



Anxiety over Transition: Visual Narrative in “Rip Van Winkle”¹

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Abstract—This article conducts an interdisciplinary study and offers a corrective to previous scholarship that has routinely overlooked the role of visual narrative in “Rip Van Winkle”. Visual narrative skills -- such as the use of color and light, ekphrasis, comic strip via phrasing, two-dimensional variable focalization -- not only elaborate, specify, and extend the characterization of the protagonists, but also act as a microcosm of social transition in 19th century America. This paper argues that Irving portrays the anxiety over transition through visual narrative in the short story.

Keywords— “Rip Van Winkle”, Visual Narrative, Anxiety over Transition



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I. INTRODUCTION

Widely known for his superb skills in short story narrative and travel sketches, Washington Irving is mainly acknowledged as a master of short fiction and a stylist of the essay, but his acute artistry in visual representation has been largely ignored. “Rip Van Winkle” is such an example. Current critical approaches to the story include new historicism (Yang Jincai, 2013, Quan Wang, 2020; Tian Junwu, 2021; Sarah Wyman, 2022), feminism (Xue Xiaohui, 2006), postcolonialism (Fang Xurong, 2024), ecocriticism and deconstruction. However, the visual narrative in the story has largely been neglected, which is actually quite important to the understanding of Irving’s art and thematic concern. This article aims to examine Irving’s skills of visual art in “Rip Van Winkle” and explore how the visual narrative skills help him cover up the anxiety undergone in the time of great social change.

According to W. J.T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, “Visible language” is a phrase that “has primarily a metaphorical meaning for both art historians and literary critics” (111). In literature, conversely, the notion of “visible language”

imports “the discourse of meaning and seeing into our understanding of verbal expression: it tempts us to give terms like imitation, form, and figuration a strong graphic, iconic sense and to conceive of texts as images in a widely variety of texts” (112). Visual narrative is to convert the diachronicity of novel’s narrative into the synchronicity of images, reflecting the interaction between the two narrative forms of text and image. Although the form of visual narrative is the spatialization of time, it is, in essence, the re-temporalization of space. While literature and the visual arts—including painting, sculpture, and architecture—did not begin to intersect until the twentieth century, Washington Irving’s early nineteenth-century short stories have already featured a distinctly visual style, just as Karl Theodor Gaedertz applauds Irving’s decision “to create his drawings with language and quill rather than with pencil and palette” and contends that “If one thinks of the figure of the sleepy Rip Van Winkle and his surroundings, he believes to have before him one of the excellent paintings of the famous Dutch master Adriaen van Ostade.” (Qtd. in Zlogar 44) So, it is so great significance to make further investigation of visual narrative in “Rip Van Winkle”.

II. THE INFLUENCE OF DUTCH GENRE PAINTING

In the 17th century, Holland emerged as Europe's richest and most advanced country; freedom of speech and religion there created conditions for the prosperity of art. Portraits, genre paintings, and still-life paintings—works that depicted citizens' lives, thoughts, and feelings—centered on core themes: human dignity and self-confidence, as well as the beauty and serenity of nature. Catering to the emerging bourgeoisie and the public, these artistic characteristics collectively shaped Dutch genre painting, representative artists including Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer, among others. This rich Dutch artistic tradition bears notable relevance to Washington Irving's work: the visual quality of "Rip Van Winkle" has long been recognized, and it shares a strong kinship with Dutch genre painting. Critical views on this connection, however, diverge. In 1823, Maria Edgeworth made a direct affirmation of the visual alignment between his writing and Northern European artistic styles when she remarked that Irving's stories "The Stout Gentleman" "The Inn Yard," and "The Rookery in Bracebridge Hall" are "all exquisite paintings in the high finish of the Flemish school" (44). By contrast, Stanley T. Williams commented that the influence of this very Dutch painting tradition on Irving's art "has never been adequately appraised" (44). These two contrasting views—one affirming the visual alignment of Irving's works with Flemish artistic traditions, the other pointing out the underappreciation of Dutch painting's influence on him—together highlight the need for further exploration of how visual arts shaped Irving's literary style.

