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Visual Metaphors: meaning, interpretation and culture

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ABSTRACT
This paper outlines an approach to meaning in visual imagery through metaphor, relying on the recent embodiment or neurological account of metaphor. It outlines this account of metaphor and discusses through the use of examples some of the ways in which metaphors work in visual images. It stresses the need for interpretation and the dependence of interpretation on cultural context.
KEY WORDS
Metaphors in visual images; interpretation; cultural contexts; embodied cognition.

RESUMO
Este artigo trata de uma abordagem para a significação de imagens através de metáforas, baseando-se nas atuais discussões sobre a metáfora sob a perspectiva da cognição incorporada. Discute por meio de exemplos alguns modos em que a metáfora funciona em imagens visuais. Salienta a necessidade da interpretação e a dependência entre interpretação e contextos culturais.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Metáforas em imagens visuais; interpretação; contextos culturais; cognição incorporada.

I have long been interested in how we make sense of artworks – how we interpret them. I doubt that there is anyone who still believes that the arts are non-cognitive – that they do not call for thinking that is at least as demanding and subtle as the thinking involved in other disciplines – though that was the standard 'behaviorist' view before the 'cognitive revolution' of the late 60s and 70s (MILLER, 2003). If there is such a doubting person, it is surely because we have had such difficulty describing what thinking in the arts is like. We still have no widely agreed-on account of how meaning works in the arts.

My own interest in the topic began with reading the efforts to explain thinking in the arts of people like Howard Gardner ('multiple intelligences') (1983), Nelson Goodman ('languages of art') (1968) and Rudolph Arnheim ('visual thinking') (1969). More recently, I have been influenced by the 'embodiment movement,' often dubbed 'the second generation' of cognitive science, which finds the origins of mind in bodily experience rather than in just the brain and sees thinking as fundamentally analogical rather than digital in character. My interest in metaphors in particular is due to the influential work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999).

Lakoff and Johnson see metaphor as the fundamental way in which we elaborate meanings from our bodily experiences. They argue that metaphors are based on neural patterns shaped by repeated experiences, especially early experiences. A metaphor basically works by laying the neural pattern of such an experience on to some more abstract or affective topic. So, for example, the experience of being held close as a baby by a caregiver gives rise to the almost universal metaphor for love of closeness. Another example is *knowing is grasping*, which originates in our early experiences of grasping things. A baby first comes to know the world through grasping it, with both the mouth and the hands. This allows us later to speak of grasping an argument, of holding a thought in mind, of chewing on an idea, and so on. It is hard to think of such activities without using a metaphor.

These are simple examples, of course, and Lakoff and Johnson's work identifies many others and pursues in detail many of their elaborations and complexities. They give many examples of this process that enables us to think more clearly about both abstract ideas and our emotional life. Without it, they argue, we would be limited to thinking concretely about particular objects.

Stimulated in large part by the work of Lakoff and Johnson, there has been a general resurgence of interest in metaphor in the last twenty years. However, most of it (including the work of Lakoff and Johnson) has been concerned with verbal metaphors (e.g., PUNTER, 2007; KOVECSES, 2000). This is no accident. In the past, metaphor was usually thought of as only a verbal phenomenon; it was often classified as one of the 'figures of speech,' which were used for mostly rhetorical rather than cognitive purposes. But on Lakoff and Johnson's account, metaphors are fundamentally conceptual in nature, rather than linguistic or ornamental, and they can be constructed and elaborated in any suitable medium. Language is a very suitable medium but, like every medium, it has limitations as well as advantages. Other possible media include dance, performance, music, and the visual arts. Science and mathematics have also been explored as being based on metaphorical meanings (eg., AUBUSSON, HARRISON and RITCHIE, 2006). My interest here is to explore the ways in which metaphor works in the visual arts and to draw attention to some that are often not noticed.

One of the themes of what follows is the cultural character of our interpretations of metaphors. I would argue that interpreting artworks, valuable and interesting to teach in itself, points also in two educational directions. One is toward improving student artworks via self-assessment and assessment in general. I shall say nothing further about this here. The other is toward understanding something of other cultures. It is often claimed that one can understand another culture better by studying its arts. I believe this is true and is one reason for teaching the arts. I try to illuminate this claim through examples.

