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The Power of Narrative Pictures in Ancient Mesopotamia

The three figures are painted, can't you see that? Painted. You have seen plenty of films and this isn't a film. You must see that there is no way you will ever see them looking any different. This is a painting, a painting.

J. Marías, *A Heart So White*, New York 2000.

Pictures have always exerted power over viewers: sometimes pictures properly convey emotions and meanings of joy, fear, sorrow and excitement, thus influencing and stimulating the reactions of the viewers; conversely, viewers confer emotions and meanings upon pictures depending on their own personal desires, often conditioned by cultural (political and religious) factors.¹ In this respect, viewers interpret and ascribe meanings and desires to pictures reflecting their own wishes and expectations, rather than looking for what pictures wanted (if they really wanted something).² The encounter between pictures and viewers is the vital moment of expression and interaction between the two worlds: indeed, it is this confrontation that determines the special value of pictures in society as a cultural product that deeply influences and founds the current life of people, being not only a sign recollecting memories from the past, but also a fundamental component for the future.

What happens with narrative pictures? Do narrative pictures have a different function and do they exert a different power? I think that narratives, expressed both through words and images, have a special function in society as they contribute to changing the historical perspective (either subjective or objective), in particular by allowing humans to master the concept of time that can be thus “materialised” and perceived as properly human.³ Distinguishing between non-narrative pictures and

¹ Freedberg 1989.

² Mitchell 2005.

³ Ricœur 1983, 85.

narrative pictures implies that not all pictures are narrative; that is, they are not intended to tell a story. Scholars have tried to explain the different natures of pictures in great detail, identifying categories and types according to various aspects of the composition and shape. Even within the category of narrative pictures, different sub-types have been recognised according to the stylistic composition of the narration, repetition of the figures, treatment of the pictorial surface, succession of time, and the development of the narration (simultaneous narrative, continuous narrative, cyclic narrative, or progressive narrative).⁴

Pictures are not all, therefore, narrative. Narratives must have a precise structure and development, according to the definition given by Peter Goldie:⁵

A narrative is a representation of events which is shaped, organized, and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure – coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import – to what is narrated.

Conversely, however, it could also be argued that non-narrative pictures can undergo a narrative process, becoming narrative pictures in themselves: pictures that are not expression of a narrative and do not tell an event or an episode can become object of narratives, where pictures become the protagonist of the story (what is narrated). In this context, pictures acquire a narrative nature due to the narrative construction(s) built upon and around them. Groups of statues and pictures without narrative content can thus be arranged and displayed according to what we could label as an induced narrative; that is, the single pictures are shaped, organised, and coloured to present an event. For instance, taking the Mesopotamian temples into account, statues of gods and kings were displayed and placed so as to create kinds of *tableaux vivants*, concretely manifesting the encounter of (the statue of) the god and (the statue of) the king.⁶ In this respect, not only might narratives be induced, but this mechanism actually develops the possibility of meta-narratives.

This implication is also strengthened by the Mesopotamian conceptual idea that pictures are alive, that they do not copy reality, but are absolutely real, acting in the world on their own.⁷ For that reason, next to pictures that are properly narrative –

⁴ On the historiography and terminology of the different types and style of visual narration, see Robert 1881; Wickhoff 1895; Weitzman 1970, 12–36; Shapiro 1994, 7–10; Snodgrass 1982; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999; Giuliani 2003. For the application of narrative methods to the art of the Ancient Near East, see Güterbock 1957; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951; Reade 1979a; Nadali 2006; Watanabe 2004; 2008; 2013.

⁵ Goldie 2012, 8.

⁶ Winter 1992, 25–26.

