Localized Stories and Regional Tales: Imagery, Identity, and Cultural Negotiation in Ulúa Visual Narratives

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The construction and expression of cultural identity is a fundamental part of the human experience, and the analysis of this process is one of the most complex issues tackled by archaeologists. Much of this complexity stems from the fact that the identities that dominate academic discourse are generally rooted in etic categories. Although this is understandable given the nature of archaeological remains, it creates homogenized views of the past that obscure attested variations. A more nuanced approach can be based on cultural narratives, which are frequently encoded in visual media and which reflect identities that would have been salient in the lives of their creators. The structure and composition of such image-based texts were used to construct and reflect cultural identities that represent distinct regional identities within a broader cultural sphere. This paper considers these issues and presents a preliminary account of a new textuality-based approach that characterizes a particular kind of structuring of graphic signs and texts as visual narration. Taking the imagery of Honduras’ Ulúa Valley as our case study, it considers how this narrative imagery transmits information concerning social and cultural affiliations and facilitates the negotiation of identities within and among groups. Although not communicative in the same way as linguistic systems, such visual texts can nonetheless serve as a basic mode of information.
Toward a textual approach to narration

Orthodox approaches to visual narration grasp the semantic distinctiveness of narrative units but assume a linear patterning that parallels the discursive structure underlying oral and written linguistic productions. McCabe traces this focus to Aristotle’s observation that narratives consist of

... [a] beginning [of a narrative] is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end, that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it.  

The linguistic dimension of this arrangement in contemporary literate contexts – including academia – has perpetuated the belief that the information conveyed through visual media is necessarily different from or simpler than the content that can be conveyed by speech and written language. This has led some to interpret visual elements in linguistic terminology (e.g. verb, noun, etc.) and to seek a linguistically-inspired interpretive frame in which visual phrases are at least partially shaped by the particularities of their supposed spoken counterparts. These views are predicated on the belief that narration is a necessarily linguistic production. They implicitly differentiate the semantic underpinnings of narration from the semiotic – and purportedly less semantic – nature of descriptive and depictive processes in a manner evocative of the distinction described by Hamon. Though such approaches are potentially appropriate for studies of comics and other visual creations modeled on linguistic templates, they create an overly narrow view of narration that fails to consider its broader communicative function.

An alternative perspective is possible if narrative is reconceptualized as a communicative mode independent of linguistic media. In the theory presented here, narratives are defined as composite textual units whose constituents are related via processes of textuality and

1 McCabe 1991, xi.
2 Aristotle 1920, 40.
4 Hamon 2004, 320.
semantically co-dependent within the narrative context; their meaning is seen as rooted in the interpretive activities of recipients responsible for recognizing and assembling the necessary semantic structure. By reconceptualizing narratives as singular semantic units whose structures convey complex meanings, this definition removes the linguistic biases inherent in definitions that emphasize sequential arrangements of events or actions and assume a language-based structure for all narrative units. It focuses instead on the processes of meaning formation that license complex meanings and thus allows for the incorporation of non-linguistic narrative forms. The definition of narratives as textual structures is key, since it allows the principles of narration to be more easily identified in non-linguistic media while also maintaining their recognizability in language-based constructions. The application of this definition to non-linguistic media facilitates a more robust view of the ways in which narration can function within human societies.

**Textual structure and narrative**

It is necessary to begin by defining *text*, since the identification of narratives depends on the ability to recognize other kinds of textual units. Many definitions have been proposed, but the ones most useful here are Hanks’ relatively straightforward assertion that a text is “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users” and Gracia’s somewhat more complex view of text as “a group of entities, used as signs, which are selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain context to convey some specific meaning to an audience.” Visual texts are not necessarily linguistically communicative in the same way as literary constructions or oral discourses, but they are indicative of symbolic systems and representational modes that are capable of conveying spe-

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5 Hanks 1989, 95.
specific information about ideas and experiences to a particular audience.\textsuperscript{7} They reflect a visual system comprehensible by individuals situated in the proper cultural milieu and they contain a set of symbols that work together to create semantically meaningful combinations.

The semantic interdependence of signs within texts is made explicit by Greimas’ identification of isotopy as a fundamental part of the textual unit. This concept is based on the notion of classemes, which can be simply defined as contextual semes that reflect the fact that “the context … functions as a system of compatibilities and incompatibilities between the semic figures which it agrees to join or not”\textsuperscript{8}. For Greimas, messages or sequences of discourse – i.e. texts – can be isotopes “only if they possess one or several classemes in common”\textsuperscript{9}. Isotopy thus “allows the semantic concatenation of utterances”\textsuperscript{10}. It indicates that “entire texts are located at a more homogenous semantic level” and shows how “the global signified of a signifying ensemble … can be interpreted as a structural reality”\textsuperscript{11}.

