

Non-sequitur: The Accidental Narrative

Dr. Maryanne Coutts

Abstract

In considering relationships between imagery and actuality, this paper explores poetic possibilities which emerge as the trace of actuality passes through generations of reproduction. Emerging from a project based in newspaper imagery, it looks at repetition, moderation and juxtaposition as central to the ways that the mass print media infiltrate the temporal experience of contemporary life. The ever-present reproduction punctuates lived experience and measures the passage of a day, engaging us intimately with unexpected intersections between space and time.

The potential for the space / time that emerges between different generations of an image, the accidental meanings generated by context, or the lack of it, and the contextual interactions between frames of moving imagery all enable imaginative intrusions of narrative. The writings of Mieke Bal, Walter Benjamin and Michel Bakhtin are used to consider these relationships and the gaps and expectations that they imply. Specific spatio-temporal qualities of visual reiterations and juxtapositions are explored in the light of Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope.

I discuss this in relation to my current animation project, which reworks printed reproductions of photographs. In this generation of reproduction I build a fluid 'stream of consciousness' by spatially and temporally linking diverse events.

Introduction: Standing a minute or two here.

'And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon.' (Eliot 1988, 3)

When this passage from George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, invites us to 'stand a minute or two on the bridge in this leafless time of departing February,' (Eliot 1988, 3) it demands that we imaginatively inhabit the most intimate and pervasive aspect of the experience of being human; the occupation of specific space in time. This paper explores some of the ways that different types of space and time make room for the activity of reading narratives and constructing fictions.

As an introduction to *Dorlcote Mill*, Eliot paints a landscape with broad strokes as common ground between an artist and her audience. This land upon which we join the characters is what Merleau-Ponty calls '...the uniform medium in which things are arranged in three dimensions.' (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 38) We recognise it as resembling the medium we occupy ourselves as we read. That we are always 'here' (in space) enables us to also experience the imagined space of the novel. We occupy space while we read Eliot. We may become so absorbed in the story we read as to forget our actual 'when and where,' but it is the integrity of our involvement in space and time which makes our imaginations capable of perceiving the river Floss, now.

But, this is not the river Floss as it always was and always will be. It is the Floss as it spans the life of Maggie Tulliver as well a single minute in late winter. These are not just specific times, but particular types of time in space. For instance, this novel has a biographical time frame, an historical period, a cyclical time relating to seasons and times of day on the banks of this river and an overriding theme of the repetition and change between generations.

Bakhtin provides a useful way of thinking about these spatio-temporal forms in art, which he calls chronotopes. The term, which means space-time 'is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity'. (Bakhtin 2008, 84) While he uses it to consider the space-time of novels rather than the 'real', I will consider ways that chronotopic forms can also straddle the fascinating divide between fiction and actuality.

For Bakhtin, the chronotope describes the ways that events are structured in various types of literature. They are the ways that space and time interact and consequently contextualise the relationships between meaning and narrative;

They are the organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative. (Bakhtin 2008, 25)

There are many different chronotopes, for instance, 'the road', as a chronotope, structures narratives through a consistent intersection between space and time where encounters or 'meetings' occur - As characters move along the space of the road they move through time at the same speed - the space and time are coincidental. This structure pervades a wide range of literatures, being both metaphorically and literally useful for combining the passage of time with the passage of space as a context for events. Those accidental intersections of space and time that take place on the road, or indeed the river Floss, point to

ways that narratives might be implied by incidental associations between images, especially where the moving image temporally structures an audience's experience.

This formal structuring of time often reflects the way we use cycles, pattern and rhythm to structure narratives. The marking of repetitions, such as days, months, seasons, years as a cultural process, is essential to our ability to conceptualise time at all. Recurrence then, a significant aspect of printing, essentially structures sequence and the passage of time. This, as Bakhtin points out, is vital for the evocation of the 'here and now' that both audience and fiction inhabit.

Where there is no passage of time there is also no moment of time, in the full and most essential meaning of the word. If taken outside its relationship to past and future, the present loses its integrity, breaks down into isolated phenomena and objects, making of them a mere abstract conglomeration. (Bakhtin 2008, 146)

However, there are many ways that this sequence between present and past, present and future can be perceived. I am interested here in ways that specific space and time between elements which are associated through sequence (repetition, reiteration) can spawn meanings and narratives which are not dictated by the individual elements. While my interest is in sequences that are generated from one to the next, such as the sequences of frames in film, or the shift from a photojournalist's photograph to a newspaper reproduction, I propose that even when the movement between one moment and the next appears to be non sequential or based in entirely accidental associations, (the non-sequitur) the activity of reading will be driven to avoid 'a mere abstract conglomeration' (Bakhtin 2008, 146) and provide temporal meaning or context for apparently random associations, especially if they form part of a pattern.