⁷ See Bahrani 2003.

that have been conceived, shaped and organised to tell and perform a story – other living pictures can subsequently have a narrative content thanks to their agentive nature. However, agentivity is not a synonym for narrativity; the agentive nature of pictures can be the element, or even the fundamental prerequisite, on which to build an ascribed narrativity.⁸

As a consequence, could those induced narrative pictures be considered as pure narrative pictures? Taking the definition of narrative previously expressed into account, the answer should be negative: instead, these pictures could be better defined as descriptive or evocative, as they do not properly tell a story, developed in space across a fixed time, but rather (re)present the culminating moment of a process of actions which, in most cases, can be referred to myths and rites that happen in undefined landscapes (space), showing the recurrent and repetitive nature of time.⁹ Those pictures are thus the manifest expression of the atemporal transcendental dimension that only narrative can transform into a humanly-perceivable time as a condition of the human temporal existence, pointing out the cyclic repetition of the actions and time as narrated by the pictures.¹⁰ In this respect, the choice of narrative plot by the ancient sculptors explains the necessity of mastering Time, as it might be argued for the representation of lion hunting in the Assyrian bas-reliefs of the 9th (Assurnasirpal II) and 7th (Assurbanipal) centuries BC. Lion hunting occurs in an undefined landscape that might be interpreted as the realistic representation of the artificial arena, on the one hand; on the other, the absence of any environmental details recalls the non-characterisation of the landscape of mythical scenes, as they share the non-human nature of Time. Within the ritual performance of the hunt, the Assyrian king thus becomes the bridge between the two spheres, acting cyclically and repeatedly on fixed occasions.¹¹

When did narrative pictures first appear in the Ancient Near East? If one looks at the production of narratives through words and pictures in the ancient Near East, from the fourth to the first millennia BC, the “catalogue” of examples and occurrences is huge, encompassing several different visual solutions. The presence of written and visual narratives represents one of the most interesting and intrigu-

⁸ On the fundamental distinction between an element (agency, narrativity etc.) marked and an element ascribed, see Winter 2007. In her article, Winter distinguishes an agency marked, as properly belonging to the ancient culture, from an agency ascribed, belonging on the contrary to the analyst. As concerns narrativity, I suggest we speak of a narrativity ascribed by and within the originating culture as the result of construction of fictions in relation to specific contexts.

⁹ Winter 1996a.

¹⁰ Ricoeur 1983, 85; Tilley 1994, 31–33.

¹¹ Winter 1996a. On the temporal nature of lion hunt in Assurnasirpal II's and Assurbanipal's bas-reliefs, see also Nadali 2010 and Nadali 2018, respectively.

ing aspects of the modern and contemporary considerations about the creation and perception of narratives by ancient Near Eastern people across time.

The manner of studying the creation of narratives, particularly in visual media, deeply changed in recent times: we passed from a reading of pictures (based on the contribution of the “linguistic turn” in Western philosophy) to a more suitable consideration of the value and meaning of pictures in how they have been displayed and shaped to tell a story (thus speaking of a “pictorial turn”) up to what we could label a properly “narratological turn” with consideration of the role and meaning of communicative positions, temporal relations, and character roles.¹²

When looking at visual narratives, interpretations and terminology descended from the approach of the “linguistic turn”, actually mixing images and words, trying to reading pictures and recognising codes of language: however, narrative (and particularly visual narrative) does not depend on language, or at least it sounds inappropriate to uncritically apply rules and forms of language to pictures. We still speak of reading of images, however, but research on the meaning and value of visual narratives should not be overlooked in their readability: rather, using the new perspective of the biocultural approach,¹³ the comprehension of episodes and events, the formation of representations of events and the invention of stories really mark the capabilities and inclinations of human beings to build up stories as an effective cultural product.

In past traditions of studies of visual narratives, attention has been broadly dedicated to “what” narratives tell and represent, while most recent analyses point to “how” pictures are represented, shaped and spatially displayed to tell a story.¹⁴ The identification of different narrative methods and styles were aimed at categorising the different types of stories that have been invented and told through pictures, but we should try to concentrate on “how pictures are represented” instead of “what they represent” in order to properly grasp the meaning of their message and the way of telling the development of events in time and space. In fact, time and space are the two most representative categories of narratives: within a very long debate, the possibility for pictures to tell a story has been denied due to their inability of expressing and representing time.¹⁵ Influenced by the idea of the flow of time, how could it be possible to represent time through fixed pictures? But are they fixed pictures? Maybe we should start rethinking the role of pictures and their presence within the society in constant and reciprocal relationships with both the viewers and the surrounding space: in fact, narrative images do not simply copy reality, fixing an event in static

¹² Boyd 2009, 129–131.

