

Metaphors in Art: A Recognition Map

Alice Guerrieri

University of Cagliari - IT

Abstract

This article explores metaphorical language as a cognitive tool that strengthens knowledge and nourishes the imagination (Aristotle 4th century BC), focusing specifically on art. Metaphors serve as a creative resource that amplifies the experience of observation (Wittgenstein 1958). Its imaginative qualities can stimulate interpreters' minds (Davidson 1978; Carston 2018). "Metaphorical seeing" shapes visual metaphors, distinguishing them from linguistic metaphors. Among the most striking visual metaphors are those with an artistic background, which derive from original aesthetic constructions in which divergent domains enrich interpretation (Carroll 1994; Nanay 2016). Observing artistic metaphorical language is both conceptually challenging and cognitively intriguing. Finally, this paper examines artistic metaphorical expressiveness within a categorisation system distinct from models tested in advertising (Forceville 1996). The universal categories of thought proposed here aim to help interpreters identify and deeply understand metaphors in art (Guerrieri et al. 2023).

Keywords: metaphor, metaphorical language, visual imagery, art, artistic metaphor

1. Metaphorical language sheds light on knowledge

Aristotle discovered the cognitive and expressive potential of metaphor in a visual sense. In the *Poetics*, the philosopher provided the earliest

known definition of metaphor: «Metaphor is the application of a word that belongs to another thing; it occurs either from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy» (Aristotle, 21, 57b 6–9). In this theoretical manifesto on the non-literal use of language, transposition can be understood as a transgression of correct linguistic usage. Metaphor is a fundamental linguistic and conceptual tool for identifying ontological relationships and similarities between entities. This figure of speech can establish semantic associations between words and phrases, thereby expanding knowledge.

In addition, metaphors have an evocative power that stimulates and elicits images. This allows us to conceptualise otherwise abstract notions through imagery. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses metaphor by analogy, which, among the processes involved in constructing figurative language, makes metaphor formation most visible (cf. Ervas & Gola 2016). Aristotle also describes the expressive mechanism known as «putting something before the eyes (*poiein pro ommaton*)» (Aristotle, III, 10, 1411a2), which emphasises metaphor's unusual cognitive ability to synthesise information. There are also “image metaphors” (characterised by a logical relationship of substitution from *species* to *species*), whose structure is purely lexical and whose nature is highly evocative. They create a visual effect and produce an immediate presence. For example, a figurative expression compares a judge to an altar, highlighting key qualities of a “true” judge, such as the sacredness of their mission, their honesty, and their courage (*Ibid*, III, 11, 1412a12–4).

This property of imagery can refer to words that represent an object in action. The most “vivid” metaphors bring things to life because they can evoke action in the recipient's mind, describing even inanimate objects in terms of movement and action. Although Aristotle was unaware of theories concerning the bodily dimension of language,

specifically the motor simulation hypothesis developed in neuroscience (cf. Gallese 2005; Gallese & Sinigaglia 2010), his reflections seem almost prophetic. The experience of “putting something before the eyes” resembles the phenomenon of *visual imagery* described by Carston (2010), in which language activates an image in the interpreter's mind, reproducing the experience of seeing a scene both phenomenologically and through simulation. The other aspect, relating to action, also seems to connect to the simulation paradigm. According to the philosopher, particularly effective metaphors describe something - especially something inanimate - in terms of action: the result of a set of immediate, pre-reflective motor skills shared by organisms of the same *species* (cf. Cuccio et al. 2013). Aristotle's insights were unique in the context of philosophical reflections on the visual component of language, and it would take several centuries for the discourse to regain consistency and redefine the activity of seeing images as a metaphorical thought process.

2. The metaphorical experience of seeing

The imagistic effects generated by language emerge in sequences of understanding metaphorical statements and figurative ways of thinking. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) has also discussed the possibility that an interpreter may wish to see and understand an image as one thing or another (*Seeing as, Sehen als*). Consider *Jastrow's figure*¹, which lends itself to the imaginative game of seeing either a rabbit's head or a duck's, highlighting the capacity for metaphorical reasoning. This emphasises the visual nature of metaphor, placing its conceptual component second. According to Donald Davidson, metaphors do not evoke cognitive content, but rather mental images that differ from pictures; pictures are difficult to express in codified language. «A

¹ Image reference: https://grokipedia.com/page/Jastrow_illusion#jastrow-illusion

picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture» (Davidson 1978: 46).

The visual representations that arise in the mind are not, strictly speaking, “portraits” of what we see, nor are they the result of perceptual activity. These figurative portrayals are created mentally, accompanied by sensory information, and recalled from memory, inducing us to relive a new situation involving the original stimulus (cf. Pearson et al. 2015). Mental images are therefore the result of the non-propositional effects of language; that is to say, figurative or literary statements distinguished by expressive nuances and the ability to activate perceptual, emotional, and sensorimotor mechanisms (cf. Wilson & Carston 2019). The visual capabilities of language are evident in the dead metaphor *He was burned up*: «When the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears» (Davidson 1978: 38). Visual imagery can automatically be activated in the mind of the interpreter as a secondary effect of linguistic and pragmatic processing. Like the cognitive effects of propositions, these visual effects are also highly relevant (cf. Davidson 1978). The ability to develop a visual image distinguishes two broad categories of metaphors: *image-permitting metaphors*, which the user can understand without further imaginative elaboration, and *image-demanding metaphors*, which require the creation of an image, whether visual, tactile, or auditory. Among the latter, let us analyse the statement «He wiped² the floor with me» (figuratively translatable as *He defeated me*), uttered by Wittgenstein to describe his first meeting with Gottlob Frege, which clearly provides a brilliant image of the master’s intellectual superiority and the authority he exercises over his pupil (cf. Green 2017).

² The verb *to wipe* literally means *to clean*.

