

Metaphors we pass by

*Thoughts over the use of metaphors
for understanding*

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“I am almost cracking under the pressure of this work”

Introduction

Of course I am not cracking as if I were made of glass; and by the way this work doesn't weigh. In fact in this exact moment this page is a complex collection of bits and bites physically made by electrons in my computer, so they cannot make me crack, they don't weigh. The statement is a metaphor, is a metaphor standing for the fact that I am working under the pressure of time. Well, that is another metaphor.

I will try to make the statement without a metaphor: “I am almost having a crisis because I feel that I will not finish this work on time”. OK, it is possible to make the statement without metaphors but the sense is not the same, something is missing, there is a part of the meaning that was portraying some drama that is not depicted in the plain version.

Metaphors explain things to signify something that is not easily explained by literal representation. It has to be represented by the characteristics of something else that is more manageable in terms of meaning construction.

John Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) wrote *Metaphors We Live By*, already a classic reference when talking about metaphors. In this book the authors are explaining how we are constructing our every day life under metaphorical statements. They claim that our cognition is structured by metaphorical systems that work as paradigms (For more over the concept of Paradigm see Kuhn, (1985) and Saussure, (1961). I found four basic statements ruling the ideas in *Metaphors we live by*.

1. We live under metaphorical concepts
2. Metaphors are present in actions and thoughts of every day life.
3. We are not aware of those conceptual systems, but we depend on them to build our interactions.
4. Metaphors are valid structures to understand the world and establish truth.

I will try to weave my discourse around these four basic ideas, trying to integrate other concepts while working on the central notions. It is not my aim, to do an exhaustive revision of Lakoff's work; instead I will build around to express my own view of the metaphor.

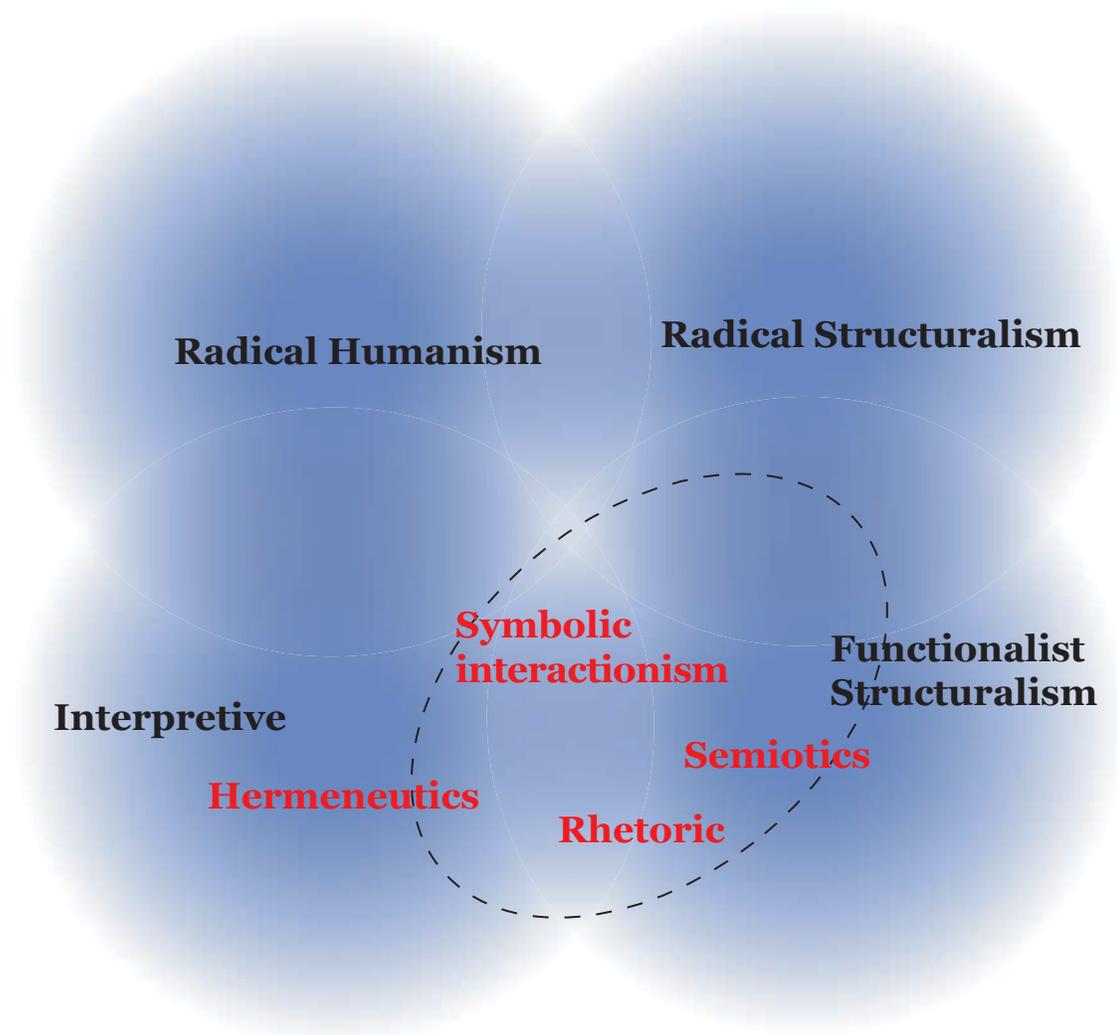
The concepts poured in Lakoff and Johnson's work are explaining how our mental constructions are establishing the signifying ground to understand reality in a metaphorical way. Yuri Lotman (1990) when speaks about the Semiosphere is using a rhetorical device that compares the Biosphere, the area of the world where life can be possible, with a cognitive area where communication can be possible, and named it in a similar way. This rhetorical device is not a metaphor it is a simile, a figure of the same kind. Anyway, I placed the Semiosphere concept here to support the idea that there should be a shared space where we can interact for meaning construction. Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors give those meaning spheres that we share with others to construct and understand reality.

