

WHEN IMAGES IN VISUAL NARRATIVES BECOME SECONDARY: THE DISTRIBUTION OF NARRATIVE DYNAMISM IN AUDREY NIFFENEGGER'S *THE ADVENTURESS* (2006)

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Abstract: Well-known primarily for her “straight prose” novels *The Time Traveler’s Wife* and *Her Fearful Symmetry* and a few short-stories, Audrey Niffenegger has also produced a number of visual works of art, the longest of which (*The Adventuress*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, and *The Night Bookmobile*) are comparably “narrative”, albeit somewhat more implicitly, inviting the reader to play their own part in the acts of storytelling, narrativization, and fantasizing. Niffenegger’s “visual novels” – an expression she uses to distinguish her narratives from the more popular format of comic strips – are structurally episodic, temporally and spatially stretched out, conceptually rich, multi-layered, and brimming with striking imagery – just like many conventional novels. Though referring to *The Three Incestuous Sisters* as well, this paper focuses mainly on *The Adventuress*, showing that the distribution of narrative dynamism does not change no matter which channel of the narrative (visual or verbal) is chosen to be primary. It turns out that *The Adventuress* is thus equally based on visual and textual elements, the two *channels* of the narrative asserting themselves to various degrees and through various factors from start to finish.

Key words: Visual narrative, narrative dynamism, functional sentence perspective, theme, rheme, thematiser, rhematiser

Introduction

In “A Clash of the Arts’ Titans: Texts and Images in Audrey Niffenegger’s Visual Narratives” (Tomášik, 2012), my recent study on the narrative structure of narratives that combine texts and graphics, I developed the concept of narrative dynamism as a term loosely inspired by Jan Firbas’ “communicative dynamism,” which is central to his theory of functional linguistics (cf. Firbas, 1992). When applied to graphic/visual narratives, the concept allows us to *measure* the potential that a particular narrative layer has to develop the narrative it is part of. For the sake of simplicity, the study only refers to three degrees to which the overall narrative can be pushed forward, namely tautological, marginal, and vehicular contributions.

Still, when applied to the textual layer of Niffenegger’s visual narratives (*The Three Incestuous Sisters*, *The Adventuress*, and *The Night Bookmobile*), these three categories show various fluctuations in the relative significance of texts (or caption-like *comments*) in the light

of the relatively dominant images that the three analysed narratives are built upon. It turns out that the images do not drive the narratives forward as a rule, their significance (dominance) often yielding to relatively significant texts, which assert themselves to various degrees and even *control* the reader's interpretation of the images (temporarily shifting their attention to particular elements that the images visualise).

Although often referring to *The Three Incestuous Sisters* (2005; hereafter referred to as "TTIS"), the present study is primarily focused only one visual novel by Niffenegger, namely *The Adventuress* (2006; hereafter referred to as "TA"), largely due to the fact that the latter is simpler in its organisation. It is organised as a single *chapter* (as opposed to *TTIS*, which has three chapters, presenting three different viewpoints) and contains no frames incorporating multiple images (e.g. see page 11 of *TTIS*). *TA* is much simpler and more uniform in this respect, avoiding combinations of different views in a single frame and retaining the unity of one *third-person-likenarrator*.

Though the methods presented in this paper are also applicable to Niffenegger's latest visual narrative called *The Night Bookmobile* (2010; hereafter referred to as "TNB"), they need further adjustment and enhancement owing to the complexity and diversity of the type of images and structures that this comic-like narrative incorporates.

Underlying assumptions: a change of *bias*

As indicated earlier, the proposed (and admittedly very basic) *spectrum* that captures the relative significance (or dynamism) of narrative elements is only divided into three roughly delimited sets: tautological, marginal, and vehicular contributions. While tautological contributions do not actually have any potential to develop the overall narrative and marginal ones only carry relatively minor degrees of narrative dynamism, vehicular contributions have a major impact on how the narrative structure is developed (and, eventually, how it impacts the *reader*).

