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## Visual Metaphors and Cognition: Revisiting the Non-Conceptual

### 1. The Challenge

Let us look at Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Bull* from 1943 – a beautiful example of visual metaphor (Figure 1). It ought to be labeled “metaphor” because its structure is such that a predicate, “being a bull”, travels from its *source* domain, animals, to a foreign domain to be attributed to a *target*, the saddle and handlebar of the bicycle in this case, to structure it anew. A bull, a metaphorical one but nonetheless a bull, is created. I opened with a visual metaphor because I think the visual is the paradigmatic kind of metaphor, rather than the conceptual or the linguistic ones. We will soon advance to these kinds to show that they as well are based on visibility.



*Figure 1: Pablo Picasso, Head of a Bull, 1943.*

The terms “target” and “source” were introduced to the discussion on metaphor in the aftermath of the 1980 publication of Lakoff

and Johnson's canonical book *Metaphors We Live By*.<sup>1</sup> Respectively replacing the terms "tenor" or "focal point", and "vehicle" or "frame", they are now commonly used in the literature. Lakoff and Johnson, as is well-known, offer a conceptual-cognitivist theory of metaphor, claiming that metaphor does not merely originate in the conceptual mind, but is also conceptual through and through. They do use the term "structure" to describe the metaphorical faculty. For example, when analyzing ARGUMENT IS WAR, which they label a "conceptual metaphor", they argue that "we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. ... Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war."<sup>2</sup> Regarding THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, they claim: "The parts of the concept BUILDING that are used to structure the concept THEORY are the foundation and the outer shell."<sup>3</sup> However, for Lakoff and Johnson, the metaphor itself dwells in the cognitive epistemological stratum and is merely reflected in our literal language or experience or reality. They define metaphor as "*understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*", rather than as a linguistic unit, let alone a visual or a material one.

By contrast, I offer a formalist, non-cognitivist and non-conceptualist theory of metaphor as a matter of composition and of visibility or materiality. Metaphors, I argue, belong to the visual-ontological sphere. They both originate and are structured there. What enables us to understand one concept in terms of another is the compositions and structural possibilities that the visual sphere offers us: the visibility of buildings whose properties are applied to theories. Those are applied as predicates to structure "theory" anew – e.g., for theory to have foundations and shell, to be solid and well supported,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms first occur in George Lakoff and Zoltán Kövecses, "The Cognitive Model of Anger Inherent in American English", Linguistics Department, University of California at Berkeley, May, 1983, and are further exploited in the 2nd edition of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed., pp. 4 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52.

or alternatively to collapse and fall apart. “Theory” is consequently accepted as a (peripheral or outlandish) member in the category of buildings, and a metaphor is created.

Lakoff and Johnson use the term “structure” to describe what I perceive as two metaphorical stages: they claim that “the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured” as well as that “our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world.”<sup>4</sup> The first use unexpectedly implies that there is some epistemological stratum which precedes the conceptual system. This is inconsistent with their conceptualist theoretical framework. More importantly, the second use just leads into the wrong direction. Metaphor is indeed a structure. But, if at all, the concepts of “theory-building” or “argument-war” are enabled by external-visual metaphorical compositions, rather than the other way around. These compositions reconfigure theory or argument and attach them to the categories of buildings or wars. Unintentionally, this order is logically necessitated by Lakoff’s and Johnson’s model itself. The possibility of the metaphor “argument is dance” (rather than war) in a different culture – where the participants are performers who aim to reach a balance rather than rivals who aim to win – is typical. And if metaphors are socially, conventionally, or physically bound, then understanding or conceptualizing metaphor comes second, and metaphorical external-visual structure or composition, i.e., the metaphor itself, comes first. Hence conceptual metaphors are actually not the most challenging case for the Visuality of Metaphors argument.

