

# **Ethics of Implied Narrative Art**

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Ethics and Visual Representation

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## Introduction

Stories are presented in a variety of different forms serving many different purposes (Barwell, 49). Sometimes they recall past experiences and sometimes an imagined future. In many cases stories are told as a way of emphasizing or “articulating a culture’s understanding of the virtues it holds dear” (Carroll 2010, 383). Narratives do this by framing experiences in a meaningful way. Narratives reveal the connecting links between past, present and future events presenting the entire sequence as a purposeful and ordered whole (Barwell, 49). David Velleman described narrative as a “genre of explanation” (Velleman 2). What makes narrative distinct from any other story form is that by representing events in an ordered and purposeful way they are able to suggest meaning rather than chaos.

It may seem obvious that narrative has played a crucial role in the history of humankind and its desire for a meaningful existence. Much of art history makes this evident from Ghiberti’s *Jacob and Esau* (fig. 1) panel to Paul Delaroche’s painting *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (fig. 2). However, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the leading artists and art scholars sought to save art from its dependency on narrative. Thinkers like Kandinsky and Greenberg attempted to eradicate narrative from the painted canvas by claiming that it was mere illustration or, at worst, kitsch. They operated under the premise that narratives represented traditional ideas that were stale and outdated, ideas that opposed progress and the avant-garde. However, their attempt was unsuccessful and narrative painting made a return in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hilton Kramer claimed that this was the result of “a number of factors - most conspicuously the decline of modernist orthodoxy and the return to Realism” (Kramer). Whatever the reason for narrative’s return, it seems that artists, specifically painters, are not ready to completely give up on narrative.

As mentioned previously, narrative and painting have had a long relationship with each other. However, some art critics today continue to question the role of narrative in painting. Specifically, they question whether paintings that are considered narrative art are actually narratives at all or if they are better understood as implied narratives. This is a question that will be addressed as well as some possible reasons for the persistence of narrative in painting. To answer the last part of this question the relationship between narrative and ethics will be explored. The purpose of the following research is not necessarily to provide a conclusive answer to these questions, but to suggest potential reasons why narrative continues to persist even today as a legitimate partner for painting. In order to do this I will first attempt to understand what makes a story form a narrative. Once the characteristics of a narrative have been determined then the relationship between ethics and narrative will be explored. Finally, I will address the validity of narrative paintings as well as the ethical implications of this form of painting.

### A Narrative Connection

What is narrative? At minimum a narrative is a sequence of related events imagined or recalled (Carroll 2001, 120). In Aristotle's *Poetics* he describes tragedy as a story that wants for nothing more. The structure of all tragedies was described as a sequence of events revealing a wholeness or completeness. What makes something whole? For Aristotle "a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and an end" (Aristotle 14). Many contemporary thinkers have come to a similar understanding about narrative which is that it is different from other story forms because it provides a conclusion. However, Noel Carroll suggests that story forms are considered narratives when they demonstrate a narrative connection. A narrative connection is made when "(1) the discourse represents at least two events and/ or states of affairs (2) in a globally forward-looking manner (3) concerning the career of at least one unified subject (4) where the temporal

relations between the events and/ or states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and (5) where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events and/ or states of affairs.” (Carroll 2001, 126) To explain what makes a narrative distinct Carroll suggests comparing it to other story forms, for instance, annals and chronicles. He defines an annal as a story form that depicts a temporal ordering of events. For example; Katie bought shoes on Friday and John went fishing on Saturday. The only evident connection between the two events is the representation of passing time. The other story form distinct from a narrative is a chronicle. A chronicle, unlike an annal, represents temporal ordering as well as a unified subject. For example; Katie bought shoes on Friday, Katie went fishing on Saturday. In this example Katie is the unified subject and the passing of days represents the temporal ordering. Carroll suggests that a narrative is distinct because it demonstrates, temporal ordering and a unified, as well as a causal link between events. The causal link Carroll refers to is when “earlier events are at least causally necessary conditions of later events” (Carroll 2001, 125).

