

# A Course in Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor

[Charles Forceville](#)

## INTRODUCTION

"The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). Lakoff and Johnson's description is an attractive one, since it suggests that what people *do* with metaphor is no less important than what it *is*. Moreover it allows for non-verbal manifestations of this trope. A crucial element in the cognitivist approach to metaphor fathered by Lakoff and Johnson (and anticipated in the collection by Ortony 1979) is that metaphor is primarily a matter of thinking, and only derivatively a matter of language. But while much fine work has been done by Lakoff and Johnson and their followers, the vast majority of studies still only discusses verbal manifestations of metaphor.

In this series of eight lectures, the focus will be on appearances of metaphor that are not, or not exclusively, verbal. The emphasis will be on visual manifestations of metaphor, but since pictures, in whatever form, are more often than not accompanied by words, many "pictorial" metaphors are in fact hybrids involving language. Moreover, once the discussion shifts to moving images (films, videoclips, commercials), a third channel of information must often be taken into consideration: the aural, a heading under which both (non-verbal) sound and music will be considered. In effect, therefore, this course gradually broadens from verbal, via pictorial, to multimodal metaphor.

## WHY THIS COURSE?

There are at least four reasons why the study of non-verbal and multimodal metaphor is a relevant pursuit (see also Forceville 2006, 2008).

1. **A complete theory of metaphor cannot ignore the non-verbal.** The cognitivist paradigm insists that verbal metaphors are *manifestations* rather than *reduplications* of thought, and thereby forcefully suggests that thought can give rise to non-verbal or multimodal metaphor. However, the cognitivist paradigm hitherto largely disregards the non-verbal. Examination of non-verbal representations should help further substantiate (or cast doubt upon) elements of the already extensive body of research based on verbal representations of metaphor. At present, metaphor theory's excessive bias toward the verbal may inadvertently but systematically hide aspects of metaphor. A theory of metaphor that aims at completeness cannot afford to ignore pictures and multimodal representations (see also Johnson 2007).

2. **Understanding culture requires studying information inhering in non-verbal form.** The cognitive approach to metaphor has – in line with its nomenclature – primarily investigated the relation between mind and language, and hence has tended to be prejudiced toward those aspects of metaphor that help lay bare mechanisms of thinking. Recently, however, more attention has begun to be paid to the interaction between metaphor and culture (e.g. Emanatian 1995, Shore 1996, Gibbs 1999, Kövecses 2005). The cognitivist tradition of metaphor has developed the notion of Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs, Lakoff 1987: chapter 4) or folk models, which reflect how communities make sense of their surroundings and endow them with meaning. Again, however, there has been a bias favouring verbal representations of such ICMs. Examining multi-medial metaphors thus contributes to a better understanding of culturally embedded knowledge and beliefs.

3. **The study of non-verbal metaphor provides tools for the analysis and production of pictorial representations.** Applicable theories of the image, as opposed to learned reflections on it, are still relatively scarce, particularly in the area of static, non-moving images. (In the area of moving images, film narratology has contributed a growing body of very useful work.) Understanding multimodal metaphor provides a fruitful angle on the strategies that people employ to produce and interpret images. Multimodal metaphor is thus not only of interest to students concerned with metaphor, but also to researchers and practitioners of non-verbal communication.

4. **"The medium is the message."** Michael Reddy's article "The conduit metaphor" (1979), which George Lakoff acknowledges as fundamental to the cognitivist theory of metaphor (1993: 203), argues that verbal communication in Western society is implicitly based on the notion that a speaker or writer "packages" her thoughts in words, which she subsequently dispatches, as if by some sort of aerial cable-way, to the listener or reader. The latter then only has to "unpack" the parcel to find the meaning put there by the communicator. Reddy shows that this conception of communication is not a neutral, objective description of what happens, but embodies a metaphor (the conduit metaphor). Like any other metaphor, this conduit metaphor highlights some aspects of the topic under discussion (here: communication) and hides others. Most people, however, are not aware of the metaphoric nature of this model of communication, and thus mistake a necessarily partial description of the communication process for the whole story.