Image activation can also be triggered during the process of understanding a metaphor observed in the visual sphere, when visual mental imagery (cf. Nanay 2016) acts in the same way as inference in the verbal sphere: “seeing” lacks immediate sensory input and differs from perception, which is the recording of a physically present stimulus (cf. Kosslyn et al. 1995). Interpreters' expertise in reactivating and manipulating visual representations without a corresponding visual stimulus encompasses everything one can imagine (cf. Ganis, Schendan 2011). Mental images come from memory and recall, and they are under the control of the will (they can be activated or not), unlike mandatory, involuntary perceptual processing.

However, not all cognitive metaphorical language originates from direct bodily experience. According to Casasanto (2014), in order to identify mental metaphors, we must look beyond the body and consider how our experiences of interacting with our physical and social environments influence our thinking.

3. The structural properties of metaphor in the visual sphere

The multifaceted nature of metaphor, with its figurative ability to generate allusions and expand linguistic phenomena, presents it as a contrasting phenomenon. This contrast arises from the alternation of unexpected words and combinations that, at first glance, form fruitful images (cf. Boehm 2009). Seeing can lead us to construct metaphors inherent in our figurative thinking. For example, the metaphorical statement *Man is a wolf* triggers a mental process that recognises similarities between the characteristics that define *man* and those that define a *wolf*, i.e., between seemingly incomparable elements (cf. Black 1954/1955). A verbal metaphor is often recognisable in the structure “A is B” (target-is-source), where the *target domain* may coincide with the grammatical subject, and the predicate indicates the *source domain*. The target domain usually refers to an abstract concept that

is not widely known or easy to explain. Instead, the source domain refers to a more familiar concept (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994; Bowdle & Gentner 2005). For example, in the statement *Life is a cone of ice cream*, life is the *target* and the ice cream cone is the *source* (cf. Forceville 2016).

A visual metaphor, also known as a *pictorial metaphor*, can be expressed in two modes. In monomodality, the target and source domains are presented in the same way (a *monomodal metaphor*), which means they are either verbal or visual, as is often the case in commercial product images. This is also true in untitled works of art, where the visual component prevails. In *multimodality*, however, the target and source domains are presented exclusively or predominantly in two different ways. This may include the visual and verbal modes, as in many advertising images or cartoons (*verbo-pictorial metaphor*), or the aural mode. In the latter, the target may be visual, and the source may be musical. Alternatively, the target may be verbal, and the source may be auditory, tactile, or olfactory (cf. Forceville 2009).

According to Noël Carroll, *pictorial metaphors* are images arising from a visual abnormality that function like verbal metaphors and are recognised in the same way by viewers. An image is classified as a *pictorial metaphor* if it satisfies the conditions of *homospatiality* and *noncompossibility*. Two or more elements are homospatial if they coexist in the same image, i.e. they are juxtaposed. Noncompossible elements are those that cannot share the same space in the real world (cf. Carroll 1994). The concepts of *homospatiality* and *noncompossibility* are illustrated through Picasso's description of *Baboon and Young*³. The sculpture depicts an upright primate with a smaller creature, probably its young, lying on its chest and sitting on its belly. However, upon closer inspection, we notice that the baboon's

³ Image reference: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81119> .

head is made from a vintage toy car from the late 1940s. The hood of the car serves as the snout, the bumper as the mouth, the windshield as the eyes, and the roof as the skull. The image can be read metaphorically, as if the baboon's head were a car. This sculpture illustrates *homospatiality*, as the mammal and the automobile appear in the same composition, and demonstrates spatial coherence. However, it also reveals aspects of *noncompossibility*, since we expect to see the primate's head where the toy car is located instead (cf. Carroll 2001).

4. Metaphorical language in art: Interpretative challenges

Having discussed the structural features of metaphor in the visual sphere, this section explores metaphor in art. To do so, we examine the theoretical perspectives of Ernst Gombrich, Philippe Minguet and Richard Wollheim.

4.1. Visual metaphors of values in art

In his 1952 symposium report, *Symbols and Values*, art historian Ernst Gombrich argued that artistic language can represent, incorporate, and express elevated values, including moral ones. In particular, he argued that the metaphorical language of art can convey visual qualities equivalent to moral values. This can be seen in his description of the Swiss *Löwendenkmal Luzern* monument (Figure 1):

We may say that when Thorwaldsen designed his once famous memorial for the Swiss guards who were killed during the French Revolution, the 'Lion of Lucerne', he wanted to convey in visual terms 'they died like lions' or 'they died, lions'. We are used to saying in such a context that the lion is a *symbol* of courage, but there are reasons to prefer the term 'metaphor' (Gombrich 1963: 12).

Figure 1⁴

Bertel Thorvaldsen (designer), Lukas Ahorn (sculptor), *Lion of Lucerne*, 1820-1821



While the term “symbol”, understood as a sign recognised by tradition, was commonly used to describe the “attributes” that distinguished and identified gods and saints — think of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who is identified with the wheel, the instrument of her martyrdom — the image of the lion is not considered a representative sign. This is because it can communicate different ideas depending on the context in which it is placed. In one context, it may convey nobility, traditionally associated with the king of beasts. In another context, however, it may convey ferocity or fear⁵. Therefore, each quality observed can be “isolated” and “transferred” to another object. In the aforementioned sculpture, the lion is not a symbolic figure nor an emblem of courage in art. Instead, it can be understood as a

⁴ Image reference (Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-2.5): https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:6315_-_Luzern_-_L%C3%B6wenzentrum.JPG.

⁵ For example, there is a story about a lion who was afraid of a crowing cock.

metaphorical symbol: «Because of its alleged courage the lion lends itself to being used as a symbol (or metaphor) for heroes» (*Ibid*: 13).