In our communicational exchange we should build meanings while exchanging metaphors. We have to be immersed in the same Semiosphere to construct sense. Lakoff and Johnson proposed the Experiential Gestalt concept to explain how a shared metaphor can determine people's interaction in assuming the truth from a metaphorical understanding of reality.

I will also bring some other concepts coming basically from Semiotics and Semiology (See Morris, 1971 for a discussion about the use of these different terms). From Semiotics I would like to argue that Rhetorical figures are related with sign types as expressed by Morris (1971) in the relation of the sign with its object. From Semiology It worth to bring the idea of Paradigm and Syntagm as expressed by Saussure (1995).

Intellectual approach

Even if most of the work on signs has been made under a functionalist point of view, the rhetorical work is placed on an interpretive tradition, the one that deals with meaning as its main matter. Rhetoric is a discipline dealing with the structure of discourse but is also a discipline dealing with meaning and interpretation. Considering Burrell and Morgan's model, the rhetorical concepts should be placed at the border of the Interpretive Paradigm with the Functionalist Paradigm. (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) Lakoff and Johnson (1980) had structured their work, considering some concepts taken from the functionalist point of view, but when they speak of meaning construction they jump to the interpretive paradigm and support their ideas bringing concepts from Hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. This can be exemplified with the statement claiming that reality is a social construction based on meaning understanding. "Metaphors as we have seen, are conceptual in nature. They are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (p. 159)



Metaphors A metaphor is a rhetorical figure that stands for a concept of another kind. In terms of Saussure, a metaphor is a sign from a specific paradigm standing for a sign of another paradigm. In terms of Bonsiepe (in Poggenpohl, 1998) a metaphor transfers an element to another field of application so that a similarity is assumed and expressed between the two fields.

Lakoff and Johnson are proposing that metaphors as figures can be used in narrative but when they use the term they refer to metaphorical concepts. They claim that a metaphor can be a structuring system that can govern the way we approach every day activities and explain interacting modes. As systems, metaphorical concepts explain experiences in terms of other experiences from another field. These systems should have coherence and should act as sense making devices in interaction. So for the authors, we live under metaphorical concepts, we understand the world by metaphors and we live by metaphors. We act, as we understand how our actions fit to the overall structure of our metaphorical constructions.

