

THE CASE FOR PICTORIAL METAPHOR: RENÉ MAGRITTE AND OTHER SURREALISTS

1. Introduction

„Metaphor“ constitutes an area of research which has witnessed a remarkable development over the past few decades, particularly in the philosophy and language departments. Everybody will remember the term metaphor from secondary school as a stylistic feature he was supposed to be able to recognize in the analysis of poetry. The Concise Oxford Dictionary entry gives as a definition of metaphor: „Application of name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable“ (Sixth edition, 1976). While metaphor has always been considered an important phenomenon in the study of literature, it is only fairly recently that students of language and philosophers have expressed an interest in it. For a long time they saw metaphor as a specimen of non-literal language, as deviation, an oddity. This condescending attitude radically changed when they discovered that metaphor, far from being a mere ornament in language, was one of its most structural elements. A metaphor can direct, guide a text, and thus present a way of looking at the world.

A theorist who played a crucial role in the revolution in the area of metaphor is Max Black. His chapter „Metaphor“ in *Models and Metaphors* (1962) has been considered by many as the decisive incentive for the new views on metaphor. Seventeen years later a refined version of this chapter was included in *Metaphor and Thought* (1979), edited by Andrew Ortony. This collection of essays gives a fascinating overview of recent theories and provides a wide range of possibilities for application of these theories. For a brief theoretical introduction of metaphor, we now turn to Black (1962 and 1979), accepting certain simplifications and restricting ourselves to essentials.

Although a metaphor can occur in all kinds of forms, we will here focus on the standard form ‚A = B‘. We will call ‚A = B‘ a metaphor when a *literal* interpretation of the comparison results in nonsense. Thus, ‚man is a mortal creature‘ is not a metaphor, but ‚man is a wolf‘ is. In a metaphor, the metaphorized B-term (here: ‚wolf‘) will be labelled its ‚focus‘ and the non-metaphorized A-component (‚man‘) its ‚frame‘ (Black’s terminology). As the statement is literally untrue, a tension arises between both terms, and it is in this tension, so characteristic of metaphor, that resides its potentially surprising or illuminating effect. A metaphor invites one, instead of considering A in its conventional meaning, to look at A in terms of the entirely different phenomenon B.

Black proposes two things: firstly, he maintains there is often no *intrinsic* kinship between A and B, thus refuting the traditional idea that a metaphor merely makes *existing* similarities explicit. Black suggests, on the contrary, that a metaphor often *creates* the similarity. His second important claim is that A and B, although usually self-contained concepts, are actually *systems* of facts, properties and associations. Generally speaking, what happens in a metaphor is that the system of relevant facts, properties and associations of B (labelled by Black 'the implicative complex' of B), is projected upon A. The determination of what are the relevant elements in the implicative complex of B depends on the context and on the imagination of the person who uses the metaphor. In a rich metaphor, many elements from the implicative complex of B are relevant for A, so that a whole range of meaning components in A is being activated. And if, moreover, A and B stem from radically different conceptual systems, a metaphor can result in a novel view of A. We can thus say that metaphor can (re)create reality.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in view of its roots in literature and literary criticism, the study of metaphor has until recently primarily focused on the verbal. If, however, Lakoff and Johnson are right in claiming that 'metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language' (1980: 153), it should be possible to talk about metaphors in non-verbal contexts, too. In this paper, therefore, I propose to discuss the concept 'pictorial metaphor' and to explore a number of pictorial metaphors in some detail.

