

This volume focuses on the relationship between time, narrative and the fixed image. As such, it highlights renewed interest in the temporality of the fixed image, probably one of the most important trends in the formal and semiotic analysis of visual media in the past decade.

The various essays discuss paintings, the illustrated covers of books, comics or graphic novels, photo-stories, postcards, television and video art, as well as aesthetic practices that defy categorization such as Chris Marker's masterpiece *La Jetée*. The range of works and practices examined is reflected in the different theoretical approaches and methods used, with an emphasis on semiology and narratology, and, to a lesser extent, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. The interest of this book, however, does not stem exclusively from the range and scope of the artefacts examined, or the methodological issues that are addressed; its fundamental importance rests in the contributors' readiness to question the differentiation between fixed and moving images which all too often provides a convenient, if not altogether convincing, starting point for image analysis. The originality and value of the contribution that *Time, Narrative and the Fixed Image/Temps, narration et image fixe* makes to the body of theoretical writing on visual media lies in this challenging and comprehensive approach.

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Foreword

The essays in this volume have been selected largely from the papers given at two major international and complementary conferences. These were organised in London (March 1995) and Leuven (April 1999) by Mireille Ribière and Jan Baetens respectively, and focused on the relationship between time, narrative and the fixed image. As such, they highlight renewed interest in the temporality of the fixed image, probably one of the most important trends in the formal and semiotic analysis of visual media in the past decade.

Although the creation of the International Association of Word and Image Studies (IAWIS) gave the study of the fixed image a tremendous impetus, issues related to temporality and narrative received scant attention during the 1980s. The reasons for this neglect are complex and diverse. As narratology and discussions around temporality found fertile ground in cinematography, film studies took the lead in these areas and research by art historians lagged behind. Meanwhile, those issues were less likely to be raised in theoretical writings about photography as a result of the successful attempt to challenge the long-standing view that pictures are essentially at the service of anecdote. More generally speaking, at that time, issues of self-referentiality occupied the theoretical foreground, and the use of narrative in the visual arts – even the very idea of narrative – tended to be treated warily. Furthermore, despite the success of cultural studies as an academic discipline and the widespread, but largely ineffectual, rejection of the distinction between ‘high’ arts and popular arts, research into narrative on the one hand and the fixed image on the other was still suffering from seemingly irrepressible prejudice against the very genres in which narrative and the fixed image most readily meet, i.e. comics, photographic sequences and photo stories.

The reasons why temporality have now come to be regarded as a significant aspect of the fixed image are essentially threefold. First of all,

the fixed image is no longer viewed in isolation since the complex interaction of visual and verbal messages in our modern multimedia environment – of which the Internet is but one component, – has led to the breaking down of artificial barriers between academic disciplines. Secondly, a large part of our visual heritage appears to invalidate the idea that temporal or narrative elements are only occasional or accidental features of images; following the rediscovery of the fascinating work carried out by Muybridge and Marey, for instance, photography can no longer be considered simply as a medium rooted in instantaneity and timelessness. Finally, those so-called ‘minor’ or popular genres in which narrative plays a key role, are increasingly regarded as legitimate fields of theoretical analysis.

In the present collection, the study of the relationship between time, narrative and the fixed image is not confined to any particular genre or medium. The essays discuss paintings (Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Karen Parna, Lut Pil), the illustrated covers of books (Marc Lits), comics or graphic novels (Thierry Groensteen, Mireille Ribière), photo-stories (Benoît Peeters), postcards (Nicole Biagioli), television (François Jost) and video art (Carol Baker, Jan Baetens), as well as aesthetic practices that defy categorization (Charlie Mansfield, Philippe Sohet, Jan Baetens). The range of works and practices examined is reflected in the different theoretical approaches and methods used, with an emphasis on semiology and narratology, and, to a lesser extent, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. But diversity does not mean heterogeneity: the essays included in this book often address common issues. Compared to other areas of research in the visual arts, the theoretical analysis of the still image has taken much longer to challenge the dominance of linguistic models. Without completely relinquishing these models, the papers presented here concentrate on the specific constraints and complexities of particular works or media, allowing distinctive theoretical arguments to emerge.

The value of this book however does not lie exclusively in the range and scope of the artefacts examined or in the methodological issues that are addressed. Its fundamental importance rests in the contributors’ readiness to question the differentiation between fixed and moving images, which all too often provides a convenient, if not altogether convincing, starting point for image analysis. Given that what is shown on the screen does not necessarily involve temporality or even narrative, the moving image shares many significant characteristics with the still

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image. Conversely, the fixed image may be thoroughly imbued with those elements on several levels, with time featuring in the picture itself, as a result of various narrative strategies, and in the very process of viewing. In this context, objects and practices which belong neither to the realm of the still image nor to that of the moving image take on particular importance, hence the interest in Chris Marker's *La Jetée*. Made up almost entirely of images that are at the same time clearly sequential, but not moving, this film exemplifies the acute theoretical sensibility of its author, who gave it the paradoxical subtitle of "photo story". No less than three contributions (Charlie Mansfield, Philippe Sohet, Jan Baetens) scrutinize some of the major aspects of Marker's masterpiece.

Finally, since images cannot be viewed as isolated phenomena, the various contributions involve a wide-ranging discussion of the media in general and prevalent cultural practices. This involves the examination of the technologies used, of the images themselves and of the institutional frameworks that allow them to be distributed and circulated in society, as well as the multifarious ways in which they may be perceived.

The originality and value of the contribution that *Time, Narrative and the Fixed Image* seeks to make to the body of theoretical writing on visual media lies in this challenging, yet comprehensive approach.