What Carroll suggests here is that a story form is a narrative when it demonstrates some degree of causal relationship between events. However, Carroll also suggests that the causal link does not need to be a necessary cause, meaning the future event does not need to be the only possible outcome of the earlier event. At minimum the earlier event must provide a sufficient cause for a later event. For example; Rob enters a bank on Friday to rob it. On Saturday the cops catch Rob and take him to jail. Rob ends up in jail because he robbed the bank, but going to jail was only one of many potential outcomes of robbing a bank. Rob could have escaped to Mexico and lived happily ever after or he might have been shot and then died. The point is, robbing a bank is a sufficient cause for ending up in jail not a necessary one. If the story went; Rob enters a bank on Friday to rob it and on Saturday he ate a burger at Hardees, then there would be no sufficient cause provided for Rob’s sudden craving for Hardees. This example would be a

chronicle rather than a narrative. In order for a story form to be a narrative it must demonstrate a necessary sufficient causal relationship between an earlier event and a later one.

## Narrative and Ethics

### *Combining the Abstract and Concrete*

How is this understanding of narrative related to ethics? First, a simple definition of ethics is necessary. For the purpose of this paper ethics can simply be understood as the principles that guide one's judgments and/or actions. From here the question might be asked how narratives encourage certain principles, judgments and/or actions. As previously mentioned Carroll wrote that "every culture [he] knows of tells stories about exemplary figures as a way of articulating and understanding of the virtues it holds dear" (Carroll 2010 383). This suggests that narratives are a tool for communicating virtues and vices. For the sake of this argument we will assume that virtues are good habits and vices are bad habits. Carroll points out that a narrative can encourage virtue and vice by bringing together the concrete and the abstract. In other words they show how goodness, which is an abstract concept, aligns with specific actions that are concrete. By concrete he is referring to details like characters, places, motivations, commitments, thoughts, reasons, and desires. Carroll explains that narratives incorporate abstraction as a result of the process of selecting the concrete. After all, certain details are selected over others. He wrote that "by employing abstraction and concreteness in the ways that encourage emotional responses, the typical narrative can enlist the emotions in the service of ethical understanding, shaping the situation in a way that makes it morally intelligible, that shows us what is at stake, and how to evaluate it." (Carroll 2010, 380) Narratives cloth abstract concepts in tangible form making them user friendly.

## *Enlisting the Emotions to Encourage Moral Judgments*

There are several ideas that may need clarified in order to understand why combining abstraction with concreteness is advantageous. The first is that it is easier for people to grasp concrete experiences than it is for them to think about abstract theoretical ideas. People respond to practical examples better than theoretical concepts. Carroll writes that “we are problem solving animals and, in this regard, typical narratives get our pragmatic juices flowing” (Carroll 2010, 374). The second idea is that concrete examples can encourage emotional responses thereby skipping the intellect when an action is required. Carroll stated that “We cultivate our moral-emotional responses through exposure to typical narratives which keep us alive to far more diverse problems than most of us are likely to encounter in our routine lives.” (Carroll 2010, 381) This suggests that emotions are instinctual tools meant for protection. Having the emotional response of fear may cause us to run, duck, or flinch, all of which are instinctual responses brought on by an emotional stimulus. Narratives can encourage the same type of responses without the real-life experience and the real-life threat. Carroll also suggests that many emotions come as a result of a subconscious moral judgment. For example when someone feels angry there is a presupposition that someone or something wronging the person feeling the anger. The moral judgment of wrongness presupposes the emotion of anger. By encouraging emotional responses narrative may in effect be disguising moral judgments in a sequence of events.

Walter Benjamin also recognized the ability of narratives to encourage moral judgments in his essay titled *Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In his article Benjamin suggests that propaganda depends on its ability to bypass the audience’s intellect in order to target the intended emotional response. Like Benjamin, Carroll also recognized the potential for narratives to encourage both vice and virtue. However, the final point to be made is that narratives can

encourage moral judgments through emotional responses and this is done by presenting abstract concepts in concrete form.

### *Recognize Causal Connections*

Narratives can also enlist our intellect. They do this by encouraging us to recognize causal connections between events. Carroll stated that “narratives not only connect the past, present, and future; they connect them by showing how the future emerges from the past and the present as a realization of a possibility that belongs to a range of alternative possibilities opened up by earlier events and states of affairs in the narrative.” (Carroll 3D 388) By interacting with narratives, the very structure of causation is revealed. Narratives are constantly reaffirming the idea that past actions are connected to future outcomes. Recognizing the causal relationship between events allows us to be better decision makers. For this reason narrative is “probably the most pervasive tool that humans have for relating the past to the present and to the future” (Carroll 2010, 387). The reason this is true of narrative as opposed to other story forms is that narratives are not opened ended. Narratives are inherently conclusive because they always demonstrate both a cause and an effect (Barwell, 49).

