

Differences Between Single and Sequential Pictorial Storytelling

Hannah Fasnacht

University of Basel, Switzerland

Abstract What differentiates narration with sequential images from narration with single images? Pictorial narration can take different forms, depending on how many images are used to tell a story. This paper questions common usages of the notions single images and sequential images, in order to better understand the differences between them for visual narration. It highlights the specific potential of sequential images regarding storytelling and notes what kinds of inference a spectator needs to undertake to correctly understand such pictorial narratives. The aim is to gain a more thorough understanding of a specific kind of two-dimensional pictorial narration: narration with sequential images.

Keywords Storytelling. Pictorial Storytelling. Single Images. Sequential Images. Narration.

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1 Introduction

Are there differences in pictorial storytelling, depending on whether it is pictorial narration with a single image or with sequential images? I will argue that many pictures which are currently understood as being single images are images that have either different scenes or could even be classified as different pictures in some cases. And many of them use the potential of sequential storytelling and apply it to single images.

There is an ongoing debate about whether single images can be narrative, especially in art history, but also in newer, more interdisciplinary texts (Kemp 1996; Nanay 2009; Speidel 2013; Fasnacht 2023). There is also a vast amount of literature focusing on sequential images, mostly in comics studies but also in studies on picture books, graphic novels, etc. (Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007; Grünewald, 2011; Postema 2013, 2014). But, to my knowledge, there are no texts that specifically address the differences between single and sequential pictorial narration and their respective advantages. I want to find out if there are such differences in pictorial narration, depending on whether one or several images are used. In this paper, I understand 'narrative images' as images that represent some narrative characteristics, like events, time, etc., which are not freely associated, but for which there are enough pictorial evidence such that one can argue about the representation of a certain story by pointing to elements in the image.

How do sequential narrative images differ in their storytelling capacity from single narrative images? What makes sequential pictorial narration special? I want to address these questions by, first, presenting different categories on how to count images, which is a necessary step to differentiate between single and sequential pictorial narration; second, addressing what makes sequential images unique; and third, highlighting what is needed from a spectator to correctly understand sequential narrative images.

A key problem is that 'single images' and 'sequential images' are categories which are used frequently, but often without systematization. To describe sequential images as many image carriers with a respective image content, and single images as one image carrier with a respective content does not always work, as I will show. The contribution of this paper therefore can be seen as twofold: by addressing the question of what makes sequential pictorial narration unique, a spotlight is put on the different possibilities to count images; and by using more finely structured categories of how to count images, a deeper understanding of sequential pictorial narration can be achieved. If the question of what exactly differentiates single and sequential pictorial storytelling is left open, a degree of

ambiguity and a lack of clarity in a general examination of pictorial narration remains.

The scope of this paper is limited insofar as I will not be looking at either the cultural history of the sequential image or medium-specific aspects that make pictures experienceable in the first place. For readers interested in these issues, research in visual semiotics and visual culture offer excellent starting points.

In addition, in this paper I will not be considering moving images – like films or movies – as a third category of pictures. This does not mean that questions regarding sequentiality are of no interest for moving pictures. On the contrary, moving images and especially movies offer interesting avenues of inquiry with regard to sequential images. I want to briefly mention five aspects here. First, a movie normally consists of different shots, which, similar to sequential pictures in comics, often present content from different points of view and from different proximities (e.g. landscape or portrait shots).¹ Second, even in cases where a movie consists of the same shot throughout, the image content can change, thereby producing some kind of sequentiality. People can walk into the frame, events can happen, people and things can move out of the frame, move closer to the camera or become smaller due to moving away. It is also possible for the camera to change position, thereby providing various content with different points of view, perspectives and proximities, just without the normally present editing cuts. An example that comes to mind is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948).² Third, there are also cases where the filmed content does not move at all. Then the camera position, the perspective, the proximity, and, mostly, the picture content do not change. An example that comes close to this is Andy Warhol's film *Empire*, which presents a shot of several hours in duration that shows the Empire State Building in New York.³ The sequentiality of such examples is not as evident as the sequentiality of other, more conventional movies. These examples may therefore intuitively be closer to 'single pictures', just moving ones. Fourth, even such cases can have some sequentiality, if one decomposes the viewing experience into the individual frames of which moving pictures consist. Fifth, apart from these more medium-specific aspects, one could also look at the complex aspects of sequentiality in the filmed content: a gesture in

1 Complications of such standard cases of sequentiality are movies which make use of jump cuts, for example Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960).

2 Even though this movie consists of several cuts, most cuts are not visible for the viewer.

3 Some things change in the picture content (e.g. the sky changes color when it becomes dark).

the more complex unity of an action, for example.⁴ The question of how movement is perceived and individuated and how this affects the (perceived) sequentiality does not just concern moving images; it is pertinent in non-moving ones too and indeed, in my view, this question is even more puzzling in non-moving images.

Much more could be said about moving pictures and sequentiality, and how moving and non-moving pictures relate and differ, but for the remainder of this paper I want to focus only on two-dimensional still images, an area of inquiry which is already sufficiently large for the scope of this article: 'two-dimensional' to exclude specific problems of image vehicle and content of sculptures and statues; 'still' to exclude specific problems of film. Even though I mention at certain points works on film as a contrasting example, my aim here is only to differentiate between single and sequential pictorial narration.

Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl introduced helpful notions with which to differentiate various features of images, like image vehicle, image content (which consists of image space and image object), and image referent (Pichler, Ubl 2014, 2018). But the notion 'image vehicle' might profit from even further differentiation, especially when it comes to the question of pictorial narration and how to count or differentiate between different images. This is so because what we refer to as 'one image' can sometimes change between the image content, the image vehicle, and further categories.

