

BENCE NANAY

Narrative Pictures

I

This article is about visual narratives. Most of the examples used in the philosophical literature on narratives are literary ones. But a general account of narrative needs to be able to cover both pictorial and literary cases. In the first part of this article, I will argue that none of the most influential accounts of narrative are capable of this. In the second part, I outline an account of visual narratives, or, rather, of our engagement with visual narratives.

There are many questions about narrative, but two seem particularly important. The first is the more straightforward of the two: what is a narrative? That is, what is the difference between a narrative and a representation that is not a narrative? There are many ways of answering this question. One would be to look for necessary and sufficient conditions. Another one would be to identify a crucial element of narratives that may not both be necessary and sufficient, but would still help us to understand what differentiates narratives from nonnarratives. Noël Carroll suggests that what he calls the narrative connection is such a crucial element, and he claims that the narrative connection, the connection between the events represented in a narrative, is a necessarily causal one.¹ But recently, it has been argued that narrative does not necessarily presuppose a causal narrative connection.² Instead of attempting to contribute to this debate about the importance of causality in defining narrative, I will try to approach the question about the nature of narratives from a different angle.

The second important question is this: in what way do our minds work when we engage with narratives? This is the question, the question about

our engagement with narratives, which I aim to answer in this article, at least in the domain of pictorial narratives. Do I change the topic entirely and ignore the supposedly deeper question about what narratives are? I hope not. The hope is that the way we experience narratives may be helpful in understanding the nature of narrative.

A convenient analogy would be understanding what depiction is. According to some, we can define depiction without any reference to the way we experience pictures, maybe with the help of the (syntactic) relations between different elements of the picture. This would be the equivalent of Carroll's strategy of understanding narratives in terms of the narrative connection. But another way of trying to understand depiction is to understand how we, or some suitable viewers, are supposed to experience pictures. This way of thinking about depiction is labeled as the experiential account.³

I aim to give an analogous account of narratives.⁴ Thus, one way of characterizing the project I undertake in this article would be to say that I aim to explore the possibilities of an experiential account of narratives, or at least of narrative pictures.

II

The question is about how we engage with narratives: how do our minds work when reading a narrative or watching a narrative film?

I am not on completely unexplored territory here. Some of the nonphilosophical accounts of narrative seem to take a similar route. The film theorist Edward Branigan, for example, raises the question when he writes: "I wish to examine how we come to know that something is a narrative

and how a narrative is able to make intelligible our experiences and feelings. I will argue that it is more than a way of classifying texts: *narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience.*⁵ What is more relevant for our purposes is that two important philosophical accounts have been given recently for our engagement with narratives that seem to take our experience of narrative to be explanatorily prior to narratives themselves.

David Velleman argues that what is characteristic of our engagement with narratives is a certain kind of emotional cadence: “any sequence of events, no matter how improbably, can provide material for [a narrative] if it completes an emotional cadence.”⁶ Velleman says little about what this “emotional cadence” would be, but a metaphorical way of characterizing it would be: “some episodes to set off an emotional *tick* to which subsequent episodes can provide the answering *tock*.”⁷ Gregory Currie, in contrast, argues that it is the perception of causal (or something close to causal) relation that characterizes our engagement with narratives.⁸ As he says, “Narrativity judgments depend on our perception (including our misperception) of relations of dependence of *some kind* between the events described.”⁹

What is important for our purposes is that the three most important recent philosophical accounts of narrative, Carroll’s, Currie’s, and Velleman’s, agree that our engagement with narratives implies some kind of representation of some kind of connection between two or more different events. Carroll writes that “narratives contain the citation of two, but possibly more, events and/or states of affairs.”¹⁰ Or, as Velleman says, narratives deploy “some episodes to set off an emotional *tick* to which subsequent episodes can provide the answering *tock*.”¹¹

Currie is the most careful of the three authors, as he does not commit to saying that narratives always represent two or more events. He makes a conditional claim: “in general, when the narrative juxtaposes representations of two events in ways that make both salient, our expectation is that the narrative represents, if only implicitly some kind of connection between them.”¹² It seems that Currie could allow for narratives that do not represent two or more events, but he fails to mention any in his writings on narrative.¹³ Carroll, Currie, and Velleman all agree that our engagement with narratives implies some kind of representation of

some kind of connection between two or more different events. That the representation of two or more events is required for our engagement with narrative is the premise I will argue against in what follows.