The metaphorical language observed in art is achieved through the continuous process of substitution carried out by the human mind: «The possibility of metaphor springs from the infinite elasticity of the human mind; it testifies to its capacity to perceive and assimilate new experiences as modifications of earlier ones, of finding equivalences in the most disparate phenomena and of substituting one for another» (*Ibid*: 14).

In the author's view, the fact that a quality observed in the visual sphere is defined as metaphorical when it corresponds to a moral value, as illustrated by Gombrich in the sculpture of the *Lion of Lucerne*, in which he projects symbolism representing values, does not fully reveal the expression of the visual metaphor. In fact, imaginative potential seems more explicit in linguistic metaphorical expression; the monument, which does not derive from the noncompossible coupling of two domains, does not seem to qualify as a pictorial metaphor (see §3).

4.2. The metamorphic power of metaphors in art

Metaphorical language reveals its full expressive value in the pictorial dimension. To discuss the relationship between metaphor and painting, philosopher Philippe Minquet (1979) refers to the critical interpretations of John Ruskin and Michel Butor. Ruskin (1856) identifies the “metaphorical-metamorphic” execution of the sea in William Turner's work *Portsmouth* (Figure 2): a wave turns into an iron glove, a marble column, or a white fleece.

Figure 2⁶

J.M.W. Turner, *Portsmouth*, 1824-1825



Conversely, Butor (1968) comments on the *Thirty-six and Ten Views of Mount Fuji*, highlighting that Katsushika Hokusai utilises pictorial metaphor to its fullest extent, particularly in his depiction of the Japanese mountain as a giant blood vessel. In contrast, Claude Monet's variations on the *Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Rouen*⁷ are defined as “unfinished paragons”, showcasing polyvalence in terms of material — it could be stone, honey, or plaster — yet they do not generate a metaphor; the object remains a cathedral (Minguet 1979).

Therefore, in the remarks on the views of Mount Fuji, certain rhetorical devices can be found, such as pure metaphor or *in absentia*. For example, to see Fuji as a huge container of blood, one must not only project the comparative ligament into the image, but also one of the assimilated terms (“reservoir of blood”). Red as it is in Hokusai's print, Fuji evidently departs from the norms of representation (a

⁶ Image reference (public domain): <https://www.wikiart.org/en/william-turner/portsmouth>.

⁷ Images reference: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rouen_Cathedral_\(Monet_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rouen_Cathedral_(Monet_series)).

volcano is not red). However, hyperbole can also be discerned: «If, on the other hand, a traveller were to point out to us that there exists in Japan, beyond the semiotic universe, a volcano called Fujisan whose flanks sometimes have pinkish reflections, we could interpret the red volcano metalogically as hyperbole» (Minguet 1979: 143, my translation).

As previously discussed, Minguet identifies the metaphorical potential of creative language. In this regard, he refers to the metaphorical approach captured in Turner's paintings, such as the metamorphic rendering of a wave transforming into a marble column noted by Ruskin, or the approach Butor highlights in Hokusai's depictions of Mount Fuji. One such depiction is described as a tank of blood and can likely be associated with the image of the red Fuji. Minguet's critical comments on metaphors in painting consider the possibility of "seeing" one subject in terms of another and of creating an interpretive viewing experience.

Thus, seeing Fuji "as a gigantic reservoir of blood" involves perceiving an internal similarity between the depiction of the red mountain and blood; in other words, a formal and chromatic affinity between the elements of the representation. This "seeing as", as understood in the Wittgensteinian sense, enables the watcher to reflect on what they are seeing, as well as to grasp those expressive properties not usually attributed to an image of a mountain. Although Minguet recognises the specific expressive qualities of artistic images, his thoughts on critics' reflections appear to be anchored in the analysis of language and the pursuit of rhetorical and metalinguistic operations (cf. Guerrieri 2025).

Figure 3⁸

Katsushika Hokusai, *Red Fuji*, 1830



4.3. The “metaphorised” artworks and the “metaphorisation” of the body

In a 1984 theoretical essay, Richard Wollheim discusses the expressive properties inherent in “metaphorised” artworks. He distinguishes between paintings whose textual content is metaphor and those that are metaphors themselves. For example, in William Blake's landscape work *The River of Life*⁹, the textual content is conceptualised by the metaphor *Life is a river*. Even the domestic interior *The House of Cards*¹⁰ by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin is understood as a metaphorical work, conceptualised by the metaphor *Life is a pack of cards* (Wollheim 1984). Metaphorical language is conveyed through conceptual formulation. The conventional metaphor *Life is a journey* (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980) describes artworks depicting life's stages¹¹. From Wollheim's theoretical perspective, metaphors appear in captions

⁸ Image reference (public domain): urly.it/31g6t5.

⁹ Image reference: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/blake-the-river-of-life-n05887>.

¹⁰ Image reference: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-baptiste-simeon-chardin/the-house-of-cards>.

¹¹ It is an example of the series created by Thomas Cole in 1840, entitled *The Voyage of Life*.

rather than within the works themselves. The revelatory aspect of pictorial metaphors is not evident in the painting's textual content, but rather in the depiction of the body. This is evident in paintings where the physicality of the depicted characters accurately conveys the artist's intended meaning. According to Wollheim, when a painting becomes a metaphor for the body, it is "metaphorised":

It is always an object that the painting metaphorizes. In point of fact, I further believe that the fundamental cases of pictorial metaphor are those where a corporeal thing is metaphorized: the painting becomes a metaphor for the body, or (at any rate) for some part of the body, or for something assimilated to the body. In some cases the painting metaphorizes both the body and something other than the body, and in other cases the painting doesn't metaphorize the body at all (Wollheim 1984: 305).