These structural underpinnings reveal the fundamental importance of textuality, which Hanks describes as the “quality of coherence or connectivity that characterizes text” and thus the “fit between sign form and some larger context that determines its ultimate coherence”\textsuperscript{12}. Fit is primary in this definition, since the nature of a specified arrangement of signs within a text indicates the existence of a system that licenses particular sign combinations and marks them as semantically significant. Textuality cannot, therefore, be viewed as only a byproduct of the use of symbolic objects but instead must be seen as “an instrument, a product, and a mode of social action … the topic cannot be confined to a separate linguistic sector in the division

\textsuperscript{7} Preucel 2006, 5; see also Hudson 2013, Hudson – Henderson 2015, and Hudson – Milisauskas 2015.
\textsuperscript{8} Greimas 1983, 58–59.
\textsuperscript{9} Greimas 1983, 59.
\textsuperscript{10} Greimas 1983, 60.
\textsuperscript{11} Greimas 1983, 59.
\textsuperscript{12} Hanks 1989, 96, emphasis added.
of anthropological labor.”\textsuperscript{13} It reflects “habitual ways of understanding … what we might call a communicative habitus”\textsuperscript{14}; consequently, its presence indicates a broader structuring system – linguistic or cultural – that licenses its form and facilitates its interpretation.

These features of text – including (i) the existence of a specified configuration or arrangement of constituent elements intended to convey a particular meaning, (ii) a necessarily contextualized semantics that becomes apparent only when the constituents are viewed holistically as part of a system of mutual interdependence, and (iii) a textuality indicative of structuring principles that guide textual formation – occur in both narrative and non-narrative textual structures. Their generality indicates that narratives represent a kind of textual unit and that narration is a consequence of a particular variety of textual formation process. They also indicate that all texts, narrative or otherwise, function as semantic loci capable of conveying complex information through the organizational patterns of their constituents. They thus represent a structured system of meaning generation accessible to interpreters with the necessary linguistic and/or socio-cultural knowledge. This generative nature – reflected in the structural semantic model developed by Greimas\textsuperscript{15} – emphasizes “relations at the expense of elements, since only the differences … between elements constitute a structure”\textsuperscript{16}. Consequently, it reflects the semiotic substrate of socio-cultural productions through which “signification presupposes the existence of the relationship: it is the appearance of the relationship between the terms that is the condition necessary for signification”\textsuperscript{17}.

**Non-narrative vs. narrative textualities**

Non-narrative textuality has a quality of coherence or connectivity characterized by the proximity or association – spatial or otherwise

\textsuperscript{13} Hanks 1989, 103.
\textsuperscript{14} Hanks 1989, 112.
\textsuperscript{16} Nöth 1995, 317.
\textsuperscript{17} Greimas 1983, 19.
of its constituent elements (Fig. 1). It is thus also eponymously described here as associative textuality, and the proximal relationship of the elements it structures is key. The “fit between sign form and some larger context that determines its ultimate coherence” described by Hanks\(^{18}\) is rooted in this proximity and thus in the corresponding conceptual associations that derive from such placement. The proximal placement of constituents within a composition governed by associative textuality is responsible for the generation of the textual semantics, and this positioning is all that is required to license the meaning of the compositional whole. This communicative habitus requires only that the interpreter knows the significance(s) of the constituents and recognizes their association, since the generative mechanisms underlying texts with associative textuality produce a compound semantics in which the meaning(s) of each constituent combine with the meaning(s) of the others as a collective whole to produce a compound significance analogous to the lexical formation processes responsible for compound nominals.

![Diagram of Associative Textuality](image)

**Fig. 1:** The application of associative textuality and the creation of a non-narrative associative text (image by K. Hudson).

It is important to note that signs are the most frequent constituent elements in compositions formed by associative textuality. Signs are defined here in the Peircean sense as “anything which is related to a Second thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a Third thing, its Interpretant, into relation to the same Object”\(^{19}\). They generate significances by relating an object and a representation in a manner recognized by some community of interpreters. These

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\(^{18}\) Hanks 1989, 96.

\(^{19}\) Peirce 1960, 51.
significances are a part of the sign itself and come from the linkage between a particular significance and a particular signifier; they exist and can be correctly interpreted independently (i.e. in contexts where the sign occurs alone) and in any textual unit in which they occur. The understanding of a sign in the context of associative textuality is thus rooted in the sign itself. Its inherent meaning can be further specified or expanded by the textual combinatorics that structure its association with other sign constituents, but the individual meanings of signs form the foundational semantic level of descriptive textual units. More specified meanings occur when these individual significances are combined to produce compound signs composed of linked but recognizably individual parts, and the overall significance of a text with associative textuality serves as the most elaborated of these compound structures.

This process is equally applicable to both linguistic and non-linguistic compositions. The graphic signs that occur in visual texts with associative textuality are analogous to the nominals that combine to form compound lexical items and to the words whose meanings combine in the context of short utterances such as adjective phrases (e.g. unhappy wet cat). Although space constraints require us to leave aside both the theoretical arguments concerning the level at which signs – linguistic or otherwise – should be reconceptualized as texts and the variability associated with relative levels of syntactic flexibility cross-linguistically, it is apparent that certain kinds of combinatorial processes are rooted in the proximity of their constituents and thus in a conceptual association of the significance(s) of these constituent elements that follows from that proximity. In spoken linguistic constructions, this association comes from the close temporal proximity of the relevant lexical items and is largely independent of syntax. Consequently, a recipient (i.e. reader or hearer) is able to extract the same meaning from all of the following sequences, even though some of them would be recognized as ungrammatical.

