

# Exploring the Application of Image Narrative in Book Design--Taking the Book Design of “City View Walking” as an Example

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## Abstract

Although image narrative is an important form of visual narrative that has been widely used in film, television, advertising and digital media, methodological research in book design remains relatively insufficient. Drawing on the theory of image narrative, this paper explores its application in book production. Using a combination of analyses of literature and design practice research, the study has produced a model for designing books based on image narratives. Called the 'narrative extraction-visual encoding-reading construction' approach, it is illustrated by the experimental book 'Cityscape Reading' which was used for practical verification. The study found that not only is image narrative embodied in image content, but it also takes part in the narrative generation process through material selection, layouts and reading path design. These factors make reading an important mechanism for narrative development. Transforming image narrative from a visual expression at the level of concept into an operational design method provides a new and practical research perspective on the innovation of book design narratives.

## Keywords

Image Narrative; Book Design; Design Method Model; Reading Experience; Visual Communication Design

## Introduction

The development of social media and changes in reading habits mean that visual information has become an increasingly important part of the way knowledge is disseminated, with images playing a key role in shaping reading comprehension. Image narrative, a way of expressing meaning visually, features increasingly in book design practice. While narrative modes that rely solely on words to generate meaning are limited by linguistic and cultural barriers, the intuitive and graphic nature of image narratives enables them to establish readers' initial knowledge and understanding of content themes relatively quickly[1]. Over the past few years,

relevant research has gradually shifted its focus from the fields of art and narrative to the practice of visual communication design. In doing so, it has opened up new avenues for expression and provided methodological support for book design. Exploring the application of images in book design from the perspective of narrative is therefore of significance in terms of both expanding the scope of book design research and also enhancing the reading experience and effectiveness of communication.

## **1. Basic Overview of Image Narrative**

### **1.1. Conceptual Traceability and Evolution of Image Narrative**

Narrative imagery is not a new concept in contemporary design. Its roots can be traced back to images from early civilisations, such as petroglyphs, cloth and silk patterns, and artefact totems [2]. Early forms of narrative expression were conveyed through images, using the organisation of characters, scenes, actions and spatial configurations to tell a story. With the development of photography, printing and modern media technology, this type of storytelling gradually broke through the boundaries of a particular art form to enter fields such as communication, design and cultural studies. It has been suggested by some scholars that the essence of visual storytelling is 'to imply the passage of time and the emergence of meaning through the organisation of space' [3]. Within the context of digital media, image narratives further demonstrate a trend towards dynamisation and interactivity [4]. Digital media and the rise of the internet have further expanded the form and dissemination of image narratives. Through online platforms and social media, individuals and groups can easily share their works. The application of digital technology also enables more dynamic, interactive and multimedia image narratives, bringing a richer and more diverse experience to audiences.

### **1.2. Patterns and Characteristics of Image Narratives**

Narrative images can be divided into two basic types: single-image narratives and series of image narratives. As far as a single image is concerned, its narrative often relies on compression, juxtaposition, and the suggestion of temporal relationships within the picture. Depending on how time is treated, a single-image narrative can be described as a single-scene narrative, an outline narrative or a circular narrative [5]. For example, a one-scene narrative can strengthen plot tension by focusing on the most dramatic moments. In contrast, an outline narrative can break the constraints of linear time by juxtaposing plots within the same image. Finally, a narrative with a circular structure can reinforce the sense of time returning with the first and last echoes. Image narratives generally possess the fundamental characteristics of intuition, ambiguity, suggestion and symbolism, which enable the rapid conveyance of information during the generation of meaning, while also allowing for reinterpretation by the reader [6].

### **1.3. Theoretical Distinction between Image Narrative and Image Representation**

Please note that 'image narrative' and 'image representation' are distinct concepts. Image representation emphasises conveying meaning and the conception of images as symbolic systems, with symbols and metaphors at their core. Whilst image narrative focuses on how images construct the order of events through the organisation of space and time, i.e. 'what happened', Former belongs to the category of semiotics, while the latter is closer to narratology.

Although a large number of visual elements in book design have a function of representation, they can contribute to an image narrative only when they form a temporal logic, provide a reading path or advance the plot. For this reason, the subsequent analysis of this paper will use 'narrative structure' instead of pure visual symbols as the basis for judgement.

