The Routledge International Handbook of the Arts and Education

Edited by Mike Fleming, Liora Bresler and John O'Toole

Visual metaphors

Meaning, interpretation and culture

Michael Parsons

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 1960s and 1970s (Miller 2003). If there is such a 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 interest in the topic began with reading the efforts to explain thinking in the arts of people like Howard Gardner (1983, 'multiple intelligences'), Nelson Goodman (1968, 'languages of art'), and Rudolph Arnheim (1969, 'visual thinking'). 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 the body rather than in the brain only and sees thinking as fundamentally analogical rather than digital in character. My interest in metaphors in particular is due to the work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999).

Lakoff & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 described as based on metaphors (e.g., Aubusson, Harrison & Ritchie 2006). My interest here is to explore the ways in which metaphor works in the visual arts.

I think that interpreting artworks is a necessary and valuable part of art education – now perhaps a mainstream view. For a long time, it was assumed that the heart of art education and perhaps its only major learning activity was the making of artworks. Now there is growing agreement that there are two major educational activities: interpreting artworks and making them; and moreover that they are highly interactive and mutually supportive. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for instance, calls this pair 'responding' and 'making' (in music, theatre and dance, it adds 'performing'); and procedurally it asks students first to respond to some work and then to make something related. I believe that one cannot respond intelligently without interpreting and that the heart of interpretation is the discussion of metaphors. I hope this chapter will stimulate ideas for teaching through a focus on visual metaphors.

The chapter points also in another educational direction. Its main theme is the cultural character of our interpretations. 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. Understanding cultures, including one's own, and understanding artworks are both important educational goals; and the two are also interactive and mutually supportive. I offer examples of how this can work.

The structure of metaphors

Max Black, an Anglo-American philosopher, is a well-known precursor to Lakoff & Johnson. He also argued that metaphor is fundamentally conceptual – a matter of thinking – rather than linguistic, and he provided an influential structure for analyzing metaphors (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 in Greek being 'to transfer something from one place to another.')

An example: Birdcages and apartments

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

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 forty stories high, of similar general appearance, and many people in Hong Kong live in them. When I first saw this work, I thought that the metaphor lays the idea

of birdcages on the idea of some typical Hong Kong apartments; and 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, 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 as 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). It shows an arrangement of birdcages in the shape of a capital letter T (http://artwindows.sffahk. com/images/kum.html).

I talked with a local student about this installation. 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 as '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 be 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; they are general ideas, each with a set of associated properties and connotations. Interpretation requires that we select which of the many possible 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 general 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 (again, 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 can go 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*); that's its point. But the primary one can make us think differently about the secondary subject too, however slight the change may be (e.g., tombstones can be seen as curatorial notes). But Black 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 to become *graveyards are art museums,* it 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 visual metaphors that they can 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 metaphor in Keung's works above as if it were 'apartment blocks are like birdcages.' But one could also read it in reverse, as 'birdcages are like apartment 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 the reversal 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 presented and represented (the birdcages and the apartment blocks). But other elements of the medium can also be read metaphorically, depending on 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. There may have been other aspects of the medium 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.

Swimsuits and dolphin skins

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). It is an advertisement for swimwear by Adidas showing a woman and a dolphin diving, both in an arc mid-dive against a cloudy sky.

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 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 (and the similarity of color 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 metaphors when they are very simple. 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?

Portraits

Even portraits, which might be read as literal presentations of the appearance of a person and hence as non-metaphorical, usually call for 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*. For example, a portrait often portrays the sitter *as* a certain kind of person; as a successful businessman, a baseball player, a fashionable woman; or perhaps simply *as* a successful, athletic or beautiful person. Good portraits are not just realistic snapshots; they have meaning. 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: Jones was a good, scholarly, thoughtful, president. This is a 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. Interpretations across historical periods have the same structure as across cultures.

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 1980s. So they might fit the reading: *Cindy Sherman is a Hollywood stereotype*; but they are more interesting than that.

In one (http://imageobjecttext.com/2012/01/19/in-the-kitchen-with-cindy/) the stereotype is of a likely heroine in the movies, an attractive young woman who will probably need help of some kind from a man. 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 surprise and even threat and we know something is about to happen. This stereotype is easily recognized by anyone familiar with Hollywood movies of that period. Each of the *100 Stills* has this same structure. What is interesting about it is that Sherman arranges them to draw attention not to the individual (which is always herself) but to the stereotype. It makes us reverse the metaphor; instead of saying, as most portraits would, *Sherman is this stereotype*, it says *this stereotype is like this (Sherman's) appearance*. It draws attention to the stereotype and thereby protests or even ridicules it. 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. This again serves to show how culturally dependent such interpretations are. But it is still a popular assignment with students of almost any age to choose favorite figures from the contemporary media, to dress up like them, adopt a characteristic pose and make a photograph of themselves. Discussing such photographs helps students examine and become aware of the stereotypes that influence them.

