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Investigating pictorial references by creating pictorial references

An example of theoretical research in the field of semiotics that employs artistic experiments as a research tool

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1 Abstract

This paper describes a doctoral dissertation that explores one of the semiotic fundamentals of many art and design works: the nature of pictorial references to abstract content.¹ This approach combines theoretical investigation with artistic experiments. It is one of the rather rare research set-ups in which an artistic process is employed as a heuristic tool.

2 Research that creates what is being explored

The main questions of the doctoral dissertation are: how do pictorial representations translate, relate to, and comment on theoretical linguistic statements? What kinds of relationships between pictorial and theoretical linguistic information are possible? These are complex semiotic questions that are of fundamental importance to art and design, as many art and design works are based on a relationship between pictorial information and either theoretical text or abstract content (which can only be conveyed in theoretical language). Exploring these

questions leads to a better understanding of the semiotic basis on which many design and art works attain meaning, intelligibility, and charm.

In order to answer these questions, I made short animated film sequences (1 – 4 min., flash film), in which small passages of original philosophical texts by authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Ludwig Wittgenstein were visualised. While creating the films I focused on the sentences as the basic unit of text and tried to draw different forms of analogy between film and text. Animated film was chosen as a form of visualisation because it is a flexible and complex medium and, moreover, can be synchronised with spoken text. First, this enables an exploration of how and to what extent animated film can translate, enact, and refer to abstract text. Second, the nature of the relationship between text and its visualisation and the potential interaction between the two can be analysed this way. I explored and evaluated the films in light of the semiotic and linguistic theories of authors such as Mark Johnson, Lambert Wiesing, and Charles Sanders Peirce. I based my argumentation on the evidence of specific film examples, available to any viewer. I also showed the films to fifty observers from different fields. I interviewed these viewers on their reactions to the films and had them fill out questionnaires. Their responses also contributed to my argument.

3 Some results

I would like to now demonstrate my method and its results using some examples. One finding of the dissertation was, for instance, that all relationships I could possibly create between film and text consisted in a combination of literal, metaphorical, and metonymical references.² I could find no other relationships between text and film. Observers understood literal, metaphorical, and metonymical references, although they rarely related to all the possible references.

One interesting result of the investigation concerned the question as to what semiotic combinations of text and film were perceived as interesting. Observers only experienced interplays between film and theoretical text as interesting if some metaphorical reference between

text and film was observed or assumed. In all cases in which these metaphorical relationships were not only perceived as meaningful, but in which observers could, moreover, name the meaning of the interplay between text and film and were able give an interpretation, the metaphorical reference of the film to the text was based on a known linguistic metaphor.

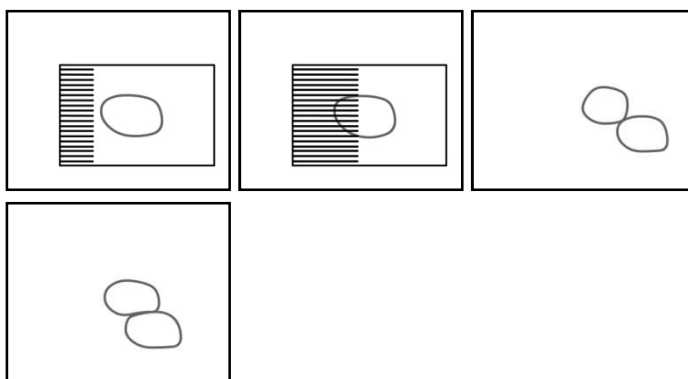


Figure 1 What cannot be understood through something else must be understood through itself.³

The observers could easily understand and interpret the relationship between the film and the sentence represented in Figure 1. All viewers judged this interplay as meaningful and could trace it back to the linguistic metaphor “to touch = to grasp = to understand”. The viewers stated that a meaning additional to the meaning of the text could be found in the gentle caressing movement with which one circle touches the other. Viewers strongly associated this to the term “grasping” and interpreted it as an analysis of Spinoza’s idea of “understanding” or as a suggestion of how trying “to understand something” should be performed.

This example represents the form of reference that many observers judged as most interesting and meaningful. It consists of a metaphorical reference based on a linguistically known metaphor. This reference is further qualified through the visual gestalt of the pictorial representation. This additional pictorial information can be related to the linguistically given metaphor and in this way is able to determine its meaning further and to thereby enhance the metaphor.