Considering an interpretive approach, we face our every day activities under three main relations with the world: Interaction, Interpretation and Understanding. We have to interact with others and with the world to understand, but before understanding, there is an interpretation of our experiences. That interpretation once appropriated allows us to create our own images of reality that cannot be valued as false as they come from experience. (Gadamer 1976)

“We claim that most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts” “Are there any concepts at all that are understood directly without a metaphor?” (Lakoff, 1980, 56)

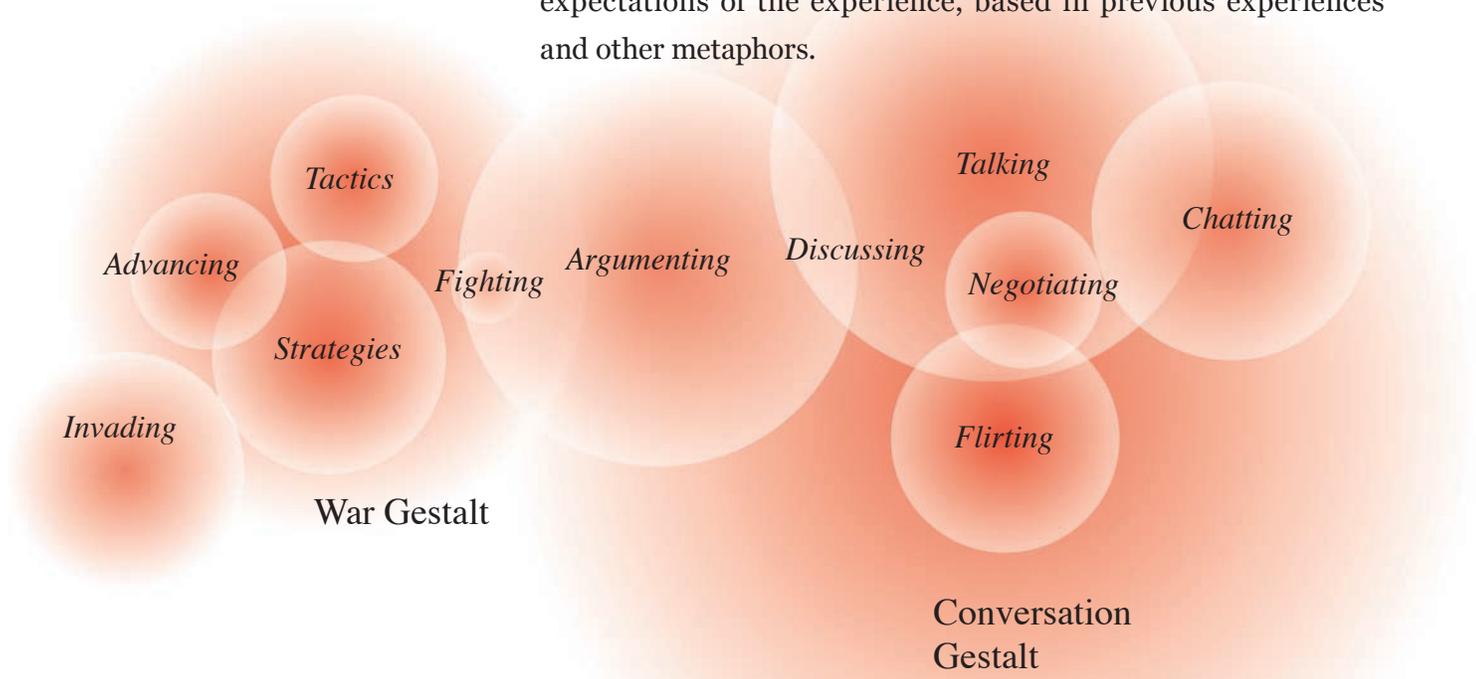
Understanding is created thus by previous experience, things have to be explained in terms of other known experiences and most of the time those experiences are explained in metaphorical ways.

Experiential gestalts

A concept that has called my attention is the one of Experiential Gestalts. For the authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors are present in the actions and thoughts of every day life even if we are not aware that they are governing our conceptual system. They claim that to prove that we use metaphors for every day activities we should revise the way we use language. Indeed in our use of language we are using metaphors all the time as exemplified in the first paragraph of the present work.

“Experiential gestalts are ways of organizing experiences into multidimensional structured wholes”. (Lakoff, 1980, p. 81)

An experiential gestalt is a structure acting as a whole that determines actions and understanding of a specific experience. These gestalts have different dimensions as part of the whole structure but that can be seen as interdependent. There is an experiential gestalt of conversation. This gestalt governs our experiences and expectations of conversations, and whenever we experience that activity we will be immersed in the dimensions of this gestalt. Those dimensions could be the participants, the narrative, the interaction, and the purpose or any others in other structure. The gestalt is a metaphorical construction of the expectations of the experience, based in previous experiences and other metaphors.



