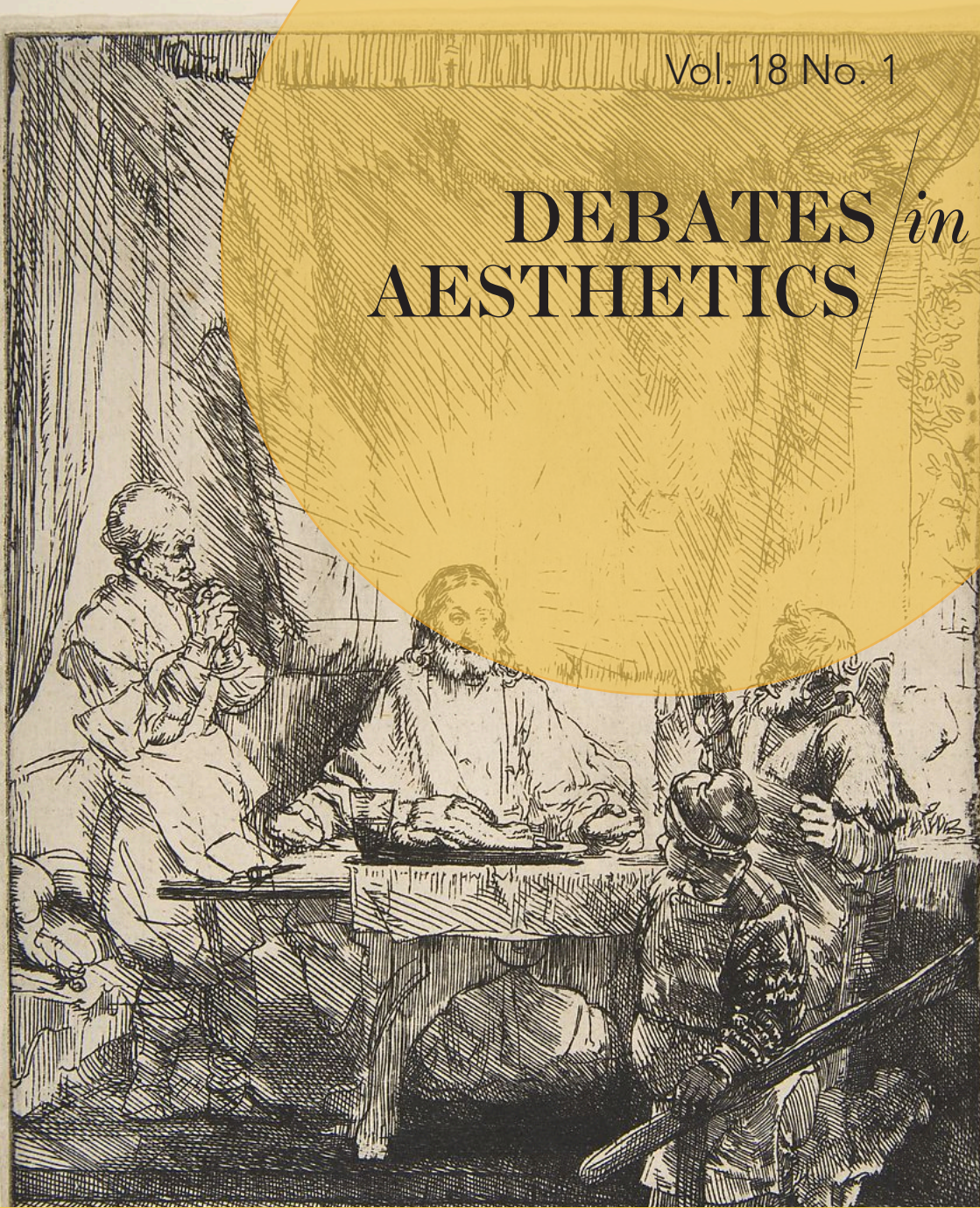


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# IS LAKOFF ARNHEIMIAN?