A straightforward idea about how to count images would be by counting the different image carriers (like the different canvases, photographs, etc.). But this way of counting the images based on the amount of image carriers poses some problems and, in many cases, seems inaccurate. One could argue that some images can transcend image carriers; for instance, one could say that several image carriers, each with their own image content, should be understood in total as a single image that stretches over different carriers, as in the example in Figure 1. One could say that the photograph shows one image, split over two image carriers and two frames with their respective image content [fig. 1].

The same problem exists the other way around, too. There are cases in which an image has one frame but may depict a person at several stages in their life, or at different places living through different events, and in that sense it potentially represents many 'images', even though it is only one frame, one image carrier. While this in general would not matter too much when analyzing an image, it matters in the context of pictorial narration and when seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how pictorial narration works. A pictorial narrative can only be understood correctly if the spectator sees such an

⁴ I thank a reviewer for pointing this out.



Figure 1 Jean Jullien. <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/675962225299745352/> © Jean Jullien

Figure 2 Detail of Quentin Blake's "The Clown"
Quentin Blake, detail of "Clown", 1998. <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/545780048582120610/>
© Quentin Blake

image as representing the same character at different points in time. Should one call these different representations image parts? Image-units? Or different images? Or do we need a different category altogether? I argue that it is beneficial to additionally distinguish between single and sequential images, regardless of whether they are using different image carriers or only one. So, taking into consideration Figure 2, I would argue that it is a single image, stretched over two image carriers with frames, each of which has an image content respectively. Yet, nevertheless, it could also make sense to say that there are two images that constitute a whole, or, that there is one image that is stretched over two material image carriers. And in Figure 3, one could either say that there are three images on one image carrier, or one image with different 'image parts', or one pictorial content that consists of three images [figs 2-3]. But every case is a form of sequential pictorial narration. If we follow along Ubl and Pichlers differentiation between image carrier and image content, it then seems that both image carriers and image contents can be composite: constituted by image parts that are themselves carriers or contents respectively. It then may be misleading to speak of 'image' tout court, without specifying further what we mean by it.

There are several possibilities when it comes to the criteria one uses to count images: the number of image carriers, the number of frames, the number of distinctive/complete image contents. Often different categories overlap, for example in classical paintings, like when talking about the paintings by Monet. Even when looking at the whole corpus

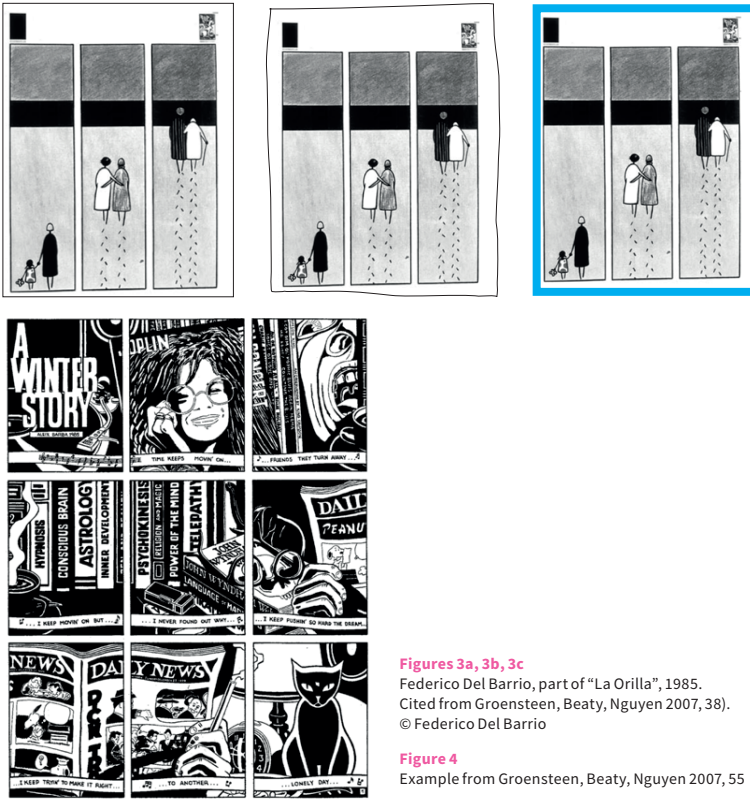
of sunflower paintings by van Gogh, which have some similarities content-wise, and one could arrange them next to each other in a series in an exhibition or in a book, each painting has its own distinctive image carrier, its specific (complete) image content and a ‘frame’ which more or less overlaps with the image carrier. These examples, where different categories overlap, are what one has generally in mind when talking about images. And if all examples were like this, we would not even need these distinctions to count the images. But there are examples where these three categories do not overlap and as such, to really understand how sequential pictorial narration differs from single pictorial narration, a more thorough analysis is crucial. Therefore, I will quickly look at each of these categories in turn.

2 Syntactic and Material Differentiators

Syntactic categories allow a counting of images independent of any pictorial content. A spectator need not be able to decipher the representational meaning of an image correctly to count the syntactic categories of ‘image carrier’ and ‘frame’.⁵

An ‘image carrier’ is the canvas, paper, wood, etc., which makes it possible for colors to be arranged on it in such a way that it produces an image content. It is the material that provides the basis. An illustrative thought experiment might be the following: we enter a room and someone tells us that all the objects we can see are paintings. But we cannot see the front we can only see them from the back, and we cannot move around to look at what is depicted. We just see how many canvases there are. If someone now asks us how many images are in the room, our best guess might be to say that the number of images is equal to the number of canvases we can see. Now, one could alter the experiment to people having the possibility to walk around and see what is depicted. Let’s say that there are examples where the ‘whole pictorial content’ is spread out over several canvases, and other examples in which there are comic-like image series on one canvas. Here people might differ in their answer as to how many images there are, how many frames, and how many image carriers respectively. And if there are examples where nothing is depicted, where it is just an empty canvas, it seems at least questionable to count it as an image, and even as an image carrier, if there is nothing that is to be carried yet. If there is no pictorial content, the

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, it is not useful to further differentiate between certain image parts like lines, foreground, background, etc., at least not as a general category. There may be examples where such a differentiation is useful, but not with regard to the differentiation of single and sequential pictorial narration.