Visuality arises from the interaction of the eye, light, and objects. From a physicist's perspective, the mechanism of vision formation first hinges on the relationship between these three elements. The opening lines of *Rip Van Winkle* immediately establish the geographical setting of the short story.

In the depiction of the Kaatskill Mountains -- a remarkable illustration of visual narrative—Irving weaves techniques inspired by Dutch genre painting to craft a landscape that is both aesthetically striking and thematically resonant with the post-Revolutionary social transformation anxiety that concludes "Rip Van Winkle". He begins with a panoramic viewpoint, framing the mountains as "a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family" (Irving 30) -- a phrase balancing grandeur with organic connection, echoing Dutch landscape painters like Jacob van Ruisdael, who grounded vast natural scenes in human-scaled coherence to make the mountains feel both majestic and familiar. Yang Jincai pointed out that the former British colonies depicted had

long since become "a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family (30)," which undoubtedly signifies the collapse of Britain's colonial system in America. From this, one can infer that the short story serves as a metaphorical tale of the transition from British colonial rule to American independence and self-governance (Yang 76). Irving then emphasizes the mountains' dynamism through meticulous attention to their mutability: "Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains" (30) -- a focus on transience mirroring the flux of post-Revolution American society, prefiguring the radical changes Rip will face upon returning to his transformed village. This fluidity is deepened by color symbolism: fair weather cloaks the mountains in stable "blue and purple" that "print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky", while even cloudless days bring "a hood of gray vapors about their summits" (30) -- signaling hidden uncertainty beneath surface calm, paralleling the fragile peace of post-Revolutionary America. The influence of Dutch art shines through in Irving's use of light and atmosphere (a hallmark of artists like Pieter de Hooch and Aert van der Neer): he describes the gray vapors glowing "like a crown of glory" in the "last rays of the setting sun," transforming the mountains into a symbol of fleeting beauty. Beyond description, this visual narrative engages directly with the story's concluding social anxiety: the mountains, called "perfect barometers" by local wives, metaphorically reflect societal stability and change. By merging Dutch realism, symbolic light and color, and atmospheric detail with American subject matter, Irving creates a landscape that celebrates nature's grandeur while prefiguring the story's ending.

Besides, Irving utilizes poetics of ekphrasis to list an array of Dutch elements. James A. W. Hefferman's definition of ekphrasis is still regarded as authoritative: "Ekphrasis is verbal representation of graphic representation" (Hefferman 303). In "Ekphrasis and Representation" he discusses the narrative function of "ekphrastic poetry". First, he argues that the title of an artwork is a literal reproduction of the work itself, and that "much shorter titles can also serve a narrative function" (303). In addition, ekphrastic poetry "has the rhetorical technique of evoking a silent object" (302). Irving's reference to the village at the foot of the mountains, founded by Dutch colonists during the governance of Peter Stuyvesant, anchors the narrative in a specific historical context. According to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. (6) The description of the village, with its "small yellow bricks" and "latticed windows, (30)" conjures

images of a quaint, idyllic community that embodies the values and traditions of its Dutch origins. By highlighting the architectural features and the antiquity of the village, Irving taps into a collective memory that resonates with readers familiar with American history. The phrase "may he rest in peace! (30)" following the mention of Stuyvesant adds a layer of nostalgia and reverence, suggesting a longing for a simpler, more stable past. This sentiment is particularly poignant in the context of Rip's story, where the protagonist experiences profound changes in his life and society after a long slumber. The mountains and the village serve as symbols of the past that Rip yearns for, contrasting sharply with the tumultuous changes brought about by the American Revolution and the subsequent shift in societal values.

III. COMIC STRIP VIA PHRASING

Generally, the construction of the cross-media narration in the novel based on the visual image is mainly embodied in two structural patterns: "comic strip via phrasing" for its narrative mode and "juxtaposed narrative". "Comic strip via phrasing" refer to a narrative mode where the novel maintains its fundamental causal-linear structure -- the story progresses chronologically and causally—but upon this linear foundation, the text strings together a series of "word-pictures." (Long 51) In "Rip Van Winkle", Washington Irving artfully employs this technique to construct Rip's and minor characters' traits and metaphorize the social anxiety over transition.