¹³ Boyd 2009, 130.

¹⁴ Nadali 2006, 296–300.

¹⁵ Mitchell 1986, 48, 100–101; Crawford 2014, 242–251.

figures, but they remake it, performing the story in their own space and time. Once pictures have been fashioned and figures have been placed in the space to tell their story, the process of seeing enacts the performative nature of narrative pictures so that the intervals (literally the “space between”)¹⁶ transform into time, and we no longer look at the figures next to each other, but rather one after the other, in narrative succession and not as a juxtaposition.¹⁷ Narratives have a very strong social value as they interact with the space around, in particular with the peripersonal space and personal time of the viewer who looks at and follows the progression of the narrated events. It is not just a passive attitude, but viewers’ interaction with the story affects the result of the story itself and, at the same time, affects the viewer by the content of the narrative: according to the “enactive perception” of A. Noë, perception is something we do and, we could state it is something we undergo in the case of visual pictures.

As a marker of distinction between words and pictures, ancient Mesopotamian people created their first narratives based on the use of pictures to tell a story either related to religious beliefs and festivals or political and social activities of the urban life (as for example the impressions of cylinder seals of Uruk with scenes of war and religious festivals, the so-called lion-hunt stele from Uruk and vase of Warka).¹⁸ Since the first texts mainly registered administrative and economic data (so not properly narratives of complex events),¹⁹ it is interesting to stress the use of visual narrative to communicate as well as the invention of pictographs and schematic pictures to express words and written concepts.

In the fourth and third millennia BC, cylinder seals are largely used as one of the most frequent visual media to represent and tell stories. Different from steles and inlays that occupy their own space within the palaces and temples of the ancient Sumerian cities, cylinder seals are an odd narrative solution because the image they carry is clearly visible and comprehensible only after the seal has been rolled on soft clay; even in this case, the operation must be effected with great care, otherwise one might run the risk of an incomplete impression affecting the meaning of the representation. In fact, fragmentary sealings bearing several superimposed impressions of the same or different seals are often found in archaeological contexts.

Taking into account the use of cylinder seals in Mesopotamian bureaucracy, why were complex narrative scenes created? Probably, the importance of those pictures did not lie in the actual possibility of seeing the complete rolled scene, but

¹⁶ Mitchell 1980, 274.

¹⁷ A. Noë speaks of “enactive perception”, with the perception as something we accomplish and not just simply as something that happens in front of us (2004, 2). The role of movement founds a sensorimotor knowledge of the world around us (2004, 90; 117–122; Nadali 2014, 45–46).

¹⁸ Bahrani 2002; Selz 2014, 439–441.

¹⁹ The later annals and chronicles lack any narrative structure, but they just briefly and repetitively enlist events without any *emplotment* (Goldie 2012, 8–9).

in the fact that narratives were carved onto cylinder seals that were not only practically used for administrative duties, but were also worn as personal ornaments.

The fine creation of cylinder seals with short narratives must not have been casual, as the restricted surface of a cylinder seals pushed the seal cutters to carefully choose and arrange the details of the story representation. The selection of specific figurative themes linked to the world of deities or the milieu of political royal power must have been the result of intentional choices and therefore the impression of those narrative motifs surely had a strong political and cultural implication. For example, it is possible that incomplete impressions are the result of quick operations of sealing but, among the officials of the administration of the city temple and palace, even a small portion of the carved scene was in fact enough to recognise the type of operation and perhaps even also the official who actually cared for the practice. In this respect, narrative scenes on cylinder seals function as distinctive markers of either a branch of the administration or a type of operation.²⁰ Small objects such as cylinder seals acquire a fundamental role in reiterating short narratives on restricted surfaces: here again, images “speak” in place of words and narrative scenes are used to secure objects and common goods.

