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Michalle Gal, 'Visual Metaphors and Aesthetics: A Formalist Theory of Metaphor'

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Michalle Gal. *Visual Metaphors and Aesthetics: A Formalist Theory of Metaphor.* Bloomsbury 2022. 224 pp. \$175.50 USD (Hardcover 9781350127715); \$58.50 USD (Paperback 9781350326705).

In this original and important book, Michalle Gal cites many examples of visual metaphors, ‘such as a piano-shaped sharpener, a cactus-shaped desk organizer or popsicle eraser’ (ix) that are easily found in daily life, to ask what motivates the human construction of artifacts that, in addition to being fit for some purpose, function as visual metaphors. Her answer is that we are fundamentally visual beings that are aesthetically motivated to find and respond to form, including forms that suggest something beyond their literal nature as manufactured objects. As motivated by the fact and exploration of form, we shape the visual aspects of our created reality ‘through our natural fascination with the power of composition’ (ix). While it is easy to agree with Gal that we are attracted to metaphor ‘because the composition of deep thought has beauty and richness’ (ix), the majority of those interested in metaphor likely think of it in relation to mind, language, and understanding, rather than linking it to an external origination, as maintained by Gal. Because linguistic or conceptual metaphors are essentially visual, the age of thinking philosophically of metaphor as based in thought and language is said to be past. Part of the reason for this is that the visual, as the terrain in which metaphor fundamentally operates, is considerably stronger, wider, and more prevalent than the conceptual or semantic. Coupled with this is the notion of metaphor being an ‘ontological composition,’ (ix) rather than having primarily to do with conceptual thought, or language, to result in metaphorical understanding.

The preface to the book, from which I have been quoting, is a well-written and composed précis in which the main points of the book to be argued for are stated. Here Gal states her view that metaphor does not consist exclusively of the source and the target that are the two parts of metaphor customarily identified. To them Gal adds ‘emergent properties’ as the third part of metaphor that the source and target combine to produce (x). According to Gal, emergent properties in metaphor result from a new construction of the target by ‘drawing upon properties of the source and fusing them with those of the target’ (ix). The primarily visual nature of metaphor raises the question of how concepts function in relation to visual metaphors since concepts apply to the visual in addition to thoughts, and constructing visual metaphors would seem to rely on thoughts and concepts as much as do metaphors that are linguistic in nature and origin. This relation of the visual to concepts is advocated in William James’s idea of *preperception* (13) in which we recognize things in perception according to concepts to which verbal labels are attached. The opposing view, advocated independently by Ernst Gombrich and Rudolph Arnheim, and endorsed by Gal, tells us that, in her words, ‘preperception and stocked labels are visual’ (13) and ‘they arrange thoughts, ideas, and ideologies and they furnish our ontological sphere. *Visuality is in our nature. Visuality is our nature*’ (14, italics in the original). All of this is part of the ‘visual turn’ (17) that occurred in philosophy in addition to larger more familiar components of culture.

This work is extremely erudite, and it contains expositions of views in addition to arguments for the ontological primacy of the visual in metaphor. In the first chapter of the book, the main



