

How does art “speak”, and what does it “say”?

Conceptual metaphor theory as a tool for understanding the artistic process.

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I. Introduction.

It would be difficult to talk about art without using metaphors like “*self-expression*”, “*describing a subject*”, or “*making a statement*”. Phrases like these let us understand art metaphorically in terms of linguistic communication, because we normally *express*, *describe* and *state* our ideas using language. We usually understand these metaphoric phrases automatically and without conscious effort. However, in the past few decades, the growing field of conceptual metaphor theory (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980) has made it possible to systematically examine the structure of these and other metaphors, along with their uses in cognition and communication.

Metaphors relating visual art to language are particularly useful in uncovering the mechanisms and motivations behind the artistic process. These metaphoric structures are as diverse as the variety of genres of art – and in fact, particular metaphors often occur in particular artistic genres. The form of “language” used in metaphors for art is sometimes spoken language and sometimes written language; the communication involved can be one-sided or two-sided; and the communication may be conceptualized as anything from poetry to an argument.

In the following pages I will compare the structure of these metaphors for art, based on the metaphoric language used by artists to describe their own artwork and artistic process. This analysis will shed light on the meaning and motivation of art, the variations in meaning and motivation across artistic genres, and the utility of conceptual metaphor theory in analyzing artistic meaning and motivation.

II. Terms and conventions used in this paper.

According to conceptual metaphor theory, linguistic metaphors reflect underlying cognitive structures called *conceptual metaphors* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Conceptual metaphors are active not just in language, but also in reasoning (cf. Gibbs 1990), in visual media like film (cf. Forceville 2002), in gesture (McNeill 1992, Cienki 1998) and even in dreams (Lakoff 1997). Every metaphoric word or phrase reflects a complex, prelinguistic conceptual structure which allows us to understand a difficult or abstract concept (like art) in terms of one we are more comfortable with (such as conversation). The abstract concept is called the *target domain* and the more basic concept is the *source domain*. Structural correspondences between the two domains are metaphoric *mappings*. These mappings are made from the (more basic) source domain to the (more abstract) target domain. The mappings allow reasoning about the source domain to be applied to the target domain, enabling us to think and talk about abstract concepts.

The source domain, target domain, and mappings are conventionally represented in the following format:

SOURCE DOMAIN		TARGET DOMAIN
source element 1	→	target element 1
source element 2	→	target element 2
...		...

The right-hand column lists the source domain elements, the left-hand column lists the target domain elements, and the arrows represent mappings between pairs of corresponding structural elements (such as participants, objects, or activities). In text, the names of conceptual metaphors are usually given in capital letters, following the pattern TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN.

III. Telling a story.

The most traditional metaphors for art involve spoken or written communication from the artist to a human audience. According to the spoken language metaphor ART IS MONOLOGUE, a speaker delivering a speech to an audience (elements listed under MONOLOGUE in the diagram below) maps to an artist creating art for viewers (elements listed under ART):

ART IS MONOLOGUE

MONOLOGUE		ART
speaker	→	artist
audience	→	viewers
speech	→	art (usually painting)

For example, the artist Gustave Courbet writes in 1855 that he delights in “the ability to be able to express the manners, ideas, and aspect of my time...” (Blunden et al. 1970:21). The rich source domain of speech permits many additional mappings, such as:

language → technique OR symbolism

For instance, Paul Cezanne speaks of “the language of forms and colors” (Blunden et al. 1970:188), and modern artist Courtney Jordan speaks of “a language of shape, line and color”. Some modern artists – including Courtney Jordan – also claim to have created a personal “language” of symbols or subjects, in her case “bridges, buildings and skyscrapers (comprising) my own painting language” (Zevitas 2003:8-61). This metaphor creates the inference that different media and techniques, like different languages, may be “interpreted” or “translated”: for example, an on-site sketch may later be translated into a finished painting (Sanders 2002:14-15).