Starting in the third millennium BC, representations of events through narrative style occupied the surface of inlays and royal steles, but who actually had access to those monuments? Problems and debates on the nature and role of the audience in the ancient Near East are far from being solved.²¹ Data about ancient phases of Mesopotamian history are still too scanty, or poorly excavated, to get a comprehensive framework of the complexity of the reality. Visual narratives existed within the society, but can we reach a conclusion on the effective presence and role of those scenes in the space of the city? Steles were placed in the main temples of the city and therefore only the part of society that had access to the temple or worked in the temple precinct could see the monuments. Nevertheless, the stele was there to tell the gods what the king had accomplished; viewers, visitors and temple personnel shared this experience, becoming, together with the gods, the recipients of the story and the instruments to reproduce the royal deeds outside the temple with the inventions and creations of new derived stories (meta-narratives or narratives of narratives, secondary elaborations of the original story).

The increasing of use of narrative pictures in the third millennium BC can be explained with the process of formation of the royal power in ancient Mesopotamia: actually, the cylinder seals and lion-hunt stele from Uruk as well as the Warka

²⁰ Additional quantitative analyses should be carried out to prove this kind of use of cylinder seals in relation to the content of the carved image.

²¹ Moreover, a unique solution working for and encompassing the three millennia of history and all regions and sub-regions of the Ancient Near East cannot be presented.

vase already showed a main character who is usually recognised as the community chief. Clear representations of kings occur in the visual art of the third millennium, and even in those cases scholars still debate whether, for example, the large figure on the top register of the banquet side of the Standard of Ur might be correctly identified as the king of the city. It seems that visual narratives in this period do not only tell stories of events, but they also contribute to the telling of royal power in a kind of process of formation of kingship: in fact, cylinder seals, inlays, sculpted plaques and steles are built upon a common figurative language that principally make figures and events recognisable,²² trying to define the figurative narrative canon that a kingship must use to express its founding principles and rules.

Such a possible use of visual art would contrast the too often abused (and too simplistic) explanation of coercion and propaganda, where the serial composition of similar coded scenes of prisoners and winning kings, for example, is considered the result of political messages deeply imbued with ideological and biased purposes. Narratives are influenced by royal power, as they are often commissioned by the kings: as a consequence, kings are often the protagonist of those images, but this cannot be used as a simple explanation of the propagandistic content of the works. This seems clear when observing the steles of Eannatum, Sargon of Akkad and Naram-Sin:²³ the organization and arrangement of the figures on the surface of these monuments both present and re-present the royal deeds with the king being the protagonist of the action.²⁴ In the Akkadian reliefs of Sargon and Naram-Sin the king is the real protagonist, on the same level as (Sargon's stele Sb2), or even

²² As happens in monuments celebrating wars and military victories (Nadali 2007).

²³ Winter 1985; 1996b; Nigro 1998.

²⁴ The difference between presentation and *representation* can actually distinguish the nature of pictures as narrative or non-narrative. Representation implies that figures are spatially organised and shaped to tell a story that continuously repeats in space (the surface and the volume where the image is displayed) and time (both the time told, that properly belongs to the story, and the time of narration, the one used to tell the story). In this respect, can we say that the steles of Eannatum, Sargon and Naram-Sin are the representation of an event or episode? Are they based and built upon a narrative style? Eannatum's stele both presents and represents the event: on one side, the stele presents the final achievement of the battle of the king with the god Ningirsu holding a net with the captives inside; on the other side, Eannatum is repeated in the four registers as the protagonist of the battle he won against Umma: in this case, we can speak of a representation of the event through a sequence of episodes in each register. Conversely, Sargon's stele Sb2 and the monument of Naram-Sin present the victory of the Akkadian king, without a properly narrative construction of the scene: despite the presence of details with scenes of soldiers and enemies fighting (as also on the stele Sb1 of Sargon), the general organisation of the pictures cannot be considered as the result of an *emplotment*; the Akkadian steles do not tell the story of the military battles of the kings, but they present the final (culminating) moment of the celebration of the victory, being the narrative of the fight somewhat implicit and evocatively recalled. As for other pictures, where no explicit narrative style can be recognised, we can thus use the definition of descriptive and evocative, where narrative should rather be understood as a meta-narrative.

exceeding, the gods (Naram-Sin's stele), but the coercive power of these pictures must take into consideration the place where the monuments were erected and the intended audience. According to the ideological propaganda-oriented interpretation, those works would have been specifically created to be instruments to force people to recognize, obey, and respect the ruler, but the point is: who are those people?