### *Practice & Test Reason*

Narratives can act as a container for virtue as well as a tool for communicating the very structure of causation. By bringing both of these characteristics together in a multitude of different ways they provide a way for practicing and testing our reasoning skills. Carroll stated that narratives “sharpen and refine our powers of observation and inference relative to discerning virtues and vices in their varied manifestations.” (Carroll 3D 386) Emmanuel Kant defined reason as a human faculty that recognizes causal connections between events. Reason then

provides motivation for the will to take the appropriate action to achieve a desired end (McCormick). However, Kant recognized that reason was not infallible. In fact it was often wrong. Reason may be wrong for several reasons, but incomplete knowledge due to lack of experience is a foremost culprit. Narratives are able to provide a wider array of experiences therefore building a broader knowledge base which in effect hones our reasoning skills. The more experience people have with narratives the more likely they are to take the appropriate actions needed for the outcomes they desire. Narratives “exercise our talents for detecting virtue and vice and applying the concepts thereof. In this, they sophisticate our operational skills in navigating our moral universe” (Carroll 2010, 385).

### *Deliberation and Narrative*

Narratives also allow us to be more deliberate about the character we want to play. Carroll refers to our ability to orient ourselves with the character we see ourselves playing in our personal narrative. It is important to note that many narrative scholars suggest that narratives can be internal or external. A narrative is external if it is presented as an experience outside of our subjective experience. External narratives may come in the form of stories, paintings, movies, etc. An internal narrative relates to how we frame our own lives in a meaningful way. Internal narratives are concerned with the character we see ourselves playing in life. Carroll suggests that these can interact and in fact they allow us to orient ourselves to specific goals. If a person wants to be a good person he or she has to determine what a good person does in order to continue along the same story path. Carroll stated that “narratives serve the purposes of deliberation by reflecting upon the past as a way of continuing the story into the future.” (Carroll 3D 392) If I see my character as a respectable honest artist up to the present moment I am likely to avoid plagiarism in order to continue along the narrative path I have already set for myself. I come to

know what honest people do through real-life experiences as well as through analyzing honest characters presented in narratives. By comparing my own internal narrative with external narratives I am more likely to take the appropriate actions needed in order to continue playing the character with which I associate myself.

In review, Carroll suggested that narratives can enlist emotions to encourage moral judgments on an instinctual level. They can also encourage people to recognize causal relationships between events, ultimately allowing us to refine our reasoning skills through practice. They may also allow us to be more deliberate in our actions by providing a way of orienting ourselves with the characters that play the same roles we desire to play. Of course each one of these could be discussed in more depth. However, for the purposes of this paper it is more relevant to recognize that there is a relationship between ethics and narrative.

#### Can a Painting be a Narrative?

It seems evident that there is a relationship between narrative and ethics, but is there a relationship between painting and narrative? In other words can painting be a form of narrative? If it can be then it must meet the standards of narrative connection. As previously mentioned a narrative connection is made when at least two events and/ or states of affairs are represented, in a globally forward-looking manner, incorporating a unified subject and a temporal ordering, where earlier events at least provide a necessary sufficient cause for future events. Of course, immediately a conflict is evident. Painting represents a static moment and is usually considered to be limited by its spatial characteristics. Unlike a book or a movie, a painting can only represent a static moment because it does not unfold over time. In other words a painting cannot represent two events. Gotthold Lessing stated that the “material limits of art confine all its imitations. The artist, out of every-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment.”

(Lessing pg 16) If Lessing is correct then painting seems to not be able to meet the requirement of a narrative connection.

However, ability of painting to satisfy the requirement of representing two events in order to make a narrative connection is debatable. The concept of representation seems to imply the participation of the viewing subject in order to complete the narrative connection. Bence Nanay, the author of *Narrative Pictures* suggests that a picture can represent more than it depicts (Nanay 121). A painting may depict a single moment, while at the same time representing many. Nanay also argues that paintings can represent actions and actions represent more than one event. For instance the action of jumping may be depicted in a painting and jumping actually represents the event of taking off, the event of flight and then the event of landing, thereby demonstrating a sequence of events. If this is the case then it would be necessary to compare painting to the other narrative criteria in order to determine a narrative connection. However, it seems clear that if the role of the viewing subject is considered in what is meant by “representing at least two events” then painting may meet the standards of a narrative connection.

