



VISUAL METAPHORS AND AESTHETICS

A Formalist Theory of Metaphor

MICHALLE GAL

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Visual Metaphors and Aesthetics

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A Formalist Theory of Metaphor

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Preface

Visual metaphors are ubiquitous in our offices, streets, museums, and homes. One only has to visit a one-dollar store to see objects such as a piano-shaped sharpener, a cactus-shaped desk organizer, or a popsicle eraser. Our attachments to the iconic forms that accompany us through our lives ought not to be taken lightly by philosophy. The gravitas of the metaphor is a Rosetta Stone in the philosophy of human nature and ontology. Furnishing our surroundings, metaphors reach all the way from mundane objects to poetics from the utterly familiar to poesis, art forms, and scientific breakthroughs. Metaphors can find their inspiration in the fleeting form of a passing cloud appearing as possessing a face or in the long gaze of a bedroom cabinet knobs. The phenomenon of metaphor progresses and solidifies into designs such as a lemon-shaped purse, or an alligator nutcracker entitled *Sweetheart*, as well as a reconstruction of life to be a journey, and a perspective-based Renaissance painting to be a window. Both Knowledge and the *White Tree* building in Montpellier (see Figure 14) complete the image of a tree with its roots, trunk, and branches, each in its own way.

Intellectual bewilderment at this immensely discussed phenomenon directs us to question what drives us to persistently reconstruct anew nature and artifacts, concepts, sounds, behaviors, cognitions, objects, and situations. My own answer is that it is an aesthetic motivation, fundamentally connected to the primary role that form plays in our lives, alongside our natural fascination with the power of composition. We are visual creatures: designing and perceiving reality through forms; reaching both banal and intellectual heights through the power of sensuous, external compositions.

Metaphors originate in the external sphere. We experience a physical depth and use it to reconstruct thought, because the composition of deep thought has beauty and richness. A sight of a solid or collapsing building can allude to reconstructing theories that solidify or collapse. Attached to the form of a face, we apply it to almost everything—everything may stare at us. The iconic form of a lemon wedge reconstructs a purse to be one. Metaphor is not a matter of a conceptual understanding or widening the semantic extension of predicates. It is an ontological composition. We are so metaphorical because metaphors, visual,

linguistic, or conceptual, are essentially visual, and there is nothing more influential for us than the visual sphere.

I endorse the new voices that distinguish our era as going through a visual turn, and the admiration they hold for former canonical visual theories of the human being, thought, and cognition. Therefore, I make it a point in this book to offer a comprehensive reintroduction of magisterial visual theories, by Arnheim, Gombrich, Aldrich, and Housman, and then by Goodman and Beardsley. Their brilliant accounts of visual metaphor are rarely mentioned in the current literature, though they are prominent in visual theory. It is this framework, which points to the visual as the right sphere to focus a philosophical study on human nature and reality, that allows us to grasp the essence of metaphor. The ruling theory of metaphor from the 1980s onwards is a conceptualist one, which was favored by almost every single discipline, with open arms and little critique.

Contrary to the ruling conceptual theory of metaphor, externalism is the appropriate philosophical point of departure for the philosophy of metaphors. This closes the age of the linguistic and conceptual era of metaphors. Visual metaphors, rather than conceptual or linguistic, are paradigmatic. I denominate this the “visualist definition of metaphor.”

A visualist ontological theory of metaphors is the primary objective of this book, insofar as I define metaphor as an aesthetic ontological construction, founded in visuality and the wonderfully rich possibilities that only the visual sphere can offer: the power of compositions. Metaphor, I claim, consists in *three parts*, rather than the two parts commonly propounded in literature—the source and target. These two elements are indeed two parts of metaphor, although they combine to constitute a third, significant, part: emergent properties. Emergent properties are those that are created by the fresh reconstruction of the target, drawing upon properties of the source and fusing them with those of the target. These lose their former identity—and are no longer distinguished separately—being possessed *only* by the metaphorical structure.

Metaphor is a form of composition that enables metaphorical properties to emerge. Compositions, established in antiquity, are powerful. They supply a context to the elements of metaphor that proffers significance thanks to their organization, mutual relations, and influences. A red stain in a green composition gains a specific unique composition-bound character. The same goes with depth, which is combined with thought in a composition. As we see the form of the 2019 *White Tree* building in Montpellier, or a tree shape combined with knowledge in the Cartesian metaphor, what emerges is an entirely different property. Disciplines as branches are different from balconies that branch off the

trunk. These are the emerging third part of the metaphor: the essential constitutive parts, but they are also based on visual (or sensuous) abilities. I contend that visual metaphors are best placed to embody metaphoricity and are, to this end, paradigmatic. Conceptual or linguistic metaphors are founded on the visual construction.