For my examples I will draw on the area where the study of metaphor once had its natural abode — the realm of art. More precisely, I will focus on Surrealism, and I will do so for the following reason: one of the central tenets of Surrealism was that ultimately all opposites (feeling vs. reason; beauty vs. ugliness; substance vs. spirit, etc.) are merely *apparent* opposites. In the last resort each two 'antitheses' are aspects of a deeper unity, and the Surrealists saw it as their task to show this unity. From this point of view, it is hardly surprising that metaphor, with its crucial characteristic of rendering one kind of thing in terms of another, could play an important role in bridging the seemingly irreconcilable opposites. As, moreover, Surrealism had both a verbal and a pictorial side, I assumed it would not be improbable that the central ideology would manifest itself in each of these. And although the Surrealists never systematically or programmatically discussed the concept of metaphor, the word does occur quite frequently in their writings. As a matter of fact, the principle of metaphorical *rapprochement* was such a common practice among Surrealist artists, that Robert Champigny coined the term 'the S device' for it (Sellin, 1975: 19).

Perhaps it would here be objected that the Surrealists' practice of a seemingly random coupling of two phenomena is a far cry from the 'controlled' metaphors which are the stock examples of modern metaphorists, but a moment's reflection will make us realize that there is no fundamental, only a gradual difference between the two. After all, as we have seen, a theorist like Max Black claims that metaphor does not so much reflect existing similarities; rather it creates the similarity. And this is exactly what Surrealism tried to do. The difference resides only in the Surrealists' radical way of applying this idea. Surrealism attempted to subvert existing modes of looking at reality and to propose new ways of looking by introducing radically novel metaphors.

Surrealist metaphors can roughly be distinguished into three categories: verbal metaphors; verbo-pictorial metaphors; and pictorial metaphors. The verbal metaphors in Surrealism do not essentially differ from what is understood by them among metaphorists. The only difference is that the Surrealists often made metaphorical connections through random couplings, particularly in all kinds of games. An example of these is: 'Qu'est-ce que la rencontre? C'est un sauvage' (Source: *L'Arc*, no. 37, 1969, p. 24. English translation: 'What is a meeting? It is a savage'), yielding the metaphor MEETING = SAVAGE. The second category consists of metaphors in which one of the terms is pictorial and the other verbal. This is probably the most complex category as it involves two different media. Under this category we can subsume for instance metaphorical painting-title relations (for analyses of these relations in modern painting, metaphorical and otherwise, see Bann, 1985 and Božičević, 1987), and verbo-pictorial relationships *within* a painting (e. g. 'Le Paysage Fantôme' and 'La Trahison des Images' both by Magritte). I will not be concerned with this category here, as it poses philosophical problems which are outside the scope of this article. The third category, which is the one I will be talking about, is pictorial metaphor proper.

Before discussing a number of pictorial metaphors, I would like to emphasize that my approach is primarily a technical one. I will try to show that a certain representation is a metaphor, but I will not attempt to give a satisfactory *interpretation* of it — often, indeed, this would seem to be impossible anyway in the case of Surrealist art. This means that I will on the whole not be concerned with what Black calls the projection of elements from the implicative complex of B upon A. I will also generally *disregard* the titles of the paintings/collages. I do not contest that for an adequate interpretation of them the titles may be essential, but as I do not, I repeat, aim at interpretation and merely use the works of art as illustrations of 'pictorial metaphors', I will only make use of titles insofar as they provide clues for what Roland Barthes has called 'anchorage' (1986 : 29), that is, insofar as they are necessary to locate pictures in space and time.

In analysing pictorial metaphors I have made use of concepts developed within the theory of verbal metaphor. Generally speaking I assume in the following analyses

- firstly, that similarity is a central concept in metaphor (Ortony, 1979 and Miller, 1979);
- secondly, that similarity is often created rather than pre-existent (Black, 1979); and
- thirdly, that every metaphor has a primary direction, i. e., a metaphor $A = B$ cannot be reversed as $B = A$ without affecting its meaning (Miller, 1979). Put differently, reversal of the terms would result in a different metaphor.