The difference brings up an interesting question concerning narrative. Where does the narrative connection actually exist, in the object itself or the perceiving subject? By focusing on the word “represent” the role of the subject is emphasized. As previously mentioned Carroll’s concept of narrative connection has some opposition from scholars like David Velleman and Gregory Currie. Both of their arguments center on the idea that a narrative connection is not inherent in the object or story form itself. Their arguments suggest the connection is made by the perceiving subject. Velleman suggested that the narrative object stimulates an emotional response creating what he calls an emotional cadence. He writes that “the audience of a story understands the narrated events, first, because it knows how they feel, in the sense that it experiences them as leading it through a natural emotional sequence” (Velleman 19). The

emotional cadence or the link between a stimuli, emotional response and then emotional relief is what provides a narrative connection.

Like Velleman, Currie also argued that the narrative connection originates in the subject perceiving the narrative. Currie suggests that “narrativity judgments depend on our perception (including our misperception) of relations of dependence of some kind between the events described” (Curry 316). Currie argues that the causal connection that Carroll speaks of is not actually evident in the story itself. In fact, according to Currie, the causal connection is always imagined by the perceiving subject. Both of these views suggest that a narrative connection is made by the perceiving subject. Therefore, narrative painting may actually be a form of narrative.

#### *Introducing Implied Narrative Painting*

If narrative paintings are actual narratives then through association narrative paintings have the same relationship with ethics as narrative. However, if Carroll is right and a narrative connection must represent at least two events without depending on the imagination of the perceiving subject then paintings are not full-fledged narratives. Paul Barolsky agrees. In his article *There is No Such thing as Narrative Art* he argues precisely that. He argues that “pictorial artists imply a narrative by referring to what has been said in words, but surely such allusions are not the same thing as a narrative in words” (Barolsky 1). His claim is that painting is spatially limited and that if narrative is evident in a painting it is merely an allusion to a known narrative. He also suggests that a painter’s concern for spatial harmony will always be the detriment of temporal ordering. If what he suggests is true then narrative paintings are not really narrative, but may actually be something else like implied narratives. In this case the relationship between

ethics and narrative are not carried over to paintings. Implied narrative paintings may have an entirely different relationship with ethics.

### *Ethics of Implied Narrative Painting*

The idea that there may be a category or genre of painting referred to as implied narrative is not widely recognized by the art world at this time. In fact many scholars may simply refer to an implied narrative painting as an allegorical painting. However, there may be ethical implications for implied narrative that are not shared with either narrative or allegory. Charles Caldemeyer, a professor of painting and working artist suggests that “implied narrative paintings excite the very structures that are essential for human survival.” What are the structures that he is referring to? The idea that narratives are linked to our survival was brought up by Carroll when he suggested that narratives enlist the emotions. Carroll suggested that emotions are instinctual tools meant to help us survive. However, what I would like to suggest here is that the structure Caldemeyer refers to is the structure of causation. Narratives link together the past, present and future in a conclusive way. Implied narratives suggest causation by presenting a single event, one that suggests the existence of an event before and after the one presented. In this way an implied narrative painting does not provide conclusions, but points to our desire for them.

As pointed out previously, Carroll suggested that a crucial characteristic for determining a narrative connection is the need of a necessary sufficient causal link between at least two events. In other words, when a future event seems to have emerged from a past event then a narrative connection is possible. However, this does not mean that the future event is necessarily determined by the past event, only that the future event represents at least one possible outcome. What this suggests is that there are many potential outcomes. However narratives only present one. This is precisely what makes them conclusive. This suggests that a typical narrative,

although it only needs to demonstrate a sufficient causal link, by providing an outcome, actually presents a more conclusive statement. Unlike a full-fledged narrative, an implied narrative does not supply the perceiving subject with a conclusion. The audience of an implied narrative recognizes the underlying narrative structure that is causal, suggesting an orderly beginning, middle, and end, but it does not provide the concrete manifestations of each structural stage. Whereas, a narrative suggests completion and conclusiveness by providing a potential outcome, an implied narrative suggests causation and potentiality itself. The structure that Caldemeyer refers to is the structure of causation as we actually experience it. Life is not as orderly and conclusive as a narrative might suggest. The difference between a narrative and implied narrative may be analogous to the differences between the beautiful and the sublime. Like narrative, the beautiful suggests a conclusive order, whereas, the sublime, like an implied narrative, suggests seemingly infinite possibilities. Both the concept of the sublime and the concept of an implied narrative emphasize potentiality rather than conclusions.