Figures 3a, 3b, 3c
Federico Del Barrio, part of “La Orilla”, 1985.
Cited from Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007, 38).
© Federico Del Barrio

Figure 4
Example from Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007, 55

canvas probably cannot be counted as an image carrier. So, it is useful to have ‘image carrier’ as a category to distinguish images, but it cannot provide the relevant distinction in every case, especially not when it comes to pictorial narration. For the latter, a more fine-grained distinction is needed.

‘Image frames’ are another category with which to count images and to decide when an image is distinct from another. When frames overlap with the image carrier, the frame can be the end of the canvas and take the form of the outside shape. But the frame can be differentiated from the image carrier, as decades of comic studies have shown. In comics, the frame is often explicitly marked with black lines [fig. 3a], where one might agree that there are three images (or five, if one wants to count the two small ones on the top as well). Someone might argue that there are three (or five) image carriers in Figure 3a, and that the frames and the content overlaps. But we could alter the example by drawing another frame around [fig. 3b], or to a composition where the blue could be seen as the outline shape of the carrier or as a higher order frame [fig. 3c].



Figure 5
Mirra Neiman,
<https://rb.gy/kav5n>
© Mirra Neiman

So, would it instead make sense to count images according to the frames, regardless of the image carrier, such that when they overlap, it is fine, and when they do not, the frames offer the relevant category? This might be a useful guide for examples like 3a. But there are other examples [fig. 4] that question whether the number of frames equals the number of images, could be of use as a general rule, as one might argue that it is one image that is split by nine frames. This example already shows that it is difficult to stay solely on the syntactical level when deciding where one image begins and ends. Consider also the case where two canvasses are put next to each other in a wooden frame. Sometimes, it might make sense to talk about one image then, sometimes not, and whether it does is decided most probably with the help of the image content.

3 Semantic and Content-Based Differentiators

On a semantic level, the image content can be individuated with the help of either ‘image objects/characters’, or ‘image space’. Especially for pictorial narration, the semantic level is important to decide where one image stops, and a new image begins.

‘Image spaces’ are a useful category to distinguish images, especially in respect of narration: for example, in Figure 4, where there is one continuous image space that is spread out over several frames, or in Figure 2, where there are three distinct image spaces (even though the space might be more or less the same, just depicted three times, and therefore distinct). One way to decide where a space begins and another ends is to look for the continuity of lines or for empty spaces between places where something has been drawn.



Figure 6
Bredun Edwards,
<https://rb.gy/kav5n>
© Bredun Edwards

A further example to distinguish image spaces from each other might be with a photograph with superimposition. Image carrier and image frame might be overlapping [fig. 5], and on this basis one could count it as one image. But because there is a superimposition, there are two image spaces, and one might argue that there are therefore two images.

A problem that arises is the standard of correctness. In another example [fig. 6] one might think it is a superimposition with two image spaces, but, as the person on the left is just visible in the reflection of the glass, it is arguably the same continuous image space, even though it is only represented as a reflection. However, one might also argue for the opposite, namely that the reflection represents another image space. The same considerations apply to the pictures on the wall of the diner. So, in counting images, we should distinguish between the top level (of the image in front of us) from lower levels (of the images it depicts, which could be several).

‘Characters’ and ‘image objects’ are another possibility to differentiate between images. When they are depicted twice, this might indicate that it makes sense to count each time they are depicted as one image.

In Figure 1 one can count two image carriers and two frames with their respective content.⁶ So, one way to categorize the example is to say that it shows two images. But equally it could be justifiably classified as one image that is spread out over two frames and two image carriers. If one wants to argue for the latter, the individuation process is established through the image content. And it is not

⁶ Of course, there is also the photograph itself. But this should not concern us here in this example.

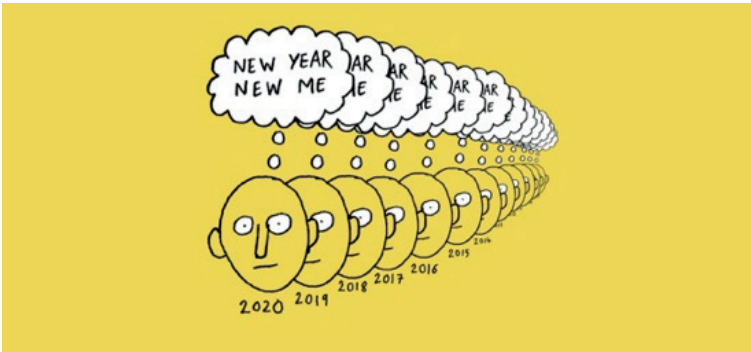
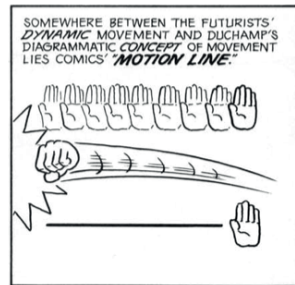


Figure 7

Jean Jullien, 2020.
<https://rb.gy/4ksjz>
© Jean Jullien

Figure 8

Scott McCloud. Example from McCloud 1994, 110



established through depicted image space; rather it is established through the characters depicted. Through the eye-contact between the orange and the green character, and because the orange body parts depicted in each frame can be read as belonging to the same individual. Size relations and other information, like the clouds depicted in the top frame, also support the reading that it is one character.

