

Elisabeth Wagner-Durand, Alexander Heinemann
& Barbara Fath

Image – Narrative – Context
Visual Narration in Cultures and Societies of the Old World

Image, narrative, and context – each of these terms relates to broad and transdisciplinary issues and thus deserves individualized approaches and attention to a variety of interrelated aspects. Consequently, each term has been discussed intensely and used within a host of different disciplines, some of which are represented in this volume. Yet in the context of the studies assembled here and the conference they stem from, it is the concept of narrative¹ that ties them together in addressing the broader subject of visual storytelling. Narratives are indeed manifest in forms and media other than just oral expressions and literary practices,² as images may depict and artefacts refer to them in a variety of ways.³ Due to their materiality, these artefacts and images appear and operate in specific contexts – they are used, observed, venerated, and even destroyed. Very much like their verbal and literary counterparts, the visual narratives embodied on material objects may create meaning and enforce identities. They do so by referring to crucial collective notions and by relating to the practices they are embedded in; their understanding thus is heavily dependent on these very practices and on the social dynamics they participate in.

The complex entanglement of visual and material culture, narration, and their respective contexts can only be grasped, described, and analyzed against specific historical and cultural backgrounds, and this holds especially true for those societies in which material culture is, for various reasons, especially prominent (e.g., sole expression in material culture, tradition, lack of written sources). This is a challenge historical and cultural studies, and the archaeologies in particular, have to live up to

¹ Cf. Nünning 2011/2012.

² Of the virtually countless contributions to narratology made within mostly text-based disciplines such as linguistics and literary studies reference here be made to the significant works by Forster 1927; Ricoeur 1983–1985; Barthes 1957; Chatman 1978; Herman 2007; Ryan 2004; Schmid 2014; Fludernik 2008; Klein and Martinez 2009; Boyd 2009; Rüsen 1987.

³ Beyond artefacts, narratives can also be *inscribed* into architecture and broader landscapes: cf. Linke and Wagner-Durand forthcoming, based on Connerton 1989 and Rowlands 1993.

when trying to assess the role of narrative images in (pre-)historic life-worlds, and it calls for mutual exchange with other disciplines.

Investigation into visual narration in its tangible material expressions and respective cultural practices lies at the heart of this volume. Its contributions focus on a variety of angles and issues, ranging from the differences between visual and material cultures in terms of narrative potential to their respective relation to oral story-telling; from the outward appearance of visualized narratives to their inner structure and grammar; from the broader agendas governing their emergence to their social, political, and religious setting. Though the papers assembled here address different questions and make use of the most diverse source material, taken together they are intended as a toolbox for trans- and interdisciplinary approaches to the subject, not necessarily coherent, and definitely not exhaustive, but one meaningful step towards a common ground.

The Emergence of the Project

This volume is the outcome of a joint venture that initially brought together its editors, archaeologists from different sub-disciplines, namely Ancient Near Eastern and Classical Archaeology as well as Prehistory. Having started as a successful application for a Young Researchers' Conference advertised by the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies (FRIAS), the project grew into a larger symposium co-financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG), bringing together junior and senior scholars from different disciplines engaging with visualized and materialized narratives across millennia and continents. Though the combined use of image studies and narratology is in and of itself far from new,⁴ in the course of planning and running the conference, it became evident that substantial contributions of material culture studies to this field are, to a large extent, still pending. While a growing number of surveys deal with the subject of visual narration, there is still a tendency to focus on the images' content at the expense of interrelated aspects, including the social contexts determining the development of narrative representations within diverse media and the cultural practices accommodating narration and narratives. It is in fact the entanglement of early visual narratives within their historical and social contexts we seek to understand.