(i) unhappy - wet - cat  (iv) wet - cat - unhappy
(ii) unhappy - cat - wet  (v) cat - unhappy - wet
(iii) wet - unhappy - cat  (vi) cat - wet - unhappy
In graphic (i.e. non-linguistic and visual) constructions, the same associative process applies. The meaning(s) of graphic elements that are spatially associated within a recognizably demarcated space are combined to produce the meaning of the textual unit; their spatial association rather than the particularities of their placement is responsible for this semantic combination process (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: An illustration of the flexibility of constituents within an associative text meaning "no smoking on the airplane" (image by K. Hudson).
The implication, for both linguistic and non-linguistic textual units, is that associative textuality produces texts with a relatively flexible nature. Their meanings are rooted in the compounding of a set of constituents within a defined conceptual or graphic space and thus satisfy the requirement that textuality-based constructions reflect a particular “quality of coherence or connectivity that characterizes text” and “fit between sign form and some larger context that determines its ultimate coherence.” The associative nature of this coherence is key, since the conceptual semantic associations underlying such structuring reflect a “habitual ways of understanding” recognized by recipients within a particular sociocultural context. The ordering of the elements, like the identity of these constituents, is secondary to their association within the recognized textual space. The overall meaning comes from the compounding of the significance(s) of elements positioned within this space and, while such processes of meaning generation are capable of yielding broader and/or more refined significances, they are unable to structure the interpretive process in the manner required by narrativity.

A different kind of textuality licenses narrative texts. The processes of meaning generation that underlie narratives are structured in a manner intended to produce a single overarching significance that results from the ordered navigation of the constituent elements and their associated meanings; consequently, meaning at the level of the narrative textual unit comes from the *fusion* of the meanings of the constituents rather than from processes of semantic compounding. This distinction is crucial and illustrates a defining characteristic of narrative structures: they represent sequences of non-randomly related events or informational units that function together to convey a singular message. Such semantic singularity is only possible if the significance of the whole is privileged over the significances of the parts, and such privileging can only occur if the constituent meanings

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20 Hanks 1989, 96.
21 Hanks 1989, 112.
22 See e.g. Abbott 2008; Cohan and Shires 1988; Toolan 2001.
are redefined as interdependent rather than independent (at least in the narrative context).

Narratives represent an instantiation of a text-generation process that is described here and elsewhere as (morpho)syntactic textuality.\(^{23}\) This kind of textuality is rooted in the *structured* combination of elements intended to produce a new and singular whole; it thus possesses a quality of coherence or connectivity characterized by the conceptual fusion of its constituent elements in a manner that produces a new and generally unchangeable unit of signification. The structured combination of elements is key, as is the fact that the resulting text represents a new and distinct semantic unit whose significance comes from the interpretive merging of its constituent elements in the way specified by the textual frame. The morphosyntactic dimension of this kind of textuality thus refines the concept so that the ways in which various dimensions of a text are patterned and relate to each other can be considered. Orthodox approaches limit texts to a single plane and view them as static entities that exist at the level of the sign due to their focus on signs and their contexts; they do not consider the ways in which signs may be composed or how smaller texts can combine to create larger textual units. They also fail to consider the rules that govern the creation and interpretation of texts and thus imply contextual significance but structural randomness. A morphosyntactic perspective considers these issues at both the level of the text and the level of the constituent motif; it also enables an evaluation of the potentially pluralistic ways in which textual units are formed and facilitates the development of an underlying grammar that relates to particular kinds of textuality. Consequently, it recasts textuality as a dynamic process that is intimately related to the cultural grammar (i.e. the governing principles of cultural knowledge and norms) that decodes it.

In narrative instantiations of morphosyntactic textuality, the signs functioning as input are first arranged into constituent texts. Many of these contain multiple signs organized according to the structural

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\(^{23}\) See Hudson 2013; Hudson – Milisauskas 2015.
principles appropriate for the relevant kind of textual unit, but it is also possible for these newly formed constituents to include only one sign that functions as a kind of self-referential text. These constituent sub-texts are then arranged according to a set of structuring principles to form the broader text that serves as the output of the morphosyntactic textuality; the result is a composite poly-textual unit composed of multiple constituent texts that together create a single textual unit representing a single semantic whole (Fig. 4). Non-narrative instantiations follow the same basic process but apply it only once (Fig. 3). In these cases, the input signs are arranged into a text whose structure is governed by the organizational principles appropriate for the relevant kind of textual unit, but no additional combinatorial processes apply; the result is a monotextual unit made up only of its constituent signs and representing a single semantic entity.

Fig. 3: The application of morphosyntactic textuality and the creation of a monotextual (i.e. non-narrative) unit (image by K. Hudson).

Fig. 4: The application of morphosyntactic textuality and the creation of a polytextual (i.e. narrative) unit. Note that CS is used to designate “constituent sign” (image by K. Hudson).
In both cases, the constituents (whether signs or sub-texts) and their interpretation are arranged according to a structure that cannot be altered without causing the text to be transformed into a different text that aligns with the altered structure. Similarly, constituents cannot be added or deleted without altering the meaning of the text and, consequently, creating a new and different textual unit. The “fit between sign form and some larger context that determines its ultimate coherence” described by Hanks\(^{24}\) is based on the structure that underlies a narrative text, since this structure specifies how the constituent elements are combined and form the meaning of the resulting textual unit. The textual semantics come from the specified ordering of the constituents; their mere presence is insufficient. The requisite communicative habitus requires the interpreter to know the significance(s) of the constituents and recognize the structure that guides their combination, since the generative mechanisms underlying texts with morphosyntactic textuality produce a fused semantics in which the meaning(s) of the constituents merge to produce a conceptual intertwining analogous to the morphological and syntactic processes that license word formation and sentence construction.

