

A Course in Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor

Charles Forceville

Lecture 2. When is something a pictorial metaphor?

Introduction

In lecture 1 we have seen how, basically, a metaphor works. It was shown how, mainly due to its connotations, a visually represented object can be used as the source domain of a pictorial metaphor. In lecture 2 we will have a closer look at what forms a pictorial metaphor can take. While the idea that a pictorial metaphor is typically a hybrid or combination of two heterogeneous visual entities is tempting, we will see that this by no means exhausts the possibilities. Not every visual hybrid is a metaphor; just as a pictorial metaphor need not manifest itself as a visual hybrid. A second aspect of pictorial metaphor that will be considered in this lecture is that the construal of a pictorial metaphor is not only invited or forced by text-internal cues; certain extra-textual information plays a role here as well. The discussion in this lecture will pertain exclusively to static, non-moving images; metaphors in films will be amply discussed in lectures 4 and 5.

Formal manifestations of pictorial metaphors

In Forceville (1996), four types of pictorial metaphors were distinguished. More recently (Forceville 2002a), I adapted not only the names of the four categories, but also proposed that the fourth type, verbo-pictorial metaphor, strictly speaking no longer belonged exclusively within the realm of the visual, and is better regarded as a subtype of a superordinate category, to be labeled “multimodal metaphor.” I will return at length to multimodal metaphor in later lectures; here I will focus on the other three types, and in addition propose a new subcategory of pictorial metaphor, the integrated metaphor.

The first three categories are “contextual” metaphor (old term: “MP1”); “hybrid metaphor” (“MP2”); and “simile” (already so named). These types can be characterized as follows:

Hybrid type of pictorial metaphor: A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or gestalt consists of two different parts that are usually considered as belonging to different domains, and not as parts of a single whole.

The interpretation of this hybrid depends on understanding one of the two parts in terms of the other. An example is COMPUTER COMPONENTS ARE NOTES IN A

MUSICAL COMPOSITION [Figure 2.1] The musical score depicted has sets of notes, connected by strokes, consisting of miniature elements of linked PC equipment. Given that the advertiser is Intel (and that the advertisement occurs in the magazine *PC Magazine*) the target of the metaphor is the computer components. The source is the notes, whose strokes are depicted. The heading, "make it all come together, Maestro," addresses the would-be user of the system as the conductor of an orchestra (for more discussion, and other examples of metaphors in computer ads, see Forceville 1999).

Contextual type of pictorial metaphor: A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or gestalt is understood as being something else due to the visual context in which it is depicted. An example is LUCKY STRIKE IS BAR OF SOAP. [Figure 2.2] The product advertised, Lucky Strike cigarettes, is the metaphor's target. It is a unified "gestalt," easily detachable from its surroundings. The source domain, a bar of soap, is not depicted but forcefully suggested by the pictorial context – the soap dish, the drops on the packet, the bathroom tiles, the naked leg below the soap dish. Possible mappings include the need to have the bar/cigarettes within easy reach and "something you want when you are taking a bath."

Pictorial simile: A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object is juxtaposed with a unified object belonging to a different category in such a manner that the first is understood in terms of the second. An example is DOMMELSCH BEER IS (LIKE) LEANING TOWER OF PISA [Figure 2.3] Dommelsch beer is the target; the Leaning Tower of Pisa juxtaposed to it is the source. The feature mapped from source to target is something like "reason for national pride."

Integrated metaphor: A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or gestalt is represented in its entirety in such a manner that it resembles another object or gestalt even without contextual cues. An example is SENSEO COFFEE MACHINE IS SERVANT (example thanks to Paul Hekkert) [Figure 2.4] Due to its bent form and cup-bearing plateau, the Senseo coffee machine (made by Philips) is strongly reminiscent of a servant, or a waiter, or even a butler (see Forceville, Hekkert & Tan, forthcoming, for more discussion of this example).

As with many categorizations, there are cases where it is difficult to decide which type a pictorial metaphor exemplifies, but prototypical specimens of the four categories distinguished are robustly different (for an explanation of "prototype theory," see Lakoff 1987, particularly Chapter 6). Let me briefly dwell on these differences.

The hybrid and integrated types both consist of single gestalts, but they differ in that the hybrid consists of an "impossible" gestalt. Noel Carroll calls this "noncompossible homospatiality" (see Carroll 1996: 213 *et passim*), by which he means that the two phenomena simultaneously occupy the same space in a manner

which, given physical laws, is impossible. (Incidentally, Carroll considers this hybrid type the quintessential variant of pictorial metaphor – which he calls “visual metaphor.” My disagreement with privileging this type should be apparent from this Lecture, but is recorded in more detail in Forceville 2002b.) In a hybrid metaphor, then, one term (the target) *is simultaneously* another thing (the source). The integrated metaphor, by contrast, has a target that is represented in a physically possible way, such that it *resembles* another thing (the source).