This paper, then, is focused on chance in relation to repetition, pattern, and duplication and ways that the point of actuality that originates the imagery re or de generates through generations of reproduction. It is driven by my fascination with the nature of representation and coloured by my studio practice which, in the context of this research, has been focused on rhythms of exchange between actuality and fiction, the 'real' and the image, as they are derived from the print media. Using strategies which generate and duplicate as an extended kind of visual 'Chinese whispers', the work derives from and is about the tension between the printed distribution of photojournalism and a personal experience of the here and now. It honours the role of print as a bridge between private experience and public multiplicity that harks back to Gutenberg's press.

The argument draws on some theories of the novel and written narrative fiction. These will be applied to both moving and still imagery which uses sequence and reproduction to imply narrative. Ultimately the project centres around ways that mass produced printed images relate to both imagined and experienced space / time.

The space / time between an image and the actual

Eliot's novel is structured around the similarities and differences between Maggie and Tom Tulliver on the one hand and their parents, Aunts and Uncles on the other. This chronotope of generational change is a lovely metaphor for the difference and disjuncture between imagery and the event that generated it, as well as for the process of animation which reproduces and modifies each frame like generations within a family.

Most of us look every day at degraded images of events that were significant enough to be reproduced for mass consumption; in the newspaper, on tv and on the internet. While these images stand in for 'real' events, they also become something in their own right which on some level is completely adrift from the parent event. There are many ways that this gap enables imaginative readings or poetic insights.

For instance we can see two very different approaches in Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein and Cindy Sherman's photographs. However different the two visual strategies might be, they both draw on a direct encounter with a subject. Picasso has painted in the presence of his subject and abstracts his responses to Stein in order to gain greater access to his perceptions of her actuality. Sherman, on the other hand, uses photography, with its direct, mechanised response to the 'real', to deny the actual identity of the subject (herself) and generate fictions.

In terms of representation, there is nearly always¹ some spatial and temporal distance between a physical source and an image derived from it. As such, the types of distances are also chronotopes which structure the meanings of events that they contain. Sherman's images, for instance, play with ambiguity where the accident of the 'real' supplies potent details which suggest rather than prescribe meaning. These details are absolutely controlled by the artist with the intention of appearing accidental so that they can work like a vacuum which naturally and immediately fills with 'meaning'.

¹ With the exception of artists like Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham whose work can engage the audience in the exact moment and place of making.

Photojournalism, on the other hand, generally attempts to deny this vacancy and the powerful role that the distance between source and image plays in the generation of any 'meaning' other than documented actuality. It relies on a belief in the conflation of image and subject which ignores the space / time between the two.

This photojournalistic argument of 'truth' to actual events relies on a concept similar to Walter Benjamin's idea of 'aura' which he describes as the 'here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is now' (Benjamin 2009, 235). For Benjamin the aura of an art object is derived from its actuality, its genuineness and its ritual origins. For documentary photography the aura derives from these qualities in its subject. A disjuncture between an image and the currency of its aura is a very interesting type of space-time, or chronotope, which enables ambiguity and is the venue of chance.

Reproduction, Multiples and Sameness

The aura of an object impacts on the ways that it might be read especially when an image is reproduced or made as a multiple. For instance, the capacity of film to be reproduced on a mass scale creates a spatio – temporal experience of looking that is usually very different to looking at a painting, just as a newspaper photograph is different to a hand printed lino-cut. As Benjamin writes, 'there is no mistaking the difference between the reproduction (such as ... weekly news round-ups...) and pictures. Uniqueness and duration are as tightly intertwined in the latter as are transience and reiterability in the former.' (Benjamin 2009, 235)

According to Benjamin, this mass-production has the result of 'stripping the object of its sheath, shattering the aura, bear[ing] witness to a kind of sensibility where 'a sense of similarity in the world' is so highly developed that, through reproduction, it even mines similarity from what happens only once.' (Benjamin 2009, 235) This is emphasised by the many artists like Marlene Dumas, Kristin Headlam and Locust Jones who draw from mass production to hand make new imagery which highlights those qualities of sameness.

Between instances of sameness, like the patterns of recorded or measured time, the sameness of mass produced images has a chronotopic function, enabling new 'meanings'. Warhol's printed paintings of the electric chair deliberately use repetition to create an open time / space between image and idea. Here there is also a site for reading between the look of mass production and the unique work.

Disjunction

Similar sites of disjuncture in the mass media are as accidental as they are interesting. A photograph of an explosion on the same page as a man getting out of a car can evoke different narratives to the same image placed next to a photograph of a bird killed by an oil slick. The impact is also modified as I see the same image in the same newspaper at home, in the street, in a coffee shop, on the train. Each time the image demands, by its incidental interaction with its surrounds, the number of times I have seen it previously and my personal and changing emotions, a slightly different perception or reading.

