

Visual Metaphor, Embodied Knowledge and the Epistemological Indefinite

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Abstract

This paper argues that the epistemological experience of artistic research-representation can be understood through visual metaphor. Using Zwicky's notion of metaphor as a form of "seeing-as," the alignment of metaphor with non-truth is problematised by arguing that metaphorical understanding is experiential truth, engaged through the body-with-the-world. Visual metaphors enrich our understandings of what it means to research through art by envisioning truth as an epistemological indefinite, a form of embodied knowledge that is not halted by conclusivity but rather is expanded by a process of continual negotiation.

Keywords: *research through art, visual metaphor, epistemology, embodiment, truth*



Figure 1 Rachel Hellner, *Incomplete Figure with Red Sock*. Acrylic and graphite on board, 1998

Poets and Magicians

There is much in this wandering that I do not comprehend. In following the catalytic path of analogy, I cannot help but wonder about the veracity of statements wading deep in pools of interpretation where this is that and simultaneously not. Thus begins my questioning with metaphor: A symbolic gesture that plays circus games, dressing-up in brocade costumes where Elsa is a young girl sometimes sporting a beard, and Spencer is a party clown with a golden frown. It is generally agreed upon that the function of metaphor is as a fictional device. However, looking around the bend to encompass a wider view, we might see that metaphor is more than an imaginary tale; rather, it is a way of understanding that challenges traditional divides between fact and fiction. Yet metaphor is not a literal truth or fact. It is reasonable to ask, then, what knowledge is contained in a metaphor, the slippery device used by poets and magicians. As Rushdie (1991: 22) questions in his fictional treatise on knowledge, *Haroun and the sea of stories*, "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?" What knowledge is there in all of this? Is it possible to learn about reality and our negotiation of it through things that are and are not? Is the unrealistic nature of metaphor at odds with understanding as truth?

Metaphor as "Seeing-As"

A metaphor sets one thing beside another and says, "see, they have the same form." Which is to say: They make the same gesture; they mean in the same way...Metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another (Zwicky 2003: 6–8L).¹

Zwicky describes a metaphor as the "phenomenon of 'seeing-as'" (Zwicky 2003) in which one whole is referred to by another in order to suggest a common meaning shared by the

two. The word metaphor originates from the Greek *metaphora*, meaning "a transfer" (Harper 2001). Metaphor is essentially the transference of meaning from one symbol (the topic) to another symbol (the vehicle). The metaphor "down the rabbit hole" reflects transference in which one thing is understood in terms of another. We may understand this metaphor as an adventure into the unknown, where the topic (a mysterious adventure) is "seen-as" the vehicle (down the rabbit hole). In literary distinction, similes and analogies are distinguished from metaphors. For the purposes of this paper, however, similes and analogies are subsumed under the umbrella of metaphor in that they too are a form of seeing-as.

A metaphor *is* and *is not* true. When we speak of falling "down the rabbit hole" as an adventure into the unknown, the rabbit hole is not a literal description but nonetheless captures the embodied experience of losing rational control and plummeting into the unfamiliar; as such it retains an *experiential* thread of truth. This is why poems and visual art carry intense visceral meaning; this is not because they are literal rational truths (also known as facts) but rather because they carry embodied experiential truth. Metaphors echo experience. They awaken our senses because they transfer somatic understanding and deep gestural and visceral memories of the body. Metaphors engage the animality of experience.

Art as a Metaphorical Device

Art is a metaphorical device. Through metaphor, both the artist and the viewer engage in a complex epistemological process involving somatic and cognitive understanding. In the cases of representational art, or on the other end of the visual spectrum, non-objective work, artwork employs symbols in a way that invites the viewer to engage in experiential insight.



Figure 2 Rachel Hellner, *Rabbit, Highway 715, Mallorca*. Acrylic, graphite and oil pastel on mylar, 2007



Figure 3 Rachel Hellner, *Duck, Willow Island Road, MB*. Acrylic, graphite and oil pastel on mylar, 2007

Rabbit, Highway 715, Mallorca (Figure 2) and *Duck, Willow Island Road, MB*, (Figure 3) painted by Rachel Hellner are apt examples of the use of metaphor in representational art (Hellner 2007a; 2007b). If the paintings are read solely in terms of their literality—as lifeless animals—a more meaningful range of interpretations the work addresses is lost. This includes the correlation between the active gestural lines of the artist and the limp bodies of the subject, the distance of the gaze of the spectator and the penetration of the injured animal other, and the distance and proximity between power and vulnerability. It is on these levels

that the works speak through a metaphorical process, engaging visceral cognitive and somatic understanding.