The contextual metaphor represents one term, usually the target, in its entirety. It differs from the simile as follows: the contextual metaphor triggers identification of the metaphorical source by depicting the target in a visual context which strongly, or even necessarily, *evokes* the source. The simile, by contrast, *depicts* the source itself. (Note that Kaplan (1992) also distinguishes pictorial similes as a separate category, although in other respects his subdivision in types diverges from the one proposed here.) Scheme 2.1 lists the four types.

STATUS OF TARGET AND SOURCE	NAME
Target & source homospatial + compossible	→integrated metaphor
Target & source homospatial + noncompossible	→hybrid metaphor
Target & source non-homospatial, both depicted	→pictorial simile
Target & source non-homospatial, source suggested	→contextual metaphor

Scheme 2.1 Typology of pictorial metaphors

Non-metaphorical hybrids

The fact that two phenomena are depicted in any of the four ways outlined above does not in itself, however, guarantee that we must identify a metaphor. What else is necessary before we feel inclined or forced to do so? One good reason to try and construe two phenomena in a picture as a metaphor is that when taken at face value (in language we would say: “when taken literally”), their merging constitutes an anomaly. Such an anomaly is most noticeable in the case of a hybrid, that is, a physical merger of two different “things.” But hybrids do not *necessarily* allow for construal of one thing in terms of another; they may be a mere mixture of two things. An amphibian car is simultaneously a car and a boat, but it is not, arguably, a car *as* a boat, or a boat *as* a car: it is simply a multifunctional vehicle. Similarly, the proverbial Swiss pocketknife is a hybrid of many things.

Thus, not every visual hybrid is, or can be construed as, a pictorial metaphor. Here are some examples of non-metaphorical hybrids. Figure 2.5 is a Dutch advertisement (some 20 years old) promoting Atag kitchens, which urges prospective customers to send for an Atag brochure. The heading roughly translates as “look before you cook,” but the literal translation, “first look, then cook,” also puns on “first look, then buy” – “koken” = “to cook”; “kopen” = “to buy.” The hybrid connects the idea of cooking (for which the spoon serves as a

metonymy) with the exhortation to fill in the form in the ad (with the pencil). In no sense should we understand the hybrid as the metaphor SPOON IS PENCIL (or PENCIL IS SPOON, for that matter). [Figure 2.5]

A similar situation applies in a 1985 release of the French agricultural ministry warning against forest fires [Figure 2.6]. The depicted hybrid is a tree at one end, and a matchstick at the other. Clearly, the fact that both consists of wood, and that the one causes the destruction of the other, is what metonymically links the two, but neither a metaphor TREE IS MATCHSTICK, nor MATCHSTICK IS TREE is in order.

The third example of a non-metaphorical hybrid is found in a painting by René Magritte that is tantalizingly called “L’Explication” [Figure 2.7]. Again, while the painter deceptively appears to teach us an easy lesson of the kind, “wine bottle + carrot = bottle-carrot (or carrot-bottle [“carottle”?]), this makes no metonymic, let alone metaphoric sense.

Intentionality and genre

While an apparent anomaly in the identity-relation between two heterogeneous things often is a signal that a metaphor must be construed, this anomaly is usually balanced by some sort of similarity between the two things, as the examples in 2.1—2.4 indicate. I will come back to the concept of similarity at greater length in Lecture 3. For the time being, it must be emphasized that the combined anomaly-cum-similarity are themselves manifestations of something far more important: the intentions of the producer of the representation in which the would-be metaphor occurs.

Formal identity or resemblance between two heterogeneous phenomena in a representation usually mean little if we do not believe that we are meant to notice them. That is, mostly we construe a pictorial metaphor (indeed, any type of metaphor) *if and because we think that the producer of the representation intends us to do so*. In this respect, pictorial metaphors are no different from any other type of visual communication – indeed from any other type of communication *tout court*. Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory (see Sperber and Wilson 1995, Wilson and Sperber 2004) depends on the idea that any act of communication comes with the presumption of optimal relevance to the envisaged addressee (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 156 *et passim*). Similarly, Gibbs maintains that “many aspects of how we understand spoken language, interpret written texts, and make sense of artworks, is to a significant extent influenced by the search for communicative intentions” (1999: 4). In short, viewers of a picture, familiar with its origin and provenance, confronted with a hybrid or a salient similarity between two phenomena X and Y, will ask themselves whether the producer of the image has *meant* them to construe a metaphor.