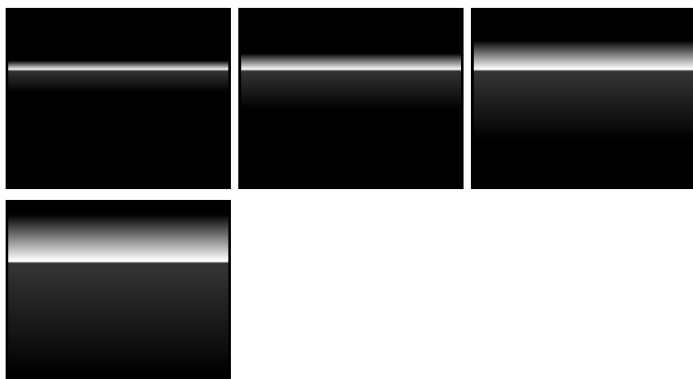


Figure 2 Immeasurability is one of the dynamic features of the calm reverie.⁴

The scene represented in Figure 2 shows the creeping light of dawn in reference to the sentence “Immeasurability is one of the dynamic features of the calm reverie.” The observers tried to draw a connection between the slow movement of dawn and the idea of “being one of the dynamic features of the calm reverie”. Besides the common association of the idea of “immeasurability” with the horizontal line or the sea (which cannot be related to the predicate of the sentence), there is no known linguistic metaphor this relation could be traced back to. Nevertheless, this interplay between film and text was perceived by most observers as interesting and inspiring. The viewers assumed that there was a strong meaningful relationship between text and film, which they just could not yet name. In creating this interplay between film and text, I tried to

establish a novel metaphorical relationship not based in any way on linguistically known metaphors. (Creating such a novel metaphor that observers could perceive as meaningful was much more difficult than I had expected.) I asked the observers what kind of relationship they expected to find in this interplay. Their answers described characteristics of a metaphorical relationship. Looking closely at the semiotic features of this relationship I argue that it actually can be designated as a novel metaphor.

These are two examples of relationships that viewers judged as meaningful. In general, observers experienced relationships between text and film only as interesting if they contained a novel or a linguistically known metaphorical reference to the theoretical texts. In the case of a reference based on a metaphor known from language, the observers could normally interpret the reference. Especially if the details of the pictorial representation of such a metaphor contained meaningful enhancements. These enhancements can themselves be described as additional metaphorical, literal, or metonymical references to the text or combinations thereof. Novel pictorial metaphors were often perceived as containing a mysterious meaning, a feeling rather than a recognition of meaning, which was nevertheless experienced as inspiring.

The dissertation also describes how combinations of multiple references between text and film were often perceived as more meaningful and interesting than simple references.

4 Literal, metaphorical, and metonymical references in art and design

Art and design employ references of all kinds and in all media. If we define metaphor in a broad sense, combining the definition in Endnote 2 with the possibility of novel and therefore not interpretable metaphors and add the idea that the point of reference need not be clearly defined, then metaphorical references can be understood as one of the fundamental functions and features of art and design. In many artworks metaphorical references appear in combination with other references. Understanding the operating mode of these combinations of references

is of fundamental importance to understanding the operating modes of art and design. Why particular artworks are perceived as relevant and meaningful (although their meaning cannot be clearly named) is often believed to be mysterious and unexplainable. I observed in my dissertation that certain combinations of metaphoric, literal, and metonymic references are particularly apt to be perceived as meaningful, interesting, and charming. Certain definable combinations of references seem to convey the feeling of sense for observers more than others. This applies not only to clearly interpretable images but also to artworks conveying the impression of an unclear but possibly deep meaning. Looking at the particular combination of literal, metaphorical, and metonymical references might be a way to describe aspects of the functioning of art and design, which are normally believed to be unexplainable. For me it was surprising and a little disilluioning to find out that the reason certain artworks convey a “mysterious” feeling of sense and even why they feel charming can be described in part in semiotic terms.

5 Implications of such a method of research

The investigation outlined above explores relationships between film and theoretical text by creating relationships between film and theoretical text. It therefore can be described as self-referential. This is not a problem, since it does not interfere with looking at the subject closely. Furthermore it is more precise to describe my approach as looking at one question from two perspectives: from a purely theoretical perspective and from the perspective of somebody creating such relationships. One could argue that I do not need these two perspectives. Creating practical examples is not necessary for semiotic research. There are enough examples already available that I could have used. It is, however, often difficult and sometimes nearly impossible to find examples that apply perfectly. But in my case the far more important reason for employing an artistic research method was that creating the experiments allowed for a special grasp of the subject. The artistic work forced me to look very closely at what I was describing verbally. This improved and enhanced the theoretical work. Creating films was a powerful tool of control and correction of my theoretical ideas: pursuing artistic experiments often demonstrated

where I was wrong in my theoretical assumptions. Given examples would not have forced me to look this closely at difficult points. Pursuing theory on the other hand sharpened my view of what I experienced in designing and gave me patterns for describing it. I assume that the combination of theoretical and artistic research made it easier to observe relationships, which seem at first view too fundamental to be perceived. Only the interplay between artistic work and analysing this work theoretically while creating it allowed my mind to perceive and understand these fundamental semiotic relationships.

Doing both implied, however, that I had to engage deeply with semiotics and linguistics.

