Interpreting Art through Metaphors

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Abstract

This article argues that much of the meaning of artworks comes through metaphors, though we do not always recognise them as such. The argument draws on the work of Lakoff & Johnson, who assert a similar claim about metaphors in general (especially in language). It analyses the notion of a visual metaphor, gives a number of illustrations and claims that, contrary to linguistic metaphors, there can usefully be more than one visual metaphor ('mixed metaphors') active in a visual image and that visual metaphors can be interpreted in both directions. Verticality is presented as one basic metaphor in visual images.

JADE 29.3 (2010)

I have always been interested in how we think in the visual arts [1]. Most art educators believe nowadays that the arts call for thinking of some sort and that the thinking involved is at least as demanding and subtle as the thinking cultivated in other subjects, like science and maths. But most people *not* in our field still do *not* believe this – they tend to see art as an easy subject, as a matter of sensitivity or talent of some kind, but not of thinking. I believe one reason for the difference is that we have such difficulty in explaining what thinking in the arts is like.

I first became interested in the topic during the time of what is now called the 'first generation' of 'cognitive science' in the 1960s and 1970s. The most influential people writing about thinking in the arts at that time probably were:

- Rudolph Arnheim and his notion of thinking in a medium and of solving the problems set by a medium;
- Nelson Goodman and the notion of the languages of art, with the associated ideas of aesthetic literacy;
- Howard Gardner and the idea of multiple intelligences.

This generation understood thinking as, fundamentally, the manipulation of mental representations (or symbols) of reality. One common model for thinking was the computer, which of course is programmed to manipulate symbols. The representations did not have to be verbal ones; they could be formed in any medium, including in visual imagery. But the first generation struggled to explain how this idea worked in the visual arts. What were the key elements of visual mental representations? How were they manipulated? As I think we all now know, this idea works poorly with visual material (and does not do well in linguistic areas either).

There is now a second generation of cognitive science that connects thinking more directly with the body. It stresses the origination of mind in bodily experience and sees thinking as inherently analogical rather than digital in character. I believe these developments are more hospitable to how we think in the arts.

An influential version is the work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999), who see metaphor as the fundamental way in which we elaborate meanings from our bodily experiences. This is the basis of my own current work. There has been a resurgent interest in metaphors in the last twenty years, stimulated in part by Lakoff & Johnson, but most of it has been about verbal metaphors. There has been relatively little writing about the nature of visual metaphors or of metaphors in any medium other than language. Visual metaphors are the focus of this article. In particular, I am interested in whether and how metaphors in a visual medium are different from metaphors in a verbal one.

The work of Max Black, an older Anglo-American philosopher, is the standard reference for the view that metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and not just a figure of language (Black 1962, 1979). Metaphors, he argued, are fundamentally conceptual in character and can be developed in any suitable medium. Although most of the metaphors he talked about are linguistic, they can occur in any suitable medium.

On Black's account, a metaphor requires two subjects, which he calls the primary and secondary subjects (1979). So, in the metaphor *Museums are the graveyard of art* (this is not Black's example), the two subjects are *museums* and *graveyards*. *Museums* is the primary subject and *graveyards* is the secondary. A metaphor, according to Black, maps some of the qualities of the secondary subject onto the primary one. In this example, it maps some of the qualities of graveyards onto museums.

It is important to see that a 'subject' here – *museums*, *graveyards* – is more than a simple, self-contained thing. It is rather a set of associated properties, a complex of connotations, often called a 'domain'. So it is always a question in interpreting a metaphor which of the many properties or connotations of the secondary subject are to be mapped onto the primary one. This is in part a matter of context, of both personal and cultural contexts. This is the main reason why the meaning of metaphors can vary with cultures and persons.

Both creating and interpreting a metaphor may also be a matter of creativity. You can create a new meaning by choosing which qualities of the secondary subject belong to the primary one. In this example, when we ask what the metaphor says about

museums, we must decide which of the qualities of *graveyards* are to be mapped onto *museums*.

For example, here are some properties of graveyards that might be relevant:

- Graveyards contain dead bodies. Mapping this onto museums suggests the meaning: *museums contain dead works of art, not live and vibrant ones*.
- Graveyards give careful information notices of the names and dates of the bodies.
- Graveyards are solemn and boring places.