Since we have not been looking for homogeneous, mainstream, and straightforward answers but rather transdisciplinary and challenging perspectives, we have

⁴ For narratological studies engaging with archaeological artefacts, see below. On the whole, the focus of visual narratology has been on films, photographs and other new visual media of the modern era: see e.g., Chatman 1978; Brink 1998; Ryan 2004; Grishakova and Ryan 2010; Kuhn 2013; Cohn 2014; Alber 2014.

aimed to bring together a substantially diverse range of disciplines with their respective baggage of phenomena and methodologies. Consequently, the conference covered a wide span both temporally – from prehistory to the postmodern present – and spatially – from Western Europe to Eastern Asia. Specialists from different disciplines, including Linguistics, Sinology, Indology, Ethnology, Modern History, Art History, Classical Archaeology, Archaeology of the Roman Provinces, Byzantine Art History, Near Eastern Archaeology, Ancient Near Eastern Philology, and Prehistory threw in both their expertise and approaches to enrich the debate on visual narration. In joining the methodological strengths of these disciplines and by exploring their respective blind spots, the papers collected here appeal for mutual understanding, trying to bridge the gaps between differing scholarly terminologies and paradigms.

It is perhaps more than a coincidence that this issue was addressed in Freiburg, of all places. Numerous projects and initiatives within the local research environment have engaged with narratological issues from a historical perspective⁵ and doubtlessly encouraged analogous enterprises in material culture studies. Moreover, the widely differentiated archaeological disciplines at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität have, in recent years, become heavily involved with matters of visual culture and its practices, and the new series this volume appears in, *Freiburger Studien zur Archäologie und visuellen Kultur*, bears testimony to this development.

Questions and Aims

Both in the run-up and during the conference the intricate issue of defining narrative has proved, paradoxically, both rewarding and frustrating. Is it helpful to devise a visually oriented classification discrete from those developed within linguistics – or should there be a universal idea of what constitutes a narrative, regardless of the media used? Above all, the question must be raised whether these taxonomical musings are, eventually, useful: Have they become an exercise in dialectic *l'art pour l'art* or do they actually provide the means to answer our questions about beginnings, contexts, functions, and practices? Needless to say, different disciplines and various scholars have brought forward a variety of (at times contradictory) definitions focusing on different aspects of narratives and the act of narration.⁶ It comes as no surprise then, that many contributions show a widely differing understanding of narrative and narration: some emphasize the story (*histoire*) itself; others turn

⁵ The University of Freiburg has housed several graduate study groups (Graduiertenkollegien) focused on pertinent issues such as *Geschichte und Erzählen* und *Fiktionales und Faktuales Erzählen*.

⁶ Cf. Forster 1927, 82–83; Genette 1983, 15; 18–19; Onega Jaén and García Landa 1996, 3; Fludernik 1996, 14–30; Klein and Martínez 2009b, 6–7 (*Wirklichkeitserzählungen*); Schmid 2014, 13; Goldie 2014, 8; Prince 2003, 53. For further definitions, such as those of Paul Ricoeur, Horace Porter Abbott, Peter Brooks, and Marie-Laure Ryan, see Ryan 2007, 23, 28.

their attention to the discourse. Some state that the material world, in particular images, have to tell the story by themselves, while others focus on the given relation to existing narratives. Doubtlessly, what a narrative is and how storytelling proceeds visually, depends heavily on the definition applied and the minimal conditions (e.g., mediacy/mediation; change of situation/temporality; experientiality/narrativity) scholars postulate in order to identify a narrative, in any given media.

The classificatory and terminological concerns with narrative run, however, much deeper and well beyond those of definition. Scholars of narratology have frequently taken issue with matters of content and form, and of story (*histoire*) and discourse respectively.⁷ Taking the ancient sculptural group of Laocoön and his sons as a starting point, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was one of the most prominent early modern thinkers to discuss narrative in relation to the visual arts. The latter, Lessing argued, were incapable to tell stories since they could not render elapsing time – a verdict, yet, that has been up for debate ever since.⁸ With reference to classical antiquity, Franz Wickhoff established a classification of the narrativity of images.⁹ Successful though it was, it was not to remain the only attempt of its kind: Half a century after Wickhoff, Kurt Weitzman, established yet another scheme;¹⁰ since then, attempts to classify potential visual narratives have been made over and over again,¹¹ introducing and applying terms such as monoscenic, monophasial, synoptic, pluriscenic or polyphaseal, sequential, continuous, and culminating, as can be found in the the works of Anthony Snodgrass,¹² Aron K. Varga,¹³ Vidja Deheja,¹⁴ Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell¹⁵ and Werner Wolf,¹⁶ to name a few.