III

The philosophical literature on the nature of narrative has been mainly focusing on examples of literary narratives and does not pay too much attention to nonliterary cases. But an account of narrative as well as an account of engagement with narratives need to apply equally in nonliterary cases. It is important to examine how nonliterary and especially visual narratives can differ from literary ones and what follows from this with regard to a general account of narrative.

Some narratives are not literary but pictorial. Examples include great historical tableaux, cartoons, and narrative films. Most of the examples I use in this article are narrative pictures: still photographs, paintings, or drawings. But what does the label ‘narrative picture’ mean? A simple answer would be to say that a narrative picture tells a story, which supposedly means that it represents a narrative. But if a narrative is a series of events connected in a certain way, then it seems to follow that a narrative picture needs to represent two or more events as well as the fact that they are connected in a certain way.

There are a couple of *prima facie* problems with this assumption. The most straightforward of these is the following. Genre paintings are traditionally considered by art historians to be a subcategory of narrative paintings. Still, they usually represent only one event or state of affairs. Although this argument is very straightforward, it can also be countered by simply biting the bullet: art historians are just wrong in characterizing genre paintings as narrative pictures. They are not narrative pictures, as the general account of narratives do not apply to them. While this way of dismissing the practice of art history may not appeal to everyone, it is certainly a possible escape route for the proponents of a general account of narrative, according to which narrative pictures represent two or more events as well as the fact that they are connected in a certain way.

But, more importantly, this claim in itself could be taken to be slightly problematic, regardless of the practice of art historians. One may wonder

how a picture could represent all this—after all, a picture can be thought to represent one event only. How could it then represent an entire narrative, that is, a series of events? Note, however, that if we make a distinction between what a picture depicts and what it represents, this *prima facie* objection turns out to be unjustified, as a picture can represent more than what it depicts.¹⁴

Similarly, even though a picture can *depict* one event only, it can *represent* more than one event. Thus, it is perfectly possible that a picture represents a narrative. But then the question will be: how do pictures represent those events that they do not depict? If the picture does not depict them, then we cannot see them in the picture. But then how do we become aware of them? An obvious suggestion would be to say that we imagine them, on the basis of what we do see in the picture. Sticking with a simple narrative of two causally connected events, the cause *c* is depicted, but the effect *e* and the causal relation between the two are represented. Further, while the cause *c* is perceived, the effect *e* and the causal relation between the two are imagined.

The problem with this suggestion is that most pictures that are characterized as narrative pictures do not follow this model. Take any historical painting, such as Jacques-Louis David's *Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris on 2 December 1804* (1808). What are the causally connected events that this picture would represent? The event depicted is clear enough: Napoleon is being consecrated as emperor. But what *other* nondepicted event is represented? It is unclear that either the causes of this event or any of its consequences are in fact represented by this painting. It may represent the overly ambitious personality of Bonaparte, without depicting it, but not events that precede or follow the depicted one. Still, it is one of the prime examples of narrative paintings. What makes it narrative then?

David's painting and other historical as well as biblical and mythological paintings suggest that what makes a painting narrative is something else. David's painting depicts (and represents) only one event, but we, the suitably informed spectators, know that this depicted event is part of a narrative. We know that this event is (causally) connected to some other events. This way of analyzing what makes pictures narrative, however, introduces an

asymmetry between the literary and the pictorial case: in the case of literary narrative, we do not call a text narrative if it represents one event that we know to be causally connected to other events. The text 'Napoleon is consecrated as emperor' is not a narrative.

But maybe this is too quick. Maybe the equivalent of David's painting is not one sentence, but an entire novel describing how the events in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame proceeded, something like the following: "The crowd was beginning to get very impatient when Bonaparte and Josephine finally showed up at the entrance and made their way toward the altar. Josephine almost tripped over her long red cloak just before she approached the altar," and so forth. It is of course not obvious that all these events are in fact represented by the painting. But, maybe some are. On the painting what we see is that Bonaparte lifts up the crown. We do not see that the crown is being put on anyone's head. But supposedly this is part of what the picture represents, otherwise it would not be a painting of the consecration of Napoleon. Thus, we did find an event that is not depicted yet, that is represented by the painting. The problem is that the event of holding up the crown and the event of putting it down on one's head are not clearly two separate events. And this question takes us to the thorny issue of how to individuate events.

