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The Remains of the Day Approaching Storytelling via Material Culture

One of the aims of the conference was to stir an intense discussion on narratives beyond texts in those disciplines engaging with material culture as historical evidence. Thus, the main focus centered on narratives as material externalizations by means of which ancient societies expressed fundamental notions designed to transmit distinct (meta-)messages, to build social meaning, and to create as well as to reinforce identities. This then was the focus; it lies in the nature of any scholarly debate, that in the course of both the conference and the publication of its papers ever more questions arose. The following paragraphs attempt a cross-section through the contributions not designed to give definitive answers. Rather we turn to selected issues that were either part of the concept at the outset or that have come up during the conference itself and afterwards in order to distill general tendencies and directions taken. These issues encompass terminologies and definitions, moreover materiality, mediality and contextuality.

Terms and Definitions

The basic terms *narration*, *narrative* and *narrativity* have never been grasped by definitions of encompassing validity across disciplines – yet, as stated already in our introduction, definitions abound, and they differ in highlighting a variety of aspects and functions of storytelling. Consequently, the archaeological disciplines find themselves confronted with both a lack of definitions in their own respective fields and an polyphonous abundance of definitions and terminologies developed especially within literary studies. The contributions of this volume mirror this lack of consensus, by either avoiding definitory strictness altogether or adopting or developing a variety of models applicable to non-textual media.

To define or not define

Luca Giuliani whose contribution opens the volume returns to his reconstruction of the development of narrative images as outlined in his monograph *Bild und Mythos*. ‘Narrative’ to him is, first and foremost a semiotic category indicating any given image’s referential quality in pointing to a known and unique course of events. Within this model, the non-routine quality of the story and the viewer’s knowledge about it are a *sine qua non* prerequisite.¹ It is central to the understanding of Giuliani’s narrative/descriptive typology, that it is *not* concerned with the formal aspects of representing action or temporality, but exclusively with ways to signal and recognize narrative specificity.

In contrast to that, the contribution of Davide Nadali takes a different stance by referring to Peter Goldie’s definition of narrative:²

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.

Nadali transcends this definition when he argues that even 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).” To avoid any misinterpretation – considering the context of the animate visual world of Mesopotamia – he further states that “agentivity is not a synonym for narrativity; however, the agentive nature of pictures can be the element, or even the fundamental prerequisite, on which to build an ascribed narrativity.”

A host of definitions and models is provided by Antonius Weixler who fuels the debate with a wealth of recent developments within literary studies, yet considering their applicability to visual culture. He starts off with the communicative aspect of story-telling, by quoting Franz Stanzel who claims: “Wo eine Nachricht übermittelt wird, wo berichtet oder erzählt wird, begegnen wir einem Mittler, wird die Stimme eines Erzählers hörbar”.³

¹ Giuliani, p. 40 in this volume: “Es [sc. the narrative image] führt ein besonderes Geschehen vor Augen, das aus der üblichen Routine herausfällt; dabei nimmt es Bezug auf eine spezifische Geschichte, deren Kenntnis es beim Betrachter voraussetzt; ohne ein solches Vorwissen wird der Betrachter nicht in der Lage sein, die Pointe der Darstellung zu verstehen. Jedes narrative Bild bedeutet somit eine Herausforderung an sein Publikum. Umgekehrt gilt aber auch, dass der narrative Stoff eine Herausforderung für den Bildermacher darstellt: Muss es diesem doch gelingen, ein Bild zu entwerfen, das sich vom breiten Repertoire deskriptiver Darstellungen signifikant unterscheidet und darüber hinaus unzweideutig klar macht, auf *welche* Geschichte es sich bezieht.”

² Goldie 2012, 8.

³ Stanzel 1979, 15.

Beyond the issues of narrator and mediacy, there are parameters like fictionality, past, epicity, sequentiality, constructivity, eventfulness, tellability and experientiality.⁴ As Weixler does not consider all these elements vital constituents for the definition of narrative, he chooses to highlight the aspects of mediacy and eventfulness, or rather the change of situation, ergo temporality. He turns to a very broad definition of story-telling when referring to Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel: “Generell liegt Erzählen dann vor, wenn ‘jemand jemandem eine Geschichte erzählt’”.⁵ This is once again about transmission and the existence of a narrator.⁶ His or her existence is not understood as mandatory for any narrative (text), and thus Weixler refers to the sub-categories of narrative texts, mediated and mimetic, introduced by Wolf Schmid.⁷ Besides mediacy as a defining, but hotly debated characteristics of narrative, there is the change of situation, a characteristic famously defined as essential by the late Gérard Genette:

Für mich liegt, sobald es auch nur eine einzige Handlung oder ein einziges Ereignis gibt, eine Geschichte vor, denn damit gibt es bereits eine Veränderung, einen Übergang vom Vorher zum Nachher. ‚Ich gehe‘ setzt einen Anfangs- und einen Endzustand voraus.⁸

In this context, Weixler also refers to Schmid who argues:

Die Minimalbedingung der Narrativität ist, dass mindestens *eine* Veränderung *eines* Zustands in einem gegebenen zeitlichen Moment dargestellt wird. [...] Ein Zustand (oder eine Situation) soll verstanden werden als eine Menge von Eigenschaften, die sich auf eine Figur oder die Welt in einer bestimmten Zeit der erzählten Geschichte beziehen.⁹

Both, Genette and Schmid, build upon the famous distinction of Edward M. Forster:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died”, is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief”, is a plot.¹⁰

⁴ See Weixler in this volume, and the discussion he refers to.

⁵ Cf. for instance Martínez and Scheffel 2012; Martínez 2011.

⁶ Therefore, he also critically cites Dietrich Weber: “Standardtyp der Erzählliteratur [...] die fiktionale, illusionistische, autor- und erzählerverleugnende, aliozentrische Autorerzählung in dritter Person”, cf. Weber 1998, 5; 90–102.

⁷ Schmid 2014, 8.

⁸ Genette 1983, 202.

⁹ Schmid 2014, 3.

¹⁰ Forster 1974, 93–94.

Later definitions have gone beyond causal relation of the event(s).¹¹ Thus, Weixler introduces a definition crucially abandoning this paradigm, namely Gerald Prince's concept of sequentiality. Prince posits a tripartite series of events, by which the last event represents the inversion of the first one.¹² Other approaches of younger date turn to cognitive aspects; Weixler points to Werner Wolf's concept of narrative as cognitive schemes, *narremes* activated by various possible stimuli or to Marie-Laure Ryan's *cognitive templates* that stimulate cognitive patterns of narration.¹³ This in turn gives rise to Wolf's assumption that narrativity is an abstractum of a gradual quality: from *genuinely narrative* over to *indicating narrative* to *quasi-narrative*.¹⁴

Ralf von den Hoff turns back to Giuliani and his distinction between narrative and descriptive images,¹⁵ a distinction he understands as based on knowledge through which the audience 'reads the image'. Yet, von den Hoff draws upon the striking intrinsic value ("plakativen Eigenwert") of the visual *per se* as discussed by Bernhard Schmaltz.¹⁶ Still, he adopts Giuliani's typology by referring to specific images as *indicating narrative*.¹⁷ In his perspective, a defining aspect of constituting visual narratives is not the depiction of elapsing time, but the emphasis given to agents and events ("Akteure und Taten"). In this vein, von den Hoff later adds the concept of focused descriptive images that he recognizes as indicating the extraordinary quality of distinct efforts and / or characters.

Barbara Fath and Daniel Ebrecht consider the existence and extent of narrativity in preliterate societies. In their view, narration, "could only take place by means of oral language", which in turn leads them to "adapt a concept of narration that leaves the narrow confines of text as consequence of written language". Their concept of narratives and the visual, or better of material narrativity, once again relates to Giuliani, as they state:

Objects and images as part of the performance of a narration do not tell the narrative themselves. It can however be shown, how objects and images can refer to a common narrative [...].

Elisabeth Wagner-Durand refers to several scholars from different contexts, some expressly engaged with ancient visual cultures, like Luca Giuliani,¹⁸ whose definition

¹¹ Danto 1985, 236.

¹² Prince 1973. Weixler also invokes M. Martínez 2011, 11; see also Martínez and Scheffel 2012, 114–122.

¹³ Wolf 2002, 44; Ryan 2004.

¹⁴ Wolf 2002.

¹⁵ Giuliani 2003.

¹⁶ Schmaltz 2004, 173–174.

¹⁷ Cf. Weixler 2015, 211 and Wolf 2002.