argument for the visual dimension of metaphor, and its framework, is laid out. Here we are informed that ‘creating a metaphor is an external ontological practice,’ in relation to which ‘properties, structures, forms, and relations are borrowed—actually reproduced—to reconstruct the target and introduce it to a new ontological group.’ (1). Gal’s thinking about metaphor has been greatly influenced by Gombrich and Arnheim, and she notes approvingly Gombrich’s idea that, in making a snowman, for instance, there is no preconceived conception of a man that guides its construction, but rather that ‘[t]he shape of the snow pile is corrected time and again until a man is recognized.’ (10). This means that ‘the origin of the snowman is external rather than conceptual.’ (10). It is not being suggested here that the snowman *is* a metaphor, but that ‘its formation could be subsumed under metaphorical practices;’ (10) that the creation of the snowman adds a member, not to the group of things that resemble, refer to, or represent men, but to the group of men itself. And what has happened in transforming snow into a man is that ‘the metamorphosed thing’ [in this case the snow] is endowed with ‘a new ontological status [being a man] due to its emergent properties [the visual resemblance that it has to a man].’ (9). What is important for Gal’s conception of metaphor here is the ontological primacy that the artifact has over whatever semantic properties it is thought to possess, which in turn is part of the externalization that is important to her treatment of the visual dimension of metaphor. This externalization is an aspect of the visual philosophy of metaphor said to be more plausible than the standard treatment of it as a matter of the internal working of imageless thought. Gal’s thought here is informed by Gombrich’s idea that the creation of such an external artifact as a snowman comes before whatever symbolic content the artifact is thought to have, or before it takes thought beyond its literal character to however it may be thought semantically to function.

The second chapter of the book is devoted to the semantic theories of metaphor, including those of I.A. Richards, Max Black, and Monroe C. Beardsley, that ‘consider the cognitive merit of metaphor to be its most significant element’ (48) that Gal opposes. This treatment of metaphor is part of ‘the linguistic turn in aesthetics’ (49) that was ‘intensified in aesthetics by the prominence of the philosophy of language’ (49). The subject of Chapter Three is cognitivist theories of metaphor ‘that shifted the discussion from language to mental schemes and perception’ (64), and that maintained, for instance by Beate Hampe, that ‘external metaphorical tokens “reflect cross-domain connections at the conceptual level, allowing targets in abstract domains to be understood and hence also talked about in terms of their (more concrete and accessible) sources”.’ (65) As an externalist Gal opposes this view, maintaining instead that, ‘*[if] we think metaphorically it is only as a result of speaking, behaving, creating, or seeing things metaphorically.* Abstract thought is neither the origin of external metaphors, nor does an internalization of external metaphor ever reach full conceptual abstraction.’ (65, italics in original). The fourth chapter looks at the genesis of the visual perspective of metaphor with which Gal agrees, and examines how philosophers of art and aesthetics attempted to pivot from language to the visual, and ‘tried to prove the visual is not only independent of language, but also precedes language, intentions, and meaning, and possesses an autonomous and substantial ontological status that invites perceptual attention and visual cognition.’ (100) The fifth chapter on metaphors and ontology includes consideration of the

emergent properties that Gal takes to be the third part of metaphor, as well as the relation of metaphor to the externality that characterizes the visuality on which Gal's view of metaphor is based. The importance of the visual to the metaphorical here is captured by the thought that '[w]ithout visual sources, imagistic infrastructures, aesthetic compositions, and their emergent properties, language and concepts *are just not enough to form metaphors*' (152, her italics) and by the declaration that 'visual metaphor is the *paradigmatic kind* of metaphor.' (152, her italics). And because the visual sources of metaphor are located in the public external world, and not the private internal world of thoughts and concepts, the ontology of metaphor is external, not internal.

This important work is well researched, well organized, and well written. It contains many photographs, some by Gal herself, to illustrate the importance of the visual to the philosophy of metaphor. It is primarily original research geared toward the professional. As such, it provides fertile ground for discussion. I will limit my questions here to these: What warrants giving external visual objects an ontological status emphasized over, or denied to, concepts or the internal workings of conceptual thought? Why should visual metaphors be included in the class of things that they resemble rather than the class of things that resemble those things? If a snowman is, although symbolic, still member of the species man, then is a certain visual appearance a sufficient condition of being a member of that group? If so, does a snowman have rights in virtue of that membership? How can one visual metaphor be distinguished from another as metaphorical, rather than as a group of distinct sense data, apart from concepts according to which they are so discriminated and recognized? And how can an external metaphor be produced without a lexicon of relevant concepts to steer the coordinated actions of intended construction in a certain direction? This book could be used in an advanced course on metaphor or could form part of a graduate course in aesthetics.

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