In the short story, Irving first delivered a cutting critique of Rip's character: "a simple man good-natured man; he was, moreover, a kind neighbor, and an obedient hen-pecked husband" (30). Then the narrator proceeds to state straight out that "The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor" (31). How can "this insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor (31)" be expressed? The depiction rejects the one-dimensional view of him as a "lazy" man, instead frames him as a figure of principled misdirection -- endowed with immense assiduity and perseverance, yet unable to channel these virtues into the roles demanded by the post-revolutionary world. Just as Yang Jincai contends, Rip appears outwardly timid in Irving's portrayal, a "henpecked husband," yet underneath he is not submissive (76). The description opens by refuting the idea that Rip lacks diligence: his willingness to sit on a "wet rock" all day with a "rod as long and heavy as a Tartar's lance," fishing without a single nibble or complaint, proves he possesses remarkable stamina. Similarly, his hours of "trudging through woods and swamps, uphill and down dale" to shoot small game (squirrels, wild pigeons) and his

eagerness to lead communal labor -- "foremost man at all country frolics for husking Indian corn or building stone-fences"—reveal a man wired for the collective, labor-intensive rhythms of pre-revolutionary agrarian life. Even his role as the village errand-runner, doing "little odd jobs" that "less obliging husbands" refuse, cements his status as a communal glue: a person who thrives on mutual aid, not individual gain. Yet the crucial contrast—his inability to tend to "family duty" or keep his farm "in order" -- is not laziness, but a mismatch. Rip's virtues -- patience, communal devotion, selflessness-- are relics of the colonial era, where survival depended on neighborhood cooperation, not the individualistic, productivity-driven ethos emerging after independence.

The depiction of Nicholas Vedder masterfully crafts a comic strip via phrasing—a series of phrased, visually vivid moments that mimic the sequential panels of a comic strip. The first "panel" in this phrased comic strip is established by the description of Vedder's daily routine: "at the door of which he took his seat from morning till night, just moving sufficiently to avoid the sun and keep in the shade of a large tree; so that the neighbors could tell the hour by his movements as accurately as by a sundial"(33). This phrase paints a static, almost sculptural image -- Vedder rooted to the inn's door, his movements minimal and predictable, tied to the tree's shade and the passage of time. Like a comic panel that uses the setting to anchor a character, this phrasing places Vedder within a fixed, unchanging environment: the inn (a community hub) and the tree (a natural, enduring symbol) frame him as a constant in the village's life. This extends his character beyond a mere landlord; he becomes a visual marker of order -- so integral to the village's rhythm that his body acts as a "sundial (33)," a tool for measuring time, emphasizing the pre-independence world's reliance on tradition and predictability. For readers, this phrased panel evokes a sense of calm complacency, a world where change is not just unlikely but unperceived, setting the stage for the disruption that independence will bring.

The next set of phrased "panels" shifts to Vedder's non-verbal communication, using detailed descriptions of his pipe-smoking to add dynamic depth, turning his silence into a language of authority. Phrases like "it is true he was rarely heard to speak, but smoked his pipe incessantly," "when anything that was read or related displeased him, he was observed to smoke his pipe vehemently, and to send forth short, frequent and angry puffs," and "when pleased, he would inhale the smoke slowly and tranquilly, and emit it in light and placid clouds; and sometimes, taking the pipe from his mouth, and letting the fragrant vapor curl about his nose, would gravely nod his head in token of perfect approbation"(33) function like consecutive comic

panels that capture micro-actions. Each phrase isolates a specific gesture: the constant pipe-smoking (a baseline of his character), the "angry puffs" (a clear sign of disapproval), the "placid clouds" and "grave nod" (markers of approval). Like a comic artist using facial expressions or body language to convey emotions, these phrases translate Vedder's inner thoughts into visible, interpretable cues. This extends his power: he does not need to speak to control the *junto*; his pipe's smoke and subtle nods of head are enough, revealing a pre-independence social order where authority operates through implicit, shared understanding rather than explicit debate. His adherents' ability to "perfectly understand him" from these gestures further emphasizes the cohesion of the pre-independence community, where norms are unspoken but universally recognized.