But there are some properties of graveyards that are irrelevant in this metaphor in most contexts:

- Graveyards don't have seats for visitors to sit on.
- The dominant colours in graveyards are green (the grass) and grey (the tombstones).

The point is that the metaphor suggests *some* similarities between the two subjects and not others, and it is not always obvious which are the most relevant. Which properties of the secondary subject are to be mapped onto the primary subject is the heart of the interpretation. Therefore a metaphor is not a simple point-by-point comparison nor is it like a scientific truth claim. This, of course, is what provides room for creativity. In short, on this view the two subjects, each considered as a complex of connotations, interact in ways that are only partly predictable and that may differ from person to person or from culture to culture.

Note that this account of metaphor is an *interactive* one: that is, as Black rightly claims, the influence goes both ways. The secondary subject (*graveyards*) affects how we think of the primary subject (*museums*) and the primary one makes us think of the secondary topic in a different way too, however slight. *Museums are graveyards* makes us think a little differently about graveyards.

Black also thinks that the two subjects in a metaphor cannot be reversed: that is, 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. *Graveyards are museums* is different from *Museums are graveyards*.

I will argue, however, that this is not always, or even often, true of visual metaphors. There are many cases in the visual arts where the metaphor runs both ways and where it makes little sense to ask which subject is primary and which is secondary. This is one way in which visual metaphors can differ from linguistic ones and, so I will argue, they are more suggestive or rich because of it. The difference seems to be 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.

The most developed discussion of visual metaphors I have found is by Charles Forceville, in *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (Forceville 1996). Forceville focuses on imagery in advertising, not on art, and this may explain his agreement with Black that the primary and secondary subjects cannot be switched in the same metaphor. Advertisements use visual metaphors because they can communicate a message that contains both emotion and ideas very quickly and interestingly. But the message in advertising needs to be predictable and to run only one way. An advertising metaphor that could be read in both directions would likely be bad for business.

An example from Forceville is an advertisement for Adidas swimwear that parallels a woman in a swimsuit diving into a pool with a leaping dolphin re-entering the water. Both are caught in mid-air in a very graceful gesture. This is a simple metaphor. We could formulate its structure this way: *Woman in swimsuit is a dolphin.* Of the many properties of dolphins (the secondary subject), the ones that seem to be suggested for transfer are:

- elegance of movement,
- a natural swimmer,
- the close smooth fit of the dolphin's skin.

In this case the metaphor would clearly change if we reversed the subjects: *dolphin is a woman in swimsuit* is a different metaphor, even though the original makes us think of the dolphin's skin as something like a swimsuit.

Figure 1
Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, oil on canvas, 81 ¾ × 121 ¼ in. (207.5 × 308.1 cm), Helen Birch Memorial Collection, 1926.224, The Art Institute of Chicago. © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Then what does metaphor look like in art, rather than advertising? Figure 1 is an example.

I will discuss Seurat's *Grande Jatte* in part because it is not contemporary but is an old and well-known one that most of us will be familiar with. Moreover, it is commonly studied in schools. I think it has several layers of metaphor, some less obvious than others.

To begin with, the principal figures presented in the *Grande Jatte* are rather stiff and they are often seen as modelled on classical figures, especially figures from the traditions of the old Roman Republic. This can be thought of as part of Seurat's reaction to the Impressionist painters that preceded him, such as Van Gogh and Renoir. Interpreted this way, the metaphor is *the citizens of Paris are ancient Romans*: that is, they are admirable, upright, virtuous models of citizenship in a Republic. Note that the secondary subject in this case, the citizens of ancient Rome, are not shown in the work. We must already have an idea of what ancient Roman citizens were like for this metaphor to work; it is obviously culturally dependent.

It may be worth noting that there are many artworks that have this same structure: *the person represented has the qualities of some culturally well-known group;* or: *X is that-well-known-kind-of person.* Many portraits have this structure. For example, portraits of soldiers usually show them as stereotyped military figures of their culture; portraits of presidents emphasise appropriate stereotypes; of beautiful women, the same. This kind of metaphor obviously relies on the cultural knowledge of the viewer. The viewer has to be familiar with the stereotype of a soldier, a president, a beautiful woman, of the time, otherwise the portrait cannot evoke that stereotype. In general, we could say that routine portraits gain much of their force from their pictorial role: that is, from what they picture – the individual in terms of the stereotype. For this reason, the point of the metaphor is relatively easy to express in words.

