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INTERLUDE

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ART AND METAPHOR, BODY AND MIND

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Metaphor has long been associated with the arts and with creativity. Keith Swanwick, in his excellent interlude in this handbook, discusses these associations and refers to various sources that justify them. This has the incidental virtue of saving me from having to make similar initial references for my own rumination on metaphor and the arts. In some ways, this interlude can be regarded as a companion piece to Swanwick's, though it lacks its elegance and systematicity.

I will speculate on what metaphors look like in the visual arts, as Swanwick does with music. One difference is worth noting. I have been interested for some time in the claim that the arts require one to think (as well as to feel). I think it is an important claim for many reasons and yet it has proved difficult to explain or justify. I am beginning to believe that the idea of metaphor may help us do that by serving as the link between thought and bodily experience – body and mind – in the arts. So I will focus on the connection of metaphor with both ends of this chain – with both bodily experience and with thinking as it occurs in the arts.

Metaphor as Embodiment

In the introduction to her *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds*, Liora Bresler (2004) (citing Csordas, 1999) says that the distinction between body and embodiment is that the latter is “a methodological field,” a paradigm for thinking, and that to use it is to “address familiar topics – healing, emotion, gender, power – from a different standpoint” (p. x). I will begin by discussing the “familiar topic” of metaphor – currently a hot one – from the standpoint of embodiment.

The recent work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) is a good place to begin. Their most basic argument is that metaphors arise from bodily experience, a claim that is new and highly suggestive for the arts. They develop this claim in detail and with great sophistication but unfortunately they say little about the arts. In addition, their concern

is mostly with the metaphors that occur in our thinking in ordinary life and in intellectual disciplines, metaphors that are established and commonplace and, because they are usually not noticed, control our thinking. Lakoff and Johnson are most concerned with the influence of commonplace metaphors and have less interest in the creative ones more often found in the arts.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors have their origins in our basic sensorimotor and perceptual patterns, which are determined primarily by the neurological structures of the human body. These patterns (sometimes they call them "domains") are mapped onto our subjective experience, enabling us to think about that experience in ways that make it far more elaborate and intelligible than it would otherwise be. Examples are the metaphors *love is warmth* and *love is closeness*. These originate, Lakoff and Johnson argue, in the experience of a baby being held closely by mother and they allow us to think about love in certain ways; to think of characters as being warm or cold, an affair as being red hot or cooling off, or to warn others not to play with fire.

Another example is the metaphor *knowing is grasping*, which originates in the experience of grasping a toy or a teddy bear. A baby first comes to know the world through grasping it with the mouth and the hands. This allows us later to speak of understanding as grasping an argument, of failing to hold a thought in mind, and so on.

In these examples, being held by mother and grasping a toy are bodily experiences that create sensorimotor patterns ("domains") and loving and knowing are subjective experiences. "Subjective experiences" include both our emotions and our thoughts and that means that metaphors make an enormous contribution to our understanding of ourselves and of the world. It suggests that metaphors are at least one kind of connection between body and mind, and perhaps, more radically, that thought is "embodied."

Art and Cognition

The arts have traditionally been associated with both bodily and subjective experience. On the one hand, art making and responding is often thought of as guided by bodily experience: Musicians feel the music in their body, dancers and other performers dance with their whole body (actors with their voice as well), and for painters the brush becomes an extension of the arm and hand. As Collingwood (1938) said, all the arts are a specialization of the body. And on the other hand, the arts have traditionally been connected, perhaps even more strongly, with subjective experience, with the expression of feeling. Since at least the nineteenth century, the arts have been considered as essentially about the human heart and its purpose as the articulation of subjective experience.