It is important to note that the semantic fusion and co-referentiality between constituent texts in narratives is not the same as the “interfusion” that defines intertextual relationships.\(^{25}\) In intertextuality, the relationships between texts are rooted in the “[the] transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another”\(^{26}\) and thus in “the fact that a specific text bears meaning in a culture because it often alludes (in part or in whole) to already existing texts”\(^{27}\). Emphasis is thus placed on the fact that at least some texts must be understood “not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by

\(^{24}\) Hanks 1989, 96.

\(^{25}\) Barry 2010, 1001.

\(^{26}\) Kristeva 1984, 59–60.

the repetition and transformation of other textual structures”\textsuperscript{28}. Signification is viewed as “the result of multiple origins or drives and hence it does not produce a simple, uniform meaning”\textsuperscript{29}; consequently, the connectivity between texts is externally generated in a manner that causes the significances of this connection to extend beyond the textual boundaries to create a plural semantics. In narrative texts, however – which are typified by morphosyntactic textuality – the connections between constituent textual units are internally generated and structured by the system licensed by the variety of morphosyntactic textuality relevant for the textual form. Multiple structuring systems necessarily exist and are reflective of the range of possible textual varieties, but in all cases the significance of each constituent textual unit is comprehensible within a particular context only insofar as it is structurally considered in relation to the other constituent units and viewed as part of a single overarching significance.

This quality of semantic coherence and singularity suggests that narratives represent a kind of integral sign, which Nöth equates with the supersign posited by information theoretical semiotics.\textsuperscript{30} This kind of text “is not discrete and does not break down into signs” but rather is itself a sign that “represents a whole and is segmented not into separate signs but into distinctive features”\textsuperscript{31}. Such signs are generated by a combinatorial process through which the constituent elements are merged to form a single cohesive unit\textsuperscript{32} and, within the resulting integral sign that constitutes the text, “all the separate signs … are reduced in the text to the level of this sign”\textsuperscript{33}. The cohesion that licenses the formation of an integral sign also allows for the “interlevel relations” involved in interpretation that permit the “reduction of parts of a synthesized text to a sign”\textsuperscript{34}. Such relations

\begin{itemize}
\item 28 Alfaro 1996, 268.
\item 29 McAfee 2004, 26.
\item 30 Nöth 1995, 333.
\item 31 Lotman et al. 2013 [1973], 58.
\item 32 Uspenskij et al. 1973, 6.
\item 33 Lotman 1970, 22.
\item 34 Lotman et al. 2013 [1973], 75.
\end{itemize}
make it clear that structured coherence within and between interpretive levels is prerequisite for semantic interpretation, since the elements of a text are “connected with one another not only syntagmatically but in a complex interrelationship on all levels”35.

Narratives can thus be defined as composite textual units made up of constituents representing distinct texts whose meanings have been merged via morphosyntactic processes, broadly defined. This aligns with Todorov’s observation that

[t]he simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have facts in common.36

It reflects the observation that narratives are characterized not by the nature of their constituents – which can represent events or other kinds of semantic loci – but rather by the quality of co-referentiality that links these constituents together to form a semantic unit that is comprehensible only when these constituents are considered in relation to each other. Narratives are thus polytextual units but singular semantic entities; texts function as their constituents, since they are capable of representing the required level of semantic complexity, and their common facts are the semantics of the narratives of which they are a part. This common semantics allows narratives to function as integral signs, since they represent the end result of combinatorial process through which the semantics of constituent signs are merged into a single cohesive unit.

Narration in the visual plane

The reconceptualization of narratives as composite polytextual units representing integral signs with a singular semantic core and morphosyntactic textuality rather than as discursive or literary processes differentiates narratives from the media – linguistic or non-linguistic – used to convey them. Consequently, it also facilitates their identifi-

35 Semenenko 2012, 80.
36 Todorov 1977, 233.
cation in visual media by facilitating recognition of the kind of combinatorics indicative of a narrative construction. This focus on the structured interplay of constituent components – including, arguably, the material on which the narrative occurs – aligns generally with Bateman and Wildfeuer’s claim that “[d]ifferent semiotic modes will in general have their discourse semantics filled in differently with … differing repertoires of discourse relations,” though the compositional constructions avoided in their analysis are treated here as necessary markers of narrative construction. The emphasis on constituent actions (i.e. verb-based events) in Groensteen 2007, Quilter 2010, and others is supplanted here by a focus on the processes of meaning generation that allow the kind of semantic merger necessary for narrative formation. These processes suggest that narratives are distinct in the mechanisms responsible for their semantics rather than in the nature of their meaning (i.e. semantic vs. semiotic) or their ability to convey complex information; consequently, their analysis in visual media should be rooted in the consideration of these semantically generative processes.

The analysis of visual narratives must therefore begin with the identification of integral signs. This requires comprehensive consideration of the imagery system(s) in which such signs occur, since it is necessary to differentiate integral signs – which function as singular semantic units – from those formed through processes of semantic compounding. In the absence of a language-based interpretation, such classification depends on an analysis of the structural underpinnings of the sign unit and on the mechanisms through which the significances of the constituent elements have been combined. Since integral signs are formed through structured combinatorial processes in which constituent elements merge to form a single cohesive unit, it follows that visual instantiations of narrative signs – that is, as representations of integral signs – reflect a degree of graphic melding.
indicative of a corresponding semantic merger. Their constituent elements (i.e. constituent texts) – though recognizable to individuals with knowledge of the relevant symbolic system – are intertwined by the merging of their semantics in a manner that precludes interchangeability or modification.