The individuation of characters can be important the other way around as well. If the same character is depicted three times on the same image carrier, it makes sense to say that there are three images (or image units or image scenes) visible (as in Figure 2).

So, a category might be to take the image objects as reference point for the decision of what counts as *one* image. To take the image object/character as the relevant category to individuate images might not always be of use. But it is of use, and I argue sometimes even necessary, to be able to understand pictorial narratives. Figure 7 only works when the character depicted is seen as the same character. Or it would probably also work when it should represent a different character each year, but then the message is slightly different.

But if one wants to distinguish images with the rule that one character can only be represented once, and whenever the same character is depicted anew it forms a new image and represents a new

moment in time, then one also introduces some problems. In our example [fig. 7], should we really count 12 different images? This might not be the most intuitive way to count it. Another complicating matter is that in single images the movement of a character is often indicated, for example through lines [fig. 8]. Is the character then represented only once? I would argue that it is, as elements such as lines, fading, etc. indicate that the object is the same, just captured in a moment of movement. Nevertheless, it is not as clear a category as one might wish. To say that each time a character/object is depicted means that there needs to be a new image, because no one can be present in two places at the same time, poses a different problem. If this were such a fixed categorization, it would make it impossible to tell a fictional story of where the same people can be present in different places at the same time or have multiple bodies, all of which look the same. For these examples, the category ‘image space’ might be more useful.

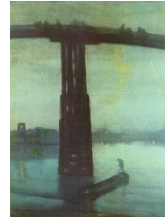
When categorizing images with the help of objects/characters, the difficulty in determining where exactly one image stops and a new one begins arises anew. This can happen, for example, if there are colors fading out into a background where no important information is given. Here one might return to the image frame as a category or combine image frame with the content, with the focus on either recurring objects or recurring image spaces. But as the purpose of this paper is not to decide to which image each particle of paint should be counted, it is not of particular interest to draw an exact line around each image, but rather to decide how many images are present, how their presentation affects the story they are meant to transport, and how they are connected for the visual narration.

3.1 Differentiation Between Single, Sequential, and Series

So, there seems to be no general right way to count images. It depends on what one is interested in.⁷ But there are better ways to count. And this depends on clear categories.

In this paper, I understand sequential images as images that have some narrative or other coherence between them; single images as images that are standing alone; and image series as images that might have some connecting element (even if this element is just that they are shown next to each other). Let’s look at examples.

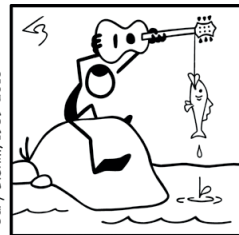
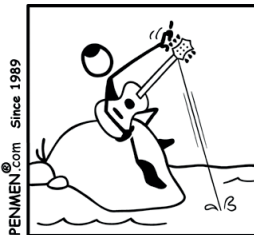
⁷ The problem of how to count things is not unique to images. Most things can be counted in different ways (Noonan, Curtis 2018). “I propose that we take the fact that there is more than one way to count, as evidence that there is more than one true number of things that exist” (Baxter 1988, 200).



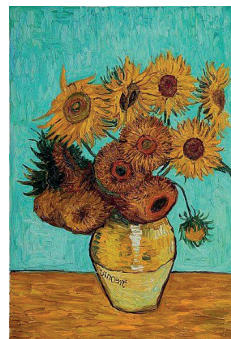
Row 1



Row 2



Row 3



Row 4

Row 1 consists of three distinct images. The way they are presented here (next to each other, simply called “Row 1”, “Row 2” etc.) and through their similarities (classical paintings, blueish colors), they might be called an image series, even though there was no intention by the respective artists to present them in this form and almost certainly no intention by the artists to make a connection between the respective image contents [row 1].

When presented like this in Row 2, certain factors – like their blueish color – no longer serve to connect them. There are still three single images, presented in a row, which might lead one to call it a series, but it is at least more disputable [row 2].

Row 3 presents sequential images. Each frame has its distinct image content. But these images are set in a certain order and have recurring elements. The ordering and the recurring elements can be seen as potential narrative elements [row 3].

So, if several images next to each other together constitute a certain narrative – one that is not freely associated by a potential spectator, but has enough pictorial evidence in the image to be called narrative – like the representation of causally connected events – the combination of these images can be called sequential images. Sequential images also constitute an image series, which can be differentiated into single images. But an image series is not necessarily sequential. Sequential images have a connective element in their content that has some narrative element.

Row 4 shows a similar image object and image space three times. Even though they are distinct images, all refer to the same flowers and they are painted by the same artist. They represent a unifying subject (the same flower bouquet) and are presented next to each other, which invites a reading with a direction. But they show that all this cannot be a sufficient criterion to call the row of images that depict the same object in different images next to each other a sequential narrative. This row does not possess any narrative element in the way of representing narrative characteristics, like events that are causally or otherwise connected or the passing of time [row 4].⁸

I differentiate between single and sequential images with regard to pictorial narration for the purpose of this paper as follows: when there is a character that is depicted twice, there is a strong indication that each depiction forms its own image, no matter how it is framed, or how many of them are on an image carrier. There is a strong indication that it is part of a sequential narration, no matter if it is on the same image carrier or not, or how it is framed.⁹ If the image content

⁸ See Fasnacht 2023 for a detailed account of narrative characteristics in single images.