We will now examine a number of pictorial metaphors in some detail. In the famous painting 'The Red Model II' by Magritte (fig. 1), the central object depicted is a pair of what are simultaneously feet and shoes. In terms of verbal metaphors we would say: these things do not exist; the statement SHOES = FEET or FEET = SHOES is literally untrue, hence it would have to be given a metaphorical reading. Many verbal metaphors have a form



Fig. 1 The Red Model II, 1937 (Le Modèle Rouge II), René Magritte.

A = B. Thanks to the linearity of verbal metaphors we know that A is the frame and B is the the focus. In pictures, however, such linearity does not exist, so that we will have to take recourse to the context to decide whether the pictorial metaphor involved is: FEET = SHOES; or
SHOES = FEET.

Which contextual features do we see? We see an unpainted wooden wall; an irregular, brownish surface; a couple of coins in the left hand bottom corner; a cigarette butt and a match in front of the left foot-shoe and a piece of newspaper with a photograph depicting a human figure in the right hand bottom corner. Furthermore there is a shadow behind the feet-shoes.

The first connotation of bare feet is, I would argue, that it is part of a human creature, that is, it carries the feature (+ human). In this the ,feet' are different from the ,shoes', as the latter carry the feature (-human). A second connotation of bare feet is that they are vulnerable and in need of protection. Shoes, on the other hand, do not need protection: on the contrary, they supply protection. Let us now consider how the contextual features relate to the two oppositions ,human' versus ,non-human' and ,needing protection' versus ,giving protection'. Wooden walls, cigarette butts, matches, pieces of newspapers are no standard element in nature, so these contextual features indexically suggest the human. Elements which do *not* suggest the feature ,human', it would seem to me, are only the brownish ground and possibly the source of light causing the ,feet-shoes' shadow, which could well be the sun. However, the ,human factor' is severely denaturalized by the fact that the ,feet' are isolated. Whereas shoes can very well occur separately, human feet are generally attached to a human body.



Fig. 2 The Rape, 1945 (Le Viol), René Magritte.

The second feature-pair, 'needing protection' versus 'giving protection', poses the question of the setting of the scene. I would argue that generally speaking one would expect to find vulnerable, unprotected bare feet *indoors* rather than *outdoors*, whereas the protective shoes are primarily suggestive of an *outdoor* setting. When we see the texture of the ground, the unpainted wooden wall and the rubbish, we probably decide that the setting is outdoors. If we decide that the shadow is caused by the sun, this strengthens the case for the outdoor context even more — but of course this hypothesis can only be made on the basis of other contextual features already suggesting the outdoor context, and thus can only be 'circumstantial evidence'. But these other features in themselves are convincing enough to conclude that the setting is outdoors.



Fig. 3 The Collective Invention, 1935 (L'Invention Collective), René Magritte.



Fig. 4 The Explanation, 1954
(L'Explication), René Magritte.

Taking all these contextual features into account, then, nonhuman, outdoor aspects would seem to be dominant over human, indoor aspects. Put differently, the shoe-aspect of our shoe-feet is more 'natural' than the 'feet' aspect. The 'feet' are the strange element here. Hence I propose to consider the shoes as the (literal) frame of the metaphor and the feet as its (figurative) focus. Thus, we here have the metaphor SHOES = FEET.

Our second example is another painting by Magritte, 'The Rape' (fig. 2). Although here there are no contextual features, we still, I think, would see a face first, and a woman's torso second. That is, we would see a woman's face represented as a woman's torso rather than vice versa. If this surmise is correct, a second mechanism apart from mere context would seem to play a role in determining directionality in pictorial metaphors: in the absence of

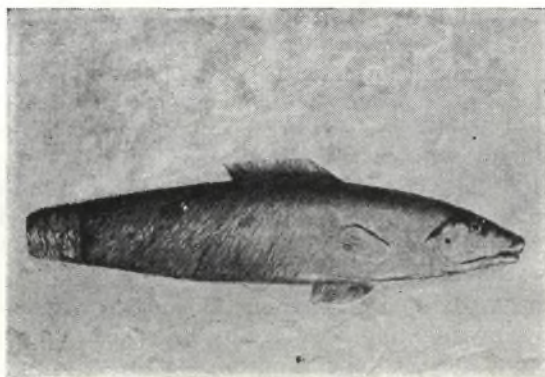


Fig. 5 The Exception, 1963
(L'Exception), René Magritte.