## 2. Metaphors and Non-Conceptualism

Drawing on the non-conceptualist terminology and arguments that were formulated in the course of the last two decades by Christopher Peacocke and Sean Kelly, one may take the proposition above a bit further: not only is it the case that metaphors are not founded on an internal conceptual system, but it also holds that what renders the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 3.

bicycle parts a bull's head (source) in Picasso's visual metaphor cannot be captured conceptually. It is a composition. It is the way in which the saddle and the handlebar, the target of the metaphor, are positioned, as well as their interrelations. Moreover, this composition is endowed with what Nelson Goodman accurately named "syntactic density" or "repleteness" to characterize the function of "aesthetic symbols" – where every single feature of the symbol counts: position, line, thickness, shape, etc.<sup>5</sup> In my view, repleteness and density are the aesthetic sub-categories of the general fine-grainedness of the experienced reality and its representational content. Peacocke asserts that those are beyond conceptual content. Mostly relevant here is his emphasis that in describing the fine-grained phenomenology, "we need the notion of the experience representing things or events or places or times, given in a certain way, as having certain properties or as standing in certain relations, also as given in a certain way". For example, Ernst Mach's cube "that can be perceived either as a square or as a regular diamond".<sup>6</sup> Kelly adds that the main features of non-conceptual perceptual content are "the dependence of a perceived object on the perceptual context in which it is perceived, and the dependence of a perceived property on the object it is perceived to be a property of."<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, and in line with Lakoff and Johnson, prominent conceptualists such as John McDowell and John Searle claim that all experiences with representational content, namely, a content which represents a perception of an external thing, have conceptual mental

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Peacocke, "Does Perception Have Nonconceptual Content?", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 98, no. 5 (2001), pp. 239–264, the quoted lines on pp. 240 f.

<sup>7</sup> Sean D. Kelly, "The Non-Conceptual Content of Perceptual Experience: Situation Dependence and Fineness of Grain", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 62, no. 3 (May, 2001), pp. 601–608, the quoted lines on p. 602.

content.<sup>8</sup> For them, a perception of a thing depends on possessing its concept. Then again, in characterizing aesthetic ontology and perception, especially of metaphors, it is evident that the conceptualist approach will not suffice.

So, while conceptualists claim that the representational content of experience is always conceptual, non-conceptualists claim that there is a content that is not captured by concepts, yet at the same time representational, intentional, and specified. This non-conceptualist terminology is useful, perhaps necessary, for the discussion of aesthetic ontology and perception. The features of non-conceptual content are the very features that characterize their ontological derivation, namely, aesthetic compositions and their abilities to invoke a specific perception of it. It is no doubt the case of a phenomenon such as visual metaphor.

In *Head of a Bull* the compositional elements exemplify the chain of dependence of perception: the reconstruction of the saddle and the bar depends on their perceptual context. The properties of shape and form which are shown forth to be perceived, which Goodman labels “exemplified properties”, depend on the object they are properties of and its position. This all culminates in some kind of a bull’s head, which can be somewhat classified as such. Though it is peripheral in the category of bull’s head, it is both structured and perceived as one. It is a bull’s head and at the same time it is not. This dialectical attribution of a predicate, this dialectical construction which is accompanied with the viewer’s aesthetic experience, cannot be fully conceptualized *as long as the metaphor is alive*. My very attempt to literally describe it here is actually harmful, since it forces linguistic or conceptual order on the *visual*, freezes the non-conceptual living and productive visual metaphor into conceptuality and turns it into a dead metaphor at most.

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<sup>8</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994; “The Content of Perceptual Experience”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 175 (1994), pp. 190–205.

### 3. The Visuality of (All) Metaphors

Analyzing this visual aspect of metaphors, I propose a theory of metaphor that characterizes *visuality* as its essence. Metaphorical structuring, creating or transfiguring, as well as metaphorical conceiving or understanding one thing as another, is *a visual ability*. Metaphorical mechanism is a predication – assigning a predicate to an object – by means of producing nonconventional structures or compositions, namely, by compositional, or even aesthetic, means. The argument here is that this mechanism of innovative predication is intrinsically



Figure 2: Pablo Picasso, Baboon and Young, 1951.

ontological, because its result is a transfiguration of the thing, subsuming it under an additional category. Consequently, metaphor is a dialectical phenomenon in the following respect: while it disrupts the order of ontological categories, its structure portrays this disruption harmonious, or at least attributes rightness to it. It is established on disorder and rightness of composition at the same time. This very mechanism of metaphor is visual-material, rather than conceptual. It is a mechanism of *syntactic structure, forms and material composition*, which goes along with perception of structures and of compositions.