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*Cognitive psychology has expressed its debts to Gestalt Psychology and Conceptual Metaphor Theorists (CMT) such as George Lakoff have expressed debts to Gestalt psychologists, like Rudolf Arnheim. However, there are prima facie obstacles to this easy genealogy, especially the Gestalt preference for an interaction theory of metaphor. This paper addresses these issues by, firstly, revisiting the discussions of metaphor by Gestalt-oriented psychologists and comparing them to CMT. Secondly, the paper discusses the ways in which CMT has appropriated Gestalt ideas, usually as a 'translation', but not a true assimilation. Lastly, the paper focuses on Lakoff's discussion of a static image using CMT and uses the insights of Gestalt-theoretic critiques of CMT to explain its shortcomings in the visual domain.*





Fig. 1, Rembrandt, Supper at Emmaus, 1648, Louvre (Wikimedia: image in public domain)

## 1 Introduction

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has proven to be a highly durable theory of expressive language. It explains expressive language as something based on bodily knowledge, that is formed by lived experience. Cognitive psychology has expressed its debts to Gestalt Psychology and Conceptual Metaphor theorists, such as George Lakoff, have expressed debts to Gestalt psychologists, like Rudolf Arnheim. But how is Gestalt linked to CMT and to what degree is Lakoff 'Arnheimian?' In particular, what are we to make of Lakoff's renderings of spatial analyses of paintings that have been undertaken in the manner of Arnheim in his own language of CMT?

The argument of this paper is that Arnheim's position is more complex than CMT's, and should not be regarded as a simple stepping stone towards it. Indeed, there is more work in the domain of contemporary metaphor theory, equally inspired by Gestalt theory, that has developed important critiques that lend further support for Arnheim and his psychology of art. By clarifying Arnheim's position on metaphor, we can see more clearly some of the simplifications and only apparent improve-

ments that CMT has contributed to metaphor theory.

This paper answers this question through a series of discussions. Firstly, it compares CMT with the Gestalt-Interaction theory of metaphor (Glicksohn 1994; Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 2010) to identify its consistent critiques, which include the need to recognize the bidirectionality of metaphor and the productivity of metaphoric imagery. Secondly, it reviews the appropriations of Arnhem and Gestalt psychology by CMT researchers. Lastly, it extends the critique of CMT by the Gestalt-Interaction theory in the domain of spatial imagery.

## **2 CMT Versus Gestalt on Metaphor**

In traditional metaphor analysis, a metaphor like ‘man is a wolf’ is parsed into its tenor (or topic), ‘man’, and vehicle, that is ‘wolf’, enlivening our sense of man and vice versa. However, CMT is not only set to analyse language but also to argue for the metaphoric structure of experience itself. As an example of Lakoff’s approach to metaphor, the expression ‘things are looking up’ reflects the conceptual schema (known as a cross-domain mapping) ‘GOOD IS UP’. Here, the source domain invariantly maps (verticality) onto the target (value) and borrows conceptual significance from some aspect of experience relating to space, time, or movement.

Not only the conceptual power of the metaphor flows in one direction but also becomes somewhat ‘Kantian’, in the sense that a category is invoked and then becomes the actual meaning. That is, a metaphor would reference a conceptual schema based on experience. In a sense, the conceptual schema is more real than the metaphor because it animates the metaphor through lived experience. Once it is invoked, the metaphor merely effects the mapping of the mind. For this reason, cross-domain mappings can be interpreted as mere ‘stock responses’ (Tsur 2000). For example, ‘things are looking up’ is no different from ‘we’re rising to the top’ because they have the same schema, that is ‘good is up’.

However, stylistically and semantically, they are vastly different.

This is a problem for the phenomenology of poetic language. It has always been accepted that metaphor is a literary device that is used to surpass language's literal semantic repertoire. Arnheim (1966) explained that metaphors make concepts tangible by referring to sensory experience thereby giving the words tangible meaning. But this is different from CMT according to which the body merely serves as an ultimate source of meanings resulting in a sedimented semantics. Similarly, if metaphors direct us to the schematic mapping of experience, this thwarts the creative and expressive elements of metaphors, which are often incongruous and search after new meanings rather than stock responses. Generally, metaphors are dynamic and mutually inflecting. A novel metaphor would not work, not due to a sensed aptness, but merely because the overlaying conceptual schema are relatively similar in structure.