Hellner's mixed media collages, *Chasm 1* (Figure 4) and *Aerial Red* (Figure 5), lean towards non-objectivity, the other end of the representation-abstraction continuum. Despite the range of symbols that can be read in the work, they are both essentially comprised of lines, colour, texture, shapes and materials. As with Hellner's representational work, much of the meaning embedded in the abstracted work is lost if it is read solely in formal terms. One interpretation of the work that engages metaphorical understanding addresses the symbolic systems of organisation, the map-like structures referenced through the flat planes.

The map-like structures provide an aerial view of the conceptual site of a wounded landscape: A microcosm that is saturated with life and loss, where the wound of life and its curative coincide. In both Hellner's representational and abstract work, we see how art operates metaphorically. In essence, it is a visual metaphor, or a way of "seeing-as," in which the embodied truth is understood through the somatic transfer of one experiential symbol to another.

Experiencing Visual Metaphor

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows on itself.



Figure 4 Rachel Hellner, *Chasm 1*. Mixed media on board, 2002



Figure 5 Rachel Hellner, *Aerial Red*. Acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 2001

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention of the object.

(Simone Weil in Zwicky 2003: 102)

When I encounter a visual metaphor, I reflect; however, my deliberation is not solely a cognitive or mental act. Metaphor as a process of the symbolisation of a "whole" is a more collaborative type of phenomenon in which an ecology of individual and collective experience, as well as embodied and cognitive processes, are enlivened alongside other multi-modal capacities. Much like Weil's observation of the act of love, it requires the full attention of the object.

Hermine Feinstein argues that by employing metaphor, art is raised "to the level of important and complex cognitive tasks" (Feinstein 1982: 45). She makes a clear and logical argument for the process of negotiating symbolisation through visual metaphor as a cognitive process involving the "reading" of symbols (commonly accepted signs that are determined by human convention). Feinstein notes that visual metaphors are connotative and implicit, while other symbols are denotative and explicit, such as a mathematical formula. Her argument echoes Zwicky's claim that "art, as most of us have experienced, can give us access to complex possibilities of understanding and perception, remote from our own. What is most peculiar, what we should wonder at first, is not how art does this, but, given that it does do it, art has become divorced from what we recognise as thinking" (Zwicky 1992: 80). Feinstein's article could be viewed as an alternate response to the same question.

The strength of Feinstein's argument is that it offers insight into the complex intellectual process involved in metaphoric understanding through symbolisation. In this way, her writing challenges the traditional position of visual arts in the realm of academia as an activity divorced from thinking. An additional strength of Feinstein's carefully crafted argument is that it demonstrates the cognitive rigor involved in metaphoric understanding. Nonetheless, Feinstein reinforces positivist dichotomies of knowing by setting the bar for value in understanding in mental cognition, an area of knowing pervasively viewed as not only separate but different from "other-than-mind"-based forms of understanding. This approach reinforces traditional hierarchies that have functioned largely to marginalise the ways of knowing that are enlivened through metaphor. However, given the marginalisation of metaphor as a research method, Feinstein's retort manages to address some of the common misconceptions about visual art practice and processes.

Zwicky discusses metaphorical understanding ("seeing-as") in terms of gestalt perception. She distinguishes between two variations of gestalt:

1. The dawning of aspects – confusion, incomprehension are replaced by insight; the face appears where before was only what seemed a meaningless swirl of lines. (We grasp an image).
2. Seeing x as y – what is already present is seen as something else; we see the face in the leaves. (We understand a metaphor).

(Zwicky 2003: 25)

Metaphor relies on embodied knowledge, experience that is perceived through the whole of the body and not just the mind. If we view the mind as a vehicle for interpretation, we disregard other potential factors that influence the experience of understanding. Not only is metaphoric understanding a gestalt perception, it also enacts gestalt experience, which Dilthey described as the "Erlebnis:"

One cannot "think" a poem. One experiences it with all one's faculties. It is indeed impossible to say what part the mind and what part the emotions play in the "Erlebnis." Each experience is a complex and organic whole (Fehling 1943: 15).

Fehling uses Dilthey's "Erlebnis" to describe the experience of poetry, which is rich with metaphor; the same is true of visual metaphor. The negotiation of visual metaphor involves gestalt experience involving the whole; the mind and the individual play their parts but neither in opposition nor isolation from the ecology of the whole.