In fact, Reddy's approach here reveals that the consequences of that cliché of communication studies, Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message," are still not sufficiently taken into account. As Chesebro and Bertelsen (1996) formulate the matter, in more general terms,

Communication technologies and media are currently treated as neutral

conduits through which ideas are expressed. The assumption here is that ideas can be adequately and comprehensively described, interpreted, and assessed independently of the channels used to convey these ideas. ... The unique message-generating capacity of each communication technology or medium itself has been all but ignored (1996: 170).

They conclude that communication channels deserve sustained investigation because of their status as "message-generating systems affecting our cultural, symbolic, and cognitive systems" (ibid.). Investigating non-verbal metaphor thus also alerts us to how a change in medium will inevitably affect its alleged content. For present purposes, this can be rephrased as the statement that a pictorial or multimodal manifestation of a cognitive metaphor will not convey the same information and attitudes as a purely verbal manifestation of that same cognitive metaphor.

## OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

The eight lectures have been designed in such a way that they should be comprehensible to students without specialist background knowledge in metaphor. The information and understanding being presupposed is that which has been offered in the previous lectures of the course. The course aims to be as practical as possible. That is, there is a constant shift between theory and concrete examples. Where appropriate and possible, pictures are provided that embody the concepts discussed.

### [Lecture 1. Preliminary concepts and terminology](#) [[link to lecture 1](#)]

A number of basic concepts and terms employed in discussions of metaphor will be explained. The framework that will be used is Max Black's (1979/1993) interaction theory, which will be complemented by other relevant studies. After the introduction of these concepts, they will be discussed with reference to some artificial, de-contextualized pictures in order to demonstrate how Black's theory works.

### [Lecture 2. When is something a pictorial metaphor?](#) [[link to lecture 2](#)]

We will now have a closer look at what forms a pictorial metaphor can actually take in static pictures. A fourfold distinction into hybrid metaphor, contextual metaphor, simile, and integrated metaphor is proposed, and an example of each is discussed.

Two textual parameters governing the decision that a metaphor can/must be construed are briefly discussed: anomaly and similarity. But the construal of a pictorial metaphor is not only invited or forced by text-internal cues: authorial intentions and genres also play an important role.

### [Lecture 3. From pictorial to multimodal metaphor \[link to lecture 3\]](#)

In Lecture 2 examples of pictorial metaphors in static images were analysed. I argued that these pictorial metaphors can be of four types: (i) Contextual metaphor; (ii) Hybrid metaphor; (iii) Simile; (iv) Integrated metaphor. In this lecture, two issues will be discussed. First, I will reflect on how the formal differences between the types affect the range of their possible interpretations. Second, I will look at how the analysis and examination of non-verbal metaphors needs to be adapted if they occur in moving instead of static images. In fact, that is, we leave the relatively simple realm of pictorial metaphor and move into the more complex area of multimodal metaphor. In Lecture 4 I will analyse examples of this kind, but first the concept of “multimodality” needs to be elucidated.

### [Lecture 4. Pictorial and multimodal metaphors in commercials \[link to lecture 4\]](#)

When the representations studied are moving images rather than static ones, the opportunities for creating pictorial metaphor proliferate. For one thing, the information channels of the written word and the printed visual are complemented by aural information, in the form of music, spoken words, and sound effects. Moreover, the visual channel now includes camera movements while the various ways to link one shot to the next (that is, the "montage") similarly lead to possibilities for representing multimodal metaphors not available to pictures without temporal development.

### [Lecture 5. Pictorial and multimodal metaphor in fiction film \[link to lecture 5\]](#)

Advertising is characterized by straightforward intentions (all variants of "buy me!"), which explains the relative ease with which its metaphors can be interpreted. But pictorial and multimodal metaphor can also occur in artistic texts. In this lecture, fragments from narrative films claimed to contain a pictorial or multimodal metaphor will be discussed and analyzed. This discussion leads to some cautious generalizations.

## Lecture 6. Metaphor and blending theory

A fairly recent development in cognitive linguistics that is related in metaphor theory is "blending theory," an approach connected with the names of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (e.g., Turner and Fauconnier 1995, Fauconnier and Turner 2000, 2002). In this lecture, the connections between metaphor and blending theory will be examined, and an attempt will be made to show what uses blending theory has for the analysis of (moving) images.