Lakoff and Johnson have explained this theory with the example of an argument as war. The participants in the conversational gestalt can assume unconsciously that in terms of having an argument they have to bring the gestalt of war, so there is a superimposition in a moment when argumentation that is a kind of dialog, becomes a war, with attacks, tactics, strategies and retreats. The next image is a visual explanation of how experiential gestalts can overlap and produce new meanings to experiences at the same time of structuring them.

The notion of an experiential gestalt is similar of the concept of paradigm in the work of Saussure (1995) and Kuhn (1985)

Syntagms and Paradigms

“Saussure assumes that signs are organized in codes in two different ways. The first is by Paradigms. A paradigm is a group of signs from which one selects the sign to be used in the text. The second one is the syntagmatic. A Syntagm is the construction resultant of the combination of the chosen signs... in language we can say that vocabulary is the paradigm and the constructed phrase is the syntagm. In this way every message include a selection (from a paradigm) and a combination (in a syntagm)”. (Fiske, 1982 p.49)

Saussure visualizes this concept taking the paradigm as the vertical axis and he called it the axis of selection from which we are choosing the signs. He implies that it is as important for meaning, the chosen sign as the one left. The horizontal axis, which he calls the combinatory axis, is the syntagmatic, where the construction of the text takes place.

In very general terms, a metaphor is a sign from a specific paradigm, representing one of another paradigm.

An extended concept of the notion of paradigm has been developed by Tomas Kuhn (1985). Kuhn took Saussure's concept of paradigm and developed an extended view of it. For him a paradigm determines a vision of the world and its processes of interpretation.

If the signs are selected from certain paradigms and not from others, the paradigm where the signs were selected will frame the general appearance of the text. As well if we are not familiar with the concepts of a paradigm, those signs won't mean anything for us, in a way they will be invisible. In a way Kuhn is using the same structure proposed by Saussure but interpreted under other paradigm.

Kuhn (1985) describes a paradigm as a mental structure that works like a filter that allows us to understand or not certain texts. In some way the paradigmatic structure will allow to read some data easily because it will seem coherent with the paradigmatic structure, and there will be other kind of data that will be difficult to perceive and understand because doesn't fit with the overall structure. In a general use of the term, a paradigm is an accepted model or patron.

Kuhn studied the way scientists had discovered things that had revolutionized scientific concepts that were taken for granted. In most of the cases the new view was generated by a shift in the paradigm governing the studies on the specific discipline.

The description of paradigm established by Kuhn is similar to the experiential gestalt proposed by Lakoff. Both work as frames that govern the actions and thoughts in human experiences. Both claim that in terms of obtaining different results, a change of paradigm or the superimposition of different experiential gestalts is needed.

Kuhn didn't write that some of the governing paradigms in scientific history were metaphors, but they were. Take for example the metaphor of the atom as a tiny solar system or the war metaphor to explain how good antibodies control viruses and bacteria in humans.

An interesting statement is given by Wittgenstein (in Kuhn, 1985) when he explains that we can identify objects in an unequivocal manner without discussion because they are part of a net of

similarities that superimpose and entwine. And the existence of that net allows us to understand the object or the activity.

As a small conclusion I could say that perception of reality is delimited by the ensemble of previous experiences; that the ensemble of those experiences govern the way we interact and understand the world and can be represented as a metaphor. That reality has to be experienced and interpreted to be understood.

Interaction Experiential gestalts are based on the notion of interaction. Interaction means information and activity sharing between at least two entities in a creative way. It is also possible although, to interact with a representative of the other like in a computer interface that allow us to do some banking procedures as if we were having interaction with a human teller. The automatic teller machine stands for the actual teller, who in another sense, stands for the organization.