Questions on the nature of audience in the ancient Mesopotamia are too numerous to be solved: often, art and visual media have been looked as museum objects, thinking that a large number of people could see them and perceive (and understand) their content. In particular, as already noted, the royal assignment of works of art directly implied that kings wanted not to communicate, but rather impose their thought, will, and vision of the world.

The bas-reliefs of the Assyrian palaces (9th–7th century BC) have for too long time been targeted as the result of imperial propaganda:²⁵ the representations of wars with the killing and execution of enemies, and the omnipresent image of the Assyrian king and anonymous mass of people moving toward him have created the false conclusion that people were purposely educated to obey through the coercive power of those images. However, the situation was probably different and this propagandistic mission of the Assyrian art must be rewritten and attenuated.²⁶ In doing this, it is important to take into consideration the main points of what can be labelled the “phenomenology of visibility”, which is firmly based on the idea of analysing the original context wherein those visual stories were displayed, seen, perceived, and enacted.

In fact, the actual location of Assyrian bas-reliefs in museums, as well as the possibility of getting details of the sculptures, fundamentally changed the way of studying and the perspective: enlarged proportion and dimension and the cutting of fragments affect the *power* of pictures and reshape our visual field. Assyrian sculptures are often presented as series of details of the slabs, rather than the complete series of reliefs: detailed study requires cutting and thus implies that the analyst chooses a small part of the bas-reliefs to become the most significant and representative, according to his perspective.²⁷ As a consequence, what does happen when, for example, details of severed heads of enemies, slaughtering and killing of people are selected? How is the perception of the observers shaped? In this case, it seems particularly significant to speak of a propaganda system, as the viewers

²⁵ See the seminal works by Liverani 1979 and Reade 1979b. The role of propaganda in Assyrian art has been recently questioned by Porter 2003, 81–97 and Gillmann 2011–12. See also Liverani 2005, 231–233.

²⁶ See also the considerations by Bernbeck (2010, 153–154) on the relationship between Assyrians and the subjected people.

²⁷ Di Napoli 2011, 326.

are clearly guided and pushed to an oriented interpretation of the sculptures. This seems much clearer when details are reshaped and replaced in their original context and we realize that they would have been almost invisible to the observer.²⁸ Moreover, we must not forget that the invisibility of detail is also due to the impossibility of entering every room of the palaces where the pictures were displayed. Finally, the idea of coercion and propaganda of those pictures must be brought into question.

Who were the addressees of the Assyrian bas-reliefs? The gods were surely involved, if not exclusively then at least on special occasions and in specific contexts.²⁹ However, palaces were thought of as for the king, the gods were invited on the day of the inauguration but have never been considered as the dwelling of the Assyrian deities. It has previously been suggested that narrative pictures of third millennium BC may have played an important role in the formation of royal power and the concept of kingship; Assyrian narrative pictures may have had a similar function. Assyrian kingship in the first millennium BC was already well established: in this context, narrative pictures probably had a double role, linking the present to the past and projecting the Assyrian power to the future.

Therefore, I am most inclined to think that the entire apparatus of images and visual narratives has been constructed by the Assyrian king for himself, or, to avoid any personalisation, for the Assyrian kingship. The message conveyed by narrative pictures is thus directed inward rather than outward: in the period from the 9th to the 7th century BC, we have an “explosion” of creation of visual narratives. Visual stories in Assyrian palaces replicated the actions of the Assyrian king in front of the king himself, his closest officials, members of the royal family, and the gods: why did Assyrian kings invest so much time, energy and money to build such a monumental apparatus of narratives that were quite exclusively seen by members of the personal palace?