IV

The individuation of events is a complicated problem in and of itself, but it is even more complicated in the case of individuating events represented by a picture. Take Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Behind Saint-Lazare Station* (Paris, 1932), the photograph of a man jumping across a puddle, with moderate success. What we see in the picture is a man in the air. But supposedly it is part of the photograph's pictorial content that he will land in the puddle. This moment is not depicted; thus, it can only be represented.

Thus, Carroll, Currie, and Velleman can run their respective models in the case of these visual narratives. Carroll would supposedly say that there are two events represented in the picture: the man in the air and the man landing in the puddle. The first causes the second: we have a clear example of a narrative. Currie would supposedly say that we experience these two events as

causally interconnected, and Velleman would say that the “tick” of the man in the air is answered in the “tock” of his landing in the puddle. A clear case of an emotional cadence of the tick-tock kind: we have a narrative.

A shared feature of all these three explanations is that they all refer to two separate events, the first of which we do see in the picture, whereas the second we only imagine. I will argue that this is one way of individuating the events represented by a narrative picture, and perhaps not the most natural one. Another one would be to say that the picture represents one event only: the action of jumping. If so, the explanations Carroll, Currie, and Velleman advocate will not work.

The framework Carroll, Currie, and Velleman use is not at all new and is rather respectable. The three authors are in the pleasant company of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who could be interpreted as holding similar views about the individuation of events represented in a picture. He writes: “It is to a single moment that the material limits of art confine all its imitations. The artist, out of ever-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment.”¹⁵ Thus, it is always just one single moment that a picture depicts: that we see in the picture. But then how are we aware of the moments that follow or precede the depicted one? We imagine them: “The longer we gaze, the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see.”¹⁶ Thus, when we are looking at a picture we see only one event depicted in it, but our “imagination can add” another event that is separate from the one that is depicted, and in the end we are aware of both when looking at the picture.

Note that the question about how to individuate the events that are represented by pictures is intricately connected to the question about how to individuate the events that we perceive. The connection between these two questions is made explicit by Alberti’s famous dictum: “The painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen.” If what can be seen is a momentary event, then the painter is concerned solely with representing (depicting) momentary events. More generally, if we can only see momentary events, then supposedly we can only see momentary events in a picture, and then a picture can only depict single moments.

My claim is that this way of describing our perception is misleading. That Carroll, Currie, and

Velleman find themselves in the company of Lessing could be construed as a warning sign. It has been argued that Lessing had a very narrow conception of what can be seen face-to-face.¹⁷ If we can see temporally extended actions, for example, and not only time-slices thereof, then we have no reason to suppose that we can only see one time-slice in a picture and that we have to imagine everything else.

Perception is not momentary: it has a temporal dimension; we have no reason to believe that the object of perception cannot be also temporally extended.¹⁸ When one sees a tomato, we do not say that one sees one part of it (the front) and imagines another (the back). We see the entire tomato. According to Thompson Clarke’s famous analogy, perceiving is like nibbling: when we nibble at a piece of cheese, we do not only nibble at the part that we actually touch. We nibble at the entire cheese.¹⁹

But if this is true for the spatial dimension of perception, what reason do we have to suppose that things are different when it comes to the temporal dimension? Rather than saying that we see the man in the air and imagine him landing in the puddle, we should rather say that we see him jumping (although we only set eyes on one temporal part of this action).

Let us return to pictures. It is misleading to say that Cartier-Bresson’s photograph represents two separate events, one visible in the picture, one only imagined. It represents only one thing really: the action of jumping, as we see the action of jumping in the picture. Similarly, it is also misleading to say that we see the crown lifted in the air and we imagine its being placed on Napoleon’s head. What we see is the coronation of Napoleon: the entire action.

The idea that we can see more than just a time-slice in a picture is not new. Richard Wollheim has a vivid illustration of this point:

I look at a picture that includes a classical landscape with ruins. And now imagine the following dialogue: “Can you see the columns?” “Yes.” “Can you see the columns as coming from a temple?” “Yes.” “Can you see the columns that come from the temple as having been thrown down?” “Yes.” “Can you see them as having been thrown down some hundreds of years ago?” “Yes.” “Can you see them as having been thrown down some hundreds of years ago by barbarians?” “Yes.” “Can you see them as having been thrown down some hundreds of

years ago by barbarians wearing the skins of wild asses?" (Pause.) "No."²⁰

Thus, we have no reason to suppose that we can see only one time-slice in a picture and we need to imagine all other temporal moments. But if this is the right way of describing what Cartier-Bresson's picture represents, then it is difficult to explain why it is a narrative picture, regardless of which of the three theories, Carroll's, Currie's, or Velleman's, we choose, as all three of them assume that for a narrative, we need at least two events, connected in a certain way (or that engaging with a narrative presupposes the representation of at least two events).