The identification of narrative (i.e. integral) signs is thus rooted in recognition of the distinct ways in which the morphosyntactic textuality that defines them can be visually manifested rather than in the identification of a language-like patterning. Visual narratives are typified by graphic mergers in which constituent boundaries become less defined, and constituent interchangability is not feasible without altering the significance(s) of the sign itself. This pattern of graphic merging incorporates constituents whose components are themselves structured in a fixed manner, and reflects the fact that narratives are composite texts functioning as singular sign units whose constituent texts are structurally related and semantically co-dependent within the narrative context. These features differentiate visual narratives from non-narrative (i.e. monotextual) texts with morphosyntactic textuality, which possess the same kind of immutable constituent structure and semantic fusion but are composed of sign-based constituents rather than sub-text. They also separate visual narratives from non-narrative signs with associative textuality, which lack all of these features and are instead typified by marked spatial association and constituent combinations in which each element retains a recognizable degree of graphic – and, by implication, semantic – independence.

This approach requires careful consideration of the medium through which a narrative is conveyed, since different media allow for different manifestations of the features that characterize narrative forms. Narratives that can be conveyed through a linguistic medium – either verbal or written – are necessarily distinct from those possible in other media, since the structural possibilities allowed by language are distinct. When narratives are visualized and conveyed through material culture, the particularities of material media shape the ways in which the requisite structural relationships are formed.
within the parameters set by the sociocultural context in which they occur. This requires consideration of the relevant mode(s) as defined by Kress, who observes that “what counts as a mode is a matter for a community and its social-representational needs”\textsuperscript{40}. Bateman and Wildfeuer offer further contextualization by noting that

\[ \text{[s]emantic modes ... may grow whenever a community of users puts work into their use and the material employed is sufficiently manipulable to show the traces necessary for revealing that 'choices' between semiotically-charged alternatives have been made.} \textsuperscript{41} \]

Narrators – defined here as creators of narrative units – thus shape the forms of their narratives through their selection of media. Analyses of visual narratives must therefore begin with a consideration of the medium and an examination of the kinds of texts permitted by it. This allows for the avoidance of the kind of linguistic imperialism described by Bateman and Wildfeuer\textsuperscript{42} and makes it possible to identify narrative forms outside of the linguistic mode.

**Visual Narration in Ulúa Ceramic Imagery**

The Ulúa cultural sphere – which encompasses a significant portion of western and central Honduras as well as parts of El Salvador – formed a major part of the southeastern frontier of Mesoamerica (Fig. 5). The region is generally viewed as peripheral to the better-known civilizations to the north and west, but archaeological evidence indicates that its inhabitants were interacting with their neighbors. The region’s cultural composition and the particularities of its relationships with neighboring societies have been extensively considered,\textsuperscript{43} but considerations of inter-regional and intra-cultural interactions are often described in terms of economic transactions or purported patterns of artistic mimicry. An alternative perspective can

\textsuperscript{40} Kress 2010, 87.
\textsuperscript{41} Bateman – Wildfeuer 2014, 182.
\textsuperscript{42} Bateman – Wildfeuer 2014, 181.
be developed if Ulúa visual imagery is considered as reflective of social processes and, in particular, the processes of cultural negotiation involved in identity formation and maintenance. This perspective is predicated on the recognition of visual narration within the Ulúa corpus and on the definition of narratives as composite textual units capable of transmitting complex information to those with knowledge of the necessary interpretive paradigms. Adherence to – or deviation from – these paradigms can convey considerable information about identity and cultural affiliation in particular interpretive contexts.

Fig. 5: A map illustrating the location of the Ulúa Valley (image courtesy of John S. Henderson).

Most Ulúa imagery occurs on painted ceramic vessels, including the polychrome ceramics considered here. Though it was costly – in the sense that considerable labor and skill were required for its production – and widely exported, Ulúa polychrome was not a luxury ware used only by the wealthy. Like other painted serving vessels, these ceramics seem to have been in use in households of all socio-economic levels, at least in the lower Ulúa valley. Distinctive spatial patterning in the distributions of designs painted on special-occasion serving vessels dating to the Classic period (ca. AD 400–850) suggests that this aspect of ceramic design may correlate with regional
and community identity. Most decoration consists of geometric designs or stylized representations of animals and birds, though elaborate representational designs with complex combinations of elements occur on a subset of Ulúa polychrome pottery. All of these styles likely reflect aspects of social and cultural identity. Many of the more elaborate Ulúa polychrome designs are textual, and hence highly structured, though comparative analyses of imagery from multiple sites in the Ulúa cultural sphere indicate that the majority are built on associative textuality and thus on sets of interchangeable constituents inserted into standardized frames. However, some textual subsets in the Ulúa corpus – including the crossed figures discussed here – show no evidence of constituent interchangability and instead represent the graphic fusion of elements that can occur independently elsewhere in the Ulúa corpus. These examples, and their contrasts with the non-narrative cases, constitute visual narration. These narrative compositions, I suggest, reflect a broader regional Ulúa identity that in some social contexts subsumes the more localized social identities signaled by associative texts and their interchangeable elements.