### *Implied Narrative in Practice*

The emphasis implied narrative paintings place on potentiality becomes even more evident when comparing what is typically considered a narrative painting with what may be considered an implied narrative painting. For the sake of comparison we will assume that painting is capable of making a narrative connection and that some paintings are narrative and others are implied narrative. A perfect example of what would typically be thought of as a narrative painting is Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (fig. 3). This painting, like many other neoclassical paintings, suggests a known historical narrative and through association promotes virtues like loyalty, honor and patriotism. It was created to encourage specific virtues and it did this by presenting a conclusion. That conclusion was that if a man fought for his own

people and country he was honorable and good. The conclusion is that specific actions make a man good and others make him bad. For a good example of implied narrative paintings the work of contemporary painter Vincent Desiderio comes to mind. Specifically his paintings titled *Without Words* (fig. 4) as well as *Mourning and Fecundity II* (fig. 5). Whereas, David's *The Oath of the Horatii* refers to an existing well-known narrative, Desiderio's paintings titled *Without Words* and *Mourning and Fecundity II* do not. Desiderio's paintings imply that there is a narrative in that they imply the underlying structure of narrative. By providing a narrative moment his paintings suggest a beginning, middle and end as well as a causal link between them. For example, after viewing his painting *Without Words*, the audience might immediately think that the man had a heart attack prior to the moment depicted and they might also think of the heartache the woman will experience afterward. However, the man could have just as easily passed out from drinking too much, or even attempted suicide. The point is that whereas David's paintings shut the door for potentially by providing a conclusion, Desiderio's open the door by encouraging the viewer to recognize their desire for causation and conclusion. Desiderio's implied narrative paintings force the viewer to think causally, this is exactly what Carroll would call narrative thinking. They do this in order to find meaning in them. Desiderio's implied narrative paintings defy conclusive thinking, instead emphasizing emerging potentiality.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion narrative painting may or may not represent an actual narrative. This depends on what position one takes concerning the role of the perceiving subject in determining a narrative connection. If the narrative object is truly autonomous in its narrativity then painting would not be a full-fledged narrative. This is because as a spatial object it can only depict a single event. However, if the perceiving subject does play a role in establishing the narrative

connection then painting can be a narrative. If paintings can be narratives then it is obvious that the relationship between ethics and narrative can be shared between ethics and painting.

However if narrative paintings are actually implied narratives then the ethical relationship will be different. The most obvious distinction is that narratives provide conclusions while implied narratives only suggest conclusions while never actually providing one. Implied narratives emphasize potentiality which promotes free thinking, imagination and creativity. This may be why some artists and critics think that the “most interesting, complex [painting] will always be that of implied narrative, because [they open] the viewer's interpretive library” (Caldemeyer). Francis Bacon stated that he did “not want to avoid telling a story, but [wanted] very very much to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance” (Alphen 489). By implying the structure of narrative, implied narratives are able to promote thinking without suggesting specific thoughts. The research demonstrated in this paper opens the door for further research into exactly what might be the underlying structure of implied narrative as well as the ethical implications of such a genre.

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## Image List

1. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Jacob and Esau*, panel, Gates of Paradise, Baptistery of St. John, Florence, 1425-1452



2. Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, Oil on canvas, 1834



3. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, Oil on canvas, 1785



4. Vincent Desiderio, *Without Words*, painting, 1989



5. Vincent Desiderio, *Mourning and Fecundity II*  
2011, mixed media and oil on canvas, 81 1/4 x 107 1/4 inches



## **Interview with Charles Caldemeyer, Artist and Professor**

**Question:** How would you define narrative (What are the characteristics of a narrative as opposed to other story forms?)

**Caldemeyer Answer:** Narrative is the conveyance of a reality by means of some kind sequential structure. This sequence may occur very rapidly in our mental processes, to the point of being unrecognized as it happens. In painting this sequence is mainly achieved by use of the basic formal compositional strategies of center-of-interest to secondary to tertiary elements of the work. The content of the narrative is conveyed by the juxtaposition of meaningful elements within that sequence, contextualized by the way they are painted.

**Question:** How might a narrative or narrative thinking contribute to a individual's or community's ethics?

**Caldemeyer Answer:** Narrative thinking is fundamental to human existence, and is evolved from structures that are very old. Individuals and communities define themselves by narratives.