More problematic than the self-reflecting aspects of the dissertation proved to be the fact that the practical research included a creative process. Creating the films was planned and conducted as an artistic process. It consisted NOT in doing scientific experiments that try out different semiotic conditions in as neutral a form as possible, but in performing a creative process aimed at producing an interplay between film and text as interesting and as enjoyable as possible. I wanted to understand how a charming and meaningful interplay between text and film works. Although I had my main scientific questions in mind while creating the films, many additional (partly subjective) criteria were at work. Employing a creative process increased the number of variables influencing what I tried to describe. It made the project far more complex. This wide setting enabled me, on the one hand, to relate to many different aspects of the films and allowed me, on the other hand, to concentrate on combinations of film and text that could be experienced as meaningful and enjoyable. I could form hypotheses and argue for them within the setting, but it would have been nearly impossible to prove them one by one by traditional quantitative psychological investigations using the films as material.

Employing an artistic process also created difficulties on another level: we cannot speak about things we designed ourselves in the same way art historians talk about artworks. It seems inadequate to interpret one's own creation or allege what it conveys. It feels neither decent nor comfortable to judge its value. It is difficult to find a "neutral" way to

speaking about one's own work, but this "neutrality" seems necessary within a scientific approach. So, directly interpreting my films was not an option. What I could talk about easily and "neutrally" were the semiotic aspects of my films. I think that this deeply influenced the choice of the main questions of my investigation. It pushed my investigation into a more abstract area than I intended in the beginning. It moved it into semiotics and linguistics, where I could address my films in an impartial way. To describe, however, in which cases and for what reasons these films gained charm and meaning I needed a way to provide some "independent evidence" of the degree of charm and meaning of particular interactions between film and text. To refer to the possible interpretations and qualities of my own pictorial compositions, I conducted interviews and passed out questionnaires, thereby introducing the "neutral position" of observers. This "neutral position" of observers helped me to regain an "objective position" and "independent evidence".

¹ Reichl, V. *Meaning matches meaning. Animated film as metaphor for philosophical text*. Portsmouth, 2008. Accessible through the British Library. A German version including a DVD was published: Reichl, V. *Sprachkino. Zur Schnittstelle zwischen abstrakter Sprache und Bildlichkeit*. Stuttgart: Merz & Solitude, 2008.

² In this paper I cannot explain all the preconditions and details of the described results. I will provide, however, a short definition of literality, metonymy, and metaphor, because these terms are fundamental to this investigation:

Literality in language means that a word stands for a content that fulfills all characteristics of the prototype of this word. The literal meaning is defined by a bundle of attributes that together must be fulfilled in order for something to be judged viable as a literal denotation of this word. Nearly all words have several prototypes, and therefore several literal meanings.

To say that some aspect of an image is in a literal relation to a textual meaning means that this aspect fulfils all the characteristics of the meaning of the text in question. An image of blooming chestnut trees is a literal reference to a sentence like: «The chestnut trees were blooming». Pictorial literality is a common form in illustrations and film adaptations. It gives the content a singular gestalt and thereby defines many aspects that might not been mentioned in the text: the actual form of the objects, its colours, its dimensions, what is in the background, etc. Pictorial literality inevitably produces a surplus of details.

Linguistic theorists describe metonymy as concerning contiguities (e.g.: Jakobson, R. *The metaphoric and metonymic poles*. In: Dirven René , Ralf Pörings (ed.). *Metaphor and metonymy in comparison and contrast*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002). In a metonymical use of a word, some aspect of the ideal-typical contiguity of the prototype of this word is denoted. In metonymy, a shift takes place; the word means the proximate, the bordering, or the broadening of the prototype. This contiguity corresponds to the environment («the room applauded») or typical usage of the material («a glass of water»), pars-pro-toto constructions («headhunter») or totum-pro-parte constructions («light the Christmas tree») etc. Metonymy allows for clear denotations without having the necessity for the *mot juste*. It offers precise references, without itself having to be precise.

Pictorial metonymy means that an image refers to a linguistic content by showing contiguities of this content. Of course images can do this. Often, however, observers do not comprehend the metonymical connections between image and text because the artificial presence of pictorial representations emphasises the

difference between the intended content and the image that depicts something contiguous to it, in other words, it depicts something else.

In the metaphorical usage of a word, certain conceptual parts of its prototype are used separately from other conceptual parts. A bundle of characteristics of the prototype of a word are abstracted from others; these conceptual contents are then carried over onto other contents that are greatly distanced from the prototype. Important components of the prototype, however, have been subtracted, so that the word can then be used in a completely different context. All forms of linguistic referencing imply some classification by naming something with a particular word. The function of metaphor, however, is explicitly to interpret and comment on the content that is denoted by the metaphorical expression. In a pictorial metaphor some aspect of the image combines a bundle of characteristics that can be projected onto the linguistic content. Metaphorical pictorial reference is the only pictorial reference able to refer to, interpret, and comment on theoretical contents.

³ Spinoza, de B. *Ethik* [Ethics]. Stuttgart, Reclam, 1990. P. 48, translation: V.R.

⁴ Bachelard, G. *Poetik des Raumes* [Poetics of space]. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994. P. 187, translation: V.R.