¹⁸ Giuliani 2003.

she compares with the detailed and syncretistic definition of Ryan, “who emphasizes intelligent agents, purposeful actions, causal chains, and closure. She (Ryan) also focuses on temporal connections, meaningfulness, and audience”.¹⁹ She also recognizes Giuliani’s issue that the story must be known to be visually identified, within the earlier concepts of Carl H. Kraeling who writes:

It has been assumed that narrative art, strictly speaking, could be identified as such only where the purpose of the artist was to represent a specific event, involving specific persons, an event, moreover, that was sufficiently noteworthy to deserve recording. The action and the persons might be historical but would not always necessarily be so. They might belong also to the realm of myth or legend.²⁰

According to Wagner-Durand, these definitions often neglect the actual act of telling itself as less important; visual story-telling is no more than mere referring. Wagner-Durand raises concerns in this respect and refers to the issue whether the story must be *told* and not *implied*, citing both Hans G. Güterbock²¹ and José A. García Landa and Susana Onega Jaén.²² In an effort to join those issues that seem valid and important to her, Elisabeth Wagner-Durand re-cites a definition already given by her, that is by no means new but re-phrases those aspects that she considers as important for what she calls a true visual narrative. Being indicative for an existing narrative is not considered as sufficient.

A visual narrative is the visual representation of a series of events belonging to one story which is – either completely or in parts – told by iconic sign representations, irrespective of the precise narrative structure applied (discourse is important, but not restricted to any specific form). Therefore, the visual representation called narrative must contain several sign representations referring to different events of one causally related story. Furthermore, the story is bound to a particular time and/or space. Consequently, in order to be a true visual narrative, the image not only evokes a known story in the mind of the user but also narrates the story in itself.²³

¹⁹ Cf. Ryan 2007, 29, cited by Wagner-Durand, p. 250 in this volume.

²⁰ Kraeling 1957, 43.

²¹ Winter 2010, 4 referring to Güterbock 1957, 62.

²² “A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way. Films, plays, comic strips, novels, newsreels, diaries, chronicles and treatises of geological history are all narratives in the wider sense. Narratives can therefore be constructed using an ample variety of semiotic media: written or spoken language, visual images, gestures and acting, as well as combination of these. [...] Therefore, we can speak of many kinds of narrative texts: linguistic, theatrical, pictorial, filmic.” Onega Jaén and García Landa 1996, 3.

²³ Winter 2010, 5, cited by Wagner-Durand, p. 251 in this volume.

In contrast, Maria M. Luiselli does not explicitly refer to a narratological framework; she does, however, focus on the one event textually and visually narrated on the monuments of her study, i.e. privately erected stelae whom she understands as visually narrated experiences. Crucial in respect to those definitions of story-telling emphasizing uniqueness is her argument for tracing individualising elements within single monuments. Close to Giuliani and others, she defines this phenomenon as a specifying rupture, which in turn constitutes the narrative visual element.

Caroline von Eck turns to the discussion of visual narrative or more precisely of ekphrastic and performative techniques designed to enhance the narrative potential of sculpture in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as discussed among others by Gotthold E. Lessing, Johann G. Herder and Carl A. Böttinger. In the case of sculptures, van Eck makes a case for narrativity not being an objective category in the first place, but rather a specific kind of approach: Within a rather short-lived discourse fomented by Lessing and others, “the narrative is no longer located in the statue, but moves to the mind and senses of the beholder.”

In his study of monuments from north and south of the Alps during the Hallstatt and early La Tène Period Martin Guggisberg also refers broadly to Giuliani’s distinction as a model for classifying narrative or descriptive images.²⁴ He goes on to differentiate between the art of telling by poets, singers, and bards as opposed to the visual arts, with the latter aiming not at story-telling proper but on condensing broader ideas into symbolic representations.

In the last chapter of this volume, Alexander Heinemann largely espouses the dichotomy of narrative and descriptive images as advocated by Giuliani but draws attention to differences within the latter. Distinctions must be made, he argues, between descriptive images of purely affirmative character and those introducing a dialectic of contrasting values that calls for a – not necessarily narrative – resolve. Conversely, several types of language-based stories still lack the specificity and uniqueness that Giuliani’s definition of narrativity calls for; in Greek myth for instance, stories of love, desire and divine offspring frequently feature stock motives hampering their unmistakable visualization.