But it seems that the natural way of describing narrative pictures is that they represent not two distinct events, but rather entire actions. Thus, a necessary feature of all these three accounts seems to be missing if we apply them to narrative pictures. If we want to find an account of narrative or narrative engagement that can cover cases of visual narratives, we should look elsewhere.

Finally, a simple possible argument should be addressed. It would undermine my analysis if one resisted the description of Cartier-Bresson's photograph as a narrative picture. The suggestion, then, would be that it does not represent two separate events, but only one action, but that is exactly what we should expect, as it is not a narrative picture. One problem with this strategy is that it would flatly contradict the way the term 'narrative picture' is used by art historians.²¹ But an even more significant problem is that it is unclear that *any* picture would count as narrative if we accept this kind of reasoning. David's painting, as we have seen, is not different from the Cartier-Bresson photograph as far as the structure of what is represented by them is concerned: both represent an action. And both show us a time-slice of this action. Thus, we have no reason to suppose that one of them is a narrative picture while the other one is not.

v

So far, I have given an argument against a premise the three most important accounts of narrative share. Now it is time to examine the consequences of rejecting this premise and to outline an account

of narrative pictures that would not endorse this premise.

More precisely, I aim to outline a proposal about what makes our engagement with narrative pictures different from our engagements with other kinds of representations. My proposal, again, is not about narratives, but about our engagement with narratives. I will return to the complicated issue of the ways in which these two questions hang together in the last section. But the question until then will be about the way in which we can characterize our engagement with narratives.

As a first step, we need to examine what the premise I rejected above should be replaced with. It seems that narratives (at least visual narratives) do not need to represent two (or more) events. But then what do they need to represent? Or, to put this point differently, our engagement with narratives does not presuppose the awareness of two (or more) (causally) interconnected events. But then what does it presuppose?

Carroll's consideration for bringing in "two, or possibly more, events and/or states of affairs" was the following: "The statement—'There was an old lady who lived in a shoe'—is not a narrative, although it describes a state of affairs. Why not? Because narratives contain more than one event and/or states of affairs."²² This reasoning does not seem to be valid. Carroll shows that the description of a state of affairs is not a narrative and he concludes that being a narrative presupposes "two, or possibly more, *events* and/or states of affairs." But it may be still possible that if a narrative represents states of affairs, then it needs to represent more than one state of affairs, but if it represents events, it may represent only one event. Carroll says nothing in favor of the claim that narratives must represent more than one event. His premise is about states of affairs alone (and only of one example thereof), but his conclusion is about "events and/or states of affairs."

My point is that while it is true that the representation of a state of affairs (especially of the kind Carroll gives us) is not a narrative, the representation of one single event, or at least a subcategory thereof, of one single action, can count as a narrative. Carroll gives no argument against this claim and our analysis of narrative pictures seems to suggest that this is exactly what happens in most examples of visual narratives.

VI

It is a striking feature of the literature on narrative that it completely ignores a concept that, intuitively, has a lot to do with narratives: that of action. A naive conception of narrative would be a text or picture where something happens. And something happening usually takes the form of someone doing something. Further, narrative pictures very often, maybe even almost always, represent actions. Cartier-Bresson's photograph represents a man's action of jumping. David's painting represents the action of putting a crown on Napoleon's head. I argue that the concept of action is indeed crucial in understanding narrative pictures (or at least our engagement with narratives), but the way actions characterize our engagement with narratives is not as straightforward as one would think. Again, I limit my attention to narrative pictures at this point. I shall say some more about the possibilities of extending this account in such a way that would apply in the case of literary narratives in Section VII.

If we want to build an account of narrative around the notion of action, a simple, and not very convincing, way of drawing the distinction between narrative and nonnarrative pictures would be to say that a nonnarrative picture, such as a still life or a portrait, usually represents a state of affairs, whereas narrative paintings represent actions. This way of drawing the distinction will not do, as there are portraits that represent the sitter as performing an action. Many of Memling's portraits represent the sitters praying, for example. Conversely, there are narrative paintings where no one performs any action. David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) is a narrative painting, but Marat does not perform any action in it, as he is represented as dead.

