Patterns and Words, Logic and Narrative:
What can we expect of a visual language?

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Current theories of perception and language can help answer the question, “What can we expect of a visual language?” There are fundamental differences between visual and linguistic forms of expression. Linguistic forms of expression are characterized by the use of a rich set of socially invented arbitrary symbols as well as a form of logic exemplified by the ‘ifs’, ‘ands’ and ‘buts’ of natural language. The grammar of visual representation is quite different having to do with pattern relationships such as ‘connected’, ‘inside’, ‘outside’, or ‘part of’. These derive from our visual processing mechanism developed through interaction with the visual environment. This means that certain kinds of logic are best left to verbal or written language whereas structural relationships are best conveyed visually.

Narrative, however, can be carried either through language or purely visual techniques or both. This is because narrative is about leading the attention of an audience and this can be achieved through either modality. Nevertheless, what can be expressed within a narrative is very different depending on the modality. Language can convey complex logical relationships between abstract ideas and support conditional actions whereas visual media can support the perception of almost instantaneous scene gist, rapid explorations of spatial structure and relationships between objects as well as emotions and motivations. Both can maintain and hold the thread of audience attention which is the essence of narrative.