The gap between identical reproductions is small but, just like the illusory and inviting river Floss, the illusory time of Sherman's and Picasso's images and the space/ time between an image and its source, the holes in the patterns made by multiple prints of the same image demand that we, by our own invention, fill in the emptinesses. This is the room where audiences, in order to avoid 'mere abstract conglomeration.' (Bakhtin 2008, 146) enter imaginatively and physically into the constructions of narratives.

Repetition implies multiples. When there's more than one there must be a space, a join or a gap between the singles; similarity and difference create space for reading, a pattern which requires explanation or a narrative which is implied. This join or gap calls out for specific spatial and temporal detail. The spaces and times that separate elements of an image, an image and its source as well as different copies of the same image are the non-sequitur, the accident that demands an answer or a reason. It is necessary, then, to consider how these gaps might operate and how these breaks enable reading.

In *Reading Rembrandt* Meike Bal describes a drawing of a beheading by Rembrandt². This drawing incorporates three moments on the one page. Two vertical scenes which represent the time when the victim is still standing, frame a third moment when the victim's body and decapitated head occupy the foreground. Of this drawing she writes;

² Rembrandt, *Three Men Being Beheaded*, 1640.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx

The face of the man at the right does seem to denote the same person in the two upper images, but his expression has changed so radically, from concern to cruelty and from a sense of powerlessness to a strong commitment to his task, that the very notion of identity becomes dubious³. In order to fill this gap we can fantasise about what happened between the two: Perhaps a conversion took place during which the executioner has become angry with the victim he pitied?

We can deal with this gap only if we let ourselves project a concern of our own onto the incomplete image. In other words, the distance between the first and second image creates a screen for our transference. (Bal 2006, 419)⁴

Like Elliot, Rembrandt asks us to put something of ourselves into a fictitious place and time, and in supplying the details we become imaginatively engaged in the work. While in the drawing and the novel this process is intended by the author of the work, these types of spaces also exist in entirely accidental circumstances such as the contextualisation of mass printed images in newspapers.

On the other hand, removing a newspaper photograph from its textual context also creates a type of room for creative reading where the space between an actual origin and the poetic possibilities of an isolated image can be provocative.

25 Frames a Second

Considering this hole, gap or disjuncture as a screen for the audience's projections of their own narratives leads to the final place that I will consider as a chronotopic site for reading. Moving images bring together all the elements I have discussed so far, adding a new site for pattern and chance; the relationship between individual frames. With film we look at a sequence of separate still images and we see a single moving image. At 25 frames a second, human beings are physically designed to fill in the gaps.⁵

Because my interest here is in physical reproduction as it affects narrative rather than formal aspects of story telling, I will sidestep the significant arena of film theory in relation to narrative fiction and focus specifically on this physical way that the interactions between frames generates narrative. In mechanical terms the vast majority of film uses the minute temporal shifts between frames to enable an illusion of

³ I question this reading. It is not clear that they are the same person. This is Bal's projection.

⁴ On page 101, Bal notes that she uses the concept of the 'gap' as 'readerly, and not textual'

⁵ There are two types of gap filling processes here, a psychological or conscious one of reading narrative and the mechanical process of reading movement.

movement. Usually this process is hidden in favour of the illusory mode that it enables. However, it is instructive to briefly look at some situations where the relationship between frames is highlighted.

Firstly, films like Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* and Australian filmmaker Kriv Stenders' extraordinary film *Boxing Day* which, by being appearing to be filmed in a single take make absolute use of the mechanical form as a vehicle for their narrative. While this is also a filmic or mimetic strategy it is significant here as it maintains a direct spatial and temporal relationship between each and every frame. This brings about a narrative which is situated in uninterrupted time and an entirely cohesive space both of which are consistent with the time / space that the audience experiences through the camera. As a type of space / time it shares with the road chronotope the exact parallel of time and space.

Much of the potency of *Boxing Day* comes from the consistent connection between source and image, which in turn connects audience to subject. In this film, the incidental interactions between house, yard and street, on the one hand, are highly orchestrated. However the practicalities of filming bring about awkwardnesses and blockages that make the space even more convincing.

The extreme opposite strategy is evident in Chris Marker's *La Jette* which use sequences of still photographs to generate story. In doing this, he enables his audiences to actively supply the space and time between frames. This allows the individual images to speak rather than be submerged in the speed of the millions of frames which usually go into making film.

Another distinctive relationship between frames is evident in stop motion animation such as that of William Kentridge where the motion of usually inanimate objects or images forces us to be aware of the process. Like Marker's work this also calls into play a slowing down. Whereas in practical terms Marker's frames are slowed down in relation to the normal frames per second ratio, Kentridge's evidently slow process is effectively speeded up. A narrative of process can be read through the gap between the evident process and the experienced outcome.