Metaphorisation is not only generated by a visual experience, but can also be provoked by the manner in which an image is perceived and viewed. This is closely linked to a reaction that draws on emotions and feelings directed at the metaphorised object, such as the body. When a painting metaphorically represents the body, this relationship attributes corporeality to the visual, partly shaping how an image is presented in ways that arouse emotions, fantasies, and thoughts about the body. Titian captured this well in his painting *The Three Ages of Man* (Figure 4), which both represents and metaphorises the body, reflecting the artist's view of the body as the «locus of pleasure, beauty and death».

Partly corporeality is a matter of how the picture represents what it does, and specifically of how it does this in such a way

as to stir thoughts, emotions, phantasies, about the body. Partly corporeality is a matter of how such responses are then transferred to the picture itself. And partly it is a matter of how, by other means, or independently of its central representational content, the picture manages to attract to itself feelings directed on to the body: I call this directly inducing corporeality (*Ibid*: 310).

Through his technique, Titian imbues the depicted bodies with movement that conveys their vitality. This is evident in the multifaceted way he renders facial expressions, such as adoration, desire, avoidance of eye contact, or the pursuit of knowledge. In *The Three Ages of Man*, there is also a kind of correspondence between the human body and nature; for example, between young skin and the sky. The human figures are also depicted as closely connected to the natural world through their anonymity. The paint's texture on the canvas creates the impression of painted skin. The work deliberately alternates textures: a visible brushstroke first portrays a leaf in the foreground, then suggests the multitude of foliage in the hedge beyond the meadow. The elements in the painting are understood metaphorically, which is why a painting is similar to a body: it contains things such as the sound of music, water, and imagined time passing. Therefore, the image gives rise to the metaphorical idea that sounds are scattered within it (Wollheim 1984).

As observed, some of the artworks Wollheim analyses derive from a metaphorical experience of aesthetic perception, as seen in the depiction of bodies. However, the conditions of homospatiality and noncompossibility that pictorial metaphors respond to (cf. Carroll 1994) do not seem to emerge in these works. In fact, the visual composition of these works does not prompt the observer to make sense of contrasting domains brought into co-presence.

Figure 4¹²

Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, 1513-1514



5. Defining art metaphors and how to observe them

Given what has been discussed so far, this section defines an artistic metaphor, details its specific characteristics, and shows how it can be perceived.

Metaphorical language in the artistic sphere differs from that in the commercial sphere. For example, an aesthetically significant image is perceived differently from a promotional image designed for marketing purposes. A work of art is a synthesis of the intrinsic creativity of individuals with extraordinary sensitivity who can see beyond appearances and truthfully interpret reality. The language of art is characterised by its expressive originality and representational autonomy.

Metaphors in an artistic context are often unconstrained and can challenge the standardised logic of the art market. They may stand out

¹² Image reference (public domain):
[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tre_et%C3%A0_dell'uomo_\(Tiziano\)#/media/File:Tiziano,_tre_et%C3%A0_dell'uomo_01.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tre_et%C3%A0_dell'uomo_(Tiziano)#/media/File:Tiziano,_tre_et%C3%A0_dell'uomo_01.jpg).

because of their compositional freedom in rendering space, experimentation with techniques, the power of colour and their ability to express emotion. They possess the allure of mysterious objects, condensing multiple meanings into a single depiction. These metaphors suggest layered interpretations and subvert our cognitive expectations.

Within an artistic genre, a metaphor may be intentionally expressed to direct the viewer's attention toward a specific area of visual exploration. While juxtaposing two domains from different sources in advertising helps the viewer grasp the persuasive intent, the expressive layers of a work of art may not guide the observer to identify the source and target domains correctly.

When an artistic metaphor is expressed only visually, it is monomodal; if both domains are rendered differently (visually, verbally, musically or tactually), it is multimodal (cf. Forceville 2009). In addition to homospatiality, which implies the coexistence of two or more elements in the same image, this metaphor can meet the condition of noncompossibility when the elements that compose it are unlikely to share the same space in the real world (cf. Carroll 1994).

Some art metaphors are referred to as "*illustrated*" (*verbal*) *metaphors*, i.e., illustrations that realise linguistic metaphors in a visual medium, whose visual elements merely allude to the original linguistic formulation (cf. Stern 1997). Therefore, the pictorial properties of a painting (colours, shapes, and lines) do not contribute to its metaphorical interpretation. Consider the side panel of Robert Campin's *Annunciation Triptych* (*Merode Altarpiece*, Figure 5), in which St. Joseph is depicted as a craftsman making mousetraps, with one displayed on his work table. According to Meyer Schapiro's interpretation (1979), the mousetrap has theological significance, as revealed through his reading of St. Augustine, who uses the mousetrap metaphor to explain the necessity of Christ's incarnation and crucifixion

to redeem humanity¹³. However, none of the pictorial properties of the trap itself provide the basis for its metaphorical interpretation as a means to defeat the Devil. Without the prior context of Augustine's text, which provides the linguistic metaphor «the Devil's Mousetrap», the painting's metaphorical interpretation would not be possible (cf. Stern 1997).

Figure 5¹⁴

Robert Campin, *Annunciation Triptych*, side panel, 1427–1432



An art metaphor has an aesthetic purpose: it conveys beauty. If

¹³ «The devil exulted when Christ died, but by this very death of Christ the devil was vanquished, as if he had swallowed the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced in Christ's death, like a bailiff of death. What he rejoiced in was then his own undoing. The cross of the Lord was the devil's mousetrap; the bait by which he was caught was the Lord's death» (St. Augustine, *Sermo* 263).

¹⁴ Image reference (public domain): <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470304>.

well designed, it stimulates common motor and sensory experiences among appreciators, creating a resonance effect (cf. Cuccio et al. 2013). Time must be dedicated to contemplating it in order to investigate its meaning; only then can the experience be enriched through polysensory stimulation. An artwork can stimulate the visual and motor systems, thereby enhancing the cognitive experience of the person interpreting it. The cognitive effort of solving the visual enigma is rewarded by the pleasure the person feels when admiring an art metaphor. What is perceived is not without effect, as it leaves an impression on the imagination and memory. An artistic image is so vital that it can strengthen a community's social and cultural imaginary (cf. Guerrieri 2025).