Metaphors in form and style

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 more than an indication of them.

I will begin with a discussion of form. Metaphors that depend on form often go unnoticed at first but they are 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 Moore's 1934 sculpture *Two Forms* (at www.henry-moore.org/works-in-public/world/united-states-of-america/new-york/metropolitan-museum-of-art/two-forms-1934-lh-146). 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 both (Lakoff 2006, p. 157; Arnheim 1969, pp. 272–3) compare these shapes with those in a pictorial work by Corot, titled *Mother and Child on the Beach* (www.wikipaintings.org/en/camille-corot/mother-and-child-on-the-beach-1860).

In fact visual form, as Arnheim and Lakoff suggest, is often metaphorical. Here I will discuss only verticality, one particular element of form, as an example. It is an expressive aspect of many visual works and also in dance and theater. For instance, standing vertically – straight and tall – can be a metaphor for good moral character, at least in the West. An example is the typical stance of John Wayne in his cowboy movies: he walks and stands vertical, upright, signifying that he is brave and honest. And in art, there are many more examples, such as Rubens's portrait of the Earl of Arundel as a soldier, standing upright, signifying the same virtues (www.national gallery.org.uk/paintings/peter-paul-rubens-portrait-of-thomas-howard-2nd-earl-of-arundel). This metaphor is well 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.

A more ironic use of the same metaphor occurs in the well-known figures of the Parisian bourgeoisie in Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of the Grande Jatte* (www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/27992). Nochlin describes these figures as parading their morality in their stiff and upright postures, after going to church in the morning (Nochlin 1989).

Verticality can also be a metaphor 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) make much use of this. Another example well known in the USA is the Washington Monument in Washington DC (www.nps.gov/wamo/index.htm).

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 form, a 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 of grand moral character and the verticality that he was pious. These metaphors and meanings are all present in this one simple form – and of course there may be others, 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 more than one metaphor and they give us 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* (www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starry-night.html), 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*.

Metaphor and creativity

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. Some of the examples I have discussed are not creative and the metaphors in them are too commonplace usually to even be seen as metaphors. The portrait metaphor (*X is the stereotype of a university president*) is usually not noticed 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 & 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) metaphors and enables us to be more critical of them. They care especially about unnoticed political metaphors in the USA, 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; nor 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. For instance, Sherman makes considerable creative use of the portrait structure in the *100 Hollywood Stills*. Each one of the Stills is a different creative work and the controlling metaphor stimulates the idea for each. In each case, the creativity lies in identifying another recognizable stereotype and finding the imaginative detail of pose and clothing that reveals it. Many contemporary artists work in series like this, using a basic structuring metaphor, with each work in the series being a variation on it. Deborah Butterfield's horses are an instance (www.gregkucera.com/butterfield.htm). Each one is made of found pieces of wood. 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 and their arrangement to suggest it.

Liu Bolin's series *Hiding in the City* is another example (http://blog.ted.com/2013/05/15/10-stunning-images-from-liu-bolin-the-disappearing-man/), and so is Monet's Water Lily series. I think 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 their artworks.

Metaphors are found at several levels in paintings: I offered examples 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 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.

References

Arnheim, R. (1969) *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Aubusson, P.J., Harrison, A.G. & Ritchie, S.M. (eds) (2006) *Metaphor and Analogy in Science Education*, Dordrecht: Springer.

Black, M. (1962) *Models and Metaphors: Studies in language and philosophy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Black, M. (1979) More about Metaphor. In A. Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Forceville, C. (1996) *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*, London: Psychology Press.

Forceville, C. (2008) Metaphor in pictures and multimodal representations. In R. Gibbs (ed.) *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 462–82), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, H. (1983) *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, New York: Basic Books.

Goodman, N. (1968) *Languages of Art: An approach to a theory of symbols*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Goodman, N. (1976) *The Languages of Art*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Kovecses, Z. (2000) *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, culture and body in human feeling*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G. (2002) *Moral Politics: How liberals and conservatives think*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. (2006) The neuroscience of form in art. In Mark Turner (ed.) *The Artful Mind* (pp. 153–70), New York: Oxford University Press.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*, New York: Basic Books.

Miller, G.A. (2003) *The Cognitive Revolution: A historical perspective*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Nochlin, L. (1989) *The Politics of Vision: Essays on nineteenth-century art and society*, New York: Harper & Row.

Punter, D. (2007) *Metaphor*, New York: Routledge.