Unfortunately, the expression of feelings has not traditionally been considered to be a matter of thought or knowledge; art has been considered an expressive but not a cognitive business. Expressions of feelings were not thought to have truth value, having to do much more with sensitivity than with thought. In the simplest terms, they were more like exclamations (*Ouch!*) than like propositions (*Doctor, my knee hurts*). But most of us in arts education today would probably agree that the arts do require

thinking. We would probably agree that this thinking is of a kind that is as demanding and rewarding as is thinking in the sciences and other school subjects. Eisner (2002) recently articulated what may have become a central belief in arts education today, when he said that "many of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when students have an opportunity to work meaningfully" in the arts (p. xii). I think this belief has important consequences for both the conduct of arts education (curriculum, instruction, assessment) and for advocacy (how to articulate and justify the role of the arts in education). It has been increasingly taken as a truism in our field since the "cognitive revolution" of the late 1950s and yet there is little agreement about how to describe the kinds of thinking involved, nor, consequently, on how to teach and advocate for them.

Generalizing broadly, one could say that, in the fifty-year history of attempts to describe the thinking characteristic of the arts, two major approaches have emerged. One, which descends from Arnheim (1954), tends to ascribe a distinct way of thinking to each art medium. The idea is that each art medium offers its own "terms" in which to think. So, for example, painters think in the terms of line, shape and color. A number of versions of this approach can be found. One is Goodman's (1976) notion that each medium provides a distinct language to think in (with consequent slogans about "literacy" in the arts). Another is Gardner's (1999) notion of a number of distinct intelligences. All versions of this approach tend to separate thinking into a number of "kinds" that, though equally valued, do not much affect each other. I think this tendency is in contrast with the view from embodiment, for the body is where all sensory and motor systems, no matter how specialized, communicate and are integrated. In the view from embodiment, normal (i.e., nonpathological) thinking results in one understanding, however complex, in the same way that the body normally responds to situations with one action, however complex. I take this as a general truth about both thinking and action.

The second major approach (which I have begun to find equally unsatisfactory) has been to identify aesthetic experience as the distinctive contribution of the arts to mind. Aesthetic experience has been understood as the direct grasp of the aesthetic (or "expressive") qualities of objects, a result of an activity that is cognitive, though not discursive. This approach is the more important one currently. Its most notable exponents in arts education are probably Elliott Eisner (1988), Ralph Smith (1986), and Bennett Reimer (1989). I find the same difficulty with this second approach. It also divides thinking into different and separate kinds, though it uses a different principle to distinguish the kinds. In addition, I think there is a continuing lack of clarity about the "aesthetic" principle. How far is it affected by the context of the work's origins or of the present particular viewer? This lack of clarity is a symptom of the artificiality of the division of thinking into kinds. Further, these approaches fail to account for the character of much contemporary art, with its heavy dependence on context, social and political content, and experimentation with new or mixed media.

Rather than debating these approaches, I am interested here in building on the suggestion recently made by Arthur Efland (2002) that the idea of metaphor may offer a better way to conceptualize thinking in the arts.

Metaphor as More than Linguistic and as General

There are two common views about metaphor that we should first discard. The first is that metaphor is primarily a linguistic affair. If Lakoff and Johnson are right that the origins of metaphor lie in our early bodily experience, it is not plausible that metaphor occurs only in language. After all, we think pre-linguistically and in many ways, including visually. Piaget, for one example, is famous for investigating pre-linguistic thinking in children; for example, he studied how babies learn to coordinate hand and eye to grasp an object (the same grasp that later becomes a metaphor for grasping a thought). The basic idea is that if metaphors occur in the visual arts, they will be nonlinguistic and may be found in many different forms and media. Since Lakoff and Johnson's examples are almost all linguistic, we need to develop examples in other media. Swanwick does this in music and I will suggest some in the visual arts.

The second assumption that we need to discard is that metaphor is only an ornament of style. Pope (1742) expressed this assumption when he said:

True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

The assumption is that the metaphorical use of words is superficial to thought; what is fundamental is the literal use. "Literal" means that there is a standardized connection between symbols and their meanings that allows them to be understood in the same way by everyone familiar with those connections. Literal language provides the body of thought, while metaphor clothes it, to make the body more attractive.