It became more than obvious during the discussions and in the later contributions that definitions are somehow a bone of contention in respect to narratological studies, both in their basal elements as well as in their overall significance. Even the question whether definitions are needed has been hotly disputed. Some have argued against strict limitations as they might hinder us to go further into the narrative matter and to encompass media and topics of any kind. Others have expressed their uneasiness when debating beyond definitions, lacking any home-base to return to: How to analyze the differences between narrative strategies, contents and media, if

²⁴ Guggisberg, p. 328 in this volume.

there is no distinct border between storytelling and non-story-telling? Is there not a meaningful differentiation between telling and talking, between communication *en gros*, and story-telling? Does the uneasiness towards the potential narrativity of visual culture (excluding comic strips, flip-books, films and giphys) result from the tendency to value texts over images? Do stories need to be verbalized, cognitively, orally and later in written form? Can stories take visual and material form without relying on words? As long as we lack consensus within cultural studies – or, at least, within the archaeological disciplines –, we need to be clear about our terminologies and our assumptions on narrativity, to ensure mutual understanding, to agree upon or to deviate, to compare and to discuss. Studies in cognitive sciences, relating to the processing and comprehension of visual culture, will add more data and with all likelihood enrich the discussion.²⁵ Still, all neural evidence will not relieve historians and cultural anthropologists of their common task, that is making sense of the practices and contexts of storytelling.

Categories and Terms

Doubtlessly, the renewed interest in story-telling in ancient cultures, especially in – *respectively through* – visual media has been fostered by the growing contributions made in the realm of narratological research in general. The main emphasis of this research has been put on textual media, and while recent years have seen a greater interest in visual narration, the primary impact and dominant models still stem from studies concerning the world of words. Nonetheless, the field of narrativity testifies to the overall limitations of the linguistic turn when applied to visual and material cultures.²⁶ What is needed is heightened awareness of what we actually trade in by implementing narratological categories derived from textual studies. Though the use of shared terminologies and models on the hand is likely to improve exchange across disciplines, it may on the other hand put the very understanding of visual media at risk. The argument then for emancipation from methodological frameworks heavily indebted to literary studies is tempting; still, the current disaccord and methodological polyphony to be witnessed within visual culture studies with regard to narratology is not exactly encouraging. For some time to come scholars will continue to make do with different methodological blends, treading the thin red line between tools helpful for understanding their evidence in its own right and a framework compatible with broader debates across disciplines.

²⁵ See e.g. Cohn 2014; Cohn et al. 2014.

²⁶ Crawford 2014; Wagner-Durand and Linke forthcoming.

Approaches taken in this volume have been most different in this respect; they differ in how they relate themselves to narratological studies beyond their own disciplines and they diverge in the respective ways of applying these terms and categories. As can be seen throughout the volume, there is neither a consensus nor a ‘best practice’ or shared approach about narrative visual media throughout the archaeologies and cultural sciences like Indology or Sinology. Common ground is not always easy to come by.

Luca Giuliani borrows his dichotomy of narrative and descriptive images from a distinction made in literary studies,²⁷ but for the rest his argument is autonomous and does without the heavy burden of narratological jargon developed in recent years. The terminological slimness of this approach (some would say: its elegance) is due to Giuliani’s interest in the referential (as opposed to the mimetic) function of the image.²⁸ Narrative iconography in his sense is not narrative by depicting action *per se*, but by referring to an exceptional or unprecedented event (“außerordentlich”, “unerhört”). Story-telling itself does not take place within the image but is an action engaged in by its viewer; narrative images therefore are those prompting and enforcing the knowledgeable viewer to come up with one specific story already known to him.²⁹ The drawback of this approach is of course its heavy reliance on the stories known to us, that is, once again, on written sources, since it is ultimately only through our knowledge of the knowable that we may detect unmistakable narrative references.

As already mentioned, Davide Nadali does not use a definition of literary studies but starts from the philosophical background proposed by Peter Goldie³⁰. Goldie’s definition bases on representation and is therefore transmedial; it knows no medial boundaries, and thus, it comes as no surprise that Nadali draws attention to the pictorial (and in the following the narratological) turn, that has liberated the analyses of pictures from the premises of text-based examinations. He states that “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”. In this vein, he introduces the performative nature of pictures and stresses the handling of visual media as different from texts and language.

In contrast to that, Antonius Weixler argues from his disciplinary background as a literary scholar, from which he reaches out to connect images and texts. While

²⁷ Giuliani in this volume.

²⁸ Cf. Heinemann in this volume, p. 374.