Thus, the representation of actions is unlikely to be a necessary or sufficient condition for being a narrative. But the aim of this article is not to characterize narratives but to characterize our engagement with narratives. Thus, what we should be looking for is not a necessary or sufficient condition for being a narrative, but a necessary or sufficient condition for our engagement with narratives. And here, I argue, actions play an important role. My claim is that it is a crucial (maybe even necessary and sufficient) feature of our engagement with narrative pictures that an action of one of the characters in the picture is part of what

we are (supposed to be) aware of when looking at the picture.

I need to make a couple of clarifications about the details of this proposal. First, I do not claim that the action needs to be depicted or even represented. It is possible that only a consequence of such an action is represented, as in *The Death of Marat*. It is also possible that what is represented in the painting is the moment before the performance of an action, but this action itself is not depicted or even represented, as in the case of Francisco de Goya's *Waiting for Julia* (1798). All that is needed for our engagement with a narrative is that this action is part of what we are aware of when we are looking at the picture. If, of course, the picture represents an action, as the vast majority of narrative pictures do, then on looking at the picture, we are likely to be aware of this action, which is represented in it; hence, our experience will be an instance of narrative engagement.

Second, the character whose action we are aware of is not necessarily depicted. Lucien Hervé's *Three Women* (1951) may be a possible example, where we see three women looking at something clearly absorbing, but as whatever it is, is outside the photograph's frame, the action as well as the actor performing it is not depicted in the picture. Yet, our engagement with this picture is not clearly nonnarrative.

Third, the action we are aware of does not need to be an action one of the characters is performing, has performed, or will perform. It may also be the action he or she *should* (or should not) perform. There is a famous scene in Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (Charles Reisner, 1928), where Keaton stands still while the façade of a house falls on him. Take this scene in itself. Keaton is not performing any action, but he *should* be performing some action.

Fourth, it is not clear what would count as action in my characterization. Is breathing an action? How about standing? And holding a balance? Being aware of these actions usually does not seem to have much to do with engagement with narratives: on many portraits we see someone sitting, and it is unlikely that this will make our experience of the picture an instance of narrative engagement. It seems that we need to restrict the circle of actions the awareness of which characterizes our engagement with pictorial narratives.

My claim is that the actions we are aware of while engaging with pictorial narratives are likely

to be goal-directed actions. What exactly makes an action goal directed is a controversial question in the philosophy of mind, but for our purposes it is enough to say that goal-directed actions aim to achieve some kind of goal. Sitting down is usually a goal-directed action, while sitting is usually not. It is important to note that the distinction between goal-directed and not goal-directed actions is not one between action types, but between action tokens. Although breathing is often not a goal-directed action, some token performance of it may be goal directed (say, when someone needs to make an effort to do so in thick smoke).

The first shot of Wim Wenders's *Summer in the City* (1970) is a very long sequence of someone walking on the sidewalks with the camera following. Suppose that the film ends when this shot ends. Would this be a narrative? I am not sure. Probably not. Would our experience of this shot be an instance of narrative engagement? Again, I am not sure. But whether we experience the protagonist's action as goal directed may make a difference when answering this question. If we assume that this action is a goal-directed one, say, I imagine that the protagonist is rushing away from a murder scene, then it makes more sense to describe our experience as engagement with a piece of narrative. If, however, we do not assume any such thing and experience the walking of the protagonist as just walking about aimlessly, as an action of that is not goal directed, then it is much less likely that we engage with a narrative.

I do not intend the distinction between goal-directed and not goal-directed actions to be a sharp one. Many genre paintings represent characters performing actions that are not obviously goal directed. Is, then, our experience of these pictures an instance of engagement with a narrative? Maybe. But it is definitely less so than our experience of a picture of the siege of Vienna.