The final layer of this comic strip via phrasing lies in its unspoken contrast to the post-independence world, which metaphorize social transition anxiety. The phrased panels of Vedder's life—his static routine, his smoke-cued emotions—create a "before" narrative of stability and predictability. When Rip returns after the war of independence, this narrative collapses: the inn now bears George Washington's portrait instead of King George's, villagers argue about "elections" and "civil rights," and Vedder is gone. Anxiety arises from the loss of this visual coherence: the clear, phrased "panels" of Vedder's era is nowhere to be found in the post-independence world. Where Vedder's "sundial" movements and smoke gestures provided certainty, there is noise, conflict, and uncertainty instead. Readers, alongside Rip, feel the disorientation of losing a familiar "comic strip"—a sequence of predictable, meaningful moments that help them make sense of the world. Vedder's phrased comic strip, in retrospect, becomes a metaphor for the comfort of the old order; its absence highlights the chaos of a society struggling to redefine itself after independence. His pipe's smoke, once a tool of clarity, is replaced by conflicting political voices, and his "sundial" movements by the unsteady, unpredictable pace of a nation forging a new identity. In this way, the employment of comic Strip via phrasing in the narrative skillfully highlights the contrast of the pre-independence stability and the anxiety of a society adrift in the wake of profound change.

IV. TWO-DIMENSIONAL VARIABLE INTERNAL-FOCALIZATION

Internal focalization refers to "the situation where the narrator only narrates the information known to a certain character" (Genette 120). That is to say, the narration unfolds from the single perspective of one

character. Readers can only obtain the information and emotional experiences that this character is aware of. Variable internal-focalization is focalization that moves from the limited perspective of one character to another by focusing on different character (Xu 222). As a result, there are multiple narrative voices in the text, and the diversity of narrative voices allows the text to contain multiple dimensions and makes it appear as a nonlinear visuality. Focalization is the "determinant" of narrative visuality: it defines the scope (comprehensive vs. limited), subjectivity (objective vs. subjective), and linearity (linear vs. non-linear) of the visual space readers perceive. Zero focalization offers a clear, all-encompassing visual "map" of the story; fixed internal focalization offers a narrow, personal window into it; and variable internal focalization offers a collage of overlapping "windows," creating a non-linear, multi-dimensional visuality. In short, how the narrator "sees" (focalization) directly shapes how readers "see" the story (visuality).

As scholars have noted, "The pattern of narrative structure in 'Rip Van Winkle' goes through a change from zero-focalization to internal-focalization and back again" (Zhang and Wang 120). Irving adopts a zero-focalization narrative perspective in the beginning, in which the narrator introduces the general setting of the story and the main characters: the magnificence and magic of the Catskill Mountains, the uncontested nature of the village, the peaceful and quiet life of the villagers; Rip's helpfulness but inactivity all day long, hunting and gossiping; and the constant reprimanding of Rip by the spirited Dame Van Winkle. In this part, the narrator not only knows everything that happens in the village but also has an insight into Rip's psychology. From Rip's "a long ramble of the kind on a fine autumnal day" (33), the narrative focalization shifts to Rip's consciousness and senses. The narrator's mode of narration changes from a zero-focalization to an internal-focalization mode. The reason for this is that throughout Rip's experience on the mountain, the narrator knows the same things as Rip. The short story switches from an internal focalization to a zero-focalization mode again when it mentions the "army of women and children at his heels" (39) behind Rip when he returns from the long slumber. Rip has been so absorbed in his own thoughts and confusion that he does not notice whether he is being followed by a bunch of women and children. Then he gradually realizes that 20 years have passed in his sleep and that things have changed. After recognizing his relatives, he quickly integrates into society and begins his life of inactivity again.

In "Rip Van Winkle", the use of internal focalization creates a compelling visual narrative that highlights the profound cultural transformation in post-Revolutionary

America. As Rip awakens from his long slumber, the contrasting images he perceives serve to underscore the dramatic changes in both the physical landscape and the societal structure. Initially, Rip's vision of "an eagle wheeling aloft and breasting the pure mountain breeze" (39) symbolizes the emergence of a new national identity, as the eagle is not only a majestic bird but also the emblem of the United States. This imagery evokes a sense of pride and power, yet it simultaneously raises questions about the nature of this new nation—whether it embodies peace or aggression. The eagle's flight contrasts sharply with the earlier image of "a crow winging its solitary flight, (39)" suggesting a shift from isolation to a collective national spirit, albeit one that Rip struggles to comprehend. The crow, often associated with scavenging and solitude, represents Rip's previous state of being, while the eagle signifies the potential for greatness and unity in the new America.