⁹ But with this I do not want to say that every image with the same character forms part of a sequence. Not every image of the Eiffel Tower that exists in the world



Figure 9 Quentin Blake, 1998, spread of "Clown". © Quentin Blake

is in a way that the same objects are only represented once and it shows only one place, it is a single image, irrespective of whether it spreads over several image carriers or transcends certain frames. Perhaps a sequence of images is a collection of images that should be interpreted in the right order. So, in Figure 9, I would count nine different images for this use, and say that it is an example of sequential pictorial narration [fig. 9].

The differentiation between single and sequential images therefore depends much more on the spectator and their correct reading than it would be with the differentiation with the help of image carriers, marks or frames, because it is crucial to ascertain whether or not the same character is depicted several times, for example, or whether there is such a break in the landscape that it cannot be happening at the same time and place, meaning that there are several depicted image spaces. So, sometimes more interpretation is needed

automatically forms a sequence with all other images of the Eiffel Tower. So, an additional criterion is needed: for example, that they are represented in a certain context, like a picture book. But even if they are represented next to each other in such a context, it does not make sense to always talk about them as being in a narrative sequence, as the example of Row 4 shows. One might say that an additional necessary criterion is that a narrator presented the different images next to each other with the intention of telling a story. Or a necessary criterion could be that the images represent some narrative characteristics, like the passing of time and events.

to correctly identify what kinds of images are sequential and single. But, nevertheless, it very often aligns and correlates with the basic understanding of frame and image mark, and to a marginal extent also the image carrier.

What is important for the narrative understanding is that the spectator can individuate the depicted characters, objects, and image spaces in a situation where it would make a difference for the plot if it were understood wrongly. Generally, it is less important whether a flower in the background of an image is identified as the same flower as in the image before. But if it is a very distinct flower, it can indicate whether it is the same image space. Whether a character is believed to be the same at another time or different at the same time or different at a different time is important to successfully understand pictorial narratives. Therefore, it is important for spectators to see sequential images as sequential images for the correct narrative understanding, no matter how they relate to the image carrier or frame. And regardless of whether one should call a pictorial narration as being told through sequential or single images, what is important is the correct individuation and identification of the things depicted.

4 Potential Advantages of Sequential Pictorial Narration (compared to Single)

Having acquired a rough idea of what sequential images are, we can now ask: what can sequential images do that single images cannot? There are some specialities and advantages of sequential pictorial narration. I want to shortly sketch each of them in the following.

4.1 Gaps Can Be a Tool for Narration

Frames and the gap in-between frames and images can themselves take on a narrative role. Things can happen in-between the depicted images: it may indicate a gap in time, a change of perspective,¹⁰ or both. So, the gap is a tool for narration that is not present in single images (or, when it is present, it does not have a narrative function, as the image is spread out over different frames). In comic strips, it is often an actual gap (sometimes called ‘gutter’). In picture books, it more often is the place where one image ends and the next begins, often indicated through page breaks, but not exclusively. So, if there are several images, the structure of these images with a gap in-between alone can be a narrative tool. But it needs to be used effectively. If there is

¹⁰ I use ‘perspective’ in a spatial sense, not as temporal points-of-view.

no connection between the image content, it seems impossible to tell a story, even though an image series with several panels alone might indicate some narrative element. So, the gap between the images can be an enormously effective tool for narration, something single images lack, but a gap alone does not make an image series narrative.

4.2 Expansion Over Longer Time Frames

Sequential images allow a narration over longer time spans than single images can. While the time span that a single image can represent is limited, sequential images in general do not per se have a limit in terms of the time span they can tell a story about.¹¹

4.3 A Higher Degree of Specificity and Depth

It is possible to specify more clearly certain elements of a story with several images. An object could be shown from different perspectives, adding elements in each image. There could be certain events explained more thoroughly, additional details could be shown, and a more detailed step-by-step narration is possible. A character can be depicted not just in one, but in several (emotional) states, giving them not only a more complex, but also a more specified representation of their personality, internal state, motivations, reaction to certain events, relationships, etc.

4.4 Surprises and Changes in Expectations About the Plot

Changes in the plot and expectations might be only possible in sequential images. It is at least easier to lead the spectator toward different expectations, and then surprise them, when something unexpected happens. With several images it is easier to indicate what happens when, and to represent different stages, and maybe also obstacles that could be overcome. Obstacles in single images are either shown as enormous, and through this maybe unachievable, or as small that it is probable that they can be overcome. In single as in sequential images it is possible to provide a degree of uncertainty as to how a story will evolve. But only in sequential images can there

¹¹ It is still up for debate, though, what is the maximum time span a single image can convey. Time lapse photography can be an example where there is naturally an element of time represented. Still there is a limit to the amount of time. What exactly this limit is, remains open here.

be a surprise and a change of expectations in respect of how a story will evolve. Given that such turnarounds and obstacles are often a crucial part of (suspenseful) narratives, sequential images have an advantage here. Single images can have an effect that is slightly similar, through captions, for example in cartoons, where the image shows something, and the caption puts it into a different light or pushes the reader to adapt their original expectation and reading of the image. But in wordless single images, it is quite hard if not impossible to disappoint the narrative expectation of spectators about how the plot will evolve. An explanation for the difference might be that surprise involves time. And while sequential images are present at the same time, they are taken in in a certain order. Single images can also be taken in over some time, but it is much harder to control how the image viewer processes the image.