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This definition is aimed to apply to the various kinds of metaphors: to visual and material metaphors such as Picasso's *Head of a Bull* or his *Baboon and Young*, 1951 (Figure 2), Claes Oldenburg's



*Figure 3: Claes Oldenburg, Giant Soft Drum Set, 1969.*



*Figure 4: French Fries and Ketchup, 1963.*

*Giant Soft Drum Set*, 1969 (Figure 3) or his *French Fries and Ketchup*, 1963 (Figure 4), Alessandro Martorelli's *Frozen Peas* ice cubes mold design, 2014 (Figure 5); to linguistic metaphors, such as the poet Nathan Alterman's "autumn mortally ill, weary/inconsolable autumns" in *The Third Mothers*, 1938, or Max Black's "the chairman ploughed through the discussion"<sup>9</sup>; and conceptual metaphors that are marked by Lakoff and Johnson such as ARGUMENTS ARE WARS, HAPPY IS UP or THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS.

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<sup>9</sup> Max Black, "Metaphor", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, vol. 55 (1954), pp. 273–294, this example on p. 274.



Figure 5: Alessandro Martorelli's Frozen Peas ice cubes mold design, 2014.

*Baboon and Young* and *Head of a Bull* combine two components originating in different categories to one entity. Oldenburg's *French Fries and Ketchup* or *Giant Soft Drum Set* do not combine entities, but themes, dimensions, and materials. The car (target) is a baboon's head (source), and it sometimes works symmetrically as well: the head is a car. The fries are enormous and made of vinyl; the drums are cushion. These structures enhance the categories of baboons, of fries, and of drums and cushions, as well as the extensions of the predicates.

Visual metaphors are quite ubiquitous in visual art. Ernst Gombrich claimed already in 1960/63 that all visual art's perception is metaphorical and is founded on the metaphorical-perceptual tendencies of the viewers. Gombrich, who is interestingly not considered a metaphor theoretician, was one of the first to extend the discussion of metaphors to include objects and images, endowing it with an ontological aspect. He claims that metaphor is a projection of a functionality on a thing, which transfigures it into another thing – be it a stick transfigured into a hobby-horse, a snowman, or Edouard Manet's



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stains of colour looking like horses.<sup>10</sup> Goodman, whose ontology was explicitly influenced by Gombrich's, elaborated it into an ontological theory of metaphorical-expressive properties, that can be attributed to any kind of phenomenon, conceptual, linguistic or visual. Along these lines, Arthur Danto, whose aesthetic theory is ontological, characterized metaphors, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, in terms of style that is derived from creative ways of *seeing* the world. Noel Carroll in "Visual Metaphor" conditions visual metaphors upon homospatiality, namely, the existence of disparate elements in the same space, or actually in the same bounded, physical entity. These elements, Carroll claims, bring to mind different categories or concepts, which we combine and activate by mapping part of what we associate with one category onto another, thus "visual metaphors use pictorial or otherwise visual devices that suggest identity in order to encourage metaphorical insight in viewers".<sup>11</sup>

So we see that quite a few theories accepted a classification of special kinds of images and objects as metaphors. However, their tendency is mainly conceptual or cognitive, rather than visual. Namely, they focus on metaphorical meaning, applying definitions of conceptual or linguistic metaphor to the visual one. Carroll, for example, argues that visual metaphors "function in the same way that verbal metaphors do and their point is identified by a viewer in roughly the same way that the point of a verbal metaphor is identified by a reader or a listener".<sup>12</sup> Accordingly he asks if visual metaphors are actually linguistic metaphors dressed in visuality. My answer is that it is the other way around. Verbal metaphor gains its metaphorical trait by its structure and its syntactic density. The answer to Carroll's query is helpful in characterizing the non-linguistic nature of the visual metaphor, paving the way to a general definition of metaphor. Visual met-