From this point of view, metaphor is only one of a number of possible ornaments of thought. Some others are simile, personification, and metonymy. If style is ornamental clothing in general, then metaphor, simile, personification, and metonymy are different kinds of clothing: hats, scarves, coats, and shoes. The choice to use any of these is a superficial one; it does not seriously affect the underlying thought.

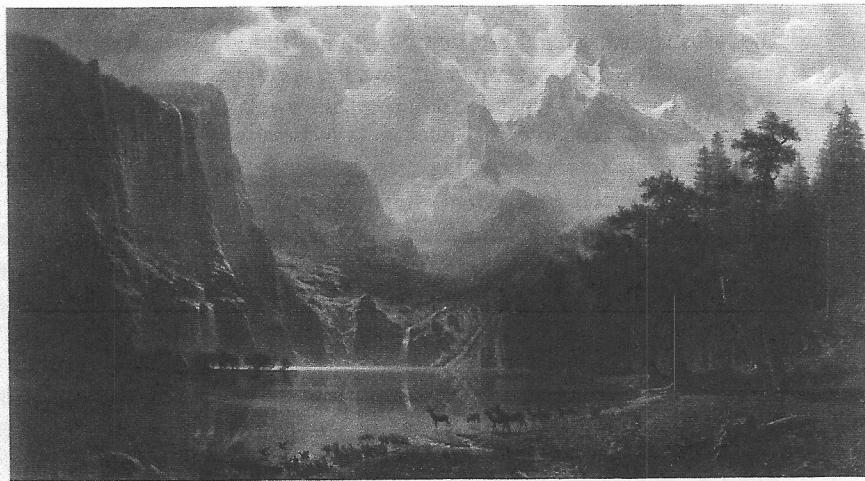
The alternative view, of which Lakoff and Johnson are recent representatives, reverses this relation between the literal and metaphorical. It holds that metaphor affects, or even governs, the thought it articulates. It is a primary conduit through which thought travels, allowing thought to go further, to be more elaborated and flexible, than it otherwise could be. Thought, one might say, is like electricity. Metaphors form a network of wires, enabling thought to run further and in many directions, limited only by the complexity of the network. Metaphors underlie most ordinary thought as wires run throughout our cities and, like them, are vital for living and often not noticed.

From this point of view, *metaphor* is the general name for a pattern of thought that may appear in a number of forms, as simile, personification, metonymy, and so on. These latter are merely variations on the underlying pattern of thought that, according to Lakoff and Johnson, has its origin in a pattern of sensorimotor experience, as with *love is warmth*.

Metaphor in the Visual Arts

What does metaphor look like in the visual arts? It seems that there are several levels. At the simplest level, there are cases where the artist takes a well-known linguistic metaphor and translates it visually. For example, sculptors have often put the likeness of the powerful on a pedestal or in other ways forced us to look up to them. Or they have personified an abstraction, as with the Statue of Liberty. Or again, Chagall portrays two lovers floating in air, one of them turning head-over-heels to kiss the other (this example comes from Efland, 2002). These are cases where the structure of the metaphor has already found linguistic expression and it is not much affected by their visual expression.

At a slightly deeper level, because it is dependent on the visual character of the medium, is Bierstadt's well-known painting *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains*.



Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Reproduced by permission of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The majesty of this painting, produced by the towering size of the mountains, the tranquility of the scenery, and the patterns of light and color in the clouds, and the suggestion of the sun, unseen, may be said to be a metaphor for the glory of God. Usually we would discuss this work as expression of glory of God, not as a metaphor for it. But the thought has the structure of metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson analyze abstractly as mapping the qualities of something in one domain onto another domain. We could say the Bierstadt that maps qualities of Nature onto its Maker, which would be a straight metaphor. Perhaps we should say it maps the qualities of a part onto the whole. This would mean it is a case of metonymy (my dictionary, the Random House unabridged, says that *metonymy* is "the use of the name of one object or concept for that of another to which it is related or of which it is a part"). A simpler

explanation would be to say that it has the structure of a simile: It says that the majesty of the Sierra's is like that of God's. All of these amount to mapping the qualities of the painting onto the idea of God, something that does not need to be put into words in order to be appreciated. The variations in my explanation of its structure (*metaphor, metonymy or simile*) result only from the attempt to compare it with linguistic figures.