Specialists have pointed out further problems to do with poetic language, which stress the inadequacy of bodily schemas to service all poetic metaphors and, furthermore, the bidirectional mapping of topics and vehicles (Brandt 2013; Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2017). Some of the inadequacies of CMT have given rise to development in 'blending' theory, associated with Gilles Fauconnier and others (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). But this development is to bypass the venerable Interaction theory of metaphor, which gave rise to the Gestalt-Interaction theory of metaphor (Glicksohn 1994; Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 2010) based on Gestalt precedents (Asch 1961; Arnheim 1966). Features of a Gestalt theory that are lacking in CMT include bidirectionality of topic and vehicle and, a related problem, a novel outcome of metaphoric signification. CMT has a permanent feature, that is the unidirectionality from target to source of metaphors. For Lakoff (2006, Lakoff & Turner 1989), the metaphor always passes from conceptual to perceptual. In this claim, he explicitly built this theory in contrast with the Interaction theory



associated with I. A. Richards (1936), Max Black (1979), and the Gestaltists, for whom there is a back-and-forth movement from topic to vehicle (Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 2010). Lakoff and his collaborators always resisted the Interaction theory of metaphor (Johnson 1987, 69-70; Lakoff & Turner 1989, 131-133).

The poetic element in a metaphor arises from the structural conflict caused by forcing heterogeneous elements or components of reality – that is, tenor and vehicle – into a whole. Unity for this whole is only attained through a retreat to the more abstract level of common expressive qualities. Arnheim writes,

negatively, the reality-character of the components is toned down and...positively, the physiognomic qualities common to the components are vigorously underscored in each. Thus, by their combination, the components are driven to become more abstract; but the abstracted qualities continue to draw life blood from the reality contexts in which they are presented (Arnheim 1966, 279).

A good example is given by Chanita Goodblatt and Joseph Glicksohn (2003); that is, John Donne's poem *The Bait* (1633). The conceit is that love is described as fishing. Donne writes of the 'enamour'd fish', who will 'amorously to thee swim'. On a standard reading that is consistent with Lakoff's approach, the target domain of courtship is made more familiar with the language of fishing; the poetic metaphor must be enriched with the conceptual schema of fish pursuing bait. In this way, "men become suffused with the predatory attributes of carnivorous fish feeding on human bait" (Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 215). However, the opposite also occurs. As indicated by the 'enamour'd fish', "fish are suffused with sexual desire" (Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 215). The theme of courtship is not the only thing enriched; our sense of a fish's behaviour is as well. Indeed, in Goodblatt and Glicksohn's Gestalt-

interaction theory of metaphor (Glicksohn 1994; Goodblatt & Glicksohn 2003, 2010), the process of arriving to a satisfying interpretation of the metaphor is akin to problem solving and far from simply tracing the target back to schema.

In these brief examples, we have seen that there is a long-standing contrast between the Interaction theory of metaphor in its Gestalt guise (Asch 1961; Arnheim 1966) and CMT. Turning to the visual arts, we would expect that the problems of stock responses, bidirectionality and the novelty of metaphors would be relevant in some ways.

### 3 CMT Appropriations of Gestalt Phenomena

A number of CMT researchers have appropriated Gestalt arguments, putting them on a proper, modern footing with the principles of conceptual metaphor theory. This, of course, suggests that Gestalt psychologists' method of explaining is inadequate. Typically, the relationship is one-sided. Arnheim's argument is rescued by CMT and the operation is considered one of 'translation' (Lakoff 2006). Mark Johnson was the first to do this in the *Body in the Mind* (1987, 76-79). This one-sided translation is not only true for metaphors, which have already been analysed, but also extensions of CMT to the visual arts. Subsequently, such translations have been affected by Lakoff's theory (2006) in visual art and Maarten Coegnarts (Coegnarts & Slugan 2022) in film studies.

Because Lakoff and Johnson configured schemas as 'Gestalts', it was clear that they were seeking a more general basis for experience that could be applied to other domains. Because Arnheim worked predominantly on visual images, it was natural to test the relationship of the new CMT with such images. In 1987, Johnson considered Arnheim's (1974) famous circle on a square. The most dramatic juxtaposition came in Lakoff's (2006) re-examination of Arnheim's (1969) analysis of Rembrandt's *Christ at Emmaus* (1648) (Fig. 2).