More importantly, the overall categorisation of concrete textual elements in the aforementioned study is based on the assumption that the images are primary, given their *obvious* dominance in terms of their size and detail (undoubtedly, Niffenegger's visual narratives are instantly recognisable as predominantly visual rather than textual). *Obvious* though this assumption may be, it makes the overall approach a little *biased* in fact: assuming that

a certain layer is dominant seems *innocuously* hypothetical, but it may lead to considerable misjudgement (or unnecessary limitations). Therefore, the present paper reverses the assumption that my previous study on Niffenegger's visual narratives is based on in that it proposes to *measure* the relative significance of the images (i.e. the distribution of narrative dynamism over these elements) in the light of what is *assumed* to be a primarily text-driven narrative. As a result, the images will be experimentally thought of as mere *illustrations* rather than *driving elements* that provide the storytelling with hinge-points.

Determining the actual contribution of an image

Another thing that the present paper proposes to reconsider with regard to my previous study is the categorisation of contributions itself. When using images as a springboard, the relative complexity of the images has to be approached in such a way as to identify significance and insignificance with scientific exactness. This is, however, quite problematic as it is sometimes difficult to say what elements are actually *central* to an image, the frame of the image being more of a *plane* that comes across as an accumulation of relatively interconnected elements.

The simplest approach that comes to mind in the circumstances is actually based on perspective, i.e. distinguishing between layers of the foreground and those of the background. Here, the number of layers – and, consequently, also the number of identifiable (sub)categories – may vary considerably from one image to another. For example, while the image on page 9 of *TTIS* is only two-dimensional, page 27 of the same book has a depth that can be actually divided into several subsets (or *sub-layers*) based on varying significance. Similarly, pages 7 and 19 of *TA* are quite flat (or give the impression of being flat), whereas pages 17 and 37 of the same book clearly have perspective to them.

As a matter of fact, Niffenegger sometimes intentionally manipulates with perspective, usually rendering the overall perspective of such images distorted so as to give more significance to certain details that would naturally remain backgrounded, e.g. on pages 39, 117, and 121 of *TTIS*; or pages 31 and 35 of *TA*. Naturally, this is a device that is *allowed* by virtue of authorship: no less than a purely textual novelist is *allowed* to foreground one thing and background another or, in other words, to make selections for the reader – selections that eventually turn out to be effective (or ineffective, as the case may be) when it comes to

specific readers (rather than the abstract average reader). This issue will become relevant after a short detour into functionalist linguistics, that is to say, when rhematising (or possibly thematising) forces determining the distribution of narrative dynamism are discussed.

You thematise some, you rhematise some: an additional source of inspiration in functionalist linguistics

When determining the actual contribution of an image to the narrative it is part of, it is possible to pick the Czech functionalists' brains again. When it comes to the utterance, the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) actually works with a whole range of categories that are identifiable, albeit not necessarily present at all times, the range going well beyond the theme and the rheme. An expanded range of categories includes *theme* (and/or *themeproper*), *diatheme* (and/or *diathemeproper*; see Svoboda 1982), *transition* (and/or *transitionproper*), and *rheme* (and/or *rhemeproper*). Most of these are just *potential* categories, not necessarily appearing in all utterance types or utterance-type manifestations.

This is, again, crucial to the functionalist analysis of *narrative images*, for instance if the author of such a narrative has a tendency to *distort* perspective and provide the *reader* with selected or *rearranged* elements instead of conveying the *perfect* impression of three-dimensionality. Such a distortion is actually a (semi)conscious choice that is made to convey certain meanings or evoke certain feelings or images – possibly a rhematisation of something that would normally be thematised under *normal* circumstances. An absence of depth (as a feature of creating perspective) results in a re-distribution of narrative dynamism over the remaining carriers. That said, the carriers that are actually present in a specific image need not cover the whole spectrum of all known components.

My argument is, therefore, that if an utterance (or a *sentence* in a larger context) can do without, say, a transitional or diathematic component, then an image that is part of a visual narrative (i.e. it is part of an expanded context) can do perfectly well without certain attributes, such as depths and details. It is a choice that artists creating *communicative* products are free to make. As a matter of fact, it is a choice that they are *expected* to make to assert themselves *as* creative artists.