## **2. Existing Design Applications of Image Narrative**

### **2.1. Application of Image Narrative in Posters**

Posters are an important type of visual communication design with dual functions: disseminating useful information and evoking emotions. Posters are one of the most common types of image narrative application. By contrast, movie posters are multimodal image narratives which combine linguistic and non-linguistic symbol systems, such as colours and images [7]. In suspense or sci-fi posters, a sense of the unknown and dramatic intensity is often created through unconventional compositions, strong contrasting light and shadow, and symbolic visual elements. In this way, the pre-narrative of the story situation is realised within a limited frame.

The publicity poster for the film *Inception* is a good example of this. The picture uses urban landscapes as the main narrative setting: the distant view is a bird's-eye view of the street, the central view uses a single-point perspective, and the foreground features images of the main characters. Multi-layered spaces overlap to create a sense of visual complexity and dislocation from reality. Adopting a lower pyramid composition, the characters highlight the core players while weakening the expression of individual characters, allowing the space itself to become the main body of the narrative. Using the spatial structure, the design conveys the film's theme of transitioning from dream layers to reality, achieving unity between visual form and narrative content.

### **2.2. The application of image narrative in packaging**

Using image narratives in modern packaging design is a commonly employed way of expressing themes. Such narratives are usually illustrated, with single or series illustrations expressing the design theme [8]. Besides protecting products and conveying basic information, good packaging design has become an important way for brands to tell their story and express their culture. Since the introduction of the

image narrative method, consumers can form an overall perception of product value and brand significance during brief contact with packaging through the organisation of visual symbols and the construction of context. Unlike traditional packaging design, image narrative packaging design is more persuasive and attractive. It conveys the characteristics of the product and brand value more effectively [9].

Using the Jingdong Health 'Guard the Red Apple' public awareness campaign as an example, the design uses the visual juxtaposition of a child's red apples cheeks and a real red apple to transform the familiar 'red apple' symbol to represent both the skin problems children experience and the care and assistance they need. Putting the red cheeks and the real red apple side by side gives the familiar 'red apple' symbol a double meaning: it points to children's skin issues and symbolises care and support. Incorporating the real apple into the packaging structure establishes a direct link between consumers' behaviour and public welfare initiatives, rendering an abstract social issue tangible and illustrating the role of image narratives in conveying emotions and values.

### **2.3. The application of image narrative in books**

Applying image narratives to book design can make books more visually appealing and encourage readers to buy them [10]. In comparison to purely textual information, image narration can communicate the theme and emotional tone of a book more effectively through visual elements such as graphic symbols, colour relationships, layout organisation, and visual metaphors. As well as enhancing visual recognition, narrative introductions establish readers' expectations before they begin reading.

Simultaneously, the image narrative extends beyond the cover to the entire visual system of the book. It encompasses the chapter structure, the arrangement of illustrations, the graphic relationships, and the organisation of the rhythm of reading. By providing continuity through visual cues and spatialised reading paths, books gradually become narrative media with a temporal dimension. In this way, readers can participate in generating meaning as they flip through the pages. The latter also provides an important practical basis for the in-depth examination of the image narrative method in book design.

## **3. The Application of Image Narrative in Book Design in Practice--Taking the Book Design of “City View Walking” as an Example**

### **3.1. Project Background and Research Methodology Orientation**

"Walking in the City" is an experimental book project designed by the author's team and completed in 2023-2024. This sample book is currently not publicly available, but one set of physical proofs has been completed and displayed at the Xi'an Eurasian College Graduation Design Achievement Exhibition (see Figure 1). Drawing

on the design process as an important path for generating knowledge and validating theory, this paper analyses the design practice research methodology.

Focusing on the urban space of Xi'an, this study conducts field research through street observation and fieldwalking. This involves collecting video materials and text records, upon which visual translation and book system design are then based. In contrast to a purely design-focused approach, our paper aims to test the operational pathway of image narratives in book design through practical application. In doing so, we seek to transform narrative theory into a design method.



**Figure 1** Graduation design results

### 3.2. Image Narrative Book Design Method Model

Image narrative is used in this study not only as a visual stylistic device or means of expression, it is also constructed as a method of book design with an operational logic. Adopting a cross-perspective approach combining elements of narratology and visual communication design, this paper summarises image narrative realisation in book production as a three-stage process of 'narrative extraction, image encoding and reading construction', forming a model for image narrative book design.

First, as part of the narrative extraction stage, the designer sifts through and reorganises characters, locations and events in real space using urban observation, notes on walks and image collection. Time clues and contextual associations are used to extract narrative elements, transforming potential visual materials into narrative units.