Here is how Arnheim analyses the picture:

the religious substance symbolized by the Bible story is presented through the interaction of two compositional groupings. One of them is centered in the figure of Christ, which is placed symmetrically between the two disciples. This triangular arrangement is heightened by the equally symmetrical architecture of the background and by the light radiating from the center. It shows the traditional hierarchy of religious pictures, culminating in the divine figure. However, this pattern is not allowed to occupy the center of the canvas. The group of figures is shifted somewhat to the left, leaving room for a second apex, created by the head of the servant boy. The second triangle is steeper and more dramatic also by its lack of symmetry. The head of Christ is no longer dominant but fitted into the sloping edge. Rembrandt's thinking strikingly envisages, in the basic form of the painting, the Protestant version of the New Testament. The humility of the Son of God is expressed compositionally not only in the slight deviation of the head from the central axis of the otherwise symmetrical pyramid of the body; Christ appears also as subservient to another hierarchy, which has its high point in the humblest figure of the group, namely, the servant (Arnheim 1969, 269).

Lakoff (2006) appreciates this description but wishes to translate it into the cognitive schemas of his theory. Here is the outcome:

a grouping is the imposition of CONTAINER schema, a bounding of a region of space with figures contained within. Arnheim describes two such schemas, one without the servant boy and one with him. In the inner CONTAINER schema, Christ is the center and highest. The metaphors interpreting this arrangement are IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL and DIVINE IS UP. Not only is Christ, the divine, the highest, but he is looking

up, toward the divine God. In the upper grouping, the servant boy appears. He is painted as being in the middle of an action, serving Christ food. This puts him socially below Christ, but Christ is painted as below him, the metaphor being HUMILITY IS DOWN. The same metaphor interprets the structure of the servant boy's body: he is bowing, tilting his body down toward Christ, showing his humility. The action of serving Christ food is metaphorical for serving Christ. The light emanating from Christ instantiates one of our culture's basic metaphors for God: God is the source of what is good, in this case the source of light, which is interpreted via two conventional metaphors: MORALITY IS LIGHT and KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT. The image schemas structuring the painting are oriental: HIGH-LOW, TWO CONTAINER schemas, two CENTER-PERIPHERY schemas, and LIGHT-DARK. Our conventional cultural metaphors apply to these schemas structuring the painting, to give it a meaning expressing an important aspect of the Protestant religious tradition: The ordinary person serves Christ in all humility, while Christ, the most important figure as the source of goodness and knowledge, sets the example, showing his own humility relative to people, and looking upward to God (Lakoff 2006, 156).

Following the theory of CMT, Lakoff is explaining how the composition imposes various structures or schemas (high-low, container, center-periphery, light-dark), and these are interpreted via various metaphors ('divine is up', 'humility is down'). Understanding the meaning of the composition requires mapping the space via a conceptual metaphor.

Part of an apparent lack of fit between CMT and Arnheim's Gestalt theory is perhaps due to the fact that CMT was developed for language – discrete words – and not the analogue medium of the image. However, although the result is enlightening, one can also see that it is a different

kind of explanation. In line with the interactive and creative nature of metaphor, Arnheim keeps the uncertainty of the units of analysis endemic to painting alive, and we are meant to sense the competing pulls on the various figures. With Lakoff's analysis, each figure fulfils its role in a tight system. Insofar as any number of similarly configured compositions could lead to the same meaning, the response is indeed stock.

#### 4 CMT and Visual Images

Although Lakoff (2006) thought that his and Arnheim's (1969) approach were more or less compatible, Arnheim shows instead how there is an active mutual accommodation between figure and 'container' between visual elements and their light symbolism or moral humility. In line with the Gestalt-Interaction analysis of Donne's poem, we might say that we lose a sense of the painting when we list each figure's relationship to its source schema. Christ is humble relative to the servant and, simultaneously, a distinguished figure to the disciples.