The metaphorical attitude expressed in Turner's paintings, for example, as in the metamorphic rendering of the wave turning into a marble column cited by Ruskin, or in Hokusai's views of Mount Fuji as underlined by Butor, despite being a rhetorical manifestation (cf. Minguet 1979), reformulates the manner of conducting visual experience and interpreting an image as if it were an artistic figure. Metaphorically, the transposition process can begin with perceiving and visualizing an image, along with the emotional reactions directed toward the object involved in the metaphorisation. From an aesthetic point of view, metaphors in art can express themselves through the depiction of characters' physical presence in a painting (cf. Wollheim 1984).

Since metaphors allow visual elements to be evoked (cf. Davidson 1978), when people comprehend an artistic metaphor, they activate all the components they can imagine. While some of them do not require an imagistic formulation (*image-permitting metaphors*), others give rise to broader icastic constructions that encompass multiple senses (*image-demanding metaphors*) (cf. Green 2017). As observed, mental imagery conveys aspects not included in the conceptual domains

involved in the metaphor. It also helps fill gaps in perceptual information visually (cf. Carston 2010, 2018).

In artistic metaphors, the evoked images, understood as non-propositional inferences, can help the viewer rediscover properties inherent in the image that were not highly valued during the process of interpreting the artwork, and contribute to a more impactful interpretation than in the purely linguistic sphere. Furthermore, these metaphors can activate mental imagery because the image's *aesthetically relevant properties* are almost perceptually represented. This creates an unusual viewing experience when an “aesthetic difference” is produced (cf. Nanay 2016). These properties shape how we see things metaphorically and influence the hermeneutic process.

Deciphering the meaning of an artistic metaphor can be context-driven. Contextual elements found in the artwork itself can guide the interpretation. Therefore, contextual features external to the artwork, such as general human and cultural knowledge and expectations, could play a significant role (cf. Forceville 1988). For this metaphor to reach its full potential, viewers must be both perceptually and emotionally engaged (see Riegl 1995). Furthermore, they can enrich the meaning conveyed by artistic metaphorical language by personalising their interpretation.

6. Categorising metaphors in art

With his categorisation proposal, Charles Forceville intends to demonstrate how the interactive theory of metaphor (cf. Black 1954/1955) can be applied to visual metaphorical language in advertising. Visual metaphors are classified into four types: *hybrid metaphor*, *contextual metaphor*, *pictorial simile*, and *integrated metaphor* (cf. Forceville 1996, 2008). This taxonomy depends on how the two conceptual domains are represented; the extension can range from domain *fusion* and *replacement* to domain *juxtaposition* (cf. Maes,

Schilperoord 2008). Bolognesi and colleagues (2018) also catalogued a genre-structured corpus, considering denotative and connotative dimensions of meaning. These proposals for systematizing visual metaphors show that framing images in advertising communication within specific categories is more effective. Here, target domains are easily distinguishable from source domains because they reflect brands' promotional intentions; moreover, visual structures are persuasively conceived for commercial purposes. In contrast, "other" pictures that do not fit a specific visual scheme require different framing.

Artistic metaphors often exhibit expressive autonomy in terms of technique, colour rendering, and subject representation, offering multiple levels of interpretation. Therefore, it is difficult to categorise them using the same approach as visual metaphors in advertising. An "alternative" categorisation of these metaphors is therefore necessary. It is proposed that artistic metaphors be described according to four universal macro-categories, inspired by Aristotelian and Kantian categories¹⁵, as well as studies in aesthetics and the philosophy of art (Walton 1970): 1) time, 2) space, 3) decontextualisation of stereotypes, and 4) fusion of forms (cf. Guerrieri et al. 2023). In conclusion, we propose applying this categorisation to an artwork representative of Sardinia, an Italian island, to best demonstrate the effectiveness of figurative language.

6.1. *Time category*

The first macro-category is *time*, which is subdivided into various sub-categories. Temporality is inherent in the creation of the work. Consider, for instance, performances that require a time frame in which to unfold, or that manifest themselves unexpectedly to the viewer. In *Balkan*

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotele, *Organon*; Kant, *Critica della ragion pura – Analitica trascendentale*.

*Baroque*¹⁶, Marina Abramović sat on a pile of cattle bones, cleaning them of flesh and cartilage, for six hours a day for four days, to denounce the atrocities of the war in the Balkans. The physicality displayed, and the metaphorical depiction of the bodies enable spectators to grasp the significance of this provocative act: the bones torn from cattle flesh evoke the harrowing imagery of war victims (cf. Demaria 2008). Some works only arise in the moment, such as *The Artist Is Present*¹⁷, in which Abramović sat at a table and stared at visitors to the MoMA in New York, creating unexpected perceptual experiences for herself and the audience (cf. Danto 2010).

The temporal dimension can be expressed from both the artist's and the viewer's point of view. Some artworks require time to be fully understood. An example is Giotto's fresco cycle *Legend of St. Francis* in Assisi, structured as a sacred representation with edifying purposes and experienced through the faithful's contemplative observation. In the fresco depicting the *Dream of St. Francis* (Figure 6), the saint (on the left) sleeps in a four-poster bed. Next to him is an angel, gesturing for him to turn his gaze to the right, where an enormous palace adorned with precious military friezes has appeared. This vision could be interpreted metaphorically as representing the celestial kingdom. Interpreting this episode requires time for meditative observation and knowledge of the saint's life events. The image also depicts a sense of temporality, developing from an earlier scene (the saint falling asleep) to a later one (the dream of the palace) (cf. Girardi 1999).

¹⁶ Image reference: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3126> .

¹⁷ Image reference: urly.it/31g6t8.