And at this point I want to allude to an important point Gregory Currie makes about any attempts to characterize narratives. He says that "narrativity" comes in degrees and any account of narrative should be able to accommodate this fact.²³ A Vermeer is less narrative than a David, but it is more narrative than a Cézanne still life. Similarly, our engagement with narratives should also come in degrees. And if what characterizes our engagement with narratives is that we are aware of actions of some kind, it seems likely that the goal-directedness of the actions we are aware

of also comes in degrees. If this action is explicitly goal directed, then our narrative engagement will be strong, while if it is less so, our narrative engagement will be weaker.²⁴

Johannes Vermeer's paintings demonstrate this point nicely. We may see a woman in a picture as holding a balance in his *Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1664), but we do not see her as performing a goal-directed action: we do not see her as trying to achieve anything. Thus, our engagement with this painting is less narrative in character. Interestingly, most of Vermeer's paintings depict actions that are not goal directed or only goal directed in a very weak sense: pouring milk out of a pitcher, playing the virginal, reading a letter. But there are a couple of Vermeer paintings where at least one of the characters is performing an action that is more goal directed, and these are the Vermeer paintings that are considered to be more on the narrative side. *The Glass of Wine* (c. 1658–61) is probably the best example, where the woman is emptying her glass, which is clearly a goal-directed action.

It would be a mistake to draw a strict line between narrative engagement and the lack thereof and try to place our experience with each Vermeer painting on the appropriate side of this divide. If the goal-directedness of actions comes in degrees, then our engagement with narratives also comes in degrees and, presumably, as Currie suggests, so does narrativity. I return to this last point at the end of the article.

VII

I need to consider a couple of possible objections to the proposal that it is a crucial (maybe even necessary and sufficient) feature of our engagement with narrative pictures that an action of one of the characters in the picture is part of what we are aware of when looking at the picture. It seems that my account could be accused of being both too strong and too weak.

First, one may argue that my account is too weak: lots of experiences would count as narrative engagement, according to my account, that we would not want to call narrative engagement. A possible example that could be thought to demonstrate that my account is too weak is Breughel's *Flemish Proverbs* (1559), which is presumably considered to be a nonnarrative painting: it does

not represent a narrative; it represents figures of speech in the Flemish language. Among all the weird events depicted in the picture, I will focus on only one. In the lower left corner, there is a woman who is swaddling the Devil. This is an action and very much a goal-directed one, and we see this action in the picture. Our (appropriate) experience of the picture then seems to presuppose an awareness of this woman's action. Thus, according to my account, our experience must be an instance of narrative engagement. Yet, the painting is a nonnarrative picture.

Although Breughel's painting may indeed be a nonnarrative picture, our engagement with it may be a narrative one: we may (and as far as I can tell, we do) experience the details of the painting in a way that can be characterized as narrative engagement. The painting, in a way, presents dozens of mini-narratives, and we engage with these. Hence, the fact that the painting is a nonnarrative one (if it is) does not exclude the possibility that we experience narrative engagement with some (or most) of its details.

How about those Hans Memling portraits of people who are praying? Praying could be thought of as a goal-directed action: it aims to achieve a goal. So we are aware of a goal-directed action when we are looking at these pictures. Yet, they are not narrative pictures: they are portraits. My response is that although praying for something (like sitting down) is indeed a goal-directed action, just praying (like just sitting) is not. And what we see the depicted characters do is not praying for something, but just praying. Thus, the action we are aware of is not a goal-directed one.

Second, one may argue that my account is too strong: according to my account, lots of experiences that we would intuitively call narrative engagement would not count as narrative engagement. Take any narrative without agents. As I proposed, engagement with a narrative presupposes awareness of some action, so if a narrative has no agents, it is difficult to see how we could engage with it. Suppose that we see a film of a complicated causal process without any actors: a billiard ball hits another billiard ball, which in turn hits a third one, and so on. It is unclear whether this sequence would count as a narrative, but this is not our question either. The question is whether a person looking at such a sequence would experience narrative engagement. As it is unlikely that part of what this person is aware of would be an

action (as it is not clear what action one could be aware of in this sequence), I need to conclude that our engagement with this sequence is unlikely to be a narrative one.

Does this mean that we cannot experience narrative engagement when watching this sequence? No. If I have some reason to imagine that the person who hit the first ball would lose all his or her money if the second ball does not hit the third one, then part of what I am aware of is an action: an action of someone who is not represented in the picture, but an action all the same. And in this case, my experience of the footage is indeed an instance of narrative engagement. Would I be justified to experience the scene in this way? This is a complex question, which I return to in the last section, but it is important to note at this point that in order to give an account of engagement with a narrative, we do not need to specify when such engagement is warranted and when it is not.