Secondly, when visual coding is applied, the extracted narrative information is translated into a visual language. Images form a plot point and emotional continuity through the selection of image types, the construction of a colour system, material and media use, and layout structure design.

Finally, the overall planning of the chapter structure, rhythm and graphic

relationships at the stage of construction guides readers to experience temporal flow and spatial movement during the reading process. The act of reading itself thus becomes an important mechanism for unfolding the narrative.

Based on this methodological model, the following design practice of 'City View Reading' is analysed.

### **3.3. Narrative extraction: construction of content information and visual materials**

City Walk is used as a narrative generation mechanism in the narrative extraction stage to establish the link between urban spaces and the experience of time through walking paths. Drawing on their fieldwork in the streets of Xi'an, which documented the city's history, daily life and contemporary landscapes, the designers built the narrative foundation of the book by selecting visual fragments with contextual continuity.

With regard to the arrangement of materials, the book's images are primarily made up of both illustrations and photographs. While illustrations are hand- or digitally drawn to enhance subjective perception and expression of emotion, photographic images preserve the realistic texture of urban scenes. Together, they constitute the narrative material system. Images from various media serve different narrative functions in the book, creating a multi-level reading experience that interweaves real records and visual reconstructions.

During the design process, the visual elements of the city are also refined and translated, with single landscapes being transformed into visual cues that provide narrative direction. These cues lay the foundation for subsequent visual coding.

### **3.4. Visual coding: overall book design strategy**

Visual coding transforms narrative information into the book's overall visual system. The City Walk is divided into five thematic chapters, each of which relates to a different urban spatial experience. A unified structure combined with differentiated visual styles creates the overall narrative rhythm.

Consistent in layout structure, the covers of the chapters feature paths on maps and chapter headings that create a reading guide. The colours, fonts and visual styles are differentiated so that each chapter presents its own distinct narrative context. This 'structural unity - visual variation' strategy ensures the integrity of the book and strengthens the narrative experience of the spatial transition.

Environmental images and summarising text are uniformly featured on the back cover, enabling readers to draw stage-by-stage conclusion as they read the chapters, thus constructing a rhythmic structure similar to walking and stopping.

### **3.5. Reading construction: internal textual organisation and material narrative mechanisms**

Once the reading process begins, the narrative no more relies solely on the images; rather, it unfolds through the act of reading. By dividing the text into chapters, organising the plates and designing the layout, *City View* establishes a reading path that creates a sense of continuous spatial movement for readers as they flip through the book.

Firstly, since the thematic chapters are organised around scenes from the city, such as 'Cyber High-Tech', 'Urban Village' and 'Xiaonanmen Morning Market', following the narrative is like walking through the city. This creates a spatialised narrative structure. Spatialised narrative structure.

Secondly, connections between the chapters are established through visual elements such as traffic signs, crowds and urban patterns, creating a natural reading rhythm. Regarding material utilisation, book binding is considered an important narrative device. The chapter 'The Gate of the Academy', for instance, uses materials such as yellowed paper and rice paper inserts to create a sense of the passage of time, while 'Cyber Hi-Tech' uses laser material to convey the fluidity of the city's nightscape, offering a transformative visual experience.

Additionally, as readers turn the pages, the semi-transparent film sheet superimposes images of cityscapes from different time periods, providing them with the experience of 'time appearing'. Turning the pages thus becomes a narrative propulsion mechanism, realising the transformation of material properties into narrative structures.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Using the theories of image and narrative, as well as design practice, this study developed a book design method based on the “narrative-extraction-visual-coding-reading-construction” model. Taking the experimental book *City View Walking* as a case study, it explored the realisation of image narrative in book design. Researchers also explore the realisation of image narratives in book design, taking the experimental publication *City View Reading* as a case study. According to the study, narrative is not only reflected in the level of expression of visual content, but also contributes to the generation of narrative through the selection of materials, layouts and the design of reading paths. In this way, reading becomes an important part of constructing meaning and thus pushes book design from presenting information to transforming experiential narratives.

In addition, it is important to consider that the aesthetic portrayal of the city through the 'City Walk' approach may be influenced by the researcher's perspective and cultural background, resulting in a subjective interpretation of urban space. An image narrative is a visual record of urban culture and a narrative process constructed from the designer's perspective. Subsequent research could adopt a multi-subject approach to expand the application of image narratives in public cultural expression.

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