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All Thought is Sorting — or is it? Metaphor and the Bounds of Sense

I Commutativity

I think I may have gotten the whole thing wrong. When I was asked to contribute in a volume on ‘metaphor shaping theory,’ my first reflex was to turn to the seminal work on metaphor contained in I. A. Richards’ The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936). But when one stops to think about it, the book is really about ‘The Rhetoric of Philosophy.’ Or is this ultimately the same thing? That is, is there a kind of commutativity involved in this chiasmus, some kind of deeper identity where any philosophy of rhetoric is always already a rhetoric of philosophy? Normally language does not work that way, as Lewis Carroll showed us long ago:

“[…] [Y]ou should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on. “I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least-at least I mean what I say — that’s the same thing, you know.” “Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same as ‘I eat what I see’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the Dormouse, which seemed to be talking in its sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe’!” “It is the same thing with you,” said the hatter, and here the conversation dropped.1

One does not have to be a mathematician of Carroll’s calibre to know that 7+5 is the same as 5+7; but it would be a sad though somewhat calmer world if everyone did indeed sleep whenever they breathed. In language, order matters, in arithmetic it does not. But perhaps if metaphor is indeed the omnipresent principle of all thought, as Richards would have it, and as we shall see shortly, then ultimately there may be no need to distinguish differences of order. If all thought, at this basic level, is indeed permeated by the same enabling metaphors, then rhetorics and philosophies are really one and the same thing.

There is certainly an obvious point to be made, and a space for serious and extensive scholarship, on the way metaphor has shaped culture and theory throughout history, just as there is an obvious case to be made for the

claim that there are metaphors we live by in our daily lives, as Lakoff and Johnson have famously argued. This idea goes further back than Lakoff and Johnson, of course; it goes all the way to I. A. Richards or to Max Black, or (somewhat more recently) to the articles included in an anthology edited by Andrew Ortony on *Metaphor and Thought* in 1979. To take just one quick example from this volume, Richard Boyd argues that there is “an important class of metaphors which play a role in the development and articulation of theories in relatively mature sciences” and that “they are used to introduce theoretical terminology where none previously existed.” He adds that “the utility of these metaphors in theory change crucially depends on [their] open-endedness” — that is, it is not by precision and total clarity that these metaphors become useful, but rather by means of a certain imprecision and flexibility. Now this is a rather convincing position, and historians can easily and fruitfully spend time documenting it. But my own goals will be slightly different, as I wish to go behind the details of the operation of metaphor in order to investigate the presuppositions and conclusions that this view often implies. It may turn out that some of the conclusions or implications do not really follow from the linguistic operations that can indeed be documented.

To help me in this task, I initially turned to Richards but ultimately to Kant. Or, to be more precise, I turned less to Kant and more to Peter Strawson’s representation of Kant in his *The Bounds of Sense*. If I were a better Kant specialist, I would be able to show how and where Strawson is being unfair or unsympathetic to the Königsberg philosopher — at least this is the impression the analysis leaves on me. As it is, I am only able to show why this is so, since it is clear from the start that Strawson reproaches Kant for not being an analytic philosopher like himself. Thus he does his best whenever possible to amend and to correct Kant by turning him into one, by making his positions sound like verificationism or by arguing roughly that Kant is right to claim that there are limits to intelligible thought and experience but wrong to see the source of these limits in our cognitive constitution. The main gist of Strawson’s argument is thus realist, and my conclusion will have much to do with what some form of realism implies for the reign of metaphor.

II The Reign of Metaphor

The title of the second part of my article is thus ‘The Reign of Metaphor’ and is, as such, a metaphor itself. There is also a homophone involved, and if I

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were to spin out the metaphor (the verb ‘to spin’ being a metaphor I like less than the French verb ‘filer’), I would have several directions in which to go. All this goes to show the omnipresence of metaphor, as I can barely get past my title without getting tripped up in tropes.

