

The Allegory and Metaphor in Visual Arts

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Abstract

Throughout the history of civilizations, the language of visual art has expressed the hidden concepts under the apparent forms and the invisible deduced through the visible. Furthermore, this process takes place through various mediums to convey complex and abstract ideas and meanings through symbols, allegories, and metaphors. Additionally, all those mediums represent hidden meaning and veiled language, a meticulously packaged lesson ready to reveal itself. This research will provide a new method of seeing and interpreting the creative experience of visual art from many aspects by monitoring and studying the development of symbolic thinking through theories of reading, receiving, and interpretation. This, in turn, requires the necessity of dealing with the artwork as a concept and not just looking at its formal aspects only. Thus, this calls for a reconsideration of visual and conceptualism metaphors and tropes in artists' practices, using metaphorical structures as one of the most important ways of contemporary thinking.

Keywords: Conceptual perspective, allegory, metaphor, visual arts

Introduction

Much of our collective memory and history is rooted in narrative, an art form unique to the human experience. How we tell our stories, feelings, and thoughts varies, from oral poetry to literature to music to visual art. This process takes place through various mediums to convey ideas. For example, such a process could be elaborated using the illustration of complex and abstract meanings through symbols, metaphors, and allegories. They all represent hidden meaning and veiled language that are just waiting to be deciphered and examined by the recipient of the work. Thus, the narrative approach became one of the modern critical approaches used to explain and interpret the aesthetics of art and literature.

The Evolution of Visual Narrative and Visual Language

Visual narration means an act, a story, or a concept that is built and told through the use of visual media such as the use of still photography, illustration, or video, and can be enhanced with graphics, music, sound, and other sounds (*Visual Narrative*, 2014). Furthermore, this visual narration has developed from the traditional narration, whose first beginnings appeared in ancient civilizations and reached their extent in the Coptic, Byzantine, and Islamic arts. Moreover, with the advent of modernity, narrative representation disappeared, and modern artistic trends rebelled against familiar narrative topics, which involve stories of history, religion, and literature. As the attention in that modern era became focused on issues of form and color, from Impressionism to Surrealism, Abstraction, Dadaism, and Conceptualism.

As a continuation of this rebellion, the postmodern and contemporary era began, which is considered a mixture of multiple movements, artistically and culturally. Affiliation with such an era is a position to criticize various aspects of modernity or the phenomena that have spread in relation to it. This postmodern and contemporary era was characterized by (Nagy, 2018):

- the generation of meanings and the availability of multiple levels of interpretation
- the avoidance of consumed and repeated literary and artistic forms
- the absence of pure facts or agreed-upon fixed meanings
- the deconstruction of the narrative structure and the confusion of reception processes using fragmentation methods
- the ironic character and the inclusion of many controversial experimentation techniques, with the use of overlaps and metaphors from common literary and artistic works within the structure of the narrative imagination
- the creation of a narrative text of multiple styles, languages, and ideological perspectives

Conceptual Vision of Metaphor and Allegory in Artwork

Throughout the history of civilizations, the language of visual art expressed the hidden contents and concepts under the apparent forms, and the invisible deduced through the visible. That would raise questions and stir minds searching for interpretations and proposals revealing the content, which is subject to continuous changes throughout history according to the change in culture and societies' thought. Consequently, that would cause a change and alteration of the reading and appreciation systems. So, in the visual arts, it is possible to notice the huge differences in the methods of establishing, implementing, understanding, and reading artworks from Rubens to Baroque and from Baroque to Futurism. Also, from the difference in ways of producing artworks by icon makers to the methods of producing artworks by expressive abstractions like Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein. That would lead to a transformation of the methods of perceiving content, understanding the meaning, and the ways to extract the significance of the visual discourse (Dahman, 2000).

Early drawings were created as a visual language to help convey religious or political opinions and beliefs and, therefore, they must be accurate and easy to understand and read. In the beginning, especially during the Classical and Middle Ages, allegorical artworks referred to biblical tales. For instance, a group of religious symbols was used to tell the story of Christ's birth or the Annunciation scene, such as the lamb, the dove, the flower, or the ray of light, which shows the necessity of seeing the world in a way that transcends reality. It allowed the artist to create an elaborate world of narratives and play with the world of metaphors and allegories instead of the direct and superficial expression of the act of encoding.

For example, Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Spring Primavera* – shown in Figure 1 – is one of the most famous illustrations of the allegorical and mythical image, referenced by many classical and contemporary texts, open to endless interpretations by critics and art historians.