VIII

This model may explain our engagement with visual narratives, but how could we apply it in the case of literary narratives? My rhetoric so far has been that we should rethink the three most influential accounts of narrative because they fail to cover pictorial narratives and only apply in literary cases. If it turns out that my account in turn only applies in pictorial cases and cannot accommodate literary examples, we have not achieved much.

It is important that the account I propose in this article is not an account of narrative engagement in general, but only of engagement with pictorial narratives. So everything I say in this section is rather tentative and should not influence the main point I made about narrative pictures. The aim of this section is merely to try to show that it is not a completely crazy idea to extend the account of engagement with pictorial narratives to literary cases.

There are literary narratives such that our engagement with them has little to do with any kind of awareness of any actions. Here is one: "This morning I was upset because I thought that I had forgotten how to add, but then I remembered that $2 + 2 = 4$ and now I am so very happy."²⁵ According to Carroll, this is a narrative, but it is difficult to see what action the person engaging with this

piece of writing is supposed to be aware of. My response is that forgetting how to add and remembering that $2 + 2 = 4$ are actions. They are mental actions, but actions all the same. Further, they may even be goal-directed actions. Thus, if when reading this sentence we experience an instance of narrative engagement, then we are aware of the (goal-directed) action of remembering.

Conversely, there are literary texts that do represent actions, but that are, arguably, not narratives. Carroll gives the following example, which he takes not to be a narrative: “I woke up; later I dressed; still later I went to class.”²⁶ Carroll wants to resist the suggestion that this would be a narrative (although he acknowledges that this may be a controversial verdict).²⁷ Regardless of whether this text would count as a narrative, the question that should interest us is whether in reading this text we could be described as experiencing narrative engagement. More generally, the question is whether reading a text that merely describes an action could count as narrative engagement.

My response is that it depends on the text. Take the following example from Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel, *Jealousy*:

She leans toward Franck to hand him his glass. . . . The glasses are filled almost to the brim with a mixture of cognac and soda in which a little cube of ice is floating. In order to avoid the danger of upsetting the glasses in the darkness, A . . . has moved as near as possible to the armchair Franck is sitting in, her right hand carefully extending the glass with his drink in it.²⁸

I would say that we do experience narrative engagement when we read this text. But our engagement with the sentence ‘A . . . gave Franck a drink’ is unlikely to be of the narrative kind, in spite of the fact that the action described by the two texts is the same. This fact itself could be thought to be problematic for a theory of narrative that tries to characterize narratives in terms of what is represented by them.

But what is the difference between these two texts? My suggestion is that the difference lies in the experience they trigger. In the case of the Robbe-Grillet quote, we are extremely likely to be vividly aware of the actual performance of the action described. In the case of the simple ‘A . . . gave Franck a drink,’ on the other hand, we may or may not be aware of the performance of the action itself. It is possible that we are only aware of

a state of affairs: Franck now has a drink. But it is also possible that we are aware of the performance of the action itself, for example, if we imagine all the details that the Robbe-Grillet text gives us. And in this case, the experience this text triggers is likely to be akin to narrative engagement.

ix

The account I outlined in the last couple of sections was not of narratives but of our engagement with narratives. How, if at all, does this help us to understand the difference between narrative and nonnarrative pictures?

I drew a tentative parallel at the beginning of this article between the experiential theories of depiction and the account I am proposing. Experiential theories of depiction want to characterize the experience we (are supposed to) go through when looking at pictures. Say our experience of pictures is characterized by a version of “seeing-in.” How do we get from this proposal to a claim about what pictures are? The general suggestion in the case of the experiential theories of depiction is that something is a picture if a suitable spectator is supposed to have a “seeing-in” experience when looking at it. We can employ a similar strategy in the case of the account of narrative engagement I proposed. A picture is a narrative picture if and only if a suitable informed spectator is supposed to undergo the experience of engaging with narrative I characterized above.

This way of defining both depiction and narratives, of course, relies on a straightforward way of specifying who would qualify as a “suitable spectator.” Wollheim says that “a suitable spectator is a spectator who is suitably sensitive, suitably informed and, if necessary, suitably prompted,” but this, in itself, is not very helpful, as it will not specify whether narrative engagement would be an appropriate response to a Vermeer or not.²⁹

I do not know whether this potential problem of experiential theories can be resolved, and I will certainly not attempt to do so here. If we can characterize the suitable spectator in a not-question-begging manner, then we have a simple way of deriving a theory of narrative from the account of narrative engagement I outlined above. If, however, we cannot do that, we are left without a theory of narrative, which I would not be too sad

about, as long as we do have an account of the way we react to narratives.