What is significant here is that the author (corresponding to the speaker/utterer in FSP) has every right to foreground/background an element (to avoid the term “information,” which

is considerably limited in its scope of meaning when it comes to works of art) or, to use the Czech functionalists' terms, rhematise/thematise an element with a view to pushing the narrative (or the conversation) forward. In other words, literary authors – via their semi-fictional alter-egos in the form of any number of narrators – make a selection of communicative means in order to narrate a sequence of events against the backdrop of spatial and temporal setting, observations, descriptions of emotional states, etc. The final amount of detail is never full, of course – and it is likely never intended to be, because this ability to select elements is very much essential to the creative act as well as readers' appreciation of the final product.

Without going too much into this issue, suffice it to say that Ernest Hemingway would have made a *considerably different* impact on his readers if he had selected non-Hemingwayish sentence/paragraph elements. He wrote what he wrote, he chose to write about what he wrote about, he chose to write about it in the way he did – and all of this (and more) is part of his *style* and *narrativity*(and more). Similarly, Cormac McCarthy, whether his style resembles Hemingway's or not, is unique, in the most abstract sense – precisely for his *choices*. When it comes to Audrey Niffenegger, she is unique – no matter how much she draws on her favourite and influential authors and text-types (e.g. Edward Gorey's visual narratives, such as those compiled under the title of *Amphigorey*, most recently published in 2004) – *primarily because* she chooses to make her aquatints in the way(s) she does and accompany them with as much text as she desires. And this is an area of overlap between Niffenegger and all other narrative writers that brings them together as *phrasers*, *drawers*, but most of all – *choosers*. They all thematise and rhematise when conveying whatever they wish to convey.

The challenge of categorising authors' choices

Similarly to the theory of FSP, categorising elements (or authors' communicative choices) in terms of their significance (i.e. their communicative dynamism) is by no means a simple task – unless we use carefully selected examples that are clear grammar-book cases, of course. This was somewhat hinted at in my previous study (Tomášik, 2012), in which my three categories – tautologies, marginals, and vehiculars – were only roughly delimited (as suggested by the terms “no significance”, “minor significance”, and “major significance”, respectively). It is, however, an issue that cannot be resolved in this study due to its limited scope (nor forgotten, for that

matter). Therefore, a certain amount of *tolerance* is required in this connection. What needs to be tackled for sure, though, is the actual transfer of the three categories mentioned earlier into the sphere of images (more precisely, aquatint prints) – the transfer of the *ways* in which we determine the relative contribution of an image to what we see as a primarily text-based narrative. This is crucial because impressionistic and intuitive approaches are judgements are undesirable.

Tone layering and colour saturation as a rhematising/thematising force

One solution that is at hand is based on a rough identification of tone layers corresponding to various *depths*(or, to be more precise, impressions thereof). The trouble is that depth-evoking tone choices are rarely clear when it comes to aquatints and, as a matter of fact, Niffenegger's aquatints are rendered rather two-dimensionally by and large, albeit beautifully (be the 2D effect an intentional choice on the part of the artist, the nature of aquatint production, or a combination of the two, it does not matter). Consequently, we cannot rely on any distribution of significance that is based *solely* on tones.

For instance, page 9 of *TTIS* is flat in terms of tones, three-dimensionality being rendered only through *isolated* backgroundings conveyed through overlapping elements, such as the three sisters' hair, which either runs down their backs (see the representations of Clothilde and Ophile) or fronts (see the representation of Bettine). Similarly, page 35 of *TA* is virtually flat in terms of tones, the impression of depth being dependent on overlapping elements again. In contrast, there are at least two tonal layers on pages 59, 65 and 83 of *TA*. However, this means of creating depth is relatively infrequent, which makes determining the contribution of images to the development of the narrative less problematic.

The absence of tone layering can be interpreted as the absence of a potential attribute – a complete absence rather than a lack of visual manifestation (in FSP, sentence elements can actually be present without verbal manifestation). Functionally speaking, this is an act of *distributing* the *pool* of narrative dynamism over a careful selection of image elements, which prevents a specific element from asserting itself and assuming a certain degree of narrative dynamism.