This book is divided into six interrelated chapters and a Conclusion, arranged in deliberately didactic linearity. Chapter 1, “The Visual Dimension of Metaphors: Framework and Main Argument,” presents the conceptual framework which is used in the book. I propose the argument that metaphor is an external, visual, ontological medium, that involves arranging categories and properties. I draw on the “attachment to forms” argument to explore the motivation of creating metaphors. This argument is aided by an analysis of the paradigmatic example of face metaphors and metaphors that are based on familiar forms: Gombrich’s theory of Pygmalion Power and metaphor followed by Goodman constructivism are noted here. The framework of this argument is the current visual turn, which is introduced as supporting the need to redefine metaphors in visual terms. Finally, I argue that while metaphor is an imagistic-aesthetic phenomenon, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ study of metaphors has been mainly led by a semantic-cognitivist model of metaphors followed by a conceptualist-cognitivist one. Therefore, I conclude the chapter by claiming that now is the time for philosophy to resolve the discrepancy in the field of metaphors.

Chapters 2 and 3 are respectively devoted to critical comprehensive surveys of the semantic and conceptual theories of metaphors that took over the stage in the 1980s. Conceptualism is presented as an internalist theory, which defines metaphor as an abstract cognition that is understood by referencing one to another. The external metaphors are but entailments of it. I track two main critical disadvantages of the conceptualist model, resulting from missing the power and significance of the visual sphere. The first is inconsistency, that is, it simultaneously points to mental content as the source of metaphor and external experiences as enabling this content. Second, it lacks the grasp of the emergent compositional and particular essence of each metaphor, which can neither be explained nor covered by a conceptual scheme. The survey on conceptualism in metaphor presents the main conceptualist theories of metaphors, such as the ones formulated by Lakoff and Johnson, Kovács, Gibbs, Fauconnier and Turner, Hampe, Steen, and Indurkha. Additionally, I present critique from within the conceptualist school followed by new embodied-cognition theories, which manifest understanding that the conceptualist model is not enough to describe the human being.

This leads us to the fourth chapter: “The Advent of the Visual Perspective of Metaphors.” Here I follow the line of thought that the visualists such as Gombrich, Arnheim, and Aldrich bravely developed amid a predominantly linguistic century. It is their early visualist theories that enabled the current visual turn to take place. They had acknowledged the status of the visual sphere in our ontology and lives and our visual nature, expanding theories of cognition and thinking to externalist approaches, and offering a constructivist theory of perception. Additionally, they were the first to detect visual metaphors and to address them theoretically. Their theories are very helpful for the next two chapters, which are devoted to the new visualist theory of metaphor, which presented both as an opposition to the conceptualist one and a positive autonomous one by itself.

Chapter 5, “Metaphors and Ontology,” details the emerging third part of the metaphor, the ontological component, followed by an according theory of constructive metaphorical perception and an argument for the paradigmatic status of visual metaphors. I proffer an account of metaphor through the lens of material culture and everyday aesthetics. I do so to support the claim that metaphor is an ontological structure.

Chapter 6, “New Terminology for Metaphors: Visuality and Affordance,” calls for a terminological shift from the conceptualist term of “understanding” to one of “affordance,” which is the visualist consecutive term of “emergence.” “Affordance,” coined by Gibson, who was in discourse with the early visualists, is logically related, if not equivalent, to their notion of the power of the object and its dynamic character. However, it goes further by bringing us closer to the current visual metaphor theory and its corresponding theoretical visual turn. It is based on the *externalist* assertion that a theory may advance from the perception of visuality of surfaces, to the perception of what they afford owing to their ontological structure. Reintroducing ontology as the sphere of metaphors, adjoined with grasping metaphors’ own materials, perceptual dynamics, and abilities to invite their own categorization, leads me to define metaphor in terms of its own space of possible relations with its audience. Characterizing metaphor in terms of visuality, emergence, and affordance leads directly to the Conclusion, which sums up by presenting a nine-part externalist and visualist definition of metaphor.