**Question:** Can a painting be a narrative or is the best a painting can do imply a narrative? (temporal/spatial issue)

**Caldemeyer Answer:** Paintings that are denotatively narrative are called illustrations, a term that is used dismissively by modernists/postmodernists in a strategy to debunk all narrative work. These works have only one, or a very commonly understood, interpretation. Connotative, or implied, narrative works play upon the viewer's associations of certain symbols with meaning systems to develop a range of interpretations, and may be viewed as involving the more sophisticated mental processes that characterize a search for meaning. As long as there are

human communities, then meaning systems will remain undisturbed, and a full range of narrative options will remain open to artists. But the most interesting, complex work will always be that of implied narrative, because it opens the viewer's interpretive library.

**Question:** If a painting can only imply a narrative what might the ethical contribution of an implied narrative be?

**Caldemeyer Answer:** A good painting of implied narrative excites the very structures that are essential for human survival. It reminds us that existence demands the balanced interpretation of many influences, some of them disparate. Our culture now has the means to insulate us from many of these experiences, and good narrative paintings revive in us a sense of the primal excitement of human life.

**Question:** What role does narrative or implied narrative play in your work both process and finished piece?

**Caldemeyer Answer:** The experience of association of meaning to various natural and cultural symbols, combined with various painting styles, is beyond the reach of any other human experience. It should be clearly understood that painting is not just 'like a language,' but is a language in full, with all of the nuances of verbal language. The experience of first conceiving the direction, then evolving the symbolic elements and conjoining them with specific and appropriate strategies of paint application and media, is a primal human activity that cannot be had by other means.

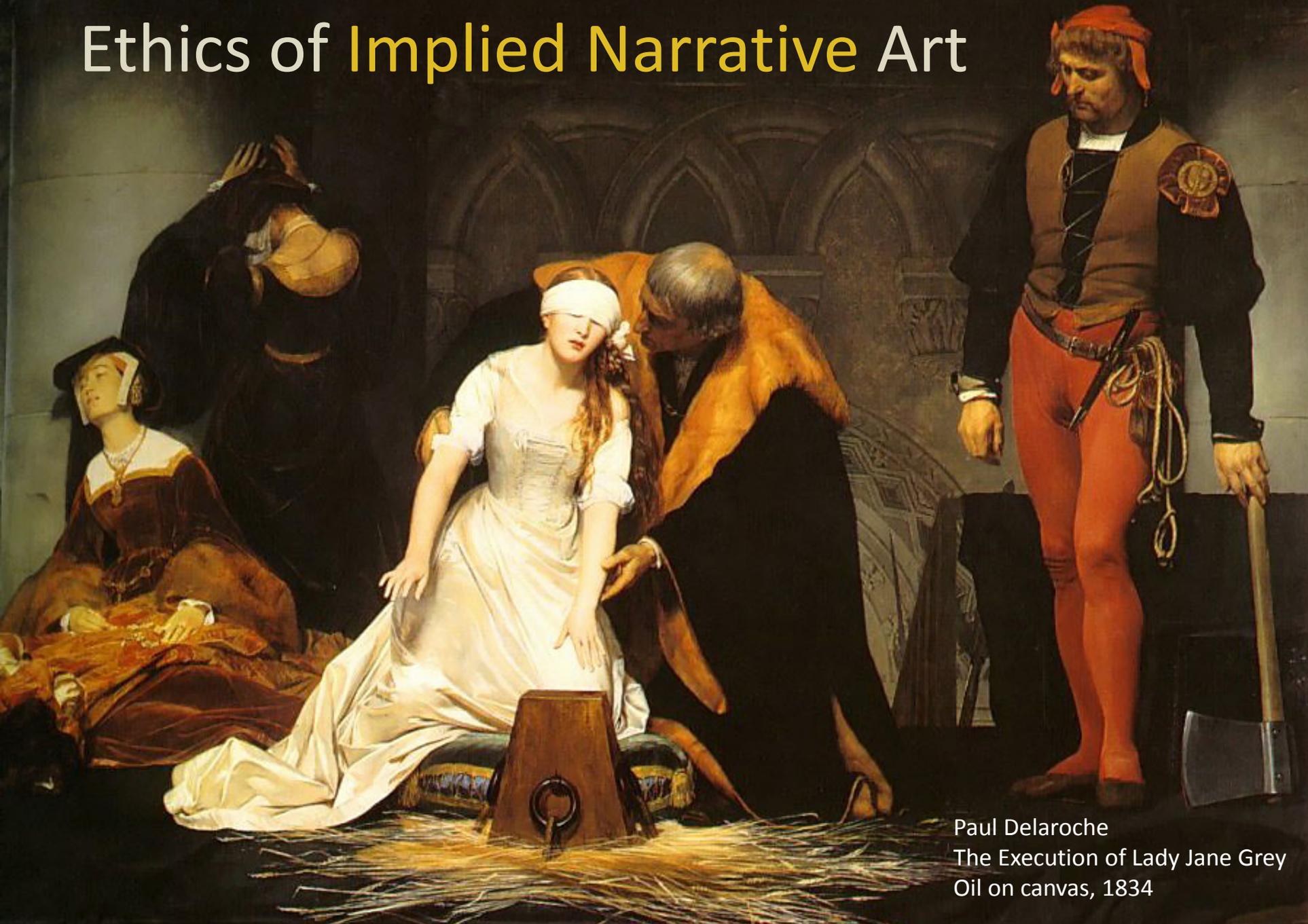
**Question:** If none of these questions seem to be relevant to your concept of narrative then please feel free to just explain how you understand narrative and what it might have to do with your work.