The Structure of Metaphors

Max Black, an Anglo-American philosopher, is a well-known precursor to Lakoff and Johnson. He also argued that metaphor is fundamentally conceptual - a matter of thinking - rather than linguistic and he provided an influential structure for analyzing a metaphor (BLACK, 1962, 1979).

According to Black's analysis, a metaphor requires two subjects, which he calls the primary and secondary subjects (1979). A metaphor lays the secondary subject – for example, closeness - onto the primary subject – for example, love. Notice that 'lays onto' is itself a metaphor that helps us understand a general and abstract idea; another commonly used one for this is of 'mapping' one shape onto another. And I cannot refrain from pointing out that the word 'metaphor' is itself a metaphor, its original meaning being 'to carry over' something from one place to another.

Here is an example of a visual metaphor in contemporary art. It is an installation work by Kum Chi Keung, a Hong Kong artist, titled *Forest*.

Figura 1 - Kum Chi Keung, *Forest*. Installation

Source: author's personal archive

The work consists of a tower of identically constructed birdcages placed against a same size photograph of a tower of apartments such as is very common in Hong Kong. These apartment towers are almost always 40 stories high, of similar general appearance, and many people in Hong Kong live in them. The metaphor lays the idea of birdcages on the idea of some typical Hong Kong apartments.

When I first saw this work, my interpretation was that it was making a negative comment on the apartments. My idea of a birdcage was that they confine birds in small spaces against their will, when birds naturally want to fly free and far, especially to a forest. So I thought the work projected the view that the apartments were confining and too small; people naturally prefer more space. I now see this a (contemporary) Western idea of birdcages and a Western interpretation of the work.

In the same exhibition, I saw another work by Kum Chi Keung. It was called *Protector*（甲).

Figura 2 - Kum Chi Keung, *Protector* (甲), 2001. Installation

Source: author's personal archive

I talked with a local student about this. He said that the overall shape of the arrangement of birdcages is the shape of an ancient protective shirt of armor for a soldier. It also is similar to the shape of the character translated *Protector.* He thought this, together with the title, suggests that the birdcages and the apartment blocks are

to be seen as places of safety rather than of confinement. I now think this was the artist's original intention.

This example illustrates several points about metaphors, including visual ones. One is that, though they carry meanings, metaphors are not like truth claims, which are either right or wrong. Rather, they must be interpreted and there may be more than one interpretation of the same work. Interpretations can judged to be more or less persuasive, more or less insightful, but they are not right or wrong.

Black's analysis provides a way to understand how variations of interpretation come about. The primary and secondary subjects that construct a metaphor, he argues, are not simple self-contained things so much as general ideas, each with a set of associated properties and connotations. Interpretation requires that we select which of the many properties and connotations of the secondary subject are to be mapped onto the primary subject and the selection may vary with both the interpreter and the context. In the case of the above works of Kum Chi Keung, the Hong Kong student and I had different sets of associations with birdcages. No doubt many of our associations were similar but mine included a sense of confinement and a lack of freedom to move at will, while his included protection and safety, perhaps rest, warmth and available food. These associations were surely influenced by our personal experiences in different cultures. I never knew anyone who kept a bird in a cage but I knew of many who spoke of protecting wildlife and their habitats. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, many people keep birds in a cage in their apartment like pets and there is a large public market devoted solely to the buying and selling of birds and cages. The point is that the meanings of metaphors are not universal but are dependent on cultures and persons; and interpretations of them are neither right nor wrong, though they may be more or less appropriate to the artist's intention and the culture of origin.

Parenthetically, I do not mean to suggest that these interpretations exhaust the significance of Keung's works. There is probably much more; for example, there were miniature (artificial) birds in some of his cages, carefully made and of different kinds. Birds can serve as metaphors of, for example, the human soul or the flight of imagination or of reason, and so on (depending on the person and the culture).

Nor do I mean to imply that the artist's intention is the best criterion for the most reasonable interpretation. Once the artist's work is out in the public, it has flown from the nest of his special influence and his opinion is then only one of potentially many. Especially when the work moves to a different culture, its meanings may change.

Black's account makes it clear that the two subjects of a metaphor are *interactive;* that their influence goes both ways. Consider, to use an old example, the metaphor *Museums are the graveyard of art*. The secondary subject (*graveyard*) affects how we think of the primary one (*museums*) and the primary one can make us think differently of the secondary subject too, however slight the difference may be. But Black also argues that the two subjects cannot be reversed, that the primary and secondary subjects cannot change places within the same metaphor. If you reverse a metaphor, he argues, it becomes a different one. If we reverse this example, *graveyards are art museums* is a different metaphor and it has a different set of meanings.