**Crossed Figures as Narrative Units**

The crossed figures found on many Ulúa vessels (Fig. 6) provide an example of an Ulúa visual narrative. These compositions consist of two anthropomorphic figures that face one another in a distinctive posture in which their torsos are upright, but their lower limbs are angled towards one another so that their legs cross. Their accessories – including headdresses, waistbands, and ear spools – are matched, but one figure is painted red while the other is orange. A black bar or scepter often appears between the figures, which are always articulated in the region of the torso. These figures are usually labeled “dancing figures”, but they are most often interpreted as engaged in sexual intercourse\(^44\) or in some kind of phallic ritual\(^45\). These

\(^{44}\) Lehmann 1910, 740; Yde 1938, 80; Stone 1957, 27; Nielsen – Brady 2006, 208.

\(^{45}\) Strong – Kidder – Paul 1938, 51.
interpretations are entirely unconvincing, however, and the specific meaning of the composition remains uncertain, though it may represent two sides of a single individual (see Hudson – Henderson In Press). What is clear is that the physical connection between the two figures is made in a region that is a common locus of meaning in Ulúa compositions. The universality of this torso-based articulation among crossed figures, combined with the structural regularity and fixity of the constituent elements across crossed figure compositions, indicates the existence of a visual narrative.

Fig. 6: Examples of crossed figure narrative compositions (illustrations by K. Hudson).

Two examples of crossed figures will be considered here as illustrations of this narrativity. The first of these, identified here as PM-18, occurs on flat-bottomed cylinder with slightly flaring walls from the site of Santa Rita (Fig. 7).

The imagery on this vessel contains one crossed figure composition, which is repeated in identical form three times on the cylinder’s exterior surface. This text is rooted in the ordered arrangement of its input signs, which are organized into three constituent texts: (i) the red figure located on the left-hand side of the composition, (ii) the orange figure located on the right-hand side, and (iii) the connecting
Fig. 7: An illustration of PM-18, a crossed figure narrative from the site of Santa Rita (illustration by K. Hudson).

element that occurs between them. The red and orange figures are each composed of constituent signs – including a headdress, facial features, forehead markings, earspool, upper body position, waistcloth, leg position, leg embellishment, and foot form – that combine in a specified manner. It is arguable that the color associated with the
body of each figure (i.e. red or orange) represents an additional constituent sign, since different media allow for different constituent features and color is one variable allowed by painting. A schematic representation of these text formation processes is given in Figures 8 and 9.

Fig. 8: A representation of the text formation responsible for the generation of the red figure in PM-18 (illustration by K. Hudson).

Fig. 9: A representation of the text formation responsible for the generation of the orange figure in PM-18 (illustration by K. Hudson).
The connecting element is similarly formed through the combination of three constituent signs: (i) a lower black bar, (ii) an upper black bar, and (iii) a ring-shaped element that connects them. It is arguable that this text is, in fact, composed of only two signs—a black bar and a ring-shaped element that is superimposed on top of it—but the spatial separation of the two bar elements indicates that three constituent signs are more likely. A representation of these text formation processes is given in Figure 10.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 10:** A representation of the text formation responsible for the generation of the central connecting element in PM-18 (illustration by K. Hudson).

In all three cases, alterations to the identity of these constituent signs or to the structure of their arrangement would change the significance of the resulting figure and thus generate a different narrative unit. Their constituent signs are combined in a structured manner, but the significance of these signs—and thus their graphic forms—are not fused in the manner typical of narratives. They thus represent monotextual units with morphosyntactic textuality that do not themselves possess narrativity but can be arranged to form a broader polytextual narrative unit.

The three constituent sub-texts of PM-18 are arranged, via morphosyntactic textuality, according to the structuring principles that underlie crossed figure formation. This creates a composite polytextual unit composed of multiple constituent texts that together create a distinct textual unit representing a single semantic whole (i.e. the significance of the crossed figures). The morphosyntactic textuality that dictates their positioning also specifies which kinds of constituent texts can fill particular slots within the structural frame of a
crossed figure narrative, thus guiding the formation of the narrative and the fusion of its constituent texts (Fig. 11).

It is important to note that the structural frame operates simultaneously at multiple levels within a narrative construction. At the level of the sub-text, it specifies how signs can be combined within the constituent texts to form the necessary constituents. At the broader level of the narrative, however, it arranges these constituents according to the requisite structure and cues the particularities of their graphic merger, since such graphic melding is not attributable to the whim of the artist(s) but rather is fixed by the requirements of the textual frame within which it occurs. This generates the integral sign that functions as the narrative unit and guides the interpretive process in a manner that facilitated a successful “reading”. Viewers with the necessary cultural knowledge could recognize the frame as a salient construction and be aware of how it manipulates its constituent parts, even as the combination of parts marks them as completely subsumed within a new and singular meaning.

The graphic fusion that results from the successful operation of these processes is therefore fundamental, since it provides the interpreter with the first indication that (s)he is dealing with a narrative unit. The form of the integral sign that instantiates a particular narrative is necessarily distinct, since different kinds of narratives make
use of different kinds of morphosyntactic textuality and thus require different kinds of mergers involving distinct arrays of constituents. Recognition of this distinctiveness requires concurrent recognition of the narrative as a singular entity rather than as a combination of multiple independent elements; consequently, narrative sign forms will indicate a particular overarching meaning in a way parallel to the signified-signifier pairings typical of more basic categories of signs. This identification is predicated on the narrator’s successful use of morphosyntactic textuality to create a polytextual entity, and it requires knowledge of the cultural system responsible for attributing meaning to the created sign form since this knowledge allows for the initial recognition of a narrative integral sign as distinct and semantically salient. Successful interpretation thus follows from the successful merger – graphically and semantically – of the constituent elements in a way that aligns with the expectations of the intended audience.