The terminologies and models developed by these and other scholars¹⁷ usually concerned with specific periods, cultures and societies raise the question, whether

⁷ The latter being a term brought into the narratological debate namely by Seymour Chatman (1978).

⁸ See also Weixler in this volume.

⁹ Wickhoff 1912: This is a revised edition of the first edition of 1895. Wickhoff describes forms of visual narration such as *kontinuierend*, *komplettierend* and *distinguierend*.

¹⁰ Weitzmann 1970: Second edition with addenda of the first publication in 1947.

¹¹ For a history of classification systems such as those of Paul Meyboom, Jeffrey Hurwit and Marilyn A. Lavin, see Horváth 2016.

¹² Snodgrass 1982.

¹³ Varga 1990.

¹⁴ Deheja 1990 and Deheja 1997.

¹⁵ Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999.

¹⁶ Wolf 2003.

¹⁷ See above; see also, among others, Meyboom 1978; Snodgrass 1982; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999; Giuliani 2003; Huth 2003; Huth 2005; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951; Güterbock 1957; Winter 1985; Bahrani 2002; Watanabe 2004; Watanabe 2008; Watanabe 2014; Winter 1981; Reade 1979a; Nadali 2006; Sonik 2014; Suter 2014; Linke and Wagner-Durand forthcoming a; Kessler and Shreve 1985; Kemp 1989; Karpf 1994; Jäger 1998.

they apply on a transcultural level, too. This is of course a two-edged sword often encountered in enquiries transcending different disciplines and their traditions. On the one hand, specific cultural phenomena call for the development of fitting methodologies; on the other hand, if we intend to engage in a meaningful dialogue on any issue, we will have to engage at least in part with ideas and terminologies established within other disciplines and for other historical contexts. As far as models and typologies of storytelling and its visualization are concerned, it simply is not particularly fruitful to engage, for instance, in a specifically prehistoric narratology as opposed to a Byzantine one. Moving towards shared terminological frameworks may highlight uncomfortable differences, e. g. that some cultures feature a broader and more complex range of narrative phenomena to be studied than others, but this does neither debase nor simplify any single discipline's endeavors to understand the meanings and workings of narratives embedded in any given material or visual culture.

With its focus on the Mediterranean and Oriental cultures of the Old World, the conference aimed, among other things, to study early instances of storytelling through artefacts and visual means. Looking at different prehistoric and historic contexts of narratives, means reviewing those constellations and conditions apt to trigger acts of narration. These cultural horizons are to be seen against the backdrops of emerging literacy, the legitimization of power, the establishment of social rituals and protocols as well as the workings of collective memory. In this broader context, many narratives found their way into writing, with some even becoming canonized.¹⁸ These written accounts may contradict or expand on stories articulated visually, be it in long storyboards or condensed into single symbols.

Still, the focus on early visuality chosen in this volume is not meant to pit images versus texts or claim any kind of chronological priority. Quite the contrary, the contributors have been asked to engage with the mediality of their sources, this being a crucial point, especially in the study of narratives. Understanding images and objects as media with an agency of their own, means taking into account their mutual and dynamic interrelation with the social environment. They are, therefore, much more than pure containers of the narratives they refer to. By consequence, a contextual understanding of these narratives will not limit itself to extrapolating 'standalone' stories. Rather, in order to understand the varying ways stories are made sense of in cultural practice, we need to grasp the interlocking mechanisms and constraints of different visual, material and performative media featuring these stories and the social and ideological fields they operate in.