²⁹ “Es führt ein besonderes Geschehen vor Auge, das aus der üblichen Routine herausfällt; dabei nimmt es Bezug auf eine spezifische Geschichte, deren Kenntnis es beim Betrachter voraussetzt; ohne ein Vorwissen wird der Betrachter nicht in der Lage sein, die Pointe der Darstellung zu verstehen. (etc.)” Giuliani, p. 40 in this volume.

³⁰ Goldie 2014.

not being on the same page with Luca Giuliani he also understands the verbally composed text (may it be oral or written) as the pre-text for any visual narrative. In his present analysis he focuses on *Mittelbarkeit* (mediation or mediacy) and change of situation as representation of time (*Zustandsveränderung, Zeitdarstellung*). By further stating that narrating is a speech act (*Sprachhandlung*) with certain defining aspects, he posits a clear primacy of language and words. Within this framework, narrative images necessarily hark back to a pre-text, narrating a story already known and put in words. Visual narrative then is (arguably) not about depicting a story, but a process of transmediation. Still, as Weixler applies narratological concepts as ‘story time’ and ‘discourse time’ (*Erzählte Zeit* and *Erzählzeit*), while at same time looking closely at concepts recurring within visual studies, he makes a strong case for the adaptability of literary models.

In his contribution on the hero in storytelling, Ralf von den Hoff centres on visual communication and understands “‘Erzählen’ im Bild als kommuniziertes visuelles Erinnern an Handlungen”. Though stressing the singular impact of images by referring to Barthes and Schmalz,³¹ he yet agrees on a written or oral transmitted pre-text that evokes the known story in the observer; in fact, the notion of a pre-text is already implicit in the mnemonic function at the bottom of his definition. With *Fokussierung* (focalisation), a key term in his argument, he ventures deeper into the terminological realm of literary studies than many of his colleagues, while still insisting on the specificity of images beyond textual categories.

Monika Zin’s methodological points of reference are represented by two prominent scholars of narrative Buddhist art, Dieter Schlingloff and Vidja Dehejia, succinctly dubbed an analyst of story and of pictures respectively. In clearly following the former’s approach Zin does not engage with linguistic methodologies; yet again, the sheer abundance of texts at her disposal testify to the vastness of the hermeneutic ground that still needs to be covered in order to put Buddhist imagery into its cultural context.

In terms of wealth of evidence, this situation is not entirely dissimilar from the picture drawn by Shane McCausland with reference to China. Against the backdrop of rich textual sources and differentiated knowledge about the historical and social contexts, McCausland directs his primary interest at different visual media whose narrative potential he explores.³² His approach takes into account the materiality and visibility of his pictorial sources, considered as works of art already within their original context. The performative qualities of the artefacts studied are

³¹ Barthes 1990; Schmalz 2004.

³² McCausland, p. 170 in this volume: “It is not my purpose to argue here if this technically ‘narrative painting’ or not, or delve deeply into text-image relations. Rather, the direction is to explore broader patterns and layers, to wonder where the story in a visual narrative may lie?”

not only heavily informed by their specific mediality, but also crucial to the exploration of their full narrative potential.

Hans Peter Hahn's contribution is deeply involved with materiality, the core theme of the author throughout his oeuvre. His commitment to Roland Barthes' semiosis brings about close encounters between material culture studies and both literary studies and linguistics. Hahn, however, is concerned with the 'messages' things can release, less with their narrativity. Referring to the work of Lorraine Daston³³ and her categories of talking objects, he refrains from drawing a clear line between talking and telling. The communication stemming from things, to Hahn, is not a unilinear, unambiguous transmission of content nor a clear-cut story embedded within a given object and just waiting to be evoked.³⁴ Moreover, evoking the object's communicative potential is not a technique outlined in textual studies; rather, Hahn emphasizes the materiality of things, the ways people act on and with them, the modes in which things are entangled throughout time and space.

In her account on figurative art of the La Tène period in Central Europe, Jennifer Bagley addresses the difficulty to extract potential narratives from the purely archaeological record of highly stylized and often heraldic images. To do so, she does not turn to any linguistic approach but to art history as epitomized in the work of Erwin Panofsky³⁵ and to archaeology as material culture studies that sets things into contexts.

Barbara Fath and Daniel Ebrecht analyze objects in a culture almost completely devoid of written sources. While they state that "texts as a consequence of written language" are not representative of storytelling in the mainly preliterate societies they engage with, the authors posit language as *the* narrative carrier³⁶. Fath and Ebrecht use Walther Ong as their point of departure, moving towards language as a shaping power of social togetherness. As archaeologists however, they turn their eye to objects, which they understand as "as part of the performance of a narration" but that "do not tell the narrative themselves."

