acknowledge the existence of a "real object", instead they emphasize the "aesthetic object" viewpoint as all encompassing. The "aesthetic viewpoint" emphasizes the role of the viewer's perception over and above the "real object."

This has led to many unfavorable outcomes in the contemporary art world, most notably the diminishing of standards in art and painting as a result of the “art is whatever I say it is” theory. It is obvious that if subjective perception trumps the characteristics of an object then the characteristics of the object become insignificant. Implied narrative recognizes paintings as “real objects” not dependent on perception therefore capable of being held to universal standards and ideals.

The label of implied narrative also suggests that the role of the artist is to observe and question their experiences rather than to manipulate and coerce viewers to come to predetermined conclusions. Because narratives are inherently conclusive, calling a painting a narrative suggests that the painter is providing a conclusive statement for the viewer to interpret. A narrative painting would require the painter to have a predetermined conclusion to communicate in the painting. However, the static nature of painting inhibits painting’s ability to be conclusive through a narrative approach. This allows the painter to focus on observation and exploration rather than the profession of a predetermined view. In the implied narrative scenario, the role of the painter is to observe and question, while the role of the viewer is to think and answer. This is important in today’s contemporary art world which sees itself as a political factory. This is the result of the false distinction made between political art and propaganda as well as a false understanding of the role of an artist, which incidentally is encouraged by the category of narrative. Whereas many of today’s contemporary artists see viewers as things to be manipulated and convinced, the implied narrative categorization would emphasize the idea that viewers are free thinking agents with their own set of beliefs and values. It does this by allowing the viewer to construct a fabula. An implied narrative label also recognizes that the

painter not only plays the role of creator of the painting, but also of viewer. Often implied narrative paintings reveal that the painter is also trying to understand the static experience depicted in the painting. Labeling representational narrative paintings as implied narratives suggests that the role of a painter is as much of an observer and explorer as the audience.

The implied narrative label suggests an approach to painting that encourages imagination and thoughtfulness. This is because implied narrative paintings operate on a fundamental level. As Charles Caldemeyer argues “implied narrative paintings excite the very structures that are essential for human survival.” What he means by this is that implied narratives emphasize the structure of thought itself, which is a process of seeking causal relationships between events. This process harnesses the power of the imagination to see causal relationships between events that are not evident in the actual experience. Whereas “narratives not only connect the past, present, and future; they connect them by showing how the future emerges from the past and the present as a realization of a possibility that belongs to a range of alternative possibilities opened up by earlier events and states of affairs in the narrative” implied narrative simply point to our desire for recognizing causation itself (Carroll 3D 388). An implied narrative label suggests that paintings can foster the natural thought process which seeks to understand experiences. By categorizing representational narrative paintings as implied narratives, artists not only oppose the dominant understanding of art as a propaganda tool, but also support a more positive role for art, which is as a fundamental stimulant of free thought, contemplation and imagination.

Vincent Desiderio is a great example of a contemporary artist applying the concepts associated with implied narrative. Although not specifically stated as doing so, Desiderio creates implied narrative paintings like *Elegy* (fig. 3) and *Cockaigne* (fig. 4) which do not provide conclusive ideas, instead they encourage the viewer to construct fabulas. In *Elegy*, a man is in bed with what appears to be a sick child. The room is cluttered and is directly connected to a bathroom. The implied narrative content is so strong that the viewer cannot help thinking there is an answer to be discovered. Yet, each painting denies the possibility of communicating a conclusive message. Viewers are left to construct their own fabula in order to derive meaning from them. Every one of Desiderio's images asks questions as well as suggests that an answer is available through further investigation, yet they are never provided. Desiderio reinforces the limitations of painting, which is its inability to depict several events, by depicting a specific moment which depicts neither too much nor too little information. Lessing wrote that an image that is the most "fruitful" is that "which allows free play to the imagination. The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see. But no moment in the whole course of an action is so disadvantageous in this respect as that of its culmination" (Lessing,17). This suggests that the most conducive moment to depict is not the one that represents the culmination of an action, but rather the one that lies somewhere between the spark and the culmination. Desiderio's paintings seem to always depict the perfect middle event. And not just any middle event, but the perfect middle event for suggesting that it belongs within other events left up to the viewer to imagine.

There are many negative consequences that come from mislabeling representational narrative paintings as narratives, the most important being that artists and viewers believe that

conclusive statements are derived from the painting itself rather than from their own perception. This may be why representational narrative paintings are often thought of as nostalgic, sentimental, conservative, illustration and even kitsch. Each of these derogatory terms suggest a conclusive view of reality, one in which the painter is no longer asking questions and observing an ever-changing reality. For instance illustration is generally thought to have a predetermined story to communicate or nostalgia suggests that the artist has a conclusive view that supports the view that the past is better than the present. This is not to say that these terms are inherently negative, but that they are associated with conclusive viewpoints.

Establishing a label and category such as implied narrative offers a way for many representational painters to establish a counter position to the dominant contemporary view of art which is as a political tool used to manipulate and coerce. It does this by emphasizing the open ended and participatory nature of static images.

Implied narrative suits painting better because it reflects both its qualities and limitations. In fact its qualities are a result of its most prominent limitation, its static nature. Its static nature allows viewers to contemplate and draw their own conclusions. The inability of paintings to be true narratives allows them to be more open ended and in this way they are a better reflection of reality which is ongoing and seemingly inconclusive. An implied narrative category suggests that the role of the painter is to observe, question and stimulate imagination, while the role of the viewer is to think, contemplate and imagine. Implied narratives encourage viewers to use their own imagination and understanding. This view promotes an understanding that values human beings as free thinking individuals that are ends in themselves rather than simply means to an end. An implied narrative label would promote freedom and potentiality rather than

conditioning and manipulation. Throughout most of art history, painters have relied on the ideas argued in this paper concerning implied narrative. The painters of the past understood that their role was to stimulate and encourage the use of imagination, rather than to manipulate and coerce viewers, and their paintings are proof of this. The best paintings have always encouraged viewers to imagine rather than forcing them to have a particular belief. By re-labeling paintings previously understood as narratives as implied narratives, representational painting can reassert its positive role in culture, which is to stimulate imagination, mystery and wonder.

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1. Julio Reyes, The Barrens, Oil on copper plate



2. Jeremy Lipking, Adrift, Oil on Linen



3. Vicent Desiderio, *Elegy*, Oil on canvas, 1995



4. Vicent Desiderio, Cockaigne, Oil on canvas, , 1993–2003