What transpires from a debate that reaches back into the centuries and has been led with growing intensity over the last decades is the ongoing, intrinsic attraction

¹⁸ Cf. Assmann 2007.

of narratives to cultural scholars, both as a repository of cultural meaning and as a tool of social interaction. Cross-culturally, narratives encode, store, communicate, and negotiate meaning and identity, and they do so from their inception in ongoing processes of (re)telling and adapting, occurring in the most widely differing contexts. The papers collected here look at the fundamental question of how these contexts – social practices, religious rituals, and demonstrations of political power – interact with, and re-affect the images, artefacts and narratives in question. This, of course, presupposes a notion of narration as a cultural practice to be understood in the context of the specific culture and society in which it is enacted. This is of course, an approach deeply ingrained in archaeological practice with its strong emphasis on contexts; in narratological debates, however, the heuristic relevance of context has been hotly disputed and even dismissed by some. In order to solve this impasse, the literary scholar Ansgar Nünning has called for “an alliance between narratology and cultural history”,¹⁹ a slogan downright programmatic for a conference as the one presented here. The cultural historians who contributed to it, in many ways heed Nünning’s rallying cry.

Why use images for storytelling? Social functions of visual narratives

What are the social dynamics leading to the production of narrative images in the first place? Luca Giuliani (*Emergenz und soziale Funktion narrativer Bilder in Griechenland*) picks up the central argument laid out in his milestone monograph, *Bild und Mythos*,²⁰ and elucidates the historical context of the phenomenon’s earliest instances in the Greek world. Since his fundamental distinction between descriptive and narrative images as sketched in the first part of his paper is crucial for several of the essays collected here, it may be in order to summarize it briefly. The subject matter of images defined as ‘descriptive’ refers to the contemporary world as it is perceived by its denizens. It is a world marked by recurring events and nameless figures, but it is neither devoid of spectacular actions nor of fabulous creatures, insofar as the contemporaries consider them as habitual features of their environment. Images depicting them may provide vivid descriptions, but will not by themselves evoke a specific storyline. This is what singles out ‘narrative’ images as they appear on Greek artefacts from around 700 BCE onwards; by displaying elements at odds with the world of their viewers, the latter can only make sense of them through understanding them as depictions of unique events. A horse on wheels, a man bare-handedly strangling a lion, three nobly clad women approaching a man of lower status (Giuliani’s example of choice in the present paper) – each

¹⁹ Nünning 2009, 53.

²⁰ Giuliani 2003.

of these visual irritations literally demands a narrative explanation, and to come up with it, the viewer(s) will necessarily need to know the corresponding story.

It is not the rise of the Homeric epic or cultural interactions that give rise to this phenomenon, Giuliani argues, but the drive and need for distinction within Greek aristocracy. Within elite contexts such as the drinking feast and its pottery (where most narrative images occur), the ability to compete playfully in this ‘show and tell’ activity critically enhanced the viewer’s status among his peers. While familial descent in Greece never had been a strong means of social distinction and notions of individual excellence on the battlefield changed rapidly with the advent of Hoplite warfare, the cultural capital displayed in telling the story behind a luxurious object signaled the well-bred speaker’s appreciation of and his partaking in contemporary elite culture. Early Greek visual narratives ultimately come into being as vehicles for the practices of social competition within the elite.

Davide Nadali’s paper (*The Power of Narratives in the Ancient Near East*) turns to the issue of why one would communicate via visual narratives in the altogether different social context of ancient Mesopotamia. In his diachronic approach, he examines the widely differing visual narrative expressions applied in the region. While the political dimensions of the use of narrative styles in order to “impose [...] thought, will, and vision of the world” seem quite evident from the very beginning of visual narratives, the intended audience of the respective images remains still obscure. Working on the assumption that access to visual narratives is quite limited, even in Neo-Assyrian times when visual storytelling exceeds anything known before in Mesopotamia, the audience remains restricted to the in-group of the king. Nadali sees one reason for using visual narratives in the images’ power to manage and communicate time.²¹ In this vein, the narratives were nonverbal tools also addressed to the king himself and designed to order life and life worlds temporally in the past, the present, and the future.