In her contribution of the hunting king in Assyria, Elisabeth Wagner-Durand explicitly refers to linguistic and literary studies as the starting point of any methodologically grounded approach to narratives. While many encounters with visual media (exception made for movies or comic strips) have granted narrativity to those objects that refer to a narrative, Wagner-Durand demands these media to tell the story by themselves and to evoke the story in the observers' minds. Referring to

³³ Daston 2004.

³⁴ "Die Dinge reden zwar, aber auf die eine oder andere Weise entzieht sich dieses 'Sprechen der Dinge' einer gelingenden Kommunikation." Hahn, p. 194 in this volume.

³⁵ Panofsky 1955.

³⁶ "As a consequence, communication and thus narration could only take place by means of oral language" Fath and Ebrecht, p. 228 in this volume.

fictional and factual storytelling³⁷, the author clearly lays stress on concepts developed in text-based studies. Occasionally owed to the literacy of the societies she analyses, Wagner-Durand joins terminologies of visual and text-based studies, using the latter as heuristic tools in understanding the application of narrativity in respect to the images analysed.

The narrative categories of Michaela M. Luiselli display no preference for either iconophile or logocentric approaches. Explicit reference is made to Nadja Braun's work on narratives in ancient Egyptian art,³⁸ who in turn proclaims a prototype theory of narration, but Luiselli herself is more concerned with aspects of ritual and the relation between images and religious practice. No distinct terminologies from literary studies are applied by Caroline van Eck, who, however, discusses aspects of agency that lurk in the background of several other contributions. Martin Guggisberg and Alexander Heinemann in turn work mainly on the grounds of the terminologies established within their own disciplines with particular reference to Luca Giuliani.

It is in the nature of things that the contributions agree to disagree; they set out from different notions of narrative, focus on distinct aspects and make use of different terminologies. Text-based terminologies, however, are, with very few exceptions, those most scholars have chosen to rely on. This is not in itself surprising and may be due to object-based disciplines having largely failed to establish a terminology of their own, capable of appreciating visual and material culture in light of its specific qualities.

Within material culture studies *en gros*, especially those subdisciplines engaging heavily with images have pushed forward to establish their own terminologies the most influential of which have been quoted throughout this volume. Some of these can be found in disciplinary divergent papers: the one most cited surely is also the oldest one, namely Franz Wickhoff's edition of the so-called Vienna Genesis.³⁹ Starting with his terminologies, further terms have been developed and adjusted over the course of time. Luca Giuliani's typology still is compatible with Wickhoff's scheme, especially as it aims at an altogether different aspect and is less concerned with narrative formalism than with hermeneutics. Yet, there is not standard view, and the question remains, whether this is owed to a lack of communication and understanding between modern disciplines or to objective disparities between the

³⁷ Martínez and Scheffel 2012.

³⁸ Braun 2014.

³⁹ The impact of classical archaeology in the field of visual narrative goes beyond disciplinary borders, as can be seen with contributions made by Snodgrass, Stansbury O'Donnell and Giuliani. Other disciplines also of explicitly contributed but their reception often stays within the borders of their respective disciplines (Art History, Ancient Near East, Indian Art), Kemp, Jäger, Watanabe, Winter, Reade, Schlingloff and Dehejia.

cultures and societies they study. Confident though we may be about the universal relevance of narration, it has become obvious, that its workings are far from universal or, to put it rather more cautiously: we are far from understanding potential universalities of images in respect to narration. Visual expression and condensation of narratives are as diverse as their emic cultural contexts. If anything, this diversity calls for even more transdisciplinary approaches working towards a mutual understanding and coherent frameworks.

Materiality, Mediality and Contextuality

If we consider narration and narratives to exist outside texts, or even language, they can take forms beyond the already vast and diverse shapes of literary story-telling. The conference's title and program have taken it for granted that narratives are transmedial phenomena. It goes without saying that preliterate or non-literate societies have to tell by other means than texts. The majority of contributions focused on images and their narrative quality; yet, visual culture not only goes beyond the image as such, the world of things – the very focus of archaeological research – also provides endless possibilities to tell stories.