The meaning of the *Primavera* remains a mystery. It is a work that can be read according to various levels of mythological, philosophical, and historical interpretation, where Botticelli's accuracy in depicting many types of flowers and plants conceals a complex symbolism.

Taking the scene as a whole is probably best understood in light of allegorical meaning. The allusions to spring and the month of May, the scene of a suitor's pursuit, and the three graces point to the idea of a springtime marriage. The painting would have been placed in Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's bedroom (Zirpolo, 1991). His wife would have seen it for the first time after their wedding, so the idea of Cupid targeting the pure Three Graces with his arrow takes on a particular meaning considering conjugal love (Zirpolo, 1991). Some suggest that the work stands as a metaphor for the idea of Neoplatonic love (Dizdar, 2015). In which meditation on *Primavera* and the complex structure of mythological associations that arise from its metaphorical meaning leads to an unconscious merging of symbolic relationships within and between males and females. That would enable the beholder to overcome traumatic experiences by structuring them in line with a worldview (Dizdar, 2015).

According to another hypothesis, *Primavera* is a metaphor for metamorphosis. *Primavera* has been said to embody the Neoplatonic philosophies and writings of the third century that were adopted and popularized by the physicians of their time. In Renaissance Italy, Neoplatonist artists and thinkers sought to synthesize or draw parallels between the beliefs of classical antiquity and Christianity. Venus, for example, has been considered the classic embodiment of both earthly and divine love and is thus a precursor or parallel to the Virgin Mary.

In his depiction of Venus, Botticelli presents the shape of the curvature of the branches behind the figure as a kind of halo, and her stomach bulges out in what some consider a depiction of pregnancy. Furthermore, Venus raises her hand in a gesture of appreciation and invitation that mirrors Mary's gestures to the angel Gabriel in contemporary Annunciation scenes, including Botticelli's *Annunciation* in 1481, as shown in Figure 2.

With this change in mind (Venus to the Virgin Mary), one can begin to recognize the pattern of transformation throughout the painting, including the transformation of Cloris into Flora, the transformation of winter into spring, and the conceptual transformation of literature into visual art.

Figure 1

Primavera by Sandro Botticelli, 1477-1482, Florence.



Figure 2

Cestello Annunciation by Sandro Botticelli, 1481.



Besides these references to familiar mental or pictorial images from everyday experience to illustrate several rhetorical concepts, several terms used in classical rhetoric were originally metaphors from the

visual experience. The transparent or polychromatic could describe the diction, but the correct understanding of the visuals was presumed rather than objective. In general, classical discourse did not branch out into a whole visual art discourse, with occasional references to mental and pictorial images and metaphors from the visual experience.

Additionally, metaphor is one of the basic categories in the ancient rhetorical heritage that oscillated between the description of the ancient rhetoric and its normative complexity. Rhetoricians have always categorized it within the investigations of rhetoric, which in their definition means to include the same meaning according to multiple ways with clarity of indication. Furthermore, metaphors are based on the philosophy of similarity, which is conditioned by a pattern of verbal and mental clues that modify the speech from the path of the real signification to the path of the performance of the figurative sign. Metaphors have rich capabilities that allow understanding the literary discourse, whether textual or visual, in its totality and comprehensiveness, which modernists realized when they sought to root the theory of the artistic image and deepen its applied aspect. Moreover, in response to the development of this interpretation system, writers and artists began to create literature and art that was supposed to read allegorically in contrast to the Bible and the classic works of Greek and Latin literature, which had a symbolic effect. Although we do not rely on this complex system today, allegorical symbolism underlies many modern assumptions about how a text or piece of art indicates meaning.

Moreover, allegory is a complex metaphor, or series of metaphors, combined and used in films, visual arts, or literature. It is often used to give abstract ideals (truth, beauty, etc.) a concrete form, sometimes by embodying these ideals as characters within work so that the reader can easily understand and build a philosophical, moral, or political point of view.

The metaphor and the allegory, which rhetoricians and critics saw in the early classics as just a decorative linguistic tool whose role was limited to decorating the literary text, is an essential process and a product of thought. The power of metaphor lies in its ability to enhance the understanding of the meaning of experience, the metaphor determines reality in art and language. Moreover, metaphor urges the receiver to look beyond the literal meaning, to generate associations and benefit from new, different, or deeper levels of meaning. Metaphors, by their generative nature, are those launched by the conceptual system towards a new understanding, and thus, a new meaning or a new idea can be placed in a much wider setting for inspiration or influence.