Usually, bas-reliefs have been used as the visual materialisation of the descriptions and technical terms of Assyrian texts: they have been largely considered a complete catalogue of illustrations with situations, people, objects, architectures, animals, and flora, even showing the interests and inclinations of the Assyrians that would otherwise be unknown, such as the fascination of the Assyrian kings and

²⁸ As for the bronze bands decorating the gates of palaces and temples (Schachner 2007; Curtis and Tallis 2008): it would have been impossible to get the details of impaled enemies and piles of severed heads represented in the upper bands of the gates.

²⁹ Gillmann (2011–12, 233–234) concludes that the recipients of the Assyrian sculptures were exclusively the gods; Porter (2010) has shown that the context plays a fundamental role, as for example with the message of the inscriptions of Assurnasirpal II, the Annals being displayed in the Temple of Ninurta and the text of the Standard Inscription being sculpted onto the slabs of the palace reliefs.

queen for exotic wild animals, plants, and luxury objects.³⁰ It would be reductive to consider the bas-reliefs as catalogues of figures and illustrations, running the risk that those images that cannot be explained through texts will simply be discarded.

To investigate why Assyrian kings largely used visual narratives in their own residences, we should avoid research that aims at recognising *what* is represented, and should rather explain *how* narratives affected Assyrian society.³¹

Why so many visual narratives? The answer lies in the human attitude and necessity of inventing and creating stories to manage time: time is the essential protagonist of narratives. In its pure form, human beings cannot comprehend the ontological status of time: as said by P. Ricoeur, narratives make time human; we could say that narratives contribute to the phenomenology of time. Moreover, narratives are a social product both in their formation (when visual stories are projected, invented and shaped) and after the accomplishment of the work. Assyrian palaces are a stratification of narratives with events glorifying the king, not as an absolute and despotic figure, but as the legitimate and authorised exponent of Assyrian kingship. This would explain why the Assyrian kings usually inhabited the residences of their predecessors, living in rooms that were still decorated with narratives and royal images of their predecessors:³² this becomes perfectly clear if we consider that the image of the king is not the portrait of the Assyrian *king*, but rather the portrait of the Assyrian *kingship*, with the consequent stabilization of bounds of *kinship*.³³

Narratives exert and guard power: Assyrian kings looking at the stories on the walls of their palaces could retrace their own actions, and could also enact the actions of their predecessors by sharing the same feelings of victory in war, bravery in lion hunting, and authority and pride in dealing with foreigners and enemies. In this respect, visual narratives in the Assyrian palaces constituted a special link with the past, working as a mnemonic sign. In particular, the living king, who ordered the making of the visual narratives for his own residence, is both the protagonist (a character within the narrative) and the addressee of the story (he might even be the narrator himself, if we want to consider the image of the king onto slabs as the

³⁰ Reade 2004; Matthiae 2014, 388.

³¹ In this way we could quite easily deny any ideological and propaganda implications of the images: did the Assyrian king need to convince and force himself? If we want to recognise or suggest the existence of subliminal messages, these were specifically directed to the future kings of Assyria and the high members of royal family and Assyrian aristocracy: the reliefs showing the aristocratic hunt and the banquet in the palace of Sargon II at Dur Sharrukin were meant to refine the bounds of fidelity between the Assyrian king and the right magnates of the court (Matthiae 2012).

³² Kertai 2013, 11.

³³ On the concept of portrait as applied to the Assyrian art, see Winter 2009.

subject of the action and narration).³⁴ As a result, the Assyrian king remembers “from the inside” the events as they took place (“field memory”).³⁵ But the Assyrian palace with its visual narratives still keeps its mnemonic function after the king’s death: future kings living in their predecessors’ palaces continue to look at those narratives, remembering “from the outside” (“observer memory”).³⁶ This encounter between the physical body of the king and the representation of events where the represented body (*šalmu*) of the king acts defines the vital importance of narratives in this double perspective of memory: in particular, the oscillation between field and observer memory points out how narrative pictures can emotionally affect the viewers, in this precise context the Assyrian king while looking at his own image or his predecessors’ images in action.