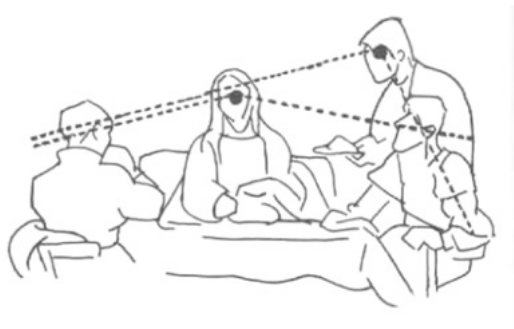


Fig. 2, after Arnheim (1969, 268, fig. 71a)

Interestingly, Arnheim (1969) provides a diagram that shows the tension or dynamics between the dominant line of sight and one subordinate line. Turning to Lakoff, it is as if Arnheim's diagram of the 'structural skeleton' of the composition has become his actual interpretation. However, for Arnheim, the diagram is only meant to help identify the real phenomenal tensions that we are meant to see visually – "the barest

scaffold of Rembrandt's painting" (1969, 278). Here we run up into a different interpretation of the meaning of 'embodiment'. Let us attempt to clarify this further.

For the Gestaltists, meaning is embodied by forms in their chosen medium (picture, sculpture, etc.) and, for conceptual metaphor theorists, meaning is embodied in sensorimotor experience. One has recourse to the visual medium in which the idea is realized and the other has recourse to the body in which the idea is realized. As it was made clear with the example of metaphors,

if the tenor is viewed through the filter of the vehicle, as suggested by Interaction theory, metaphor comprehension will be dependent on perception and on *perceptual* qualities, and not on conception and on *semantic* features (Glicksohn 1994, 231, my emphasis).

In order to make sense of this we have essentially three variables: the visual stimulus, sensorimotor sensations, and visual sensations. The way that theorists describe our relation to the work can be summarized in these three scenarios:

1. The expression is only seen by activating present sensorimotor sensations
2. The expression is inferred by imagining past sensorimotor sensations
3. The expression is seen directly in the visual material, without the body

There are some theorists that believe that we see the tension because of sensory-motor facts. This was the old empathy theory, held by Hermann Rorschach (1942) in his *Psychodiagnostics*, among others. Subsequently, a version of it was developed by Heinz Werner (Werner & Wapner 1954) and others, as the sensory-tonic field theory of perception. This



theory was mostly out of favour but somewhat revived in mirror neuron accounts of perception. In that case, owing to the intimate connection between visual and action neural pathways, seeing a work of art can simulate virtual motor activity in the form of motor-evoked potentials (inter-muscular stimulation). It is the evocation of sensorimotor sensations that makes the visual forms expressive; they are only expressive secondarily.

On the other hand, for CMT writers, the tension is related to concepts derived from the body via schemata. The spatial schemata is recognized in the image and interpreted as a bodily metaphor. Although the body is necessary for cognition, it is only a means to an end. Sedimented ideas of sensorimotor knowledge lead to inferences of metaphoric meaning.

Finally, for Arnheim and the Gestaltists, we *see* the tension visually as a phenomenal object, contrary to the empathy theory in which our motor simulation of bending communicates weight to a pictorial form. Secondarily, there can be a kinesthetic participation with the object (Arnheim 1966), in which case, sensorimotor sensation reinforces the visually perceived tension. However, it is principally a visual experience.

Focusing mostly on the second two options, we can see that they differ in the meaning of embodiment and the role of the body. According to CMT, the sensorimotor experiences passively (through inference) dominate over the visual, while, from the Gestalt position, vision is primary and dominates, while the body is secondary. In this difference, Lakoff might remind us somewhat of Gombrich (1960). For Arnheim, concepts are perceptual; for Gombrich, perception is intellectualized (Pizzo Russo 2005).

This schematism helps us understand the difference between a CMT and Gestalt explanation of a work of visual art. In Arnheim's account of Rembrandt's painting, we see directly the humility of the apostle and the aggrandizement of the servant via the phenomenal tension of the

two figures within the compositional framework. In Lakoff's account, we first need to observe how the scene is structured by schemas and infer via interpretation which cultural metaphors are in play.<sup>1</sup>

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