Chapter XI
The Spatial Development of the Visual-Narrative from Prehistoric Cave Paintings to Computer Games

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ABSTRACT

The art of the visual-narrative is not a new phenomenon. Artists and designers have been using images to tell stories for thousands of years. From cave paintings to computer animations, they have been manipulating visual elements and tailoring techniques to attract our attention, to stimulate our interest, and to entice us into a process of interpretation and story making. Indeed, it is a tradition that has worked its way successfully through time, adapting along the way to meet the advancements of each successive and increasingly visual generation. The aim of this chapter is to explore the spatial journey of the visual-narrative. In particular, it will examine how each new medium has brought with it a new treatment of space, and then how this has influenced the visual-narrative and the art of storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

The definition of a “work of art” is highly subjective: for some, it might be an Impressionist painting, for others an unkempt bed (cf. Tracy Emin’s bed, short-listed for the Turner prize in 1999), for still others it might be an interactive installation. Art embraces not only the visual media but music, literature, dance, and so forth: it is a complex phenomenon that both fascinates and perplexes. Since classical Greece, scholars have been trying to understand how art “works” and what art “means” (Berleant, 1991, p. 9). Moreover, today, we are still no closer to that single unified
definition; in fact, art is becoming more elusive and indeed is continually finding new ways of expression and new levels of communication. Yet, in many ways, this ambiguity is what adds to the fascination: the idea that art is constantly evolving generates much intrigue and excitement, especially as new technologies and social changes enhance and reshape our perceptual activities in the arts into new and different forms (Berleant, 1991, p. 33).

This chapter concerns visual-narrative, that is, the use of pictures to tell a story. A visual-narrative comprises the arrangement of images in a space in order to engage people in a story. From prehistoric cave painting to modern day computer games, the aim of this chapter is to explore the spatial development of the visual-narrative. In particular, we examine how the visual-narrative has been influenced by the treatment of space.

PICTURE SPACE

The word “art” is from the Latin ars, meaning “arrangement.” As Arnheim specifies: “we see a painting, sculpture or building as an arrangement of definable shapes organized in a comprehensive structure” (Murray, 2000). Therefore, when we look at any work of art, whether it is a painting, a sculpture, or a building, we are, in fact, looking at different ways that an artist has arranged elements in a space. According to Andrews, when we look at a painting, “it is possible to imagine ourselves within a picture space moving throughout it over time, as if it were the real world, where several moments or episodes all remain in view, even as we concentrate our attention on the first one and then the next” (1995, p.117). Indeed, every picture, whether painted, photographic, digital..., is a collection of elements (dots, lines, shapes, forms, tones, textures, colours, etc.) arranged in a carefully planned composition. It is this careful arrangement and composition of elements that allows us to express, to communicate, or even to tell a story. As O’Toole demonstrates in the context of painting, the visual units, the characters and objects in a painting, together with their actions, gestures, and stance, all have the potential to carry important clues about what the people portrayed are doing and what stories are thereby created (p.7-12). By perceiving the visual units or elements in a carefully arranged and organised picture space, the viewer is able to piece together the whole story.

As Boyd Davis (2004) notes, there are broadly two ways of organising graphical images of the world: the configurational and the pictorial. In the configurational, he states, the elements are combined in the two-dimensional space of the composition itself (as in early Christian, Romanesque, and Byzantine art). In the pictorial, meanwhile, they are combined in an assumed world space, real or imaginary, that is then depicted (as in Renaissance, Baroque and much later art). Both these modes of graphical representation offer interesting ways in which elements can be arranged within a picture space. However, what is of interest to us is the relationship between the inside picture space and the world space (i.e., the outside picture space), which actually varies according to the mode of representation and the arrangement of the elements within the picture. In many pictures, for example, the frame acts as a divider between the outside picture space and inside picture space; in others, it acts as mediator. Often, there might be one unit that attracts the viewer and draws them into the picture, with other units then engaging the viewer and leading the eye further around, and then in, or out of, the picture space. As Poore points out, every unit in a picture has a given value; the value of a unit depends on its attraction, and its attraction varies according to its placement (1967). This chapter explores the relationship between inside and the outside picture spaces, and in particular, the role they play in the visual-narrative, through examining artistic use of picture space through the centuries.