Elementplacement as a second rhematising/thematising force

Another crucial factor that interplays with tonelayering is composition (or *mise en scene*) – Niffenegger’s choices related to the placement of elements within the rectangular (or circular, as the case may be; e.g. on page 11 of *TTIS*) frame of the aquatint plate. From the functionalist viewpoint, such element placement can be seen as a set of choices that has thematising and rhematising effects. Of course, the optical centre of a frame (the cross between the diagonals in the case of rectangular images) need not be actually an indication of other forms of centrality (i.e. other forms of thematisation/rhematisation), much as this may appear to be the most frequent case. For instance, while pages 51 and 59 exemplify central placement, pages 63 and 67 of *TTIS* are clear examples of eccentric placement. In *TA*, pages 7, 43, and 69 make use of central placement, but pages 37, 117, and 119 distribute narrative dynamism eccentrically.

In fact, placing an element in the centre of a frame may be overridden by other factors, such as tone layering (e.g. page 119 of *TA*) or size adjustment (see below for a brief discussion of this factor), as a result of which a centrally located element may be thematised. Similarly, a visually peripheral element may actually be rhematised if its tones are saturated or enhanced in another way (e.g. by heavy outlining). The significance of element centrality is therefore a force that is relative to all other forces entering the complex interplay of visual imagery.

Relative size as a third rhematising/thematising force

Another potentially crucial factor in the distribution of narrative dynamism is related to the relative size of elements appearing in *narrative frames*. This aspect is frequently related to perspective, but it may not actually be limited to it. For example, the proportion between the father figure and the representation of Ophile on page 121 of *TTIS* is unrelated to perspective (in fact, it runs counter to perspective because the two figures happen to be practically in the same depth), the attribute of size functioning as a rhematising factor. Page 57 of *TA* is similar, whereby the size of the larger-than-life moth is rather disproportionate to everything else in the frame. On page 13 of *TA*, the sheer size of the mermaid-like figure in the centre of the frame can be interpreted as a manifestation of rhematising forces in the circumstances, overriding the novelty of the element in the context of the narrative (in FSP, information that is new to the context of the utterance is frequently, though not invariably, rhematic rather

thematic). Cases such as these (i.e. where size is used as a primary rhematiser) are relatively rare in Niffenegger's visual narratives, but they must be considered nonetheless, however marginal size may be with respect to other factors at play.

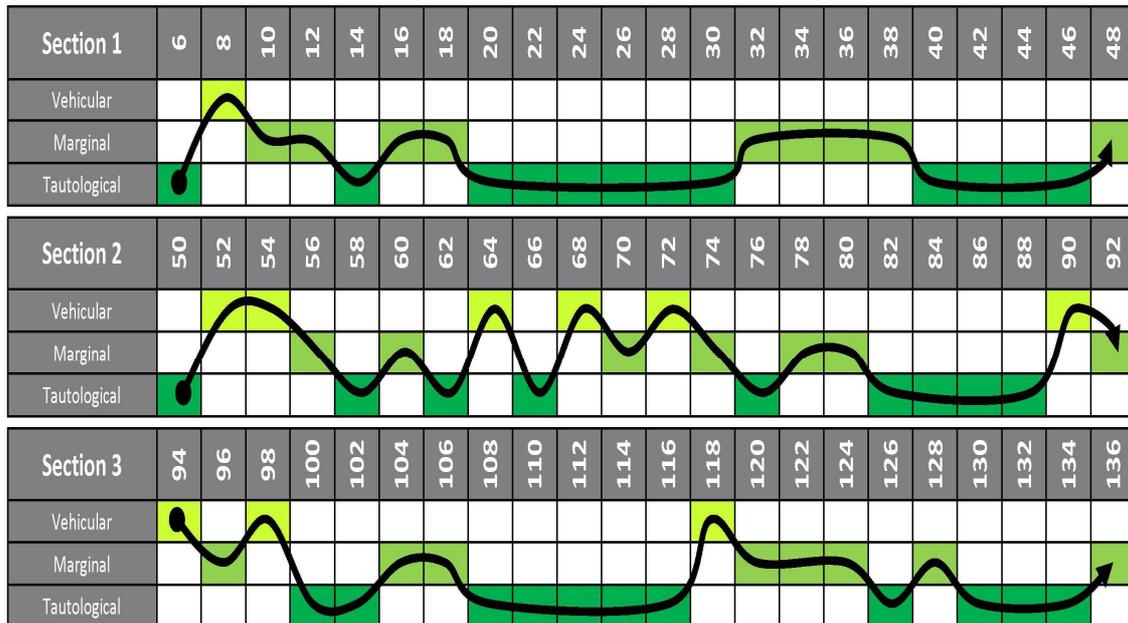
The distribution of narrative dynamism in the visual component of *The Adventuress* (2006)