The second example considered here, PM-37, consists of a crossed figure composition that occurs on another flat-bottomed cylinder with slightly flaring walls from the site of Los Naranjos (Fig. 12).

This text is strikingly similar to the one in PM-18. It is based on the arrangement of input signs into three constituent texts: (i) the orange figure located on the left-hand side of the composition, (ii) the red figure located on the right-hand side, and (iii) the connecting element that occurs between their faces. The figures consist of the same suite of constituent signs found in PM-18 – including a headdress, facial features, forehead markings, earspool, upper body position, waistcloth, leg position, leg embellishment, and foot form – that combine to create the monotextual units representing the figural forms. The use of color (i.e. red or orange) is once again likely to represent an additional constituent sign, since it represents a variable that can be manipulated within the medium of painting, but the variability in its positioning (i.e. left-side vs. right-side) suggests that it may be a secondary component. A representation of these text formation processes is given in Figures 13 and 14.
Fig. 12: An illustration of PM-37, a crossed figure narrative from the site of Los Naranjos (illustration by K. Hudson).
The connecting element consists of only a single element — a black bar — positioned between the faces of the two figures. Although many connecting elements in crossed figure narratives consist of monotextual units composed of two or more constituent signs, it is possible for them to contain only one element. In these cases, the sign functions as a kind of self-referential text within the narrative context. Since narratives are, by the definition developed here, polytextual units, it follows that their constituent elements must be texts. Single signs such as the center bar found in PM-37, which cannot be
linked to other constituent texts due to the rigidity of the relevant narrative frame, can therefore be conceptualized as monotextual units. In these cases, the sign form combines with its textual position to form a text in which the graphic sign and a particular feature of spatial placement serve as the constituents. A representation of this text formation processes is given in Figure 15.

This textual formation process, like the ones that generate the orange and red figures, is rooted in the structured arrangement of signs to create the kinds of monotextual units required by a specific kind of narrative. Changes to the constituent sign or the details of its placement would change the identity of the resulting text and thus alter the kind of narrative that could be created with them, since the morphosyntactic textuality of narratives requires the combination of particular kinds of textual constituents in a particular order.

The three constituent sub-texts of PM-37 are arranged via morphosyntactic textuality to create a composite poly-textual unit representing a single semantic whole (i.e. the overarching significance of the crossed figures). Since the textuality that dictates their appropriateness for and placement within the narrative frame is the same as that governing the crossed figure composition in PM-18, it follows that the significance of these two units is the same and thus that they are two representations of the same narrative. This identification is based on the structure specified by the morphosyntactic textuality, which arranges the constituent sub-texts in a manner that indicates the presence of a particular kind of narrative to interpreters with the
necessary cultural knowledge. This process, as it occurs in PM-37, is illustrated in Figure 16.

In both cases, the attested semantic coherence – indicated by the graphic fusion of the constituent texts – reflects the narrativity of crossed figures by indicating that they function as integral signs in which the overall significance of the narrative depends upon the coreferentiality of the significances of these constituents. Crossed figures cannot be easily broken down into signs but rather represent “a whole … segmented not into separate signs but into distinctive features” in the manner described by Lotman et al. The constituent texts (i.e. the red figure, the orange figure, and the connecting element) are graphically merged into a new unit – the narrative – in a manner indicative of a corresponding level of conceptual and semantic conflation. This graphic melding is key, since it serves as the visual representation of the kinds of conceptual combination that typifies narrative constructions and allows for the formation of a new and semantically singular unit. The resulting text functions as an integral sign in which “all the separate signs [constituents, also constituent

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46 Lotman et al. 2013 [1973], 58.
texts] … are reduced in the text to the level of this sign”.\(^{47}\) The structured coherence within and between interpretive levels is thus prerequisite for interpretation, since the elements of a text are “connected with one another not only syntagmatically but in a complex interrelationship on all levels”.\(^{48}\)

**Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

Data on the distribution of Ulúa design elements and their combinations is not yet full enough to specify precisely all the kinds of identities they reflect, but it is possible to recognize the links that bind geographically disparate communities within a single cultural sphere through their use of shared narrative forms. Imagery composed in accord with the principle of associative textuality, producing an array of compositions with comparable structures and overlapping but not identical sets of constituent elements, appears to reflect relatively localized affiliations. Interchangeability of elements within comparable structures allows for the signaling of related but distinct identities. Narrative compositions, in contrast, seem to be more widely distributed, and it is likely that these compositions, with stable sets of constituent elements, correspond to more regional identities salient at broader geographic scales, perhaps including a global Ulúa identity that embraces all of the more localized affiliations.

Narrative forms thus function as materialized markers of the kinds of sociocultural commonalities that underlie the formation of widely shared group identities. The cultural grammar that licensed the construction of crossed figure forms and imbued them with significance also helped to define the existence of the Ulúa cultural sphere itself and contributed to the common substrate that allowed local groups to interact with each other and recognize cultural commonalities despite contrasting localized affiliations. The common structure of crossed figure forms reflects the existence of a shared underlying structural core and, by extension, a common cultural

\(^{47}\) Lotman 1970, 22.