If I am to believe Jacques Derrida, however, I would be wise to eliminate the meteorological connotations of [rein], much too cloudy in this context, and concentrate on the more kingly figure of the sun. In an article on the art of Olafur Eliasson, to whom I will also turn shortly, Daniel Birnbaum has argued:

Philosophy as such seems to have started as a kind of sun dance; the tropes of language itself turn towards the celestial light. Writing about heliotropism as the foundation of all philosophical metaphors [...] Jacques Derrida spells out the solar obsession in Platonic discourse: “There is only one sun in this system. The proper name, here, is the nonmetaphorical prime mover of metaphor, the father of all figures.”

Birnbaum goes on to ask if the sun is not indeed the original metaphor or the “anchoring point” of all figures, and this, of course, ties in with what we can read elsewhere in the work of Derrida: “Avant d’être procédé rhétorique dans le langage, la métaphore serait le surgissement du langage lui-même.”

It also ties in, of course, with the work of Richard Rorty, for to emphasize the role of the ‘mirror’ (or of our “glassy essence”) is simply another way of emphasizing the sun. In a sense, some of the impetus for a conference on how metaphor shapes theory seems to be derived from Rorty’s brand of pragmatism:

It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods.

In this kind of pragmatism, a change in metaphor is a change in philosophy and thus a change in truth. One of Rorty’s main points is that the dominant metaphor of the ‘mind’s eye’ was just an accident of history: “There was [...] no particular reason why this ocular metaphor seized the imagination of the founders of Western thought.” Of course, if one could show that there is a reason for the prevalence of this metaphor – in other words, if one could

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5 Birnbaum 142.
8 Rorty 12.
9 Rorty 38.
justify it in some sense, then one would be well on the way towards refuting certain aspects of Rorty’s pragmatism. Indeed, in the same passage, Rorty himself goes on to admit that the mind’s eye metaphor was a “powerful” one—though he never fully explains why some metaphors are ‘powerful’ and others are not.

But such latent contradictions hardly troubled Richards as he prepared the first radical theories of metaphor back in the thirties. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* was originally presented as a series of lectures at Bryn Mawr where the concern for metaphor went hand in hand with a blossoming interest in what we might call today information theory, cybernetics, or communication sciences. But metaphor is indeed the object of a central chapter:

> That metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language can be shown by mere observation. We cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it, as you will be noticing throughout this lecture. Even in the rigid language of the settled sciences, we do not eliminate or prevent it without great difficulty. […] In philosophy above all, we can take no step at all without an unrelaxing awareness of the metaphors we, and our audience, may be employing […].

In the pages that follow we learn that “[t]hought is metaphoric” and that “a command of metaphor” is a “command of life”—hardy and heady words, but hardly surprising from a future poet.

What interests me is not the rhetoric of philosophy here, but the deeper implications involved. Richards’ main idea is that thought itself is fundamentally metaphorical. To quote a less familiar work, *Interpretation in Teaching* (1938), Richards argues that all mental processes

> […] operate in the main mode of metaphor. For all thought is sorting, and we can think of nothing without taking it as of a sort. Logic is the Art or discipline of managing our sortings […].

I think that this notion of ‘sorting’ is not unlike later theories of metaphor, and notably Nelson Goodman’s general discussion of what he calls “transfer

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10 Rorty 41.
12 Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 94.
13 Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 95.
14 Richards, *Interpretation in Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, 1938) 16; see also *Philosophy of Rhetoric* 30. For similar ideas in a recent work by a popular philosopher, see Douglas Hofstadter, *I am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic, 2007): “One of my firmest conclusions is that we always think by seeking and drawing parallels to things we know […]” (xv) and “in the final analysis, virtually every thought in this book (or in any book) is an analogy, as it involves recognizing something as being a variety of something else” (xviii). To say that all thought is based on analogy is obviously quite close to the slogan that “all thought is sorting.”
of symbol schemata.” In metaphor, according to Goodman, the symbols of one domain get transported to another. One recalls that the same transportation metaphor was already at work in Richards’ terminology of tenor and vehicle.