Structuring Images, Viewing Stories

The dichotomy between narrative and descriptive established by Giuliani notwithstanding, there is much room for differentiation when analysing the potential of images to evoke collectively relevant stories. In his study of hero images in early Greek visual culture, Ralf von den Hoff (*Vom Heros erzählen. Visuelle Strategien der Heldennarration im antiken Griechenland*) distinguishes different ways of putting these extraordinary figures into focus. Images referring to narratives, he argues, are not about visualizing a given process, but rather aim at assigning specific qualities to focalized agents and actions. In this framework, emphasizing an individual figure

²¹ The author refers to Ricoeur 1983–1985.

within a descriptive scene can be understood as a starting point for the development of the imagery of heroic narratives. While late Geometric and early archaic images occasionally set a hero-figure apart through size, attribute, or an inscribed name, the evidence from sixth-century vase-painting qualifies the hero through the eyes of spectator groups included in the scenes. Within the increasingly competitive and interrelated society of the archaic polis, it is ultimately larger groups who create the hero by testifying to his deeds and passing authoritative judgment on him. This element disappears in early red-figure imagery of around 500 BCE. Theseus as Athens' quintessential hero acts on his own; his exceptionality is rooted not in his outward appearance (quite the contrary), but in the sheer multitude of his interventions. In the specific case of heroic myth, the study of different narrative strategies bears heavily on our understanding of contemporary social and political concerns.

Antonius Weixler's contribution (*Bild – Erzählung – Rezeption. Narrativität in Erzählforschung und Kunstwissenschaft*) introduces concepts and terms of narratology from literary studies, namely "Mittelbarkeit" and "Zustandsveränderung". He also argues for a phenomenon of narrativization taking place in the course of reception. Narrativization, he claims, includes cognitive narrative processes that are not directly embedded in the object. The author explains current concepts of narration in visual studies with emphasis on the crucial representation of time and aims at replacing the concept of narrative time (*Erzählzeit*) with the one of time of perception (or reception). Weixler further focuses on archaeologically and historically relevant means to identify narrative visualizations. In the following, he creates a typology of pictorial narrativity based on Erwin Panofsky's works on iconographic analyses and iconological interpretation in combination with Max Imdahl's iconic concept that releases the artwork from any requirements made by language.²²

With *The Techniques of the Narrative Representations in Old India*, Monika Zin presents the most characteristic features of the narrative representations in the kingdom of Sātavāhanas in India in the 1st c. BCE and the 3rd c. CE. With regard to the archaeological remains, the strong relations and reciprocal exchanges with the Classical world are striking. At the same time, her findings highlight ways of dealing with the representation of time and space in complex scenic art highly unconventional from a Mediterranean point of view, stressing the crucial importance of cross-cultural perspectives.

In the last chapter of this section, *Intermediary Moments: Framing and scrolling devices across painting, print and film in China's visual narratives*, Shane McCausland traces the use of recursions, both formal and semantic, within visual narratives from ancient and modern China. Starting from three seemingly disparate

²² Panofsky 1975; Imdahl 1981.

examples (an early medieval scroll, luxurious 17th c. illustrations, and a 2006 feature film) he shows how the main narrative of each is didactically reinforced, ironically subverted, or, melancholically intertwined through other narratives. Well-established figurations and metaphors – the mountain as expression of imperial power; the rhythm and sequence of dynastic procreation; human existence likened to that of puppets, shades and reflections – refer to both the texts in question and other images and provide varying sorts of *mises en abîme*. Such recurring recursions are part of an ongoing and self-conscious tradition in Chinese visual culture. On a more general level, McCausland's argument (very much like von den Hoff's and others in this volume) effectively shows how issues of narrativity can hardly be framed satisfactorily without reference to both the wider historical context and the modes of visual expression available.