Metaphor's Epistemological Indefinite

Now the outstanding thing about metaphorical language is that it would be inappropriate to attempt to correct a metaphorical statement in the same way that one attempts to correct literal ones...For if when you say, pointing to the people below, "Ants," someone tries to correct you by showing you a dictionary; or argues that they have two legs and therefore cannot be insects; or invites you to notice that they have clothes on, or that they will look up if you shout at them, then you take it that he has misunderstood you (McCloskey 1964: 216).

The experiential negotiation of visual metaphors results in a plurality of "answers." While contextually common interpretations exist, the knowledge accessed and embodied through the negotiation of metaphor acts as a catalyst. In this way, metaphors provide an opening, acting as conduits to experience. The meanings of metaphors shift depending upon contextual factors during the participation of the artist and viewer. We see this if we juxtapose our earlier metaphor "down the rabbit hole" with Hellner's *Rabbit, Highway 715, Mallorca* (Figure 2) the metaphorical meanings suddenly shift, and we see from another lens. In the painting, the rabbit hole is penetrated by a loss of life: The motionless presence of the rabbit. What was once an adventure into the unknown is rendered a solemn and ethically consequential journey. Metaphor is not only dependent upon juxtapositional contexts but is also dependent on the very specific meeting of unique time-place-matter and variables that reverberate between the artist, artwork, viewer and environment.

A key epistemological distinction between mainstream research practices and research in the arts (particularly visual arts) relates to the nature of knowledge accessed through visual arts-based methods. Many of the traditional methods employed in the natural sciences,

social sciences and humanities create a form of knowledge that seeks to establish a variety of assimilative practices in order to condense knowledge into a definitive conclusion or answer. However, visual arts-based research deals with knowledge that is characteristically inconclusive. The truth contained in a metaphor does not have a one-to-one correlation; rather, it points to more.

Research in the visual arts utilises rigorous metaphoric methodologies to investigate a form of knowing that results in compound hermeneutic answers. These divergent answers echo experiential truths. I would argue that it is precisely this element of uncertainty—an "epistemological indefinite"—that comprises the external contention and fuels the continuing debate on arts-based research. It is this approach to knowing that creates the resistance that many doctoral students and other arts-based researchers face in explaining the nature of their practice (rather than the subject of their research) to those unfamiliar with the field.² Rigorously examining the nature and legitimacy of research methods employed in the arts undoubtedly extends and redirects the scope of individual research topics and practices extensively as it requires practitioners to gain a broader understanding of ontology, methodology and epistemology than from employing accepted methods. It is a process that could benefit those inside and outside of the arena, as arts-based researchers continue to probe, delineate and explicate not only their own practices but also the practices frequently set as the point of reference for academic research in general.

Metaphor is the "epistemological indefinite" in visual arts-based research. Its open-ended form leads to not one but multiple answers. While metaphor is the root of much contention in legitimising the practice of arts-based researchers, it is also the very element that makes it somatically engaging, resonant and personally meaningful. Additionally, because of the subjective nature of metaphoric understanding, a plurality of incongruent views can be maintained simultaneously. Visual metaphor results in a multiplicity of truths, and as a result,

it is accommodative of individual, class, cultural, ethnic and gender difference. Because of its expansive epistemological nature, visual metaphor does not require assimilative universals and thereby enlarges possibility. For example, it can simultaneously acknowledge the legitimacy of the multiple perspectives of the child, midwife, shaman, scientist, poet, mathematician and farmer. Zwicky acknowledges this multiplicity when she says:

But doesn't non-metaphorical language tell the truth about the world, too?
Aren't the eyes *eyes* and windows *windows*? — Yes, that's one way of
looking at it (Zwicky 2003: 12).

That is *one* way of looking at it; yet, surely eyes are more than just eyes, and the same is true of windows. Each of these symbols conveys much more about reality and our negotiation and understanding of life than the literality of their given names imply.

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Notes

1. In *Wisdom and metaphor* (2003), Zwicky makes use of a double text, providing a left hand side and right hand side for each page number. Citations of *Wisdom and metaphor* follow a similar method indicating page sides as left (L) or right (R).
2. In his paper, the debate on research in the arts, Henk Borgdorff (2007) argues that the emergence of the contemporary debate on research in the arts is reflective of challenges experienced by doctoral candidates and other arts-based researchers in defending their practice, rather than the subject of their research, to those outside of the arena.

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