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<sup>10</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays On the Theory of Art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1985, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Noel Carroll, "Visual Metaphor", in Jaakko Hintikka (ed.), *Aspects of Metaphor*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

aphor is a material construction of an image or an object. Tracking back to the terms of “bike” and “bull” will not interpret Picasso’s piece. This metaphor is independent of language. It is based solely on the visual features of the saddle and the handlebars transfigured to a bull’s head, while partially maintaining their original formal identity. The *Visuality of Metaphors* argument thus challenges theories that define metaphor as a linguistic or conceptual phenomenon in nature, which is based on its semantic mechanism, broad meaning, and cognitive value. Those theories have been prevalent in the philosophical discussion since the second half of 20th century, under the influence of the philosophy of language, and later of cognitive studies.

My argument goes as far as proposing two more assertions. The first is that while visual metaphors do not originate verbally, verbal metaphors originate visually. These are visual-verbal units (that take on “visual verbality”). The second is that verbal attempts to extract metaphorical conceptuality actually either fail to capture the metaphor or freeze it into literal expression. This applies to all kinds of metaphors, verbal ones included. The issue is not whether metaphor originates in concepts or pictures. The right way to characterize metaphor, initially, is through formalist philosophy that points to structures as essences of phenomena. This argument hopefully has an explanatory power. It helps to explain the aesthetic trait of metaphor, which renders it active, productive and reverberating as long as it is alive.

Defining the visuality of metaphors as their essence, we may accept that *visual metaphors are the paradigmatic ones*, whose mechanism is shared by the various kinds of metaphors. Metaphorical mechanism is based on aptness of form, configuration, syntactic arrangement, or material composition, rather than on understanding one thing through another. Those terms, though not obvious, were chosen to present the qualitative traits of metaphor – namely, its appearance, the metaphorical medium itself – as its foundation. Even a conceptual metaphor is dependent on a structural categorization and on seeing of one concept as a different one, which is enabled by the structural possibilities offered by the visual media. Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual HAPPY IS UP is a composition, a reconstruction of an emotion or

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mood enabled by using external physical qualities. The same applies to Altherman's verbal *wearied/inconsolable autumns* – it is a transfiguration of autumn. But as what? As... a deeply sad season? concepts and words cannot actually capture it.

The role of the syntax of linguistic metaphors – where the structure of the sentence is essential to the identity of the metaphor – and of visual metaphors is thus even clearer. Accordingly, metaphor is the aesthetic layer of ordinary language – the intersection in which language meets art. Metaphors paradigmatically comprise the relationship between the visual realm and ordinary language, or more specifically between images and texts. The visual metaphor is paradigmatic in a few ways: it shows the ontological aspect of metaphor, namely, of the newly constructed target made by metaphor. It exemplifies the compositional perception of metaphor: it manifests the fact that the perception of metaphor is based on its visuality instead of on conceptual understanding or cognition. The metaphorical mechanism is predicated upon cross-categorical structures, non-conventional compositions. Figurative language itself is dependent on the ability to see those in actuality, or to create them in our mind as *new compositions*. Grasping novel compositions is, in a broad sense, a visual or even aesthetic ability: to perceive not only Pablo Picasso's *Baboon and Young*, but also to picture to ourselves, as well as to create, warm and cold colours, mouth of bottle, or a horse made of a wooden stick, and to conceive – to see – the concepts of a ploughing chairman and theory-buildings.

Revealing the visuality of metaphors might have implications for characterizing cultural progress and intellectuality as aesthetically, rather than conceptually, oriented. Gombrich beautifully explains both the ontology of metaphor and its perception:

The headlights of a car may look to us like a pair of glowing eyes, and we may call them so. The artist may use this similarity to work his magic of transformation. Picasso did precisely that when he created his wonderful bronze baboon with its young. He took a toy car, perhaps from the nursery of his children, and turned it into a baboon's face. He could see the hood

and windshield of the car as a face, and this fresh act of classification inspired him to put his find to the test. Here, as so often, the artist's discovery of an unexpected use for the car has a twofold effect on us. We follow him not only in seeing a particular car as a baboon's head but learn in the process a new way of articulating the world, a new metaphor...<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon Press, 1962, p. 89.