I will argue that, while this may be true of linguistic metaphors, it is often not true of visual ones. In fact, it seems to be one of the characteristics of the visual medium that metaphors can often be read both ways. This, when it happens, makes them more suggestive and richer in meaning than linguistic ones. For example, I first read the birdcages in Keung's works as the secondary subject, as if the metaphor were "apartment blocks are like birdcages." But one could also read it in reverse, as "birdcages are like apartments blocks." It is not clear from the work itself which way it should be read. In fact, this reverse may be the way my Hong Kong friend read it, because it makes it clearer that the birdcages are a place of refuge, rest and maybe food and drink - that they are like home. So, this metaphor can be read in both directions and the result is more meaning and a richer experience. This difference in reversibility seems to be due to the fact that language has a linear grammatical structure that requires the primary subject to precede the secondary one (at least in English), whereas there is no such need in visual imagery. I will give other examples of reversibility later.

In the example just discussed, the metaphor was primarily carried by the subject matter – by what was represented (the apartment blocks) or presented (the birdcages). But other elements of the medium can also be read metaphorically, depending of the

work. There was also meaning in the shapes of the arrangements of cages – as a tower and as a shirt of armor – which we can call their form. Form is a major feature of the visual medium, as are color, line, texture, style, size. There may have been other aspects of these works that were meaningful. The birdcages were carefully made, of particular materials, had a certain shape and proportion, were of the same color, and so on. It is possible that any of these things had connotations of social class or cultural history, or something else. Not knowing much about Chinese birdcages, I do not know.

It is easy to find examples of metaphors that depend on what is represented. I will discuss one more. It is from Charles Forceville, who has the most sustained discussion of pictorial metaphors I have found (FORCEVILLE, 1996, 2008, p. 138**).** It is an advertisement for swimwear by Adidas that pictures a woman wearing a swimsuit diving together in parallel into the sea. The arc of their bodies is elegant; the ad has no colours but is in white and a variety of greys. Across the bottom in large letters is written: ADIDAS SWIMWEAR.

This is a relatively simple metaphor, though it has more than one level of meaning. It parallels the woman with a dolphin and says: The *woman in the swimsuit is a dolphin*. We can almost instantly read this in the subject matter – the pictures of a woman and a dolphin. But the visual form contributes too; for it is relevant that their bodies are shown in parallel and that they have a similar graceful diving posture. This far we can read from the picture without the words; when we read the words, we realize that there is a second metaphor, or perhaps it is a specialization of the first one. It is: *the swimsuit is a dolphin's skin*. This metaphor also depends primarily on what is pictured, especially the close fit of the swimsuit (though the similarity of the greys also helps).

It is worth noticing that even representations like this, which seem to call only for recognition rather than interpretation, may be affected by cultural contexts and hence are interpreted. We often do not notice the presence of metaphor when they are very simple and we can take them for granted. But what if, for instance, the Adidas advertisement was shown in a culture that thinks of dolphins primarily as a luxury food? Or in a culture that disapproves on moral grounds of women wearing swimsuits in public? Where culture is relevant, there is probably a metaphor and vice versa.

Even portraits, which are usually representations of one person only, usually need interpretation. It is a commonplace in art criticism that a good portrait should reveal something of the spirit of the sitter, in which case the structure of the metaphor would be: *the spirit of the sitter is the way the portrait looks*. Very often a portrait portrays the sitter *as* a certain kind of person; as a successful businessman, a baseball player, a fashionable woman; or perhaps simply *as* successful, athletic beautiful. Certainly portraits are not just realistic snapshots. I used to walk to my office through a corridor in which hung a series of portraits of the previous presidents of the university. I was struck by how similar the portraits were: all of older men, dressed in dark clothes, usually sitting, holding a book or a pen and looking serious, or at least unexpressive. In other words, the sitter was portrayed as a stereotype; the portrait laid the same stereotype on each of the individual persons. This is a very common structure of portraits: they portray the sitter *as* a stereotype. Stereotypes of course are cultural constructions and one must be able to recognize the stereotype to interpret the portrait.