4.5 More Guidance

Sequential images provide more guidance to potential spectators through the different aspects they should focus on step by step – for example, by showing different characters in their own frame after each other. There might still be some readjustment happening, like looking back at a previous image (see, for example, Cohn 2013, 2020, 2021), but in general the focus is more guided than in single pictorial narration. This guiding is brought to an even more extreme form in movies. In films, the filmmaker determines what comes after what and how long we are to look at each shot (leaving aside the possibility of stopping the movie, scrolling back in time, or otherwise manipulating the film, compared to how it would be perceived in a cinema). Yet, even in movies a spectator has the choice to focus on certain aspects of the image. Thus, not everything can be determined by the author/illustrator/filmmaker, but the amount of guidance has the potential to increase – and generally does so – from single, to sequential, to moving images.

4.6 Narration that Happens in Different Places

With sequential images, stories can be told that occur in different places: either after each other – such that character X could change its location throughout the story – or at the same time – whereby it is about several characters. So, character X is at place p and character Y is at place q, and this story is somehow connected.¹² In single images,

¹² Like in the wordless picture book *The Red Book* by B. Lehman (Clarion books, 2004).



Figure 10
Marie Kiefer, *Tafelbild*, 2023.
Grundschule Englisch Nr. 82/2023,
Spring, © Marie Kiefer

it seems quite hard to depict a story that stretches over different distant places. One way to do this is to use thought bubbles with images or indicate different places by, for example, distorting proportions and having character X in the size of a country in country X and character Y in country Y in another part of the world, like in the image [fig. 10]. But here a loss of specificity of the place or a distortion of sizes can be the price to pay. (And depending on the example, one might even want to argue if it then still represents only a single image.)

4.7 Close-ups Make More Sense

A further difference between single and sequential pictorial narration is that in single images a close-up of a character with nothing else is not sufficient for it to be narrative. But, together with another image in sequential pictorial storytelling, close-ups can make sense. Not only can they be tolerated when enough other images from a series represent narrative characteristics, but they could add the crucial element that changes a pictorial narrative and moves it in a certain direction. A close-up of a face combined with another image can change the overall narrative, for example by adding an (unexpected) reaction to an event that happens in another image. Conversely, the other image influences how the close-up is interpreted, for example the emotional state the character is believed to be in.¹³

4.8 Higher Degrees of Complexity

As with the potential to provide more specificity, there is the potential for more complexity in sequential pictorial narration. Different unexpected events, focusing on different characters, side-stories, point-of-view from side/supporting characters, etc. – all this is easier when there are more images.

¹³ For studies into this direction with film montage, see Prince, Hensley 1992.

It is possible to tell a mini-story of a side character in a single image as well. But in sequential images, it is easier to disrupt the main narrative, for example, to tell the side story of a different character. Or to have several parallel stories happening, which might not even interact. In the latter case, the main story would not even have to be interrupted. This happens often in wordless picture books for children.¹⁴ But complexity can perfectly well happen also in single pictures, see for example in paintings by Brueghel. In the *Flemish Proverbs* many things are happening; it is a complex image with a host of small narratives and lots of details. But it is not a story that has a complex continuous narrative.

4.9 Potential for More Narrativity?

The more images, the more narrativity? Not always. Narrative density could also decline. While there may be more possibilities to tell the same story with two or three images than with only one, it is not necessarily the case that more images provide also more narrativity or even more details.

The more narrativity, the more narrated time? Again, not necessarily. Three images that show the same moment from different perspectives can add to the narrativity, even though there is no amount of time added.

But what heightens the narrativity if ‘sequentiality’ alone is not doing so? I have noted elsewhere the following aspects that might heighten the levels of narrativity in single images: quantity of narrative characteristics, quality of narrative characteristics, interrelations between characters, suspense, conflict and complication, prominence and framing; it also depends on the individual judgment of a spectator (Fasnacht 2023). These aspects can be important in sequential images as well. Additionally, it might be a matter of the relationship of one image towards the whole. That is to say, is one image out of ten representing narrative characteristics (like events, passing of time, display of intentions, etc.), or are ten images out of ten representing narrative characteristics? The latter probably is higher in narrativity, not only because in total there are more narrative characteristics represented, but also because the ratio of how many images have some narrative elements is high. So, a single image that is fully packed with narrative characteristics and interrelations between

14 For example: *Where is the cake* by Thé Tjong-Khing (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2007). Here, several different characters are experiencing several things. The main narrative element is the stealing of a cake and how it can be recovered. Yet there are other narrative elements going on. And these other elements invite a re-reading of the story, with a focus on different characters each time, for example.

characters and suspense is probably higher than an image series that represents the exact same amount of narrative characteristics overall, just spread out over ten images. But sequential images have an advantage over single images that by their structure alone a certain amount of narrativity or narrative expectation is provided. This makes sequential images potentially more narrative, even though this is not a given in every case.

When there are several images one can look at the relationship of one image to all the images. When there is narrative density, then almost all single images bring the story forward. When there are several images in a series that do not add anything specific or relevant to the story, not even some atmosphere, then the story gets more monotonous, even though there are more images than if it were told only through one. So, the expectation we have of images when we know they should tell a story is, maybe unconsciously, that more images should equal more information. And if an image series fails to do that, then the narrative expectation might be disappointed.¹⁵

So, sequential images have the potential to tell more complex and more specific stories that are higher in narrativity. But through this potential the expectations of the narrativity and complexity of sequential pictorial narration might rise as well. This could lead to the evaluation that a three-image panel is lower in narrativity than a single image, even though they might 'tell' the exact same thing, the panel just spreads it out over three frames. The frames alone, the sequentiality alone, can lead to a narrative expectation. This can help the illustrator, but it may in some cases also lead to a kind of disappointment in the evaluation of the amount of narrativity, as when the potentiality is not fully utilized.