Now the act of sorting seems to imply the same sort of transference. If all things were absolutely identical from the outset, there would be no need to classify them. Sorting is a way of applying the criteria and labels of one domain to some particular entity which may or may not fit in. It is not simply a matter of putting things into the categories to which they already automatically belong; it is a matter of putting new things into old categories, or a matter indeed of creating new categories for equally new things. In all of these cases, there is, Richards argues, a metaphorical operation going on. But this theory of sorting is, of course, itself a metaphor with further implications. It gives us a picture of a world with no inherent order, a world composed of a collection of disparate things, that we later sort, but that we might have sorted differently. Indeed, in a stronger version, close to the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the things themselves are already the result of linguistic sorting, or, in other words, reality itself is a linguistic construct. Inevitably, realists will be tempted to object to this stronger version, by arguing that 1) the sorting is never really arbitrary, for the operation of metaphor latches on to true features of the world, and that 2) there are also levels of experience where things just are, and are not sorted — i.e. there are non-linguistic, non-metaphorical levels of experience that involve thought (in some sense of the term), but do not involve comparing. This is a rough description of my own strategy in the following remarks. I intend to pursue this strategy with a series of examples and observations where I will not necessarily be talking about metaphor in the narrowest sense, but rather about a whole series of operations that we can call ‘transfer’ in the sense adumbrated by Goodman.

III Singularities

The third part is entitled “Singularities” and is inspired by a recent and ground-breaking article on stylistics by Jean-Jacques Lecercle. “Pour une stylistique des singularités” is “an attempt at elaborating a stylistics informed by the work of Gilles Deleuze around the concepts of singularity, of remarkable point, and of problem.” I trust I have gotten at least this bit right, as I am quoting from Lecercle’s own abstract of the article. Indeed, it is important for me to get things right here, since, for once, I am quoting in total agree-

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ment with his analysis, and I hope to argue that what he has to say about stylistics casts a light on what we can say about the way metaphor shapes culture. More specifically, I have the feeling that the perception of such a 'singularity' may indeed involve a different or even opposite procedure than that involved in the perception of a dominant metaphor. It may be that my understanding of Lecercle’s position is wrong, for I am even less a specialist of Deleuze than I am of Kant, if that is possible, but it also may be that my misunderstanding might still be fruitful in this context.

For Lecercle, the concept of singularity “allows one to concentrate on the individuality of the text, conceived as a set of remarkable phenomenal points, and as an individual built upon virtual singularities.”

For example, and no doubt to oversimplify, the massive presence of oxymorons in Dracula (Lecercle’s own example) is a singularity which responds in its own way to the remarkable points (“being a woman, being a vampire”) which in turn embody in a special way the vaster problem involved in being a woman in the late-Victorian era. To take Lecercle’s other example, the problem behind a more traditional Annunciation is not the same as that which motivates Tintoretto’s version, a version which confronts “the violence of the contact between the human and the divine.”

I am not sure I have the system worked out perfectly, for I may be confusing the three different levels — singularity, remarkable point, and problem — but I think one gets the gist of the demonstration.

In conversation with Jean-Jacques Lecercle, I once wondered if, after all, this stylistic concept of singularity might be related to its cosmological counterpart. In astrophysics, a singularity is “a region in space-time at which matter is infinitely dense,” or more generally, a point where for some reason the laws of physics break down. My goal in mentioning this is not to engage in the kind of abuse of language that sent Sokal and Bricmont into battle, but simply to suggest that the transfer from one realm to the other – from science to stylistics — might be useful. If the artwork involves some sort of agrammaticality, as both Lecercle and I have variously argued, then it could be because a problem of some sort is generating the need to break the rules. To say that an Italian Annunciation (my favourites are those of an earlier period) involves the representation of “matter” which has become “infinitely dense” is, of course, to speak metaphorically. But how else could one speak of the

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17 Lecercle 24.
19 Lecercle 30.
irruption of the divine into the finite, and the metaphor may be an enlightening one.

Yet though I am referring to these singularities via metaphor, I am not convinced that they themselves involve metaphorical operations in any useful sense of the term, and certainly