When an artist has command of a range of techniques or sets of symbols, the “language” mapping would give the inference that the artist is “multilingual”. However, this usage does not regularly occur. Instead, a new mapping comes into play:

vocabulary → range of techniques/symbols

For example, modern artist Donna Baspaly writes that “working with mixed media (is) expanding my creative vocabulary” (Baspaly 2001:37-40). This mapping implies that each medium or technique is a word, not a language. These mappings do not, however, produce drastically different inferences. Multilingual speakers and speakers with large vocabularies both have enhanced linguistic resources, which map to enhanced repertoires of creative techniques available to a visual artist.

More far-reaching inferences arise from the mapping of manner of speech onto artistic emphasis:

speech style → artistic style

Almost every reference to art discusses artistic “voice”, which may be “confident” or “hesitant”, “loud” or barely a “whisper”. An artist without a discernable voice may be criticized as producing only “frantic, incoherent gesture” (Esterow 2002:32). Artists can “imply”, “hint at”, or “scream”; their works may be “reticent” or “wordy”. For example, Edouard Manet champions Impressionist painting using the metaphor, “The man who is concise makes you think; the man who is wordy is a bore” (Blunden et al. 1970:147).

This quote suggests the mapping:

words → brushstrokes

The resulting inference is that an economy of brushstrokes, as in Impressionism, equates to conciseness in speech. Other Impressionists utilized this inference, describing their sought-after style as “frank” and “honest”, the conveyance of “information” from nature in the simplest possible “terms” (Blunden et al. 1970:19).

However, other artists and art analysts extracted different inferences from this metaphor. Critics of the Impressionists described their paintings as devoid of “eloquence”, “expression” and “poetry” and even lacking the “truth” that a greater degree of specificity could bring (Blunden et al. 1970:104,111,151). This schism between artistic schools exemplifies the potential that a single metaphor has to generate different inferences, when people with different agendas do the mapping.

Along with the manner and style of speech, the supposed intent of a speech act may be mapped:

speech intent → artistic intent

Thus an artwork may be a “protest”, a “message”, a “description”, a “statement”, or an “argument”. The “argument” metaphor seems particularly prolific. Artists speak of a “convincing” seascape, a “believable” still life, or a “persuasive” portrait. Artwork may, as mentioned, be “truthful”; it can also be “lying” if it is unfaithful to its subject or tricks the eye with manipulative techniques.

Art that is created with the intent of communicating a sequence of events is often conceptualized using a special case of the metaphor ART IS MONOLOGUE, namely ART IS STORYTELLING. In most cultures art has been used to document events or mythology accompanying, or in the place of, spoken or written language. In the Western tradition artists may refer to paintings as “allegorical” or as exhibiting “narrative”. “My drawings tell stories,” says modern representational artist Mitchell Marco. “Each picture focuses on a character...” (Zevitas 2003:78-81).

Whatever the artist’s manner of speech or speech intent, the audience does not usually actively participate in the spoken communication that is art. This attribute of some artistic genres encourages the use of the metaphor ART IS WRITING, discussed in the following section.

IV. Writing on the wall.

Many of the examples of ART IS MONOLOGUE and ART IS STORYTELLING quoted above are ambiguous as to whether the communication between artist and audience is verbal or written. In a way, ART IS WRITING involves more complete mappings than any verbal language metaphor for art. An integral part of most verbal communication is conversational give-and-take, and in order to exclude audience response from the mapped features of the verbal communication metaphors, the metaphor’s source domain must be a nonstandard form of talk such as monologue or storytelling. Written communication escapes this dilemma. Texts, in many contexts, do not permit an in-kind response from the readers.

ART IS WRITING

WRITING		ART
author	→	artist
readers	→	viewers
writing	→	art

While the metaphor ART IS WRITING provides many of the same mappings and inferences as those discussed in the previous section, several are specific to the written nature of the artistic communication. For example, returning to the Impressionists’ metaphors, Degas is praised as painting “a prose...articulating a new...observation”

(Blunden et al.:1970:151). “Prose” evokes a specific style of writing via the ART IS WRITING metaphor. This metaphor makes possible reference to many different kinds of writing, permitting modern artist Calvin Seibert to call his work “a diary, a visual text...” (Zevitas 2003:126-129). A surreal piece, such as Nic Hess’s masking tape art, can be imagined as a “fairy tale” (Esterow 2002:96).