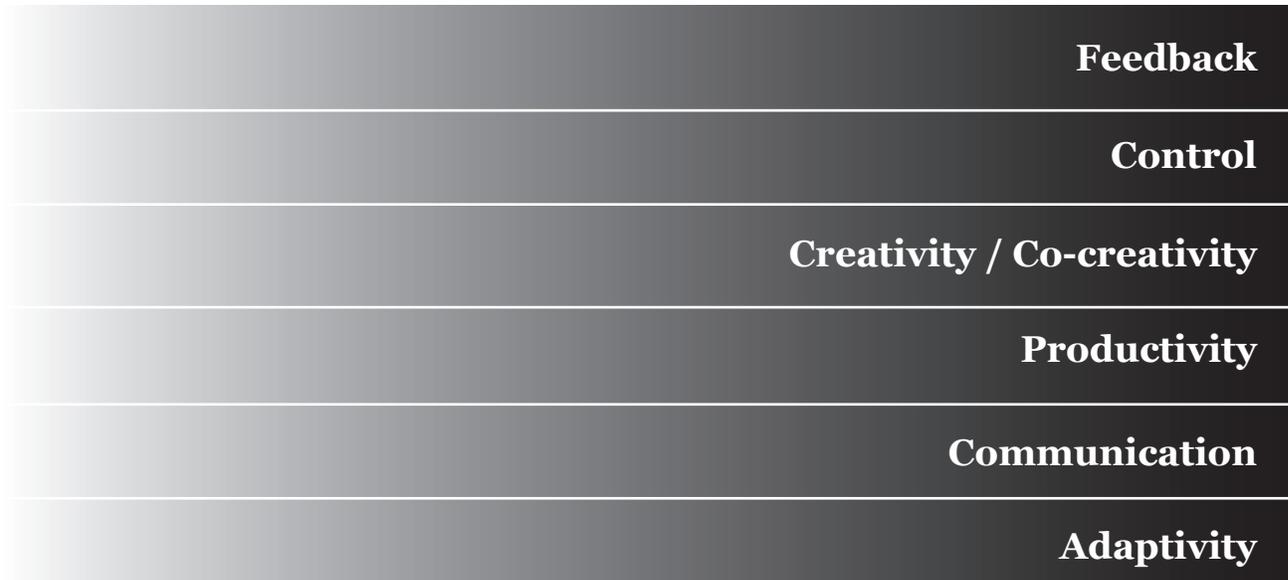
There are levels of interaction and we can have very interactive experiences like a passionate conversation with a friend or activities where interaction is almost null like when we are part of an audience listening the annual report of the president of the firm.

Nathan Shedroff (1994) has worked studying interaction, and he is proposing a scheme that can be helpful to understand the topic. He is placing in his chart, some concepts that involve interaction and that he calls continuums of interactivity. "One way to consider the meaning of interactivity is to envision all experiences (and products) as inhabiting a continuum of interactivity. On one side are passive experiences like reading a typical book or watching television. "The difference that defines interactivity can include the amount of control the audience has over the experience, pace, or content; the amount of choice this control offers; and the ability to use the experience or content to be productive or to create." (Shedroff, 1994)

Shedroff's interaction scheme

Less interactive

More interactive



Control and Feedback

The first two spectrums of interactivity focus on how much control the participants has over the outcome of the experience, or type of action, and how much feedback exists.

Productivity and Creative Experiences

Productivity is another spectrum that can coincide with other interactivity spectrums. Creative experiences allow participants to make, do, or share something themselves. Creative products and experiences require that others participate by creating or manipulating instead of merely watching and consuming.

Adaptive Experiences

Adaptive situations are more enjoyable for the participants. Together with control, adaptiveness is considered in the spectrum of interactivity because of the possibility to change environments of interaction considering the situation and needs of the participants.

Communicative Experiences

Like productive and creative experiences, opportunities to meet others, talk with them, and share their personal stories and opinions, are always viewed as valuable and interesting. Because these experiences involve two or more people, they also inherently involve high levels of control, feedback, and adaptivity.

Three dimensions of signs

These three elements are the basic structure of the sign as proposed by Peirce. The sign vehicle is the thing that is perceived by senses, is the sensorial aspect of the sign it has to do with form and perception, it is the only thing appearing to the senses. The object is the reference of the sign is the idea or concept, which the sign is pointing out, when I say 'apple' which is the object of this sign? what makes an apple be an apple?. The third element is the Interpretant that is related with social reality. In fact is the key that I need for interpretation. How should I interpret apple in this context? as a fruit, as a computer, as sin, or as passion? When we bring together these three elements we have a sign, when we are able to realize this process called semiosis and build meaning from a sign vehicle, we have a sign.

Charles Morris (1971) establishes three levels of interpretation based on the relations between the parts of the sign that he calls dimensions.

The first dimension refers to the relation between the sign vehicle and itself or with other sign vehicles of the same kind. This dimension is known as Syntactics.