This section focuses on *The Adventuress* (2006) and the distribution of narrative dynamism therein, whereby the verbal channel is taken to be pivotal to the overall narrative (owing to its narration-like attributes) and occasionally developed (or shaped/controlled) by visual contributions. In contrast, my previous study (Tomášik, 2012) showed how the verbal channel of the narrative contributes to the visual channel (not *vice versa*).

The way the distribution of narrative dynamism is captured in Table 2 below is, of course, subject to interpretation. However, the three factors (or rhematising forces) briefly described above usually narrow various interpretive possibilities down to one. Admittedly, an expanded range of factors that determine the distribution of narrative dynamism might make the present observations and findings more exact. Nonetheless, the three factors considered in this study in the course of are sufficient enough for illustration. Further research will show just how crucial they are in the light of a more complex network of identifiable and, more importantly, *measurable* factors that have potential to drive the narrative forwards in literary texts based on both verbal and visual elements.

A short look back

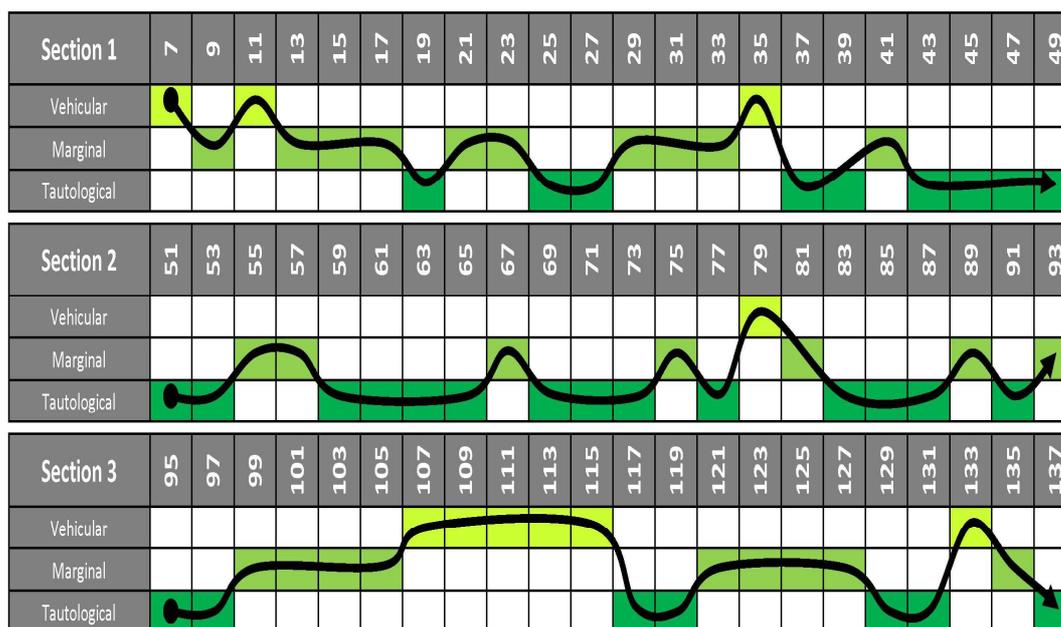
Before showing the significance of TA's images to what we experimentally consider here as an essentially verbal narrative, here is a reproduction of a table (Table No. 2 in the original source) from my previous study on Niffenegger's visual narratives which shows the contribution of the verbal (secondary) to the visual (primary):

Table 1: Distribution/fluctuation of narrative dynamism in the verbal component of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Adventuress* (2006)

As observed in the aforementioned study, “the side-texts’ vehicular contribution to the novel’s development is the least numerous, heavily outnumbered by the relatively insignificant and dispensable side-texts put together (85%)” (Tomášik, 2012). More importantly, the study reveals that “the underlying structures of the novels [i.e. *TTIS* and *TA*] significantly amplify the importance and centrality of Niffenegger’s concept of ‘a story in pictures’... Although the author *succumbs* to her temptation to communicate with the reader verbally rather than visually on the off-chance (15-19% of the cases), she seems to partially resist the temptation more often than not (34-36% of the cases), and gives full vent to her emotions and thoughts *using wax and acid* rather than words (46-48% of the cases)” (*ibidem*).