Fig. 6 Tatlin at Home, 1920 (Tatlin at Home), Raoul Hausmann.

relevant contextual features, the outermost layer determines the 'literal' term, i. e., the frame. Thus, the metaphor would run: (FEMALE) FACE = (FEMALE) BODY. Note, incidentally, that this corresponds nicely with the meaning of the word 'frame' — the face 'frames' the body.

In 'The Collective Invention' (fig. 3), again by Magritte, we find a woman-fish or a fish-woman. It is doubtful whether it is the fish-features or the woman-features which are dominant. It is arguable that sea/water connotes fish and beach/land connotes human life, the two balancing each other off. In this case there is no predominance, so that it is not clear which of the two, fish or woman, is frame and which is focus. From an artistic point of view, this ambiguity is of course a nice touch—after all, the hybrid creature is an inverted mermaid. A similar problem of context occurs in a painting which is tantalizingly called 'The Explanation' (fig. 4). Because of the neutrality of the context, each of the two components of the metaphor, bottle and carrot, seem to be equally in or out of place. Hence it remains vague whether we should process this metaphor as BOTTLE = CARROT or as CARROT = BOTTLE. The problem confronts us once more in 'The Exception' (fig. 5). Due to the absence of contextual features, it is impossible to accord primacy to either of the two terms. Thus the metaphor FISH = CIGAR is as plausible a rendering as CIGAR = FISH.

We will now examine the matter of directionality in pictorial metaphor by investigating a collage by Raoul Hausmann, 'Tatlin at Home' (fig. 6). Looking closely at the contraption on the upper part of the man's head, the viewer

sees parts of wheels, a drill, a steering mechanism etc., which he will probably sum up by the word 'machine'. This analysis would seem to be corroborated by the presence of other machine-like features in the context: a part of a plane, and a model of the insides of a human torso, which arguably also suggests a (+ machine) feature. In the absence of decisive contextual features, however, it is initially unclear how the second term of the metaphor should be named. Considering the location of the contraption together with general human knowledge and expectation, I think the average viewer would waver between two versions of the metaphor. It could be HAT = MACHINE, but also BRAIN = MACHINE.

In the background there is a man wearing a hat, which thus could suggest the HAT = MACHINE metaphor, and there seems to be nothing to suggest BRAIN—except the title, 'Tatlin at home'. Tatlin was a leading Russian artist of the productivist school. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that after a stay in Paris, Tatlin 'became the leader of a group of Moscow artists who tried to apply engineering techniques to the construction of sculpture' (*Micropaedia*, Vol. IX, 15th edition, 1974, p. 840). Thus it is the title, here to be seen as a contextual feature 'anchoring' the work of art in time and space, which suggests the BRAIN = MACHINE metaphor. It could be added, moreover, that this later metaphor is a fairly conventional one, too, so that we would probably opt for BRAIN = MACHINE rather than HAT = MACHINE. Notice, however, that there is, true to Surrealist ideology, no question of an absolute either/or in this case. It is noteworthy, that we intuitively opt for BRAIN = MACHINE rather than vice versa, despite the machine-features in the context, which would seem to be dominant over the brain-features, which are after all restricted, as we have seen, to the title. A first reason probably is the role



Fig. 7 Plate 121 of *Une Semaine de Bonté*, Paris, 1934, Max Ernst.