And at this point I want to return to the crucial point Gregory Currie emphasized about the degrees of narrativity. Narrativity comes in degrees and any account of narrative should be able to accommodate this fact.³⁰ A Vermeer is less narrative than a David, but it is more narrative than a Cézanne still life. Thus, some instances of narrative engagement with a picture may be more or less appropriate. We do not have to appeal to some ideal spectator to draw a strict line between narrative and nonnarrative, as there is no such strict line.³¹

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1. Noël Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," in *New Perspectives on Narrative Experience*, ed. Wille van Peer and Seymour Chatman (SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 21–41.

2. Gregory Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 309–316; J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1–25.

3. Richard Wollheim, "Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation," in *Art and Its Object*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 205–226; Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton University Press, 1987); Kendall Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990); Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. Interestingly, Gregory Currie also makes a connection between the experiential accounts of depiction, or, rather, one such account, Wollheim's, and the way we should think about narratives. See Gregory Currie, "Both Sides of the Story: Explaining Events in a Narrative," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 49–63, especially pp. 49–50.

5. Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

6. Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," p. 6.

7. Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," p. 20.

8. Gregory Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," "Both Sides of the Story," and "Pictures of King Arthur: Photography and the Power of Narrative," in *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, ed. Scott Walden (New York: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 265–283.

9. Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," p. 316, footnote 23.

10. Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," p. 22.

11. Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," p. 20.

12. Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," p. 312.

13. Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," "Both Sides of the Story," and "Pictures of King Arthur."

14. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*; Richard Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 217–226; see also John Armstrong, "Non-Depicted Content and Pictorial Ambition," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (1997): 336–348.

15. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1766/1853), p. 16.

16. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 17.

17. Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," p. 223.

18. James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); James J. Gibson, *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (MIT Press, 2004).

19. Thompson Clarke, "Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects," in *Philosophy in America: Essays*, ed. Max Black (Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 98–114; P. F. Strawson, "Perception and Its Objects," in *Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to A. J. Ayer with His Replies*, ed. Graham F. MacDonald (Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 41–60; Noë, *Action in Perception*, p. 76.

20. Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," p. 224. Wollheim famously held that imagining is a kind of seeing. He writes: "When I imagine seeing the façade of St. Peter's, then, necessarily, I see the façade of St. Peter's"; Richard Wollheim, "Imagination and Identification," *On Art and the Mind* (Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 54–83, quote from p. 55. However, what matters for our purposes is that we can be prompted to imagine the barbarians wearing the skins of wild asses, but we cannot see them in the picture.

21. See, for example, Jack M. Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

22. Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," p. 22.

23. Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," pp. 310–312.

24. One may wonder what it means to say that we are aware of an action that is "very" or "really" goal directed. What is at the "goal-directed" end of the spectrum between goal directed and the lack thereof? My response is that sometimes we are aware of a goal-directed action in such a way that we are aware both of the performance of the action and of the goal it is directed at. Interestingly, our awareness of this action then seems to imply the awareness of two distinct states of affairs (as Carroll, Currie, and Velleman suggest): the state of affairs of the performance of the action as well as the desired state of affairs the action is supposed to achieve. It is important to emphasize, however, that this analysis, which overlaps with the one Carroll, Currie, and Velleman propose, applies only to the very extreme case of engagement with a narrative: when the goal-directedness of the action we are aware of is made extremely explicit.

25. Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," p. 35.

26. Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," p. 25.

27. It is indeed controversial. One consideration that would count against Carroll's intuitions is again an appeal to nonliterary, in this case, cinematic narratives. Marco Ferreri's *Dillinger è morto* (1969) is a narrative film, at least it is categorized as one. But what happens in the film is very

similar to Carroll's "I woke up; later I dressed; still later I went to class." The main character, Glauco, played by Michel Piccoli, makes a coffee, prepares some food, takes apart his gun, paints it, puts it together again, and so on.

28. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels* (New York: Grove, 1965), p. 43.

29. Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," p. 217.

30. Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," pp. 310–312.

31. I am grateful for comments by Felicitas Becker as well as the participants of my graduate seminar "Fictionality and the Mind" at the University of British Columbia.