Things that Talk and Things that Tell

In his contribution *In Geschichten verstrickt. Was Dinge erzählen und was nicht*, Hans Peter Hahn concentrates on the variability of the meaning of things. Considering Roland Barthes'²³ groundbreaking work and relating it to the concept of entanglement,²⁴ Hahn challenges the concept that things tell a singular, linear, and unchanging story. The author argues for an understanding of material objects through a differential and diachronic, non-static view. It is, Hahn argues, by unraveling the (diachronic) entanglement of things and by considering their embeddedness in different *Lebenswelten* (life worlds) that we will be able to unseal the wide-ranging area of meaning expressed by and through things.

Jennifer Bagley (*Narrative and context of early La Tène art in Central Europe*) presents a case study on specific motifs and their relation to archaeological objects. Usually these are single motifs that most often appear on objects that could be used as pendants or other items of adornment worn directly on the human body. But a few of these objects show actual scenic motifs identifiable as narrative images, still, many of them have 'shape changing' qualities hinting at underlying narrative dynamics. According to Bagley, almost none of these motifs can be clearly identified or be considered as sources for knowledge about societal conventions, worldviews and religious life. But it is one of their characteristics that there is not only a specific connection between the objects and the motifs shown on them but also to specific activities linked to structures and the way of life in La Tène society.

Daniel Ebrecht and Barbara Fath expand the definition of *image* in their contribution *Woven stories: The golden thread in the Early Iron Age*. They not only focus on

²³ e.g., Barthes 1957.

²⁴ Schapp 1953; Hodder 2012; Thomas 1991.

objects with figurative motives, but also define some objects in and by themselves as figurative markers in their specific context and combination. The different forms of textiles in Early Iron Age burials in Italy and the surrounding Alpine region have to be considered in this perspective. In burial contexts, specific everyday objects were deposited together with their representations in pictures and miniatures and became symbolic with regard to this specific environment. Due to the fact that in oral societies, information cannot be stored in the same way as in literate contexts, this treatment of objects can be considered as a performative act through which their narrative character is disseminated in oral cultures, especially in the context of burials and the preceding funerals.

Performative Contexts of Visual Narratives

The contribution of Elisabeth Wagner-Durand (*Narration. Description. Reality: The Neo-Assyrian Royal Hunt*) merges the concepts of visual narrativity, royal legitimation, and image perception. By reviewing the royal lion hunt of the Neo-Assyrian kings as an ancient and traditional topic of Mesopotamian royal ideology and propaganda, the author draws a distinction between depicted tales of reality²⁵ showing a course of events and therefore telling the story by themselves and symbolized magical visual presences of the royal hunter that are spatio-temporally unbound and therefore understood as timeless. Both forms of visual materialization, often used in equally different contexts, serve distinct purposes by using different ways of referencing that hark back to one common meta-narrative.

Michaela Luisellis' contribution (*Visualising Religion. Narration, Performance and Interaction in Religious Scenes of Ancient Egypt*) is dedicated to the so-called private stelae of New Kingdom Egypt. These monuments depict individuals making offering to deities. Alongside the characterization of these images as 'Bildakte'²⁶ and despite the canonized codes used in them, individual experiences of religious and ritual nature are communicated by what the author calls "narrative visual elements". Luiselli ascribes this apparent dichotomy to the functions the stelae had to fulfill. While the canonized elements expressed the performative character of the stelae, which acted on behalf of the donor when they were erected, the narrative elements conveyed their individuality and their relation to reality.