It should be noted, incidentally, that a metaphor does not require a work to show both the primary and the secondary subjects. It is often sufficient to show only one. Keung's *Forest* shows both; his *Protector* shows only one. This is true of both linguistic and visual metaphors and it is perhaps one reason why the presence of metaphors is often not noticed (as in the case of portraits).

The *Hollywood Stills* of Cindy Sherman make creative use of this common portrait structure. They feature the figure of Cindy Sherman dressed and posed in such a way as to fit a stereotype of a woman in earlier Hollywood movies, prior to about the 80s. So they might fit the reading: *Cindy Sherman is the stereotype*; but they are more interesting than that.

In one example, the stereotype is of a heroine in an old-fashioned movie, an attractive young woman alone in her kitchen. She is looking back over her shoulder off the camera. There is a strong narrative element to the photograph: she appears surprised by someone who has just entered or said something. There is a slight sense of tension and we know something is about to happen. It is almost certainly a man that has just entered, either an intruder or a lover. This person and situation is easily recognized by anyone familiar with Hollywood movies of that period. Each of the *100 Stills* has this same structure. What is interesting is that Sherman arranges them to

draw attention not to the individual (which is always herself) but to the stereotype laid on her. It makes us reverse the metaphor; instead of saying, as most portraits would, *Sherman is this stereotype*, it says *this stereotype is like Sherman's appearance here*. It draws attention to the stereotype and thereby protests or ridicules Hollywood stereotyping of women. Of course, the common stereotypes of women in contemporary movies have changed greatly and many children in school today do not recognize these older ones, which again shows how culturally dependent such interpretations are.

My examples of visual metaphors so far use primarily what is pictured as material for the metaphor. It is worth noting that the title of Forceville's book carefully announces its limitations: *Pictorial metaphor in advertising.* But the *visual* goes well beyond the *pictorial*. There are other visual elements that may carry a metaphor, as I already noted. These elements often suggest nuances that are harder to put into words than are the pictorial ones and words usually cannot provide a full translation for them.

I will begin with a discussion of form. Metaphors that depend on form often go unnoticed at first but they are very common. Rudolph Arnheim wrote significantly about the meanings that form can convey in art, though it was not in terms of metaphors (ARNHEIM, 1969); and Lakoff picked up on Arnheim's lead in an essay that discusses the neurological basis for the recognition of form (LAKOFF, 2006). An example that they both use is Henry's Moore's 1934 sculpture *Two* (The Museum of Modern Art). It is an abstract work, in which one larger stone reaches toward and over a smaller one. They analyze the larger stone as reaching toward and protecting the smaller one and they compare these shapes convincingly with those in a pictorial work by Corot titled *Mother and Child on the Beach* (LAKOFF, p. 157; ARNHEIM p. 272-273). The theme of mother and child recurs frequently in the work of Henry Moore.

In fact visual form, as Arnheim and Lakoff suggest, is often metaphorical in visual works. Here I will discuss only verticality, one particular element of form, as an example. It is an expressive aspect of many visual works and in dance and theater. For instance, standing vertically – straight and tall - can be a metaphor for good moral character, at least in the West. In art, for instance, there are the well-known figures of the Parisian bourgeoisie in Seurat's Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of the Grande Jatte, showing their morality in their stiff and upright posture in the park after going to church

in the morning (NOCHLIN, 1989). And there is the typical stance of John Wayne in his cowboy movies: he walks and stands vertical, upright, signifying that he is brave and honest. This metaphor seems very suited to the visual and performing media but it often occurs in language too. We say that someone has an upright character or is crooked, stands tall or has low thoughts.

Verticality can also be a metaphor for a religious orientation, for looking upward to God and trying to do what is religiously right. The vertical lines of the fifteenth century Perpendicular style of British churches (as in, e.g., Winchester Cathedral or King's College Chapel) makes much use of this. Another well-known example is the Washington monument in Washington D.C.