Sometimes concepts may be deceptive, abstract, and difficult to interpret. Hence, metaphors and allegories provide an external expression for conceptual designations that may be difficult to translate literally, whether in language or images. The rhetorical use of the spirit of the artwork and the metaphor must be united in the overall sense. Additionally, the metaphorical image here is conducive to the purpose. It expresses this purpose, and it cannot be cut off from the organic unity or the artistic experience, but the consideration of sensory similarity between the two parties must be transcended. It is realized that the potential of the metaphor must be related to the feeling, and this metaphorical process often creates divergent meanings, as the attributes of one entity are transferred to another, by comparison, substitution, or because of interaction.

Artists construct ideas in the creation process that can be described as figurative expressions. The figurative expression occurs when domains are mapped to each other resulting in new meaning taking shape in a work of art, whether it is planned, entirely unplanned, or somewhere in between. Artists' working methods open the possibility of metaphorical visions while immersing themselves in materials and techniques. The inner passion of artists to express themselves always stems from their conceptual system by exploring and investigating their creative vision in some way or form. Since artists think conceptually, metaphors are inevitably created by communicating ideas through the medium used. The argument is most clearly laid out according to the viewer's perception of a piece of art. This is because artists make metaphors while expressing themselves, but what they really want is to simply externalize a piece of art so that the viewer can experience the work and provide its interpretation. Before exploring viewers' perception of metaphors that communicate through art, it is important to state what the artist wants the viewer to "see." The artist wants to generate other metaphors for viewers. Artists only wish to integrate the viewers' conceptual system with the artwork so that the latter can form personal connections with the piece of art.

Artwork Analysis and Theory Application

By focusing and using the theories of reading, reception, and interpretation as an analytical model in revision and awareness of the current artistic work research, this paper can reach actual results. Whereas the theory of interpretation and reception emerged as a result of a reaction to the omission of the role of the reader and its neutrality in reading the literary text, this theory came to achieve a balance between the elements of the creative literary process (work, writer, and recipient). These theories seek, in their entirety, to involve a broad and actual audience to develop their aesthetic taste through strong communication with artistic texts.

This, in turn, contributes to broadening the perceptions of critical reading of the recipient through the process of deconstructing and interpreting the text. In addition to studying the relationship between the signifier and the signified and then linking the signs according to semantic systems that form the main axis of the meaning that the recipient reaches through understanding, intuition, and perception. And whenever the recipient re-reads, he will discover other meanings that he did not realize the first time.

Looking at the period of modernity, one of its most famous artists, Van Gogh, deliberately used elements in an allegorical sense and made better use of metonyms, metaphors, and similes. He also deliberately created connections and benefited from new, different, and deeper levels of meaning. The artist expressed the human being by declaring visible extents that carry within them non-virtual connotations and suggestions, such as his shoes, vases, and daily needs. Still, he gives them a metaphysical dimension that frees them from their realism. By looking at the famous Van Gogh *chair painting* (Figure 3) and Gauguin's *chair painting* (Figure 4), we discover the psychological and metaphorical differences and the rhythm of dealing with life, ambiguity, and complexity on the one hand, and simplicity and optimism on the other hand. It was an analogy in adjectives or verbs, and empty chairs were frequently used as personifications of the people who possessed them. These ideas lead to much discussion of the idea that the accompanying paintings may have been intended to represent the contrasting moods of the artists as they are portraits of two very dissimilar people who never find unity. And when placed next to each other, their tumultuous differences and problems fade away, and the essential spiritual connection emerges, and it is not unreasonable to interpret the chairs as representing Van Gogh's conception of Gauguin. With the most elegant elements, he chose to represent Paul Gauguin.

Figure 3

Van Gogh's Chair by Van Gogh, National Gallery, London



Figure 4

Gauguin's Chair by Van Gogh, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



In a fast-moving world, it can sometimes seem that the only constant is the change, and this makes keeping up with knowledge of topics and events a challenge (Charman & Ross, 2006). With the developments at

that time in the course of art and its abandonment of realistic representation and its tendency towards abstraction, surrealism at this time can always be considered an excellent example of the metaphors created in works of art. Many artists in this direction used symbols, images, shapes, or materials that represent a philosophical and spiritual idea. Marcel Duchamp's ready-made works, Marguerite's drawings, and Dali's works are just a few examples we can use to present visual metaphors through art.