Another example with the same basic structure comes from James Clifford, who speaks of collections, especially in art and ethnographic museums, that "create the illusion of adequate representation" by making objects on display "stand for abstract wholes – a 'Bambara mask,' for example, becoming an ethnographic metonym for Bambara culture" (Clifford, 1988, p. 218).

It seems likely that this metonymic structure, taken as a figure of thought and not just of speech – the part for the whole, or one thing for another to which it is related – plays an especially important role in the visual arts. Its opposite would be to take an image as just a representation of the object (or of the visual field) that it pictures, as we usually do with snapshots and as young children often do with artworks. That would be a literal reading. In these two examples, the literal reading would be to see the Bierstadt as just picturing a scene from the Sierra Nevada and the Bambara mask as a particular mask with no contextual relevance. A metaphorical reading is to see what is presented as related to something else, something usually larger or more abstract.

A third example, also a case of metonymy, is the automobile advertisement in which a pretty woman is pictured with an automobile (I add this example only to make it clear that popular visual culture, and not just the artworld, often has a metaphorical structure). The structure is again that of metonymy: Some of the qualities of the woman are mapped onto the automobile. Lacan (1981) might explain it as the metonymy of desire – the substitution of one desired object for another. It is clearly grounded in the metaphorical thought that, in some unspecified way, the car is like a pretty woman. The literal reading, of course, would be that a woman is leaning on an automobile.

Art and Creativity

So far I have not discussed the creative use of metaphor or the association of the arts with creativity. After all, we find metaphors in all disciplines and fields of endeavor – think of the family of man, evolutionary trees, the foundations of chemistry, the course of history, moral rectitude, the kindergarten. Metaphor also structures our thought about most ordinary affairs of life. In fact, one view of what we call literal language is that it consists of metaphors with which we have become so familiar that we no longer notice them at all. Although this is not quite Lakoff and Johnson's view, they spend time digging up and examining the bodies of metaphors that lie buried deep in our collective unconscious. "*Love is warmth*" is an example. Usually we are unaware of these as metaphors and for that reason they not only enable but also control our thought. One of Lakoff and Johnson's motives is to promote greater awareness of these established metaphors (especially in politics: See Lakoff, 2002), thereby giving us greater freedom of choice.

So, one might ask, what is so special about metaphor in the arts? How can it explain the difference between thinking in the arts and thinking in other areas of life?

One difference is that the arts don't just use metaphors, they invent them. Much of the creativity of art, from this point of view, lies in the creation of new metaphors, which amounts to the creation of new possibilities of thought. This is close to the view of Rorty (1989), who argues that artists are more important for social change in the long run than scientists or politicians because their new metaphors allow us to think in new ways. When these ways are beneficial ("help us to do what we want to do"), they constitute progress. For the same reason and much earlier, Shelley (1815) called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," because it was only through their new ways of speaking that people could be freed of "the mind-forged manacles of man," that is, the old habits of thought that control our behavior. Hence creativity in the arts has often been associated with freedom of thought and social change.

Of course, no work of art is creative in all respects. It is always a mixture of tradition and novelty and, as I have already mentioned, the underlying metaphorical structure of some of the most powerful works is quite traditional – my example was the Statue of Liberty. Consider the case of Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*.