Figure 6¹⁸

Giotto, *Dream of St. Francis*, 1297-1299



6.2. Space category

The abstract concept of time is often expressed in spatial metaphors. These spatial metaphors serve to express the concept of time in verbal, visual and multimodal spheres.

In Salvador Dalí's decontextualised landscape, *The Persistence of Memory*¹⁹, three clocks appear to be liquefying, suggesting that time is not flowing coherently. Inspired by his observation of melted Camembert cheese, the "hyper-liquidity" of the clocks symbolises the four-dimensional space-time continuum of the theory of relativity²⁰. If man-made time is transient, the "persistence of memory" (identified in the illuminated backdrop of rocky shores) can survive (cf. Weyers 1999).

¹⁸ Image reference (public domain): <https://www.wikiart.org/en/giotto/dream-of-the-palace-1299> .

¹⁹ Image reference: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/salvador-dali/the-persistence-of-memory-1931>.

²⁰ According to this theory, each body possesses its own time, which depends on its movement and energy state rather than the time measured by clocks. This conforms to the energy states assumed by the body itself from time to time.

The frame delimits the spaces of observation: «[...] it separates the image from everything that is not an image. It defines what it frames as the signifying world, as opposed to the out-frame, which is the world of simple experience» (Stoichita 2018: 173). Those who participate in contemplating the visual game can let their imagination venture beyond its limits until they cross the boundaries of the gaze and enter an entirely new dimension.

The second macro-category of *space* (and its sub-categories) may concern works that exist within the frame's limits and those that cross them, extending to the places of creation themselves. Examples include murals created to regenerate urban environments and public spaces, such as those by Keith Haring²¹, and spaces redefined by public participation, where the public become both subject and object alongside the artist.

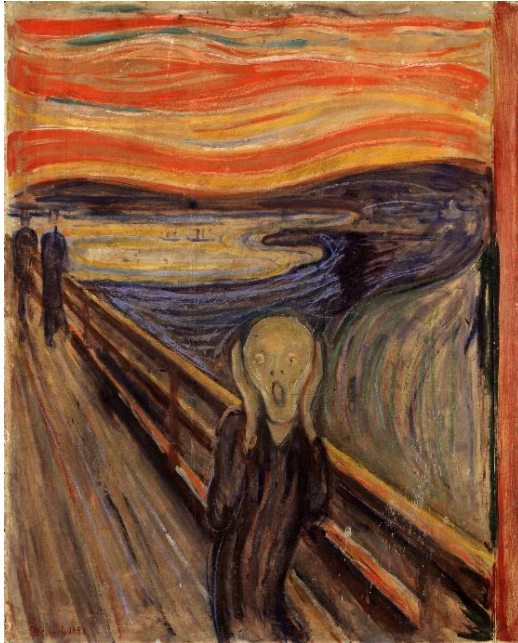
The picture-within-a-picture theme creates a space within a space; it marks the boundary between reality and representation, and between visual perception and thought. The painted image deceives the eye by presenting itself as the reality it represents. The representation differs substantially from the represented object, as seen in René Magritte's *The Human Condition I*²². This painting metaphorically illustrates the human condition of living in a deceptive world, as if suspended between real and illusory space (cf. Argan 1990; Argan & Oliva 2017). Decontextualised, distorted space evokes dreamlike images, as in Dalí's aforementioned work, and becomes a metaphor for human anxieties, as in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (Figure 7) (cf. Argan 1990).

²¹ Murales reference: https://www.haring.com/!/genre/public_projects .

²² Image reference: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.70170.html#provenance> .

Figure 7²³

Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893



6.3. *Decontextualisation of stereotypes category*

The third macro-category illustrates the subversion of stereotypical thinking by extracting it from its usual context of use. The use of stereotypes - i.e. a set of certain properties that characterise a class of individuals, objects or actions - is a way of categorising reality and can help to understand complicated situations (cf. Domaneschi & Penco 2016). Therefore, the *decontextualisation of stereotypes* can disrupt a pre-constituted way of thinking when the depiction shows a place other than the one ordinarily known to our mind. Stereotypes, even those conveyed through multimodality, can be misunderstood and lead us to errors of evaluation or reasoning, especially when they create barriers against specific social categories. For instance, *The Persistence of Memory* subverts the stereotypical idea of time as a quantifiable and measurable category according to ordinary human rhythms,

²³ Image reference (public domain): urly.it/31g8hc .

intensifying unreal aspects in a surreal context.

The subversion of stereotypes can be observed within the limits of the frame (understood as a subcategory). For example, in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)²⁴, the horrors of the bombing of the city and the lacerations of bodies are set in a domestic interior rather than on the war front, as one might expect based on our knowledge of the world. Decontextualisation can also be expressed through unusual techniques; for example, the use of recycled materials can be seen as overcoming the limits imposed by frames, in which matter becomes space and space becomes matter (cf. Argan 1990; Argan & Oliva 2017), as in Alberto Burri's works, which juxtapose acrylic paints and jute²⁵.

6.4. *Fusion of forms category*

In the fourth macro-category, *fusion of forms* rendered by means of expressive technique or colour, the elements of the pictures hybridise. In Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* (Figure 8), the metaphorical rendering of the spinning stars like whirlpools out of control is achieved by the vibrant brushstrokes, by a pictorial material that radiates in a circular manner and almost contrastingly blends the ultramarine and cobalt hues of the sky and the Indian and zinc yellows that tint the stars.

²⁴ Image reference:
https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_%28Picasso%29#/media/File:Mural_del_Guernika.jpg.

²⁵ Consider *Sacco and Rosso* (1954): <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/burri-sacking-and-red-t00787>.