An experimental reversal

Now, if we reverse the approach, as indicated at the beginning of this paper, so that the verbal is considered *primary* and the visual *secondary* (i.e. a mere contribution to a narrative that *primarily* rests upon verbal means), the table given above will change considerably even though it actually refers to the same *double-sided*, two-channelled narrative (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Distribution/fluctuation of narrative dynamism within the visual component of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Adventuress* (2006)

Indeed, it will have been noticed that there are significant differences between Table 1 and Table 2. More importantly, Table 2 is by no means just an *inversion* of Table 1, although some frames actually do suggest such a tendency (e.g. 7, 43-47, 109-117 and a few others). Statistically speaking, out of the total of 66 visual components, as many as 30 prove to be tautological, 26 are marginal, and only 10 are vehicular, i.e. crucial to the development of the narrative, which is, in other words, a little less than a half, just over a third, and a meagre 15%, respectively.

Strikingly, however, these percentages are more than roughly tantamount to those that I arrived at when comparing the verbal to the visual (secondary contributions to primary drivers, respectively) in the aforementioned study. For the sake of precision, here is an exact quote from said study (Tomášik, 2012):

Out of the total of 66 verbal components, as many as 32 prove to be tautological, 24 are marginal, and a mere 10 are vehicular, i.e. crucial to the development of the narrative, which is, in other words, a little less than a half, just over a third, and a meagre 15%, respectively. Still in other words, the side-texts' vehicular contribution to the novel's development is the least numerous, heavily outnumbered by the relatively insignificant and dispensable side-texts put together (85%).

Amazingly, the percentages remain the same, though the perspective has actually been reversed (see the underlined passage and compare it to the middle section of the previous paragraph, which is a literal copy of the quoted passage to emphasise the sameness). What this means is obvious: the ratios and proportions signal and refer to the abstract structure underlying Audrey Niffenegger's *The Adventuress* as a *text* (in the broadest sense of the word) or text-type that combines verbal and visual elements, regardless of the way we approach it: whether it is the words or the images that we *choose* to *make primary*, they all matter only to some extent – until we reach a depth of the narrative in which the two channels are inseparable from one another. Like writers and readers alike (representing two different approaches to one and the same text), analysts (representing a third approach) are free to make their own choices. Still, some aspects of the narrative under scrutiny (of a *readerly* type, a *writerly* type, or any other conceivable type) seem to be functionally constant.

Conclusions

What remains to be specified by way of conclusion is the resulting *constant* presented in this article (it is not constant per se as it varies from one text to another, of course). It is the overall proportion of the three identified categories that remains constant, the set of tautologicals (or thematised elements) being the most numerous, the set of marginals (or, possibly, diathematised elements) representing about a third, and the set of vehiculars (or rhematised elements) being the least numerous. This may seem paradoxical because rhemes (i.e. elements carrying the highest degrees of communicative/narrative dynamism) are what interlocutors (in the broadest sense of the word encompassing readers and writers) are after in the first place. However, yet again, it has to be noted that the approach proposed here merely *measures* the contribution of a certain narrative *layer* to whatever remains after such a layer has been isolated.

One thing that has to be kept in mind is that, once they have been isolated, contributions are a function of what they are thought to contribute *to*, so the initial assumption/choice (what we might call the *original bias*) is crucial here. The method used in this paper, as any other really, is selective to begin with: it chooses to focus on chosen layers of a literary text from a specific perspective – this is a bias in itself (albeit an insurmountable one). Nonetheless,

it is a bias that reveals how, under the specified experimental circumstances, certain things actually work *beyond* the edge of the innumerable specifics that readers are *aware of*.

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