The figures presented in the *Grande Jatte* are stiff and highly controlled. The most prominent are walking in the park after church on Sunday afternoon, parading their social virtue and upright morality. One might note here – Linda Nochlin (1989) has argued this – that their morality requires a strict control of nature and it is visible in both the stiffness of their gestures and the neatness of the park. This is a metaphor at the same level as that of the *Sierra Nevada*. Their erect postures, joyless expressions, the clipped trees in the background, the monkey on a leash, are part of a metaphor for their morality. At the same time, however, these figures have been seen as quite traditional, as modeled on classical figures, especially from Roman traditions, and they may not be so creative after all. If so, the metaphor is more routine, one that has been used many times in the history of art. It says something like *the citizens of Paris are very like ancient Greeks*.

But there is also metaphor here at work at a deeper level, the level of style. One aspect of Seurat's creativity was to paint with very controlled dots of varied colors, in a style that has subsequently been called *pointillism*, rather than with the personal and expressive brushstrokes of the Impressionist movement of the time. Many critics have commented on this new style as influenced by a scientific theory of light at the time, as an effort to paint light in a scientific manner. One might claim that this has the structure of a metaphor, again a kind of metonymy. It maps the color and light presented by the painting onto color and light in general; it says, in effect, *light is like what you see here; vision works like this*. In the same way, one might say that the style that Seurat was refusing, the Impressionist style of personal and expressive brushstrokes, also had a metaphorical structure. It mapped the qualities of the brushstrokes onto the personal qualities of the artist, saying, in effect: *my emotional life is like what you see in these brushstrokes*.

There is a somewhat more subtle account of this notion of metaphor in the arts. It is that the arts always invite a metaphorical interpretation at some level, whether or not the artist intended it. We don't read artworks as merely literal, as we do family snapshots. Rather we always want to go beyond the literal and look for meanings, which I am suggesting are possible only through the use of metaphors. The arts are about meanings at several levels and for this they need metaphor. Moreover, they have developed elaborate ways of debating interpretations of the meanings of works, which are ways of examining and critiquing metaphors both old and new. These ways have been institutionalized in the various critical traditions, psychoanalytic, political, historical, feminist, and so on; and it is notorious that there is rarely agreement about particular interpretations, nor any limit to what can be proposed. We can think of criticism as the collective critique of metaphors through the detailed discussion of particular works. This is a way of saying that creativity in the arts lies not only in the creation of new metaphors but also in reading them in new ways.

Moreover, artists often exploit this fact and create works that invite interpretation but remain ambivalent. At the simplest level, they may portray people with enigmatic expressions – think of Grant Woods' *American Gothic*. Is it a satirical comment on rural mid-western life, or not? Or they create ambiguous situations – for example, Hopper's *Nighthawks*. What does it say about American urban life? A great deal of contemporary performance and installation art goes much further. One of my favorites is the work of Sandy Skoglund; for example, *Revenge of the Goldfish*.



Revenge of the Goldfish, Reproduced by permission of the artist: Sandy Skoglund

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Revenge of the Goldfish, Reproduced by permission of the artist: Sandy Skoglund

Its fascination lies in just this combination of the suggestion of meaning – an invitation to interpretation – and resistance to it. The invitation lies in the careful design, the oddity of the content, the obviousness of the staging, the title. At the same time, any particular interpretation can be endlessly debated. The work, we may say, suggests numerous metaphors without making it easy to decide which is most appropriate. This, incidentally, makes Skoglund's work excellent educational material.

The answer, then, to the question why art is special with respect to metaphors is that in other areas of life we use metaphors to think with as convenient schema and usually without examining them. When so used, they facilitate thought but they also control it. Our thought becomes the working out of the consequences of whatever metaphor we happen to be using. This is a basic concern of Lakoff and Johnson. Art, on the other hand, is essentially in the business of examining metaphors, through both the creation of new ones – which then in turn throw light on old ones – and the traditions of art criticism. When metaphors are so examined, some degree of critical leverage on them is created and a larger space for intellectual freedom is opened up. And art is usually allowed to operate in this way freely, socially and politically, because it remains a domain where practical consequences are not expected (although some art is banned often enough to make the point).

This possibility of critical purchase on the concepts we use to understand both bodily experiences and subjective experiences is what art contributes to mind.

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