**Caldemeyer Answer:** The question of the 'ethics' of narrative is interesting to me, since I believe that narrative art is a primary form of artistic expression, and needs to justify its ethics no more than the process of survival needs to justify eating. Even the most cursory study of art history will reveal this primacy, and it is only since the rejection of narrative art by modernism, beginning in the late 19th century and continuing in various posturing manifestations until the present day, that these questions have arisen. Clearly, the particular narrative strategies of late 19th century academic art (Bouguereau, Leighton, etc.) that were rejected by the Impressionists, post-Impressionists, and modernists were stale, stilted, and emblematic of extant power structures, and they needed to be rejected. But then modernism proscribed all narrative and tried to characterize it as a lesser endeavor in the artistic hierarchy in order to validate formalist inquiry. They purposefully associated narrative with the art of aristocracy for no other reason than to discredit it, and so to vindicate modernist principles. Narrative's excommunication from cutting edge artistic practice became shrill, defensive, and snobbish - witness the writings of Kandinsky and Greenberg. But narrative art has a primary power that strict formalism lacks, and this has been shown by the general rejection of modernism, and the strict reductive formalism of minimalism which is its logical outcome, in favor of some form of narrative. As humans, we want visual communication on all levels, not just color, or shape, or whatever is the formal element of the day. In order to maintain their hold on what they view as the cutting edge and the monetary resources that come with it, modernism/postmodernism rejects those concerns as the thinking of unenlightened troglodytes. In fact, the reverse is true, and much of the shallow and uninteresting theories of contemporary art are built on a premise that is fundamentally false.

Narrative is still reflexively dismissed by many current academics, without any critical thought, just because they were taught that way (witness Priscilla Roggenkamp). So on some level I reject the notion that narrative art needs to have an ethics to justify it, since it is a primary activity in my view, a natural evolutionary outgrowth of human perception and basic survival psychology. Modernists are superficial decorators by comparison.

We are visual creatures, with about 80% of our sensory perception coming from our eyes, interpreted by our brains in sophisticated leaps that are still not fully understood. Frankl was right - the discovery of meaning in our worlds is central to human existence. Over many thousands of years we have developed our interpretations of the visible world in order to discern threats and opportunities, and these processes allowed for our survival as a species in our hunter/gatherer days. In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt discusses these survival systems of human perception, and they are well known to psychologists. But most of what I know of this subject comes from my own experience, both in the studio and from visiting galleries and museums. Narrative art is built off of our power to interpret visual stimuli via these primary structures, so humans are able to decipher a lot of content from the juxtaposition of meaningful elements, conjoined with the style of depiction, in a work of art. We attach symbolic meaning to various motifs and interpret them into a larger meaningful whole using an evolved version of the same survival system our hunter/gatherer ancestors used. This has become an unconscious act for most of us, and good artists (such as Nerdrum, Tansey, or Risner) use it to develop complex meaning systems.

# Ethics of Implied Narrative Art



Paul Delaroche  
The Execution of Lady Jane Grey  
Oil on canvas, 1834

Are **paintings** that are labeled **narrative art** really narratives and if so what are the **ethical implications** of their association with narrativity?





Meister des Maréchal de Boucicaut  
The decoration of this page from a French  
Book of Hours, ca.1400



Transfiguration  
Raphael  
1520, Oil on wood



Las Meninas  
Diego Velázquez  
1656, painting



Gleaners  
Jean Francois Millet  
1857, Oil on canvas

- What is a narrative?
- How do narratives contribute to ethics?
- Can a painting be narrative?
- If paintings can be narratives then what are the ethical implications?
- If they are not then what other ethical value might they have?