5 Crucial Aspects for the Narrative Understanding of Sequential Images

A spectator needs to infer and draw conclusions in order to understand pictorial narratives. This is the case for single pictorial narration and sequential pictorial narration. I want to highlight here what is special in the understanding of sequential narrative images.

¹⁵ An example of this might be the picture book "Leaf" by Daishu Ma: it uses many images to tell a rather basic and short narrative. And the images do not add that much to the surrounding atmospherics either. This, overall, gives the impression that some pages were unnecessary to bring the story forward or that it is not really that high in narrativity. The relationship of one image to all the images is important in terms of deciding which ones are driving the narrativity forward, which images are just decoration, or a "pause", which add something, if not an event, but some other atmospheric elements.



Figures 11-12 Spread of *Inside Outside* by Anne-Margot Ramstein and Matthias Arégui.
© Anne-Margot Ramstein, Matthias Arégui

5.1 Inference – Ability to Infer

The spectator must be able to infer from visual cues what is happening and extract meaning. This is especially important in sequential images when there is a gap between the images that function as part of the narration, not through depiction or ‘telling’, but rather through leaving certain aspects out. This gap does not necessarily indicate that something has happened; it could also just indicate a change of perspective. So, for the correct understanding of a visual sequential narrative, the spectator needs to infer whether the gap indicates a change of perspective, a change of time or whether crucial events happened in-between. To draw the right conclusion, the spectator needs to look for recurrences to correctly identify (at least) three things: time, perspective, identification/reference.¹⁶

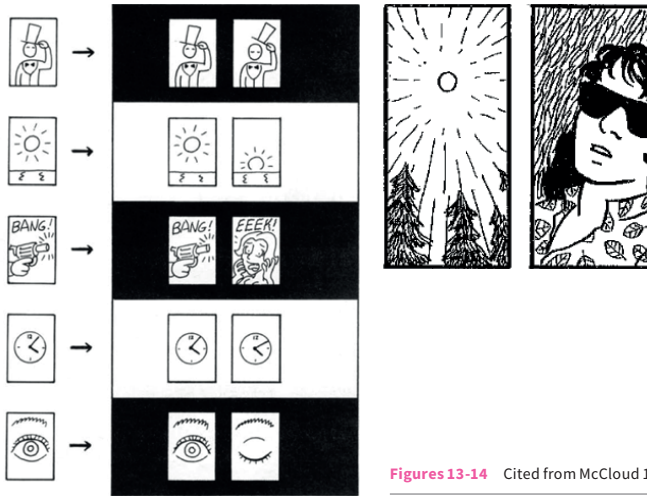
5.2 Time and Perspective

Two images can represent a succession in time or represent a change of perspective of the same moment.

Figure 11 shows a succession in time from a similar perspective while Figure 12 shows a change of perspective from a similar time. It could also be both. A change of perspective *and* a succession in time at the same time. Quite often this is the case, especially in picture books [figs 11-12].

To understand whether the gap between two images indicates a change of perspective or a change in time can be crucial for the correct narrative understanding of sequential images. Two images or

¹⁶ The ability to infer is necessary in certain non-sequential pictures too, for example if a temporal sequence is represented by a single picture, then the image viewer needs to fill in the aspects that are not explicitly represented or depicted.



Figures 13-14 Cited from McCloud 1994, 5

more can indicate that there is a temporal succession between the images. The gap could also indicate that it is just a change of perspective and that the scenes depicted in the respective images happen at the same time or have some 'temporal overlap'.¹⁷ So, how to decide which is which? It helps to look for recurrences. Without any recurrence it is difficult to establish connections between images. Recurrence of characters, places, objects, motifs, etc. is important for narratives, especially in sequential pictorial narratives. This is obvious, but if there are more than one image, there seems to be some recurrence needed, or, if there is none, then this lack of recurrence might be part of the 'story'. For example, image one is somebody going into a lake. Image two is just the lake. If there are some bubbles in the second image, it is clearly connected. If there is only the water, one might speculate more as to whether the person sank, is diving, went out of the water and this is just a shot of a later time, etc.

The recurrence of the same image space or the same point-of-view on a depicted character/object indicates a succession in time, generally. See for example the top two rows and the bottom two rows in the Figure 13. But exactly how much time is questionable, as it could also be just additional images of the same scene to put the focus on it, to show a close-up of the face, etc. Then there might be a little bit of time happening between the images, but to a very low extent, and not in a manner that substantially propels the narrative forward.

If there is no recurrence, it might indicate a change of perspective, as in the third row of the example [fig. 13]. A change of perspective can

¹⁷ See also Abusch 2014.



Figure 15 Fiete Stolte, 2017, *Fade*. Aludibond. Exhibition "Transit". Albertz Benda NYC. © Fiete Stolte

be indicated through the depiction of two elements that can stand in a connection together, for example the shining sun and sunglasses in the related example [fig. 14]. Here, the two images indicate a change of perspective, and probably no change in time. Or if they (also) indicate a change in time, it is not that relevant. The sunglasses and the sun give a hint that the images belong together and establish a minimal connection between them. But there is no general rule as to what kinds of objects establish such a connection. For example, the fir trees on the left image and the leaves on the shirt on the right image do not establish a connection in a relevant way here. But it is possible that leaves and trees form such a connection in another example. When there is a change of perspective, some elements in the picture often indicate this. In Figure 12 the clothes of the workers establish a connection between the images which would perhaps otherwise need more imagination or association to establish.