The biggest breakdown in the mimetic role of the speed and interaction of film frames comes when the imagery is printed or painted directly onto the film stock disregarding the divisions of the frames. While often the work of Len Lye does, to a certain extent, work within frames, generating patterns within the randomness, Jennifer West's work is completely random. Using household substances to stain and colour the film, her work can have an absolutely accidental relationship between the frames as they are projected.

Conclusion: Meetings and Chances

Bakhtin emphasises the 'chronotopic motif of meeting' (Bakhtin 2008, 98) as pervasive, in literature as well as in 'spheres of public and everyday life.' (Bakhtin 2008, 98) Whether it is the fictional interaction between a bridge and a particular moment, the collision of an event with a camera, an encounter between unrelated images or the sequencing of frames in a film, meetings, in their openness to chance generate the possibility of 'meaning' and of narrative.

In conclusion, the significance of this role of 'meetings' and juxtaposition plays out in a recent body of my work, which, in a sense explains the direction the paper has taken.

On my recent move to a new city, I decided to engage with the new place through the images in the local newspaper, but quickly discovered that as Benjamin observed, the imagery 'mines similarity.' (Benjamin 2009, 35) While there is very little that is distinctive (in that their distinction is consistent) about the newspaper images, the universalities that they suggest are potent. The intensity of visual encounters, patterns and accidents that emerge through accidental contexts within the mass media is extremely powerful, creating exciting spatio-temporal sites for provoking narrative readings.

I worked from the newspaper images with watercolour on an A4 format. By removing context and changing the materiality, the images are released to tell different stories about more 'ordinary' and sometimes more 'poetic' things. Watercolour, as a medium facilitates this as it works with the white of the paper, enabling gaps, and highlighting absences. The uniform format of my watercolours enables me to place the new images in relation to each other, generating entirely new connotations and patterns.

The process of making watercolours in relatively random or accidental sequence from printed photographs which had been removed from their context, led me to observe rhythms or patterns that I had not expected. In particular, images of fires and explosions, images of animals and images of crowds have a universality that belies their specificity. Crowds at the football, protesting in France or celebrating in Egypt have a visual and poetic commonality that speaks of something beyond the, usually, significant specificity of a unique event. This commonality is repetitive, seemingly cyclical, in a way that resembles the patterns that mark the passage of time.

As I worked I became fascinated by the ways that the mass-produced images have some direct link to moments in people's lives all over the world; I could pay intense attention to printed pixels which had taken their form in direct relation to the crease in someone's shirt in India two weeks ago. And yet, the vast distance between the actual shirt and its visual trace in the newspaper virtually annihilates the actual

person, the actual shirt from my experience of the image. All that is here is evidence that allows me to read, imagine and interpret as I enter the gap between actuality and imagination, mechanical print and fluid watercolour.

The watercolours provide room for new readings as images in their own right as well as in relation to each other. The images start to be categorised according to poetic, visual or thematic ideals rather than the pragmatics of world events. Ironically, the further they get from their original source, the more potential 'meaning' they might generate and so I have made drawings from the watercolours which move even further from the original source.

These still images exploit the many gaps within themselves, and between each other as well as between the image and a far off original source. While the pattern of the uniform format does this in a spatial sense, I also wanted to use the cyclical potential of the frame-per-second structure of film to structure time. To this end I have made an animation from some of these watercolours which utilises some of the strategies for foregrounding the frame in film that I have mentioned.

Most obviously the strategy of stop motion with its speeding up of a slow process highlights the nature of the frames as well as giving evidence of the process of watercolour. However, my main interest is in the 'real' time/space of Russian Ark as well as the looping of a temporal sequence. I have linked the watercolours in an unbroken sequence which resembles real time in that it is not broken or cut. By linking images from many different times and places in a single 'stream of consciousness' the narrative sequence is accidental. It appears as if the men who were originally protesting in Israel and the women cheering politicians in North America are in a continuous space, part of the same group of people.

I have drawn on similarities to generate a rhythm which, like a river, moves through both time and space, generating accidental associations. Given the impossibility of these disparate events concurring, the conjunctions demand new readings and question the stability of reproduction.

Bal, Meike. 2006. *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word / Image Opposition*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam Academic Archive

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 2008. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Trans Holquist, Michael. Austin: Texas

Benjamin, Walter. 2009. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Trans. Underwood, J. A. London: Penguin

Eliot, George. 1985. *Mill on the Floss*, London: Gernsey Press

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2008 *The World of perception*, Oxon: Routledge,

Rimmon-Kenan, Schlomith_1983. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen,

Tarkovsky, Andrey. 1986. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Trans. Hunter-Blair, Kitty. Austin: University of Texas