## Lecture 7. Structural and ontological multimodal metaphor

In their classic *Metaphors we live by* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson have argued that many of our concepts are systematically governed in terms of other concepts, leading to such metaphors as IDEAS ARE PEOPLE ("The theory of relativity *gave birth* to an enormous number of ideas in physics"; "His ideas will *live on* for ever") and ARGUMENT IS WAR ("Your claims are *indefensible*"; "You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*"). These so-called "structural" metaphors are deeply embedded in the conceptual framework of communities in Western culture. Even more "abstract" are spatial orientations such as the UP/DOWN, CENTRE/PERIPHERY and LEFT/RIGHT, giving rise to metaphors as GOOD IS UP, as in "we hit *a peak* last year" and "he does *high-quality* work" (but also: RATIONAL IS UP, as in "he couldn't *rise above* his emotions"; "we had a *high-level* discussion") and BAD IS DOWN, as in "it's been going *downhill* for weeks now" and "we're at an all-time *low*" (and EMOTIONAL IS DOWN, as in "the discussion *fell to the emotional level*"). A third type of conceptual metaphors are the so-called "ontological metaphors." These metaphors reveal that we understand many abstract experiences and events in terms of concrete entities and processes. Thus, underlying "we're still trying to *grind out* the solution to this equation" is ultimately (via the structural metaphor THE MIND IS A MACHINE) the ontological metaphor THE MIND IS AN ENTITY. Similarly, "the ship is *coming into view* now" is a sentence we understand because we rely on the deeply ingrained ontological metaphor VISUAL FIELDS ARE CONTAINERS. Such structural, orientational and ontological metaphors contrast with the more "incidental" metaphors hitherto discussed by being already latently part of people's Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs). This lecture will focus on the question whether, and if so in what manner, these more fundamental metaphors find their way into visual and multimodal representations.

## Lecture 8. Loose ends: suggestions for future research

In the course of the preceding lectures, while hopefully much has been clarified, many questions have surfaced as well. In this last lecture, some of them will be inventoried and tentatively discussed, where possible with reference to work done by others.

**AUTHOR'S E-MAIL:** [c.j.forceville@uva.nl](mailto:c.j.forceville@uva.nl)

[Document last revised January 2009]

## References

- Black, Max (1962). Metaphor. In: Black, *Models and metaphors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 25-47.
- Black, Max (1979). More about metaphor. In: Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 19-43 (second edition: 1993).
- Chesebro, James W., and Dale A. Bertelsen, *Analyzing media: communication technologies as symbolic and cognitive systems*. New York/London: Guilford Press, 1996.
- Emanatian, Michele (1995). Metaphor and the expression of emotion: the value of cross-cultural perspectives. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10:3, 163-182.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner (1998). Compression and global insight. *Cognitive Linguistics* 11, 283-304.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner (2002). *The way we think: conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Forceville, Charles (1988). The case for pictorial metaphor: René Magritte and other Surrealists. In Aleš Erjavec, (ed.), *Vestnik IX: 1*, Inštitut za Marksistične Študije, Ljubljana, 150-160.
- Forceville, Charles (1996). *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. London/New York: Routledge. [Paperback published in 1998].
- Forceville, Charles (2006). Non-verbal and multimodal metaphor in a cognitivist framework: agendas for research. In: Gitte Kristiansen, Michel Achard, René Dirven and Francisco Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (eds.), *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 379-402.
- Forceville, Charles (2008). Metaphor in pictures and multimodal representations. In: Raymond Gibbs, Jr. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 462-482. <http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521600863>
- Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. (1999). Taking metaphor out of our heads and putting it into the cultural world. In: Raymond Gibbs & Gerard Steen, *Metaphor in cognitive linguistics*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 145-166.
- Johnson, Mark (2007). *The Meaning of the Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kövecses (2005). *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, George (1987). *Women, fire and dangerous things: what categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Lakoff, George (1993). The contemporary theory of metaphor. In: Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 202-251.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Reddy, Michael (1979). The conduit metaphor. In: Andrew Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and thought*.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 284-324. (A revised and expanded edition of the book appeared in 1993).

Ortony, Andrew (ed.). *Metaphor and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993).

Shore, Bradd (1996). *Culture in mind: cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turner, Mark, and Gilles Fauconnier (1995). Conceptual integration and formal expression, *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10, 183-204.