5.3 Identification of Individuals Over Time (and Different Images)

For the recurrence of characters, they need to be identifiable as the same character. What processes are at play when we distinguish individuals? How do we do this? In images one can look for certain distinguishing characteristics, like looks, faces, clothes, etc. Or if it is an object, individual characteristics, specifics, anomalies of this object. Is there something that stands out from the masses, that makes a certain object or character special?¹⁸

There are examples where it is especially hard to individualize someone or something, especially if certain features like the face are not shown. If this process of checking for individualizing features

¹⁸ How to individuate and how to identify something as being identical with itself, for example over time, or parts to the whole, etc., has been the subject of extensive philosophical research (Noonan, Curtis 2018). While I am not aware of any texts in this area that pertain to images, it is certainly a relevant aspect of pictorial narration (and narration in general). Some background literature on the identity problem that could be useful for pictorial narration are (Baxter, 1988) on aspects of many-one identity, and a sketch of how to count (Geach 1973; Noonan 2015).



Figure 16 Cave art in Valonsadero, Spain. <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/cave-art-discovering-prehistoric-humans-through-pictures>

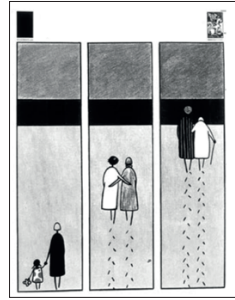


Figure 17 Federico Del Barrio, part of "La Orilla", 1985. Cited in Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007, 38. © Federico Del Barrio

fails to come to a conclusion and remains ambiguous, a spectator cannot be sure whether it is the same character recurring or another one, whether it is a change of perspective on a different character or a succession in time with the same character.

In the example [fig. 15] it could be the same person, then they would be photographed at different moments. It could be different persons, then it could be a momentary image. But independently of how the image was made (photography, manipulation) or what message was intended (if there is one), there may be questions asked about how to individuate the person(s) in the image (no face makes it more difficult) and how to decide whether it represents a succession of time or one moment in time. This is especially difficult with stick figures that do not have any distinguishing features, such that it could represent five different persons at the same time or one person at five different times. In some examples of ancient cave paintings, this problem seems to arise, as Figure 16 shows [fig. 16].

In Figure 17 the spectator needs to infer that these are the same two persons at different stages in their life, and not six different individuals. Only through this correct identification can something like a 'narrative' evolve. Otherwise, it would just indicate a moment in time with six different people walking [fig. 17].¹⁹

These are things with which an illustrator can play. To make it either ambiguous (perhaps more of a tendency in classical artworks)

¹⁹ Figure 17 is not a paradigmatic case of sequential pictorial narration, as it does not represent events, but rather represents the same unifying subjects over an extremely long time span at different stages in their life. And since one can make the metaphorical reference to life itself, this adds some elements of narrativity that would not be there if it were to represent three stages of someone preparing an espresso machine, putting it on the cooker, and drinking the espresso.



Figure 18
Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434.
Oil on oak, 82,2 × 60 cm. National Gallery, London

or clear (maybe of more interest for picture book illustrators). There are exceptions, of course, and I am not even committed to saying that are the tendencies.

5.4 Image Inside an Image

As a last point: what about the examples [figg. 18-21] of images inside an image? These can arguably be single images. But by having an image inside an image, each of which stand in a relation to the other, they use the possibilities of sequential narration. This gives single images the possibilities to refer to different places and perspectives, different time frames, and different versions of a character (for example, younger, in a relationship with someone else, etc.). All three aspects would normally only be possible in sequential pictorial narration. One might even say that these kinds of ‘image inside and image’-examples allow the potential for more complex and detailed stories and high levels of narrativity. And they demand from a spectator the same levels of correct identification of the same characters, of whether the image inside the image is a change of perspective and no change in time (as, for example, a TV or Zoom meeting would indicate), or whether it represents a change in time (as an old photograph on the wall would indicate). Even close-ups can make sense as one of the two images. In conclusion, one might think that the potential and the specificities of sequential pictorial narration can also be, at least to a certain extent, found in single pictorial narration – at least if one would wishes to count examples that represent images inside other images that stand in a narrative relation to each other as single images.



Figure 19 Detail of Barbara Lehmann's *The Red Book*. © Barbara Lehmann

Figure 20 Detail of Gabrielle Vincent's *Ernest & Celestine's Patchwork Quilt*, 1982. © Gabrielle Vincent

Figure 21 Detail of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*. © Shaun Tan

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to address the differences in pictorial narration depending on whether single or sequential images are used. The paper established different categories with which to differentiate between and count images: on a syntactical level, the image carrier and the image frame; on a semantic level, by distinguishing (recurring) image spaces or depicted objects/characters. For sequential pictorial narration, the semantic categories prove to be especially useful. These different images or image scenes – which can be classified either through image spaces or the recurrence of characters, for example – stand in a sequential relation to each other. This means that there are at least two images or image scenes that together evoke a narrative. And this relation needs to be deciphered correctly by a potential spectator to evoke a specific meaning. While inference and interpretation are needed to understand narrative single images as well, there are certain aspects that are especially or only relevant in sequential pictorial narration (and probably moving images as well): the correct identification of objects, characters, and image spaces and the correct inference of what happens in-between the depicted scenes and images. Some of the advantages of sequential pictorial narration over narration with a single picture include the potential to tell stories with longer time spans, more details, surprises, and plot twists, and greater complexity and narrativity.

So, when to use what kinds of images to convey something? When a detailed narrative is needed: more images. When it is complex and different steps need to be understood to follow the story: more images. If it is a metaphorical, ambiguous, or poetic 'story': both single and sequential images are good.²⁰

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