Figure 8²⁶

Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889



The category of form is also expressed in corporeality, i.e., how a pictorial representation expresses emotions and thoughts about the body. In the work *The Broken Column* (1944)²⁷ Frida Kahlo depicts a broken column in several places to symbolise her diseased spine (due to a serious accident). The gashes on her body and the corresponding chasms of the barren, lonely landscape, and the complexity of the colour structure on the canvas seem to merge to confirm the constant physical pain experienced by the artist in her life (cf. Kettenmann 2001).

6.5. A case study of categorisation

In this subsection, the categorisation of metaphors discussed above will be tested on a single work of art only. This will demonstrate that a significant artistic image contains categories of thought that are useful

²⁶ Image reference (public domain): https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van_Gogh_-_Starry_Night_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

²⁷ Image reference: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Broken_Column.

for identifying meanings and recognising expressive elements from a metaphorical perspective. The decision to focus on a Sardinian work is motivated by Sardinia's imaginative potential for metaphorical language, which astonishes observers with its original creative expressions.

The category of space can manifest in a decontextualised manner, using reused materials that subvert the audience's preconceived notions. Thus, a space such as the Sulcis Iglesiente mines can be understood as both a stereotypical Sardinian space and a real place represented beyond the boundaries set by figurative convention. In Paolo Piria's 2012 triptych *From Darkness to Light*²⁸, for example, reused materials from the Monteponi mine are placed in a decontextualised canvas space. These include an access ladder to the shafts that protrudes beyond the frame and leads nowhere, a dirtied ice axe, and a helmet with a defunct light bulb (cf. Guerrieri, Saiu 2021). In artistic, metaphorical terms, the objects and materials that identify the mining world could be considered the source domain, while the entire unframed canvas corresponds to the target domain.

The arrangement of forms and the hybridisation of techniques used to create the work provide an unexpected viewing experience. Outside the confined landscape of the mines, one does not expect to find the symbolic elements of the mining collective imagination arranged on the canvas. For this reason, the work demands time for slow contemplation and in-depth interpretative investigation.

Engaging one's imagination is necessary for discovering the image's additional properties, such as the tactility of the materials, in addition to the visual ones. Even the limited correspondence to the intended function of the objects can encourage the viewer to reveal

²⁸ Image reference here (p. 75): <http://www.planum.net/planum-magazine/planum-publisher-publication/strong-esplorazioni-narrative-artistiche-e-videoludiche-strong-br-il-caso-di-monteponi> .

other aspects of the representation's meaning, such as the dreamlike connection between the colour of the helmet and the gold that every mineral seeker dreams of finding. These aspects amplify the gaze, involving even watchers "outside" mine life in the mining story.

7. Conclusions

The paper discussed metaphor as a cognitive tool that enhances understanding and stimulates the imagination. If we exercise our ability to observe the world around us figuratively, we will have a surprising viewing experience, as what we discover through metaphorical lenses will be "seen" and interpreted as an original contribution to our thinking. The main arguments can now be summarised as follows.

We defined metaphor as a resource of creative thinking that stimulates the experience of seeing and invites the observer to construct mental images (§1, §2). Metaphorical seeing enriches the meanings attributed to an image and outlines the structure of a visual metaphor, differentiating it from a linguistic one (§3).

Interpreting a metaphorical image can be challenging, as it involves attributing meaning that corresponds to the creator's intentions. This is particularly true in art, a field in which metaphorical language seems to offer more of a conceptual challenge to the interpreter than in other fields (§4).

This investigation focuses on the metaphor expressed in the artistic background image, which is the outcome of an aesthetic construction. The domains involved are often divergent and stimulate the beholder's imaginative interpretation (§5). Equally challenging is the attempt to categorise artistic metaphors within universal thought categories, which is useful for highlighting the autonomy of the visual component with respect to the advertising framework (§6).

This contribution is not intended to be exhaustive. The study of artistic metaphors should be approached differently depending on the type of artistic image. A broader range could be analysed, encompassing not only figurative art, but also sculpture and architecture. Furthermore, multimodal analysis could be extended to include performance art, dance, and cinema.

Scholars could use the categorisation of artistic metaphors to improve their approach to analysing works of art. These categories could be used to analyse the formal aspects of a work, as well as to situate it within its social, spatial and temporal context.

A future development of this research could be to apply this systematisation to promote cultural heritage. In other words, artistic objects categorised according to metaphorical language could be incorporated into museum narratives to enhance visitors' learning experience.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Andrew DeVigal (University of Oregon, Portland) and Laura Lo Forti (Vanport Mosaic) for their invaluable contribution to the proofreading of this text.

Thanks are also due to the reviewers for their insightful comments.

References

- Argan, G.C., Oliva, A.B. (2017). *L'Arte moderna, 1770-1970. L'Arte oltre il Duemila*. Milano: Rizzoli Libri S.p.A./Sansoni.
- Argan, G.C. (1990). *L'arte moderna*. Milano: RCS.
- Aristotle (4th century BC). *Poetica*.
- Aristotle (4th century BC). *Retorica*.
- Bolognesi, M., van den Heerik, R., van den Berg, E. (2018). VisMet 1.0: An online corpus of visual metaphors. In G. J. Steen (edited by), *Visual*

Metaphor. Structure and process. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 89–114.

Black, M. (1954-1955). Metaphor. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 55(1): 273-294.

Bowdle, B. F., & Gentner, D. (2005). The career of metaphor. *Psychological Review*, 112(1): 193–216.

Boehm, G. (2009). Il ritorno delle immagini. In A. Pinotti, A. Somaini (a cura di), *Teorie dell'immagine. Il dibattito contemporaneo*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 39–71.

Butor, M. (1968). Trente-six et dix vues du Mont Fuji. In *Répertoire* (vol. III). Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Carroll, N. (1994). Visual Metaphor. In J. Hintikka (eds.), *Aspects of Metaphor*. Dordrecht: Springer, 189–218.

Carroll, N. (2001). Visual Metaphor. In N. Carroll (eds.), *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 347–368.