One example of metaphors created by artists is Duchamp's way of describing the conceptual system of thinking towards creating art and thus creating metaphors through it. He suggests that the ability of the human mind to transmit experiences/memories helps artists to express themselves. At the same time, it places the viewer facing the "transformation phenomenon" at the point where the viewer transforms the artist's inert material into a work of art. But, again, the viewer's intelligence of perception operates unconsciously and imposes the artwork's aesthetic value. How does the human mind create — by acting conceptually — metaphors to perceive the surroundings? Visual thinking is how the brain translates everything it sees into concepts that always lead to metaphors as it tries to describe the world through cognitive processes.

Contemporary art today is an eclectic arena and, as such, allows for a variety of different approaches and styles, with shifting periods and civilizations. Many examples of artists using everyday consumables to reflect on current pressing issues. For instance, British artist Sarah Lucas uses sculpture and installation to promote allegorical tropes in art, creating sculptures that use everyday objects and consumables — such as old furniture, food, tights, and cigarette butts — to present uncomfortable truths about sex, gender, and death. For example, in her work *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*, she uses food to discuss sexual politics. For instance, eggs and kebabs could be translated into the breasts and genitals of women. Additionally, the table, tabletop, and four legs could be used to show the body and the four limbs of a human, resulting in a sculptural representation. It is undeniable to "woman as an object" and the sexism that Lucas felt as a young artist, and it is unclear whether this anthropomorphism is an attack on the societal characterization of the female body as consumable or simply as a receptacle where men make their deposits or is more personal to think about. In this representation of the artist's own body and sexual experiences, this model serves as a critique of sexual attitudes toward women, as two fried eggs and kebabs illustrate Lucas' desire to play with metaphors of street language. This shift in subject matter makes us realize that the principle of using the symbol has not always remained the same (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab by Sarah Lucas, 1992.



The bed is no longer a place of comfort or privacy in Mona Hatoum's production. While she molds the bed like a soft mattress, any suggestion of comfort is rejected by the steel plate material she has chosen to build the artwork, turning the sense of family comfort into a state of anxiety. These steel plates are usually associated with their decorations in industrial engineering or military defenses. Mona Hatoum is among

many artists who masterfully create metaphors using materials and objects, causing endless discussions with viewers' perception and their conceptual system for perceiving ideas, events, feelings, and thus metaphors. Many of the traditional connotations associated with the bed metaphor (such as comfort, privacy, and serenity) are rejected in this work. She presents images and material more commonly associated with pain, discomfort, torture, and abuse, with references to social and political oppression. It appears in such works the contradiction of feeling and the ambiguity of the meaning, which are sought as ends in themselves. The limit did not stop at the unfortunate repercussions of the conditions of the immigrants from the occupied lands, but their companion in their migration to countries that support this occupation. As soon as you think about comfort, the decorated metal will leave a painful imprint on the body of anyone who lies on it, in a reference by the artist to the extent to which migrants feel pain in places and countries other than their own.

Figure 6

Divan Bed by Mona Hatoum, 1996.



Therefore, metaphor and allegory are a rich way to study and read the components of the artwork, color memory, and the secrets of the expressive visual language. Its apparent and implicit connotations, aesthetics, and use value extracted from it can be used to re-vision and analyze contemporary visual artworks. Modern semantic perceptions made metaphor an essential value, representing a semantic innovation and automatic creation of new meanings. Metaphor is also considered an argument based on the structure of reality and redrawing its scenes, based on the creation of similarities that are not ready in reality, and the suggestion of the moral energy generated by the artistic structure of the partial metaphorical image in its total framework, which works to expand and multiply levels of understanding and interpretation. The inspiration is not limited to the creator but includes the recipients, who increase their interpretive ability and pushes them to search for the essence of the artistic image. This inspiration is also used for a specific expressive purpose, such as generating meaning and exaggerating its description, or for an artistic purpose, such as brevity in the image, improving its position in the recipient, and highlighting familiar things in an artistic image, in a manner different from what is customary, and discovering the new hidden relationships between things, phenomena and events.

Conclusion

Based on this, metaphor is an essential tool for understanding the world, thinking about it, and talking about it. It is necessary to emphasize that metaphor is not only a linguistic issue but, instead, the product of a relationship between its forms and thought. As a means of communication highlights the artistic meaning, it goes beyond its traditional meaning towards the eloquence of the image, and the resulting significance and meaning, to understand the part through understanding the whole, and to employ our feelings, experiences, behavior, and aesthetic awareness within a social and cultural system. They are structures that reflect deeper moral, spiritual, and political meanings and speak of life, death, love, virtue, and justice.

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