\(^{48}\) Semenenko 2012, 80.
grammar, since such structures would not occur in contexts where the cultural knowledge necessary to recognize their significance was absent. The boundaries of this grammar allowed individuals to determine relationships and identities, since the structures found in material culture can be taken as indicators of which communities adhere – in at least general terms – to the same cultural tradition.

This view of narrative as an indicator of identity, whether culturally defined as in the examples presented here or more locally reified, suggests that the primary role in the narrative process belongs to the interpreter (i.e. the recipient of the narrative meaning). If visual narratives are defined as composite textual units whose constituents are semantically co-dependent within the narrative context in a way that forms an integral sign, it follows that the recognition and extraction of their meaning(s) is rooted primarily in the interpretive activities of recipients responsible for recognizing and assembling the necessary semantic structure. A narrator is required for the creation of a textual unit with narrative potential (linguistic or otherwise), but the actions of the narrator are insufficient since narrativity can only be actualized if the recipient (i.e. the hearer, reader, or viewer) recognizes the existence of an narrative structure and is able to interpret it correctly. Visual narratives are thus rooted in their interpretative context which, in turn, depends upon the relevant cultural context and its associated cultural grammar.

Linguistic narratives are necessarily sequential and linear due to the structure of linguistic communication. Reception of linguistic narrative is thus sharply constrained, since recipients can only receive a narrative in the linear sequence created by the narrator. It is possible, of course, to move through written linguistic texts in varying order – by, for example, reading the last chapter of a novel before reading the beginning one – but the existence and overall comprehension of the narrative as a distinct entity depends on linear orders of its constituent elements (chapters, verses, etc.). The recognition of a linguistic narrative is thus based on the recipient’s knowledge of this arrangement as a distinct structure that cues a collective narrative significance. Graphic expressions of narrative do not necessarily linearly
constrain presentation or reception in the manner of their language-based counterparts, but their existence is similarly rooted in the structured ordering of the relevant constituent elements and in the interpreter’s ability to recognize this structure as indicative of the presence of a narrative unit. Interpreters must therefore first recognize the existence of a narrative structure and then make their way through its constituent texts – and their constituent signs – in order to ascertain the meaning. Cultural grammar may indicate a preferred sequence for this process, but it cannot constrain it to a linear sequence as linguistic production and scripts for recording it do. The recipient is thus, by necessity, a much more active participant in the semantic structuring of graphic narrative.

In both cases, therefore, the interpreter is key. It is arguable that a narrative cannot exist unless at least one interpreter recognizes the significance of its structural foundations, since this structure is responsible for transforming the constituent elements into an integral sign that represents a cohesive narrative unit. Compositions intended to be narrative can be interpreted without recognition of this structure and its significance, but the interpretative process may proceed in a manner very different from that intended by the narrator. Without recognition of the overarching structure, all of the narrative constituents may be analyzed independently and in isolation. This is true for linguistic narratives, since interpreters that do not recognize the narrative form might, for example, view each chapter of a story as a separate entity intended to stand on its own. In visual narratives, failure to recognize the overarching narrative structure could result in a misinterpretation in which the polytextual unit or one of its constituents is recast as an associative text without a fused semantics. It is also possible for each constituent text to be treated independently and in isolation, thus leading to the comprehension of multiple distinct significances rather than a single, fused semantics.

This interpretation also suggests the existence of a multistage interpretive process in which increasingly more specific structural variations are considered when determining the meaning of a textual
unit. Culturally constrained syntactic forms can occur at multiple levels of increasing specificity, and an ancient individual confronted with a crossed figure form would necessarily have begun with the recognition of its overall structure as a salient construction that functioned as an integral sign with a singular significance. Following this initial recognition, the particular crossed figure variety – joined by a composite bar, joined by a single element, etc. – would have been identified. This allowed for the refinement of the general meaning attributed to the crossed figure structural frame and a more specified interpretation that incorporated both the general meaning of the crossed figure narrative frame and the implications of its constituent particularities. This newly specified connotation would, in turn, be further refined through a consideration of the details of the constituent texts and, eventually, an analysis of the implications of the signs that form their foundations. The directionality of this process – from sign to constituent text to narrative frame vs. from narrative frame to constituent text to sign – is unknowable from the etic perspective of archaeologists and other contemporary analysts, but it is clear that either approach must begin with the recognition and comprehension of the narrative form.

It is important to note that our understanding of the patterns of distribution of the elements of Ulúa ceramic imagery is by no means comprehensive. Data available at present, however, strongly suggest that some narrative compositions are more broadly distributed than compositions constructed according to the principles of associative textuality and that they are likely to reflect different kinds of identities salient at different socio-cultural scales and perhaps in different kinds of contexts. Associative principles of textuality – in which the aggregate of the significances of constituent elements constitutes the overall meaning – create arrays of distinct but comparable compositions. This property seems to lend itself to the representation of similar but distinct localized identities. Narrative compositions, in contrast – constructed as polytextual units under principles of morphosyntactic
textuality – are characterized by structures in which constituent elements are fused into distinctive new compound entities. An important focus of continuing analysis is an exploration of the ways in which these more complex graphic wholes and the more complex and more firmly specified meanings they imply are suitable for the nuanced representation required for more expansive cultural identities. It is also important to recognize that our perspective as analysts is etic; it cannot be emic. Our understanding of visual narratives (and other visual texts) will always involve analyzing structure as a proxy for meaning.

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