Admittedly, texts themselves are not beyond materiality. As materialized language they come in different sizes, shapes and colors: they use different carriers determining the process of narrative perception through opening or scrolling, through moving around or manipulating.⁴⁰ Our present focus, however, has been on the narrative potential of non-textual media. These are not confined to images, which lay at the heart of the conference, as stories can be told via landscapes, their spatial use and/or alignment, too; via performances of any kind including rituals and staged acts may represent or evoke narratives and the same holds true for things and their arrangement, their use and appearance. Media whose transmissive form relies on their materiality (at least in some parts) imply aspects of narrativity not fully embraced by its textual articulations. Many material forms of both storytelling and talking (in a Daston-Hahninan sense) owe their suggestion of temporality to movements, be it ritualized processions through landscapes and architecture, attentive perambulations aimed at taking in a multi-faceted object, or movements of the eyes alone as they saccade across the crucial details of an image. Material media take narrative experience to other levels of perception: they exert a multisensory impact including experiences of smell, touch and sound.

Going beyond the pure materiality of things, questions arise concerning the entanglement of stories and societies they are embedded in. How can we describe

⁴⁰ Cf. the work undertaken within the Heidelberg *Sonderforschungsbereich 933 Materiale Textkulturen* and the newly-formed Hamburg Research Cluster *Understanding Written Artefacts*.

the relations between the shape of a society and the narratives it tells as well as the media it uses? No story – as far as it may travel – exists without the social context it has been created in. Both the archaeologies and material culture studies, as Hans Peter Hahn has made abundantly clear about, have come to the understanding that things are not meaningful by themselves, they transfer messages depending on the context they are seen and used in, and through a process of constant negotiation with the rules of the societies they are perceived in.⁴¹

While material culture itself is somehow boundless and becomes increasingly blurry in times of mass production, narrative visual media of past societies – namely before the invention of photography and film, and especially before digital media – are comparably few. Having stressed the central role of narratives within human societies, this finding comes as some sort of a paradox, and it will be up to future research to look into the peculiar rarity of early narrative media in the strict sense.

This volume brings together vessels of various materials, stone reliefs on palace walls or stelae, seals and sealings and luxurious items connected to practices of adornment like mirrors and belt buckles and even text-bearing artefacts as scrolls. Some of these objects can be moved, scrolled, turned or used in the manifold ways they are functionally designed for; others call for the viewer (or just his eyes) to fulfill complex movements in order to be fully taken in. This motoric dimension of appreciation invests artefacts with a temporal quality that is no actual substitute for their oft-discussed lack of temporality, but still provides a chronological depth to the process of tapping the objects' communicative resources.

The praxeological dimension of material objects is of course intrinsically linked to the contexts they are used and looked at. Without knowledge of these contexts it is virtually impossible to specify the implicit addressees of images and objects and their relative dispositions. After all, it is within the complex mediatic triangle of users/viewers, objects/images and social context with its specific rituals and functions that artefacts are invested with meaning in the first place. The varying possibilities of manipulating media laid out in the last paragraph work to establish different relationships within this triangle and different ways of producing meaning. This dovetails with the work of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell and others who have highlighted the recursive effect of the material world on people, a crucial point when it comes to understand how objects may trigger storytelling. The way things are used in which contexts and how they are perceived based upon common practice, individual knowledge, and social dispositions, re-affects the user/viewer which in turn influences choices of story, discourse and media. Thus, media of narratives are neither random nor insignificant, and material culture proves a powerful realm for the creation and transmission of meaning and identity.

⁴¹ Cf. Hahn in this volume; Hahn 2005; see also Leicht 2002.

Material culture and the stories mediated through it, are embedded into contexts: *de facto* spatial contexts of usage and display, but also praxeological as well as ideological contexts. The stories and their carriers are set up in graves to display the grand narratives of their time. They are displayed in palatial contexts to legitimize kingship. They are enrolled on paper scrolls both to cement social conventions and to sophisticatedly entertain. They are filled with wine at social gatherings to provide food for thought, conversation and competition. They are presented as wedding gifts to claim marital values. They are turned into stone and enshrine temple facades to assert world orders.

Contexts, forms and contents of stories are as diverse as the societies they are embedded in. They are witnesses of the societies they originally belonged to. Consequently, their analysis is vital for the understanding of these societies: They provide information on how these societies expressed and understood themselves, both mentally and materially. Thus, the transmedial study of ancient narratives, their contents, contexts, and material as well as textual expressions continues to be a more than promising endeavor in order to significantly broaden our comprehension of past cultures and societies.

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