Carston, R. (2010). Metaphor: Ad Hoc Concepts, Literal Meaning and Mental Images. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 110: 295–321.

Carston, R. (2018). Figurative Language, Mental Imagery and Pragmatics. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 33(3): 198–217.

Casasanto, D. (2014). Experiential origins of mental metaphors: Language, culture, and the body. Life. In M.] Landau, M. D. Robinson, and B. P. Meier (edited by), *The Power of Metaphor: Examining Its Influence on Social Life*. American Psychological Association, 249–269.

Cuccio, V., Carapezza, M., Gallese, V. (2013). Metafore che risuonano. Linguaggio e corpo tra filosofia e neuroscienze. *E/C*, 7(17): 75–80.

Danto, A.C. (2010). Danger and disturbance: the art of Marina Abramović. In M. Christian (edited by), *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 29–35.

Davidson, D. (1978). *What Metaphors Mean*. *Critical Inquiry*, 5: 31–47.

Demaria, C. (2008). Rendere visibile l'invisibile: il corpo politico di

- Marina Abramović. In F. Timeto (a cura di), *Culture della differenza. Femminismo, visualità e studi postcoloniali*. Torino: UTET, 95–104.
- Domaneschi, F., Penco, C. (2016). *Come non detto. Usi e abusi dei sottintesi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza Editore.
- Ervas, F., Gola, E. (2016). *Che cos'è una metafora*. Roma: Carocci.
- Forceville, C. (1988). The case for pictorial metaphor: René Magritte and other Surrealists. *Filozofski vestnik*, 9(1): 150–160.
- Forceville, C. (1996). *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Forceville, C. (2008). Metaphors in pictures and multimodal representations. In R. W. Jr. Gibbs (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 462–482.
- Forceville, C. (2009). Non-verbal and multimodal metaphor in a cognitivist framework: Agendas for research. In C. Forceville and E. Urios-Aparisi (eds.), *Multimodal metaphor*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 19–44.
- Gallese, V. & Sinigaglia, C. (2010). The bodily self as power for action. *Neuropsychologia*, 48(3): 746–755.
- Gallese, V. (2005). Embodied simulation: From neurons to phenomenal experience. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4(1): 23–48.
- Ganis, G., Schendan, H. E. (2011). Visual imagery. *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 2(3): 239–252.
- Gibbs, R. W. Jr. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Girardi, M. (1999). *Giotto. La fiducia nell'uomo e nella storia*. Milano: Editore Leonardo Arte.
- Gombrich, E. (1963). Visual metaphors of value in art. In E. Gombrich, *Meditations on a hobby horse, and other essays on the theory of art*. London: Phaidon Press, 12–29.
- Green, M. M. (2017). Imagery, expression, and metaphor. *Philosophical*

Studies, 174: 33–46.

Guerrieri, A., Saiu, V. (2021) (a cura di). *Esplorazioni narrative, artistiche e videoludiche. Il caso di Monteponi*. Roma-Milano: Planum Publisher.

Guerrieri, A., Ervas, F., Gola, E. (2023). Multimodal artistic metaphors: Research on a corpus of Sardinian art. *Frontiers in Psychology, Sec. Psychology of Language*, 14: 1–12.

Guerrieri, A. (2025). *Metafore artistiche. Come si vedono e cosa raccontano*. Milano: Meltemi Editore.

Kettenmann, A. (2001). *Frida Kahlo 1907-1954. Sofferenze e passioni*. Colonia: Taschen.

Kosslyn, S. M., Behrmann, M., Jeannerod, M. (1995). The cognitive neuroscience of mental imagery. *Neuropsychologia*, 33(11): 1335–1344.

Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Maes, A., Schilperoord, J. (2008). Classifying visual rhetoric: Conceptual and structural heuristics. In E. McQuarrie, B. Phillips (edited by), *Go Figure! New Directions in Advertising Rhetoric*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 227–257.

Minguet, P. (1979). Metafore della pittura, pittura della metafora. In E. Mucci, P.L. Tazzi (a cura di), *Teoria e pratiche della critica d'arte*, Atti del Convegno di Montecatini (maggio 1978). Milano: Feltrinelli, 135–151.

Nanay, B. (2016). *Aesthetics as philosophy of perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pearson, J., Naselaris, T., Holmes, E. A. & Kosslyn, S. M. (2015). Mental imagery: functional mechanisms and clinical applications. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 29(10): 590–602.

Riegl, A. (1995). Su antichi e moderni cultori d'arte. In S. Scarrocchia (a cura di), *Alois Riegl: teoria e prassi della conservazione dei*

monumenti. Bologna: Clueb, 303–311.

Ruskin, J. (1856). *The Harbours of England*. London: Gambart & Co.

St. Augustine (400 A.D.). Sermo 263, De Ascensione Domini. In J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 38, col. 1210, [1844-1855].

Schapiro, M. (1979). *Late Antique, Early Christian, and Medieval Art*, 1. New York: G. Braziller.

Stern, J. (1997). Metaphors in Pictures. *Philosophical Topics*, 25(1): 255–293.

Stoichita, V.I. (2018). Margini. In D. Ferrari, A. Pinotti (a cura di), *La cornice. Storie, teorie, teorie, testi*. Cremona: Johan & Levi Editore, 173–196.

Walton, K. L. (1970). Categories of art. *Philosophical Review*, 79: 334–367.

Weyers, F. (1999). *Salvador Dalí. La vita e le opere*. Colonia: Könemann.

Wilson, D., Carston, R. (2019). Pragmatics and the challenge of 'non-propositional' effects. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 145: 31–38.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wollheim, R. (1984). Lecture VI: Painting, Metaphor, And The Body: Titian, Bellini, De Kooning, Etc. In R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, Bollingen Series XXXV.33. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 305–357.