The qualification “familiar with [the picture’s] origin and provenance” is an important one. In order for viewers to construe a metaphor in a picture, they must know something about who made it, and why. Since most pictures in contemporary Western society are made for mass— rather than individual consumption (children’s drawings made for dad or auntie Emily are the exception rather than the rule), addressees’ estimates of the origins of a picture are made predominantly on the basis of genre attributions, not on the basis of individual authorship. We recognize a picture as an advertisement, an art poster, a book illustration, an illustration in a manual, an artistic drawing, etc. Usually the provenance of the picture comes with the context in which we encounter it: a magazine, a public announcement, a children’s book, the manual, a museum. On the basis of the genre attribution, we have certain expectations about what kind of messages about what kind of things we are likely to encounter, and these help steer and constrain interpretations (Goffman 1974), including anything that might be a metaphor.

One important exception to the transparency of metaphors is the realm of artistic communication. While here, too, the majority of metaphors has been envisaged and explicitly cued by their producers, it is possible that an individual art appreciator (or a group of them) discerns a metaphor where none may have been (consciously) intended by the artist. Artistic representations, according to Siegfried Schmidt (e.g., Schmidt 1991) are governed by the “aesthetic convention” rather than by the “fact convention”: we read, watch, hear art not primarily to be informed about facts in the world (as for instance when we watch the news, read journalistic reports on the front page, skim through a manual) but to experience textual echoes and layers of meaning that move and delight us intrinsically, without being necessarily true of states in the world. Corresponding to the aesthetic convention Schmidt postulates the existence of the polyvalence convention (contrasting with the monovalence convention), which exhorts the art appreciator to look for, and celebrate plural interpretations and ambiguities of a text. A dimension of this search for rich aesthetic meanings, I propose, is an open eye (or other organ of perception) for phenomena that *can* be construed as metaphors. As with many elements in artistic representations, if an art appreciator construes a metaphor in such a way that it can be made to fit other elements of the work’s perceived meaning, there is no reason to discard such a metaphor – even if it could somehow be proven that the artist herself did not intend this metaphoric construal.

There is at least one other exception to the rule that a metaphor must have been intended by an author: a deliberately subversive, against-the-grain reading of a text, too, can result in the construal of a metaphor that was not planned as such. To give an example, there is an official photograph (1961?) which shows a member of the Dutch royal family (Prince Bernard, who died in 2004), posing for the camera with next to him a snow-white poodle in a room where no other objects are present except for a chandelier and a statue in the background [Figure 2.8]. A

staunch anti-monarchist, or somebody who detests the prince, may maliciously want to see the metaphor PRINCE IS POODLE in this photograph, with as mapped feature for instance “being domesticated,” “being restricted in its movements,” and/or “being dressed and groomed for representative purposes only.”

Note that at least *some* formal similarity between the alleged target and source of the metaphor seem necessary for their combination to be construable as a metaphor. In the case of Bernard and the poodle, for instance, their symmetrical alignment, their “posed” bodily posture, and the colour white (the dog’s fur, the prince’s emblematic white carnation) contribute to the feasibility to construe a metaphor.

Summary

A pictorial metaphor in a static representation can take different forms, giving rise to at least the following subcategories: *hybrid metaphor*, *contextual metaphor*, *simile*, and *integrated metaphor*. Cues that two phenomena in a picture are to be construed as the target and source of a metaphor usually involve an awareness of both their incongruity and their similarity. Since in pictures there is no equivalent to the verbal “is” or “is like,” it may be a matter for debate whether a picture features a metaphor. Sometimes such a conclusion is virtually inescapable; sometimes only some viewers will “see” a metaphor. For this reason, it makes sense to say that a picture strongly or weakly invites a viewer to *construe* a metaphor, rather than to say that a picture *contains* a metaphor.¹ An analysis and interpretation of a metaphor cannot be undertaken without an awareness of the intentions of its producer. Anticipating a more detailed discussion in later lectures: The metaphor’s producer may choose to present salient cues for the similarity, more or less forcing the audience to perceive it and hence construe the metaphor, or alternatively give subtle hints, giving the audience more freedom to construe it. The importance of such intentions, in turn, is to a considerable extent governed by the genre to which the representation exemplifying the metaphor belongs.

¹ By contrast, the statement that a picture *is* a metaphor seems wrong by definition, a result of a confusion between levels of analysis. Just as a sentence, while exemplifying stimuli that invite the construal of a metaphor, may also contain many other things (nouns and verbs; grammatical subjects and grammatical predicates; alliterations and repetitions), so a picture may exemplify many other things besides a metaphor that do not, or not necessarily, partake in it: signatures, logo’s, background elements, photo-credits, colours, shading lines ...

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For questions, criticisms, and suggestions, e-mail: c.j.forceville@uva.nl