This is the kind of metaphor that Forceville examines in advertising – hence the title of his book: *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. But the *visual* goes beyond the *pictorial*. It includes visual elements that do not simply picture but never-

theless affect the meaning. These visual elements are harder to put into words than are the pictorial and words never provide a sufficient translation of them.

For example, Goya's portrait titled *The Family of Charles IV* is usually thought to be critical of the sitters, even though the king commissioned it and accepted it with praise. Gardner calls this one a 'menagerie of human grotesques' and 'a revelation of stupidity, pomposity and vulgarity' (1980, 731). This reading relies on the visual, rather than the pictorial, character of the work. It relies on the color of Charles' face, for example, the gesture of the queen, the expression in the eyes of the aunt; these things are metaphors for the character of the family. The more such visual qualities are important, the less the meaning can easily be translated into language. I will try to identify metaphors like these that are inherently visual, rather than those that rely on pictorial representations.

Back to *The Grande Jatte*. There are other metaphors in this complex work. For example, there is another interpretation of the peculiar upright stiffness of the most prominent figures. These figures are parading in the park after church on Sunday afternoon, displaying their morality and social virtue. And that morality appears to be based on a strict, even puritanical, control of nature. Linda Nochlin (1989) has argued that their morality is visible in both the restrictive character of their gestures and in the character of the park around. The erect postures, frozen movements, joyless expressions, clipped topiary trees in the background, the monkey on a leash, are all part of a metaphor for the careful control – we might almost say the repression – of nature, which is the heart of the morality. It is hard to do justice to this idea with words; a translation would be something like: *the morality of middle-class Parisians is like the way the painted people and the park appear*.

This interpretation is additional to the previous one – that the figures are like ancient Roman citizens. Both are based on the stiff erect figures of the people. In verbal works, when we use two metaphors at the same time, we call it a case of 'mixed metaphor' and it is regarded as a confusing fault. But I think in this case, and with visual metaphors in general, the two metaphors do not so much conflict as add to each other. They add richness to the work and the viewer is free to accept one or the other or both at once. This difference is again because the visual medium does not have the linear structure of the verbal.

Metaphor also seems to be at work here at another level: the level of the style. One aspect of Seurat's creativity was to paint with controlled dots of varied colours, in the Pointillist style so well known to school teachers. Many critics have commented that this style was influenced by a scientific theory of light of the time; it was an attempt to paint light in a scientific manner – and was another aspect of Seurat's reaction to the more impromptu and animated brushstrokes of the Impressionists. On this account, the style itself is a metaphor. It maps the colour and light presented by the painting onto colour and light in general; it says, in effect, *the painted light is real light*. Here the inadequacy of words to the meaning and the advantage of the visual medium are quite striking; one can hardly at all express the quality of the light and colour in words.

In the same way, of course, one could say that the styles against which Seurat was reacting – Van Gogh's style, for one – was also a metaphor. For example, the agitation of the brush strokes in Van Gogh's *Starry night* is usually taken to be a metaphor for the agitation Van Gogh's emotional life.

I want to connect my argument with the work of Lakoff & Johnson. As I said earlier, they have written extensively about metaphors and what they add to Black is the argument that metaphors arise from our bodily experience, a claim that is highly suggestive for the arts.

They argue that metaphors have their origins in our basic early experiences. Our nervous systems organise themselves around recurring sensorimotor and perceptual experiences into neurological patterns and we later map these patterns onto our subjective experience. This mapping enables us to think about our subjective experience, which is both emotional and cognitive, in ways that make it far more elaborate and intelligible than it would otherwise be. An example is the metaphor *love is warmth*. This originates, Lakoff & Johnson argue, in the experience

of being a baby held closely by mother and later it allows us to think about love in certain ways: to think of characters as being emotionally warm or cold, a love affair as being hot or cool, or to warn others not to play with fire.