What is striking about the monument is the simplicity of the form. There is no ornamentation, no complexity, no attempt to picture anything. It is simply a very large tapering column, square in cross-section, pointing vertically to the sky. Everything depends on the form and the size. This simplicity itself can be read as a metaphor: it says that Washington was a simple man who lacked ornamentation and had only one goal in mind. The height says that Washington was a man of grand moral character and the verticality that he was a pious man reaching toward God. These metaphors and meanings are all present in this one simple form - and of course there may be more, and they are all no doubt affected by culture. This is different from the way metaphors work in language. For a linguistic sentence to contain more than one metaphor is usually considered a sign of muddled thinking – we call them *mixed metaphors* and regard them as confusing. In the visual medium, they create not confusion but enrichment. Many visual works contain several metaphors and we have no sense of confusion.

Style is another element of the medium that may be read metaphorically. One aspect of Seurat's creativity was to paint with controlled dots of primary colors, in the Pointillist style so well known to schoolteachers. Many critics have commented that this style was influenced by a scientific theory of light and color of the time: it was an attempt to paint light in a scientific manner – a part of Seurat's reaction to the more impromptu and animated brushstrokes of the Impressionists. If so, the Pointillist style is a metaphor. It maps our idea of actual color and light onto the color and light presented by the painting; it says, in effect, *real light is the painted light***;** this is what

color and light are really like. Here the advantage of the visual medium over a linguistic one is obvious; one can hardly at all express the quality of real light and color in words.

In the same way one could say that the Impressionist styles against which Seurat was reacting are metaphors. In Van Gogh's well-known *Starry Night,* for example, the agitation of the brushstrokes is generally taken as an expression of Van Gogh's emotional life. The metaphor is: *Van Gogh's emotional state is the agitation of Starry Night.* This applies to the style of most of his mature work. Whether all artistic styles can be read metaphorically, I am not sure, but there is an old saying that "the style reveals the man"; in other words, *the character of the artist is the character of the style*.

I want briefly to say something about the role of metaphor in creative activity. After all, the first association many people have for the word 'metaphor' is with creativity. Many of the examples I have discussed are not creative and the metaphors behind them are often not even seen as metaphors. The portrait metaphor (*X is the stereotype of a university president)* is usually taken for granted and a portraitist who uses it is not, in that respect, creative. Sherman's creativity was to have found a way to make us notice it. Much of what I have said above is meant to draw attention to the presence of metaphors where we would not usually see them. That is the explicit purpose of much of the writing of Lakoff and Johnson and a main function of any theory of metaphor: to bring awareness of metaphors that underlie the way we think in various media. They argue that this awareness gives us more control of our interpretations of (in their case, linguistic) meanings and it enables us to be more critical of them. They care especially about unnoticed political metaphors, such as *Washington is the father of the country* (LAKOFF, 2002). Hence they are not much interested in creative metaphors, which are the ones most people notice; not is that my topic here.

However, since as art educators we are always interested in promoting creativity, I want to point out that metaphors often spark creativity in art. I have already described the use that Sherman makes of the portrait structure in the *100 Hollywood Stills.* Each one of the Stills is a creative work and the controlling metaphor stimulates the idea for each new one. The creativity of each is in the imaginative detail of pose and clothing that reveals still another recognizable stereotype. Many contemporary artists work in series, using a basic metaphor, with each work in the series a variation

on it. Deborah Butterfield's horses are an instance. Each one is made of found pieces of wood or metal. The basic metaphor is *this arrangement of sticks or metal is a horse* and *even this piece of wood is a horse's tail*. In the latter case, the metaphor stems from the material, from the character of the piece of wood that suggests a horse's tail. The creativity in each work lies largely in the selection of particular pieces for their ability to carry such a metaphor in and their arrangement to suggest it. Liu Bolin's series *Hiding in the City* is another example, and so is Monet's *Water Lily* paintings. I believe this general structure of variation on a basic metaphor is also a good way to stimulate creative work with students.

In summary, I have tried to suggest that metaphors are what allows visual artworks to have more than simple representational meanings and what allows us to interpret them. I have also discussed a structure of metaphor in general that enables us to understand why interpretations differ and especially how they depend on cultural knowledge. I think this is the basic argument for the view that we can learn about other cultures through the study of artworks.

Visual metaphors are found at several levels in paintings: I offered examples of metaphors at the pictorial level, in visual form and in styles of painting. Visual metaphors are different from linguistic ones in that they can often be read backwards and forwards and in that several metaphors can co-exist in the same work without creating confusion. This means that they can be richer and more suggestive than linguistic ones. The basic purpose was to suggest a theory of the way in which visual works have meanings and some ways of teaching the interpretation of artworks to students.

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