The transformation of the great tree into "a tall naked pole" (39) further emphasizes Rip's disorientation. The tree, once a symbol of shelter and stability, is replaced by a stark pole that, while adorned with the flag, lacks the practical significance and comfort that the tree provided. This visual shift reflects the loss of the familiar Dutch colonial past and the unsettling nature of the new American identity, which Rip finds incomprehensible. The flag, with its "singular assemblage of stars and stripes," represents the founding of the United States, yet to Rip, it is merely a confusing emblem that lacks the warmth and meaning of the tree. This juxtaposition highlights the cultural identity crisis faced by individuals like Rip, who are caught between the old world and the new. The flag, a symbol of unity and freedom for many, becomes a source of confusion for Rip, illustrating how the very symbols of national identity can be alienating to those who have not participated in the revolutionary changes.

Moreover, the change in the political landscape is illustrated through Rip's encounter with the "lean, bilious-looking fellow" who passionately discusses "rights of citizens" and "liberty." (30) This character embodies the democratic fervor that has replaced the authoritative control of patriarchal figures like Nicholas Vedder, who once dictated public opinion. The bustling, "disputatious tone" of the crowd signifies a shift from the tranquil, phlegmatic nature of Rip's past to a more dynamic and contentious civic life. This transformation reflects the broader cultural identity of a nation grappling with the ideals of democracy and individual rights, which are foreign concepts to Rip. The language used by the haranguing fellow—filled with terms like "elections," "members of congress," and "Bunker's Hill"—is described as a "perfect Babylonish jargon" to Rip, further

emphasizing his alienation from the new political discourse. This confusion illustrates the challenges faced by those who have been removed from the societal changes, highlighting the generational and cultural gaps that can arise in the wake of significant historical events. Through these visual contrasts, the narrator effectively captures Rip's bewilderment and highlights the anxiety over identity construction of early America. The internal focalization allows readers to experience Rip's confusion and nostalgia, emphasizing the challenges faced by individuals who must navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing society. The eagle, while a symbol of strength, also raises questions about the nature of the new American identity—whether it is one of aggression or peace. The starkness of the "tall naked pole" in place of the comforting tree symbolizes the loss of the familiar and the unsettling nature of the new political landscape. Rip's inability to recognize the significance of the flag and the change in his community reflects a broader commentary on the disconnection experienced by those who have not actively participated in the revolutionary changes.

"Rip Vans Winkle" produces a strong visual effect through the transformation of narrative modes, especially the two-dimensional variable internal focalization, which in turn triggers reflection on cultural memory. The revolution of the War of Independence has removed the isolation and tranquility of the village and replaced it with a noisy society that has not progressed substantially under the rule of violence. The peaceful and quiet villagers are gone, and the post-revolutionary people all look busy, panicky, and contentious. The revolution changed the world, but the changes brought about by the revolution were negative, and the people did not receive any real benefits or advantages. The reader reads this meaning, and the judgment of the independent revolution is naturally affected and greatly impacted.

V. CONCLUSION

To summarize, this article mainly explores the visual narrative skills -- the influence of Dutch Genre Painting, comic strip via phrasing, two-dimensional variable internal-focalization-- in the "Rip Van Winkle", thus saturating the characterization of the characters and witnessing the relationship between the visuality and the anxiety over transition in 19th century America. From the visual imagery in the text, the presentation of spatial scenes to the portrayal of characters, Washington Irving employed unique visual narrative strategies to visualize and dramatize the anxiety of transition. The visual narrative of "Rip Van Winkle" is not merely an artistic technique but also a carrier of message. It vividly

demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the anxiety in the early days of the United States, providing a unique perspective for us to understand the formation of American culture and national character.

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