# What is a Narrative?

“In telling stories about what happened, both how it happened and how it is significant are explained. Every story fulfills them to some degree, and narratives fulfill them to a high degree. They do this because they have conclusions.” (Barwell, 49)

# Different views

- Aristotle
- Noel Carroll
- David Vellman
- Gregory Currie

# **Narrative Connection** – Noel Carroll

*What makes a narrative a narrative*

- (1) Represent at least two events and/or states of affairs
- (2) Globally forward-looking
- (3) Unified subject
- (4) Temporal relations between the events represented in an orderly fashion (beginning, middle, & end)
- (5) **The earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events**

# Ethics of Narrative

*“every culture (he) knows of tells stories about exemplary figures as a way of articulating an understanding of the virtues it holds dear.” (Carroll 383)*

- 1) Recognize Causal Connections
- 2) Practice Reasoning
- 3) Be More Deliberate
- 4) Enlist Emotions
- 5) Encourage Empathy

# Recognize Causal Connections

*“Narratives not only connect the past, present, and future; they connect them by showing how the future emerges from the past and the present as a realization of a possibility that belongs to a range of alternative possibilities opened up by earlier events and states of affairs in the narrative.” (Carroll 388)*

*Hypothetically connecting  
means and ends*

*(Kant’s Hypothetical Imperative)*

# Practice Reasoning

*“Narratives exercise our talents for detecting virtue and vice and applying the concepts thereof. In this, they sophisticate our operational skills in navigating our moral universe.” (Carroll 3D 385)*

*Practice makes perfect!*

# Be more Deliberate

*“Orientational narratives serve the purposes of deliberation by reflecting upon the past as a way of continuing the story into the future.” (Carroll 392)*

*Be who you want to be!*

# Enlist Emotions

*“By employing abstraction and concreteness in the ways that encourage emotional responses, the typical narrative can enlist the emotions in the service of ethical understanding, shaping the situation in a way that makes it morally intelligible, that shows us what is at stake, and how to evaluate it.” (Carroll 380)*

*Employing emotion to  
encourage ethical decisions  
instinctively*

# Encourage Empathy

*By “a reflective assessment of the situation to figure out whether the participants have understood it correctly and reacted reasonably; it means, as well, that we must omit that portion that derives from our own personal interest in our own well being.” (Nussbaum)*

*Seeing ourselves in others' stories*

Rembrandt's  
*The Night Watch* comes alive

<http://youtu.be/y1ys2UCROU0>

# Narrative Painting?



Rembrandt, The Night Watch  
Oil on Canvas, 1642

# Is narrative also in the eye of the beholder?

*Does painting fit the criteria? Maybe*

- (1) Represent at least two events and/or states of affairs
- (2) Globally forward-looking
- (3) Unified subject
- (4) Temporal relations between the events represented in an orderly fashion (beginning, middle, end)
- (5) The earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events

# Implied Narrative?

*The “material limits of art confine all its imitations. The artist, out of ever-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment.” (Lessing 16)*

*“images are spatial and texts are temporal.” (Barolsky 1)*

*“As some critics have observed, pictorial artists **imply a narrative** by referring to what has been said in words, but surely such allusions are not the same thing as a narrative in words.” (Barolsky 1)*

# Narrative Connection Depends on

## ***The Subjective Experience***

*Currie and Velleman believe that a narrative connection depends on the perception of the viewer to make the connection. **Imagining multiple events is good enough.***

## ***The Objective Characteristic***

*Aristotle and Carroll believe that the connection is evident in the narrative itself. **Paintings don't cut it.***

*It could be both*

# Ethical Implications

*If Paintings can be Narratives then what?*



The Oath of the Horatii  
Jacques-Louis David  
1785, Oil on canvas

# But what if Paintings are Implied Narratives

*Ethical implications?*



My Father Fallen  
Vincent Desiderio  
2009, Oil on paper



Mourning and Fecundity II  
Vincent Desiderio  
2011, mixed media and oil on  
canvas



*Without Words*  
Vincent Desiderio  
Painting, 1989



I Liberati,  
Vincent Desiderio, 2011



*Bride*  
Vincent Desiderio, 2011



*Couple*  
Vincent Desiderio



*Sink*  
Vincent Desiderio  
2010



Cockaigne, 1993-2003  
Vincent Desiderio  
1955, Oil on canvas

# Implied Narratives encourage Narrative thinking!



Spiegel im Spiegel  
Vincent Desiderio  
2010