Caroline van Eck (*Visual Retellings: The Medusa Rondanini and the Rise of the Tableau Vivant*) delves into the realm of performative-based reception of art and how protocols of viewing influence a narrative understanding of works of art, especially sculpture in the decades around 1800. Her combined take on ekphrasis as a

²⁵ Based on the differentiation made in Klein and Martínez 2009b.

²⁶ Assmann 2007, 99–120.

technique of reframing the image as text and on viewing rituals aimed at enlivening the petrified highlight the period's preoccupation with visual narrative. Animated displays of statuary not only aimed at extrapolating and activating the images' narrative power; they also prefigure contemporary notions on the agency of art, by embedding viewers and statues alike in performances, where art seems to turn actively on a (terrified) viewer and conventional relationships of visual appreciation are playfully capsized.

Mediatic Contexts of Visual Narratives

Martin Guggisberg's paper *Handlungsbilder oder handelnde Bilder? Narrative Konstruktionen in der eisenzeitlichen Kunst nördlich und südlich der Alpen* focuses on anthropomorphic sculpture in prehistoric burial contexts of the Iron Age Circumalpine regions. He stresses the differences between these sculptures (and figurative Celtic art in general) from Mediterranean visual culture, differences that come to the fore especially when analyzing their respective narrative potential. Though the monuments from Central Europe he discusses cannot be defined as 'narrative' in a strict sense, they may be seen within a performative frame work of special activities and staging. This performative character applies not only to sculptures in burial contexts but also to small objects and the specific forms they take in early La Tène Art. Both operate with a specific form of movement that connects the viewer to the object and involves him as an actor in a narrative-like process. In this vein, the art production north and south of the Alps shows to be closely interconnected, sharing fundamental concepts concerning the relation between media and viewer.

Issues of mediality as part of the complex relationship between images, narratives, and their social context are also tackled by Alexander Heinemann (*The Cave, the Gaze, the Bride, and her Lover: The Constraints of Narrating Desire on a Hellenistic Mirror*). Starting from the décor of an early Hellenistic mirror, he analyses a recurrent element of Greek myth, i.e., men voyeuristically spying upon women grooming themselves. Their depiction on toiletry, especially mirrors – objects with a built-in focus on seeing and being seen – is crucial for understanding their function as emphatically underscoring and exalting social practice. Though hardly depicting an actual sequence of events, these scenes constitute set-pieces, understood by the audience as triggers, not necessarily suggesting a specific course of ensuing events, but opening up a dialectic situation calling for the viewer to negotiate its underlying fault lines.

In discussing the complex network of visual media, narratives, and social contexts that constitute the central agenda of this volume, the contributions collected therein tie in to current debates within the broader field of cultural studies. Still, they represent

neither an all-embracing attempt to analyze and understand visual and material narration in past societies *tout court*, nor the closure of a long ongoing debate. All attempts at finding mutual understanding, shared definitions, and general methodologies notwithstanding, the results overall highlight diversity: diversity in the questions asked, in definitions given, in approaches taken – all the material at hand, and the societies analyzed. Within a given context, narratives may be perceived and experienced in virtually every realm of the material world, from the human body to stone monuments, from perishable paper work to metal vessels, and from small seals of stone to rock art, landscapes, and burials. Indeed, the diversities the contributions of this volume testify to reflect the variety of avenues people from early days on have taken in order to materialize stories. This variety by itself illuminates the deep impact these tales exerted. As Norbert Meuter states: “stories speak to us on a far deeper emotional level”.²⁷

Stories are indeed a fundamental aspect of the human experience, constituting meaning for any recipient familiar with their codes. As such, all stories sprung from the human mind are bound to be externalized in any possible form they can take. They permeate all sectors of human life; they condense, constitute, and transmit meaning. They are a profound part of human nature articulated in distinct contexts in the most different forms. Considering this overwhelming diversity of material storytelling in contextual perspective, the contributions of this volume are by no means exhaustive; they do, however, both allow comparative views and open new perspectives on these forms and contexts in all their geographic breadth and chronological depth.

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