Fig. 8 The Frogs Ask for a King, 1838 (Les Grenouilles qui Demandent un Roi), Grandville.

of the *location* of the contraption in or on the man's head; human expectation quickly establishes that there is a literally untrue situation here, and subsequently, that 'brain' rather than 'machine' is what best qualifies for the position of literal frame in the metaphor. A second reason might well be that 'the human' is such a strong norm for the viewer, who after all is a human himself, that when in doubt he automatically attributes the status of literalness, i. e., the frame, to any human element, in this case 'brain', and reserves the other term for the non-literal focus.

In plate 121 of Max Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté* (fig. 7), another collage, the human features in the context are dominant over the bird-features, hence we would verbalize the metaphor it contains as MAN = BIRD and not as BIRD = MAN. It is illuminating to contrast this collage with a drawing by Grandville, 'The Frogs Ask for a King' (fig. 8), where we have the reverse



Fig. 9 My Wife Nude, Contemplating Her Own Flesh Becoming Stairs, Three Vertebrae of a Column, Sky and Architecture, 1945 (La meva Dona Nua, Contemplant el seu Propi Cos, Convertint-se en Escales, Tres Vertèbres d'una Columnata Celestial i Arquitectura), Salvador Dalí.



Fig. 10 Fountain, 1917 (Fontaine), Marcel Duchamp.

situation: animal features are dominant over human features, so the metaphor would here have to be processed as BIRD = MAN. Notice, incidentally, that the former picture is more disturbing than this one: it is far more reassuring for human beings to model animals upon themselves (the typical situation in fables) than model themselves upon animals.

Fig. 9 shows a painting by Dalí, titled 'My Wife Nude, Contemplating Her Own Flesh Becoming Stairs, Three Vertebrae of Column, Sky and Architecture'. Without further discussion I present the hypothesis that this work by Dalí contains a pictorial *simile*. Instead of metaphor's 'short circuit' we here have the 'is like' situation characteristic of simile: WOMAN IS LIKE BUILDING.

Finally, I would argue that 'Fountain' (fig. 10), the well-known ready-made by Marcel Duchamp, too, can be considered as a pictorial metaphor, namely, the metaphor FOUNTAIN = WORK OF ART. Notice that it is not merely the signature and the date which suggest we perceive the fountain not literally but metaphorically; it is—or was—even more the wider context of the fact that it was originally submitted as an object to be displayed at an art exhibiton. One can even wonder whether the order of the terms in the metaphor should not be reversed. It is arguable that the signed object, when found in a toilet, would yield the metaphor FOUNTAIN = WORK OF ART because of the dominance of the 'toilet' context, but would in the context of an exhibiton have to be processed as WORK OF ART = FOUNTAIN. Particularly this last example, I think, makes the importance of context and expectation abundantly clear. In conclusion I would like to make the following points:

— I hope to have shown that there is such a concept as pictorial metaphor, and that the theory of verbal metaphor can, to a considerable extent, be usefully applied to it. This does not mean, of course, that there are no fundamental differences between pictorial and verbal metaphor. We only need to look at any pictorial Magritte metaphor to realize that it 'succeeds' in a way its verbal counterpart by no means does.

— If one pauses to think of it, all the examples I have shown are philosophically or literally speaking *collages*. This constitutes a direct parallel with verbal metaphor, which after all could well be seen as a 'verbal collage': a certain term B is extracted from its original context B' and projected on a term A with its context A'.

— Finally, directionality in pictorial metaphors would seem to be far more dependent on context than in verbal ones. It is context which guides our processing of the metaphor. Moreover, this context is not restricted to the work of art itself; external context-features, including general human and cultural knowledge, as well as expectations, play an important role. (It will also be clear, incidentally, that an analysis of pictorial metaphors can significantly contribute to an insight in the mechanisms underlying the processing of visual information.) Thus, if I am right in claiming that the pictorial idiosyncracies I have been talking about can be labelled 'pictorial metaphors', thereby extending the area of metaphor to the non-verbal, it would perhaps be better to replace the old-fashioned 'literal versus figurative' opposition by the dichotomy 'conventional versus unexpected'.

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