As pointed out by Goldie:

My suggestion is that the contrast in emotion between field and observer memory should not be between more emotionality and less emotionality, but rather between recall of the emotions that were experienced at the time remembered, and the emotions that were experienced at the time of remembering.³⁷

In particular, although we do not have any precise Assyrian evidence, it might be argued that visual narratives in Assyrian palaces contributed to the creation of the narrative sense of self,³⁸ where the self should not be identified with the person of the Assyrian king, but rather with the concept of kingship. For that reason, Assyrian kings can look at their own and their predecessors’ pictures in the same way, as they did not recognize the self-portrait of a king, but rather the portrait of the Assyrian kingship. In this context, narrative pictures are a necessary condition for personal identity and the idea of survival, via a process of empathic access and correlation.³⁹

A group of neurons (mirror neurons) discovered in the 1990s in the brain of macaques is responsible for empathy.⁴⁰ These neurons have a very peculiar function: not only do they fire when we perform a goal-directed action, but they also discharge when we look at someone else performing a goal-directed action. This discovery increased our knowledge of the perception of the world and the reciprocal interactions among human beings: the fact that these neurons fire when the

³⁴ Goldie 2012, 26.

³⁵ Goldie 2012, 49.

³⁶ Goldie 2012.

³⁷ Goldie 2012, 51.

³⁸ Goldie 2012, 118–149.

³⁹ Goldie 2012, 132.

⁴⁰ See Rizzolatti et al. 1996; Gallese et al. 1996; Gallese et al. 2004. For the evidence of mirror neurons in humans, see Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008, 115–138.

action is seen can explain the importance and the large use of narratives in ancient society and in our contemporary world. Looking at images that tell a story, show moving figures, goal-directed actions, and representations of gestures enacts a process of simulation or, as has been labelled, of embodied simulation.⁴¹ Through the system of mirror neurons we are able to live within ourselves, and thus understand the actions and intentions of others.

Narratives are a social product. They become a bio-social product, and studies of visual narratives of the ancient societies should take into consideration this mechanism of the functioning of the human body. Narratives have a real and tangible power: they help in building social relationships and contribute in explaining and understanding the reality around us, pushing to think of our behaviours, feelings, and history. The empathic access and process of the embodied simulation point to the identification with one's past.⁴² moreover, narratives are a balanced connection between the past and the future, being the viewers' link with the present. As with the examples of the Assyrians, historical narratives refer to occurred events that are constantly repeated and represented in the rooms of the royal palaces; the living king promotes new visual narratives, but also preserves the ones of his predecessors, as they are the bridge with the past.⁴³

The creation of visual narratives in ancient Mesopotamia thus seems strictly linked to the necessity of narrativizing the lives of the society, as a process of foundation and explanation of the mechanism of evolution and interaction with others. In this respect, it seems that narratives develop "as a system of meaning encoding propositions about the world and as a system of action intended to change the world".⁴⁴ Visual narratives are cognitive tools working in the present as a continuous reference to the past ("propositions about the world"), replicating in the present and transmitting to the future stories whose mimetic agency is still functioning ("change the world").

As concerns Mesopotamia, visual narratives are linked with the process of the formation of ancient societies and their rules: the telling of royal stories has often been interpreted as the mirror of propaganda, as with Assyrian sculptures, but I think that visual narratives are indeed the mirror for the society that created them, as visual narratives of historical events, myths, and rites reflect the way in which humans deal with their memory and awareness, and make humans reflect on their lives, trying to put an order (sequence of events) in a permanent balance between what is remembered (the content of the story) and how it is remembered (the manner of narrating).

⁴¹ Coplan 2004; Gallese 2005; Freedberg and Gallese 2007.

⁴² Goldie 2012, 132.

⁴³ Brown 2010, 35.

⁴⁴ Winter 2007, 62.

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