The second dimension, Semantics, deals with the relation between the sign vehicle with its object. This second dimension studies how the sign signifies, how the sign represents what it should represent. And the third dimension, Pragmatics studies the relation of the sign with the Interpretant; it places the attention in the social process that gives context and gives the clue for meaning construction.

He is also establishing a three-layer relation on how signs refer to its parts. In this case I want to bring the concepts of relation of the sign with its object. The first relation of a sign with its object is based on similarity. The basic representation in human concern is similarity. We represent something because it resembles the other. In this case the sign is called an icon. A second relation of the sign with its object is by a matter of cause and effect. We represent something by a relation of action. This kind of relation is called an index. A dark cloud is index of rain; a footprint is index of the fact that someone passes by. The third layer is a sign that relates with its object by convention in an arbitrary way. A sign represent its object in a precise manner but the code has to be learned. All the letters are visual signs representing sounds in a symbolic way.

I suppose that there is a relation of these semiotical concepts with rhetoric figures such as a metaphor. I am sure that there are studies on this relation but at this moment I don't know any of it. From my limited knowledge I can infer some basic relations.

If a metaphor is a sign that stands for other of a different kind, there is a cognitive process that achieves the shifting of an object and Interpretant of a sign to use them with a sign vehicle of another.

“Claudia is an angel”

This statement is a metaphor standing for the qualities found in the beloved. Is better to use a metaphor because it involves the abstraction of the object of the sign angel, and it is placed instead of the object of the sign Claudia. The Interpretant should change also, but is a new Interpretant; it cannot be the one used in the semiosis of Claudia but neither the Interpretant of the sign angel.

Claudia		
<i>Sign vehicle</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Interpretant</i>
'Claudia'	Claudia is a woman that happen to be my wife, she is nice and... (we can place here the whole known paradigm of 'Claudia' as established by its Interpretant.	Claudia is a person, a human being.
Angel		
<i>Sign vehicle</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Interpretant</i>
'Angel'	An angel is a celestial winged creature known for his/her attributes of beauty, kindness... (We can place here the whole known paradigm of 'Angel' as established by its Interpretant.	An angel is a mythological creature that we like to believe exists but we know it doesn't. (see Christian mythology)
Claudia is my angel		
<i>Sign vehicle</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Interpretant</i>
'Claudia'	An angel is a celestial winged creature known for his/her attributes of beauty, kindness... (We can place here the whole known paradigm of 'Angel' as established by its Interpretant.	I know that Claudia is not a real angel but I can use the idea to express about her, knowing that the other people will know that I am using a metaphor.

Well I think that it works like that. In a way the signifying attributes of the sign are placed in the semantical relation, thus in the object quality. The Interpretant will help to do the right semiosis and not mistake the intended meaning. The signifying qualities of a metaphor are placed in the object of the sign.

The Interpretant is placed in the social world, so all the conventional inferences of the sign have to be placed in this part of the sign structure. The Interpretant of a metaphor is a convention. The audience must know that we are using a metaphor thus we are talking in a figurative way. This is something that we learn is a complex code that we share with others. This statement places the metaphor in the third layer of the relations of the sign with its object. Then a metaphor is a symbol.

There are other rhetoric figures that are not necessarily symbols. For example a Metonymy or a Synecdoche are indexes because they are substitutions of a sign for another of the same paradigm with a direct relation. It cannot be symbolic because we don't need a convention to understand the meaning.

“Her steps are following me”