Another example is *knowing is grasping,* which originates in early experiences of grasping. A baby first comes to know the world through grasping it, with both mouth and hands. This allows us later to speak of understanding as grasping an argument, of holding a thought in mind, of chewing on an idea and so on.

Metaphors, then, according to Lakoff & Johnson, map sensorimotor and perceptual experience onto emotional and cognitive experience. *Love is closeness* and *knowing is grasping* both have the basic structure: *emotional life is sensorimotor and perceptual experience.* In this way, metaphors make an enormous contribution to our understanding of ourselves and of the world. They are the principal way in which we elaborate meanings and they constitute a fundamental connection between body and mind.

My interest is to suggest what this might mean for the visual arts, because Lakoff & Johnson are not much concerned with either creative metaphors nor with visual ones. One way to look for visual, as opposed to just pictorial, metaphors, is to choose some quality that is inherently part of a visual medium, as are the face of the aunt in the Goya and the light in the Seurat. I choose the idea of the vertical to explore as a final example.

Verticality has an intrinsically visual dimension, as well as a sensorimotor one. It is an expressive aspect of many visual works, and is also present in dance and theatre, and it can often express more than is easily put into words.

Being vertical, standing up straight, is used in two common visual metaphors. One, which I have already discussed, has to do with character and morality. It is that *being moral is standing vertically*. This occurs in both language and in visual works. We speak of an upright character, of standing tall, of falling into error or into sin, of slipping morally, of being crooked in character. My example above was the upright postures of the citizens in the *Grande Jatte*. Its basic structure was: *standing vertically is good moral character*.

Figure 2
The Washington Monument

Many such visual metaphors have to do with height as well as verticality.

Consider the Washington monument in Washington, DC, where there is no attempt to picture anything. One can say of this that the metaphor, trite as it is, is wholly dependent on the visual character of the work. The metaphor, hard to express in words, is something like *vertical height is grandeur of character.* We may say also that. In this work, *simplicity of shape* and *reaching toward heaven* are metaphors of moral character. And though these verbal formulations make the metaphor seem trite, the exact shape of the monument, its gradual slope, it final point, its placement and so on give it much more specificity and meaning – that is to say, its visual character, which is read metaphorically, cannot easily be put into words.

Examples are commonplace in the history of art. Think of the pyramids, for examples, or the medieval cathedrals. Here is my last example, a more extended one:

Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* clearly requires some cultural context. It is one of a number of well-known paintings of

mountains in the American West produced in the mid nineteenth century. It was the time of the westward movement of pioneers when the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada mountains were still being explored. Pictures like this were very popular in the east, which was relatively flat. There is a religious feeling to this work, a sense of majesty, of wonder and sublimity. These qualities are produced by the patterns of light and colour in the clouds, the suggestion of the sun, and especially the towering height of the mountains. We can say it is a visual metaphor for God: *the glory of God is the glory of the painted mountain.* And because Americans of the time thought that God had given them this new land in which to create a new society, the metaphor was also for them about the possibilities of that land. They would also have said: *the future of America is the glory of the painted mountain*.

Notice that in this case the religious metaphor could easily be reversed and the resulting interpretation would not be very different. We could as easily read it as *the Glory of the Mountain is the Glory of God* where the majesty, wonder, sublimity of God are transferred to the mountain. In fact, it was during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that people in the Western world changed their attitude to mountains in just this way. Instead of seeing mountains as dangerous and difficult places, obviously inferior to flat land, they began to see them as glorious and sublime, the pristine works of God. Art like Bierstadt's taught this lesson in a powerfully direct visual way.

In summary, I have tried to suggest that the work of Max Black and of Lakoff & Johnson, taken together, offer a way of interpreting the meanings of artworks through metaphors. Visual metaphors are found at several levels in paintings: at the pictorial level, in representation itself, in painting styles, and in purely visual elements of the media. Visual metaphors can be 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. For these reasons, visual metaphors can be more suggestive and ambiguous than linguistic ones.

Note

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the InSEA World Conference held in Osaka, Japan, in August, 2008.

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Figure 3
Albert Bierstadt, *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*. Bequest of Helen Huntington Hull, 1977.107.1, Smithsonian American Art Museum.