For some artists, different genres of writing are mapped to genres of art. For example, “still lifes...offer a degree of creative freedom unlike any other genre – a dichotomy which (still life artist Daniel) Greene likens to the difference between fiction and nonfiction writing”(Sullivan 2001:30-35). Frank Webb, a judge in an art contest, demonstrates a similar mapping. Looking for something “going beyond realism”, he wants “to see a painting that’s more in the manner of the poetic than the journalistic” (Carpenter 2002:8).

Conventions specific to written communication may also be mapped. A simplified drawing of a subject may be termed an “abbreviation”; a simplified style is “shorthand”. An attention-getting point of interest, such as a butterfly hovering over a still life, may be a “punctuation mark” (Carpenter 2002:30, Esterow 2001:34). An inference of the ART IS WRITING metaphor is that artworks are expected to be “read” and are created for this purpose. Artist Jack Hines describes his artistic goal as producing paintings which are “every bit as legible and clearly read as an atlas” (Chapman 2001:44-49).

An actual or potential “reader” is an essential part of art, according to the metaphor ART IS WRITING. However, as with the monologue and storytelling models of art, the audience has only a receptive role – a situation not typical of most communication. Let us now turn to a metaphor that does permit the mapping of audience participation.

V. Talking back to art.

In most communicative situations, at least two participants interact and respond to each other. The models for art discussed above map a speaker/author, a hearer/reader, and the artist’s speech/writing. The hearer/reader’s response in the source domain of communication apparently cannot map to any element in the artistic target domain. This makes a more complete mapping from the domain of speech difficult.

ART IS CONVERSATION I

CONVERSATION		ART
speaker 1	→	artist
speaker 2	→	audience
speaker 1's speech	→	art
speaker 2's speech	→	?

Some artists map “speaker 2’s speech” onto the audience’s internal response to the artwork. This is not a complete mapping, because the artist cannot respond in turn to the “speech” except by anticipating it. One artist suggests that “lost and found” edges – boundaries which are soft or blurred – “allow the image and viewer to dialogue” more than crisp edges, because the viewer will have to search for the edges and will be more of a participant in understanding the painting (Newfield 2001:61-63). Many techniques evolve with the intent of maintaining a viewer’s interest in the painting; however, an artist’s anticipatory response to viewer’s potential reactions still falls short of permitting a more complete conversational mapping.

Some modern art deliberately seeks to expand the audience’s role, to more perfectly fit the communicative model. Performance art exemplifies this attempt. The performance artist’s ability to respond to the audience’s reactions is usually integral to the art form. Other forms of art include video cameras or mirrors which reflect the audience and their reactions, or music which changes according to the audience’s movements. Some art depends entirely on the viewers and their actions for its significance. For example, the recent exhibition in Norway of a series of blenders containing live goldfish – which museum visitors could either blend or refrain from blending – relied on audience actions to make its statement about human nature (of the thousands of visitors, only a few blended fish each day). Likewise, the “artificial cloud” created by two New York architects, in which visitors’ raincoats change color in response to the presence (and programmed information about the wearers’ likes/dislikes) of other visitors, eschews the “passive” quality of traditional “paper art”, according to the artists, and more completely represents a “conversation” than traditional painting (Deere 2001:109).

VI. Eavesdropping on art.

While some modern artists seek to expand the audience's role, other artists make use of language metaphors which marginalize the audience, as in ART IS CONVERSATION II below.

ART IS CONVERSATION II

CONVERSATION		ART
speaker 1	→	artist
speaker 2	→	artwork
speaker 1's speech	→	art process (painting, sculpting, etc.)
speaker 2's speech	→	results of art process

Many artists now speak of “communicating with the canvas” rather than with a human audience. Modern artist Masako Kamiya, for example, uses this metaphor most explicitly when she says, “I engage in a dialogue with paint. My statement is each dot I make with the brush, then I respond intuitively to each unexpected play of dots...This process is an interchange with the painting activity” (Zevitas 2003:62-65). The audience has no role in this conversation. The only possible mapping for the audience is as an eavesdropper on the artist-artwork conversation.

A common manifestation of these mappings is found in the metaphor ART IS THERAPY. Psychiatric therapy is a specialized form of conversation, in which speaker 2 helps speaker 1 resolve emotional problems. ART IS THERAPY has the same mappings as ART IS CONVERSATION II above, but with the added inference that the artist benefits emotionally from the exchange, and perhaps the inference that the artist's emotional state is the motivating factor behind the conversation/art creation.

While conversation with a canvas can be psychiatry, it significantly *cannot* be some of the forms of communication possible for artist-to-audience communicative metaphors, such as a protest, message, description, or argument. No artist “convinces” a canvas the way they may convince an audience, nor can a canvas receive or interpret a “message” or “protest”. An inference of ART IS CONVERSATION II is that the canvas, as conversational participant, is not capable of all the responses of a human being.

The communicative form “description” is omitted for a different reason than these other forms of communication. A conversation with an artwork is only possible if the

artwork responds in unexpected ways (note Masako Kamiya’s statement, above). Without response, we would have only a monologue – and artist/canvas monologue does not seem to exist in metaphor. This requirement entails that a haphazard element must be introduced into the art creation process for ART IS CONVERSATION II to apply. As a result, ART IS CONVERSATION II very rarely describes representational works, and it is never used in reference to realist paintings. Information-based forms of communication like “description” require a distinct, recognizable subject – a requirement which is incompatible with this metaphor. This incompatibility strengthens the conclusion which was suggested by our discussion of the Impressionists and their critics, that different language metaphors in art are tightly bound to different schools of art creation.

There exists a third conversational metaphor, which maps neither artist nor audience. This metaphor maps conversational participants onto multiple artworks:

ART IS CONVERSATION III

CONVERSATION		ART
speaker 1	→	artwork/art element 1
speaker 2	→	artwork/art element 2

This metaphor may be used by artists working several canvases simultaneously. “I like the way one picture starts a dialogue with the next,” says artist Neo Rauch (Galloway 2001:110-111). The metaphor may also be used more in the sense of ART IS CONVERSATION II, when different elements of an artwork “speak” to each other through unplanned interactions. Abstract artist Anne Neely reports that her goal in art is to explore “how color, paint and form meet and respond to one another” (Zevitas 2003:98-101). Unsurprisingly, like ART IS CONVERSATION II, this metaphor is used mainly by abstract artists who depend on random interactions to produce their work.

VII. Conclusion.

Forms of linguistic communication provide a rich source domain for art creation metaphors. Human uses of speech and writing are so varied that they provide metaphors with mappings and inferences appropriate for every kind of artistic endeavor. However, different mappings from language source domains apply best to different kinds of art

creation. Artists concerned with having a certain effect on their audience “speak to the viewer” or provide a “message” for the viewer to “read”. Within the general scope of ART IS WRITING/SPEECH (to the audience), artists may draw different inferences: an Impressionist might value “conciseness,” whereas a Romanticist might value “lyricism” or “poetry” and a photorealist might value “truthful description”.

Some artists try to include the audience in their “conversation”. Artists throughout history have attempted this by incorporating complexities in their art which the viewer explores slowly. In more recent years, artists have moved beyond this illusion of responsiveness and have developed works which literally react to the audience.

However, other artists have moved in the opposite direction. These artists fail to map the audience into their artistic process, focusing instead on “conversation” with (or amongst) their materials, techniques and canvases. The audience is mute witness to a conversation in which it plays no part. No doubt some audiences enjoy playing the “eavesdropper” on this artistic process. However, when artists decline to consider audience comprehension in their metaphors and artistic process, it decreases the likelihood that an audience will understand the art.

As the art world becomes more diverse, a comprehension of the different metaphors for art becomes increasingly essential to the appreciation of the vast array of artistic processes and artworks. The tools of conceptual metaphor theory are uniquely suited to documenting what genres of art are “saying”, what kind of audiences they are “addressing”, and why they are “speaking” at all.

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