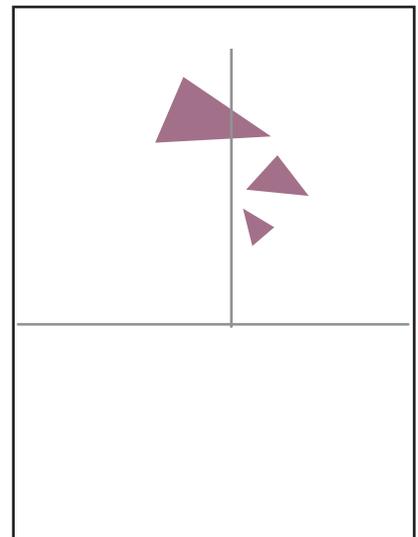
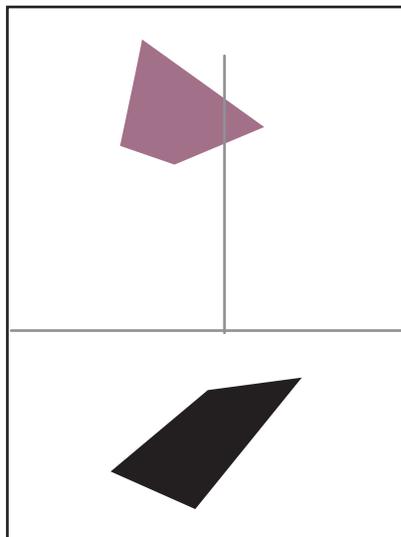
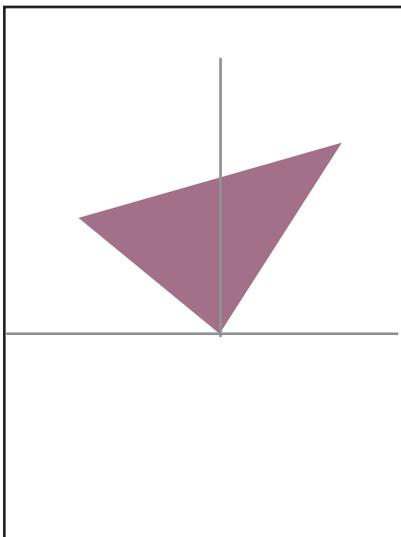
The steps are in place of herself, that is a direct relation because the steps don't exist without her. There is not substitution of the object of the sign but it is substitution of the Interpretant.

Two examples *First example.*

The metaphor of composition in art and design

It is very difficult for Art students to understand the basic concepts of composition. It is normal to find freshmen horrified with a pencil and a blank page in front. They don't know how to proceed and first traces are dealing every time with the problems of composition.

Composition is a matter of Gravity. Our relation with the world is determined by the horizon and a vertical human being. Man's relation with the world is a perpendicular line that has to keep its balance. The balance is dependent of forces pulling and pushing the objects that are attracted to the ground by Gravity force. Once this concept is understood, students will start to solve composition with creativity and risk.



Dondis (1985) expresses that “ The most important psychological and physical influence in human perception is the necessity of standing firmly with two feet on the ground and knowing that one will remain vertical in any circumstance in any attitude and with a reasonable degree of certitude. Equilibrium is the strongest visual reference for humans”. (p. 35-36)

The gravity force metaphor for composition acts in a play of balance and counterbalance, the good composition is playing with tension, balance, weigh, attraction and grouping, always in search of equilibrium or the loose of it. The metaphor establishes a vital relation of a vertical axis (human being) with a horizontal (the world).

Any element depicted in the canvas has a weight that depends on position and size. An element placed at the bottom of the page is heavier than the one placed above, even if they are the same size. Elements at the bottom of the page are falling; elements above are floating. Tchichold (****) considers that a page seems to be lighter thus more appealing to the reader, if the upper margin is thinner than the one at the bottom. The general appearance of the printed page will be better for reading because will be pulling up.

Second example.

The metaphor in comics narrative.

A classic metaphor that we pass by in visual communication is the representation of time in comic books. We have assumed it so much, and it is so normal now, that we give it for granted. This metaphor considers that time has a physical position.

When reading a Comic book we know that the frame that we are reading is the present, the frame at the left is the past and frames at the right side are in the future. This metaphorical order of time gives coherence to the reading, even if we just find images and texts on the page, we know that there is a strict order to make sense of it. Temporality metaphor governs the sense of the narrative. All the frames appear to be simultaneous to the viewer but the reader knows which is the structure and the code and give sense to the story.

Other rhetoric devices in comics are dialogue boxes. Dialogues are treated as if the words were suspended in balloons. The dialogue boxes change shapes depending on the dialogue situation. It is possible to understand when someone is shouting or whispering, or even the difference in tone. The voices will be represented with boxes with thick or thin lines, with different shapes.

The use of other rhetorical devices is also common. Onomatopoeias are used when there is a need to express sounds and other effects. Also metonymies are used in the composition of the frame. They use a zzuuummm or a zzzzzZZZZZ when something goes fast or someone is sleeping. Sinecdoches are normal in frame composition, as regular are *Ellipsis* or *Hyperboles*.

Comics are narratives, and as narratives the use of rhetoric is basic. The time structure indeed is a metaphor as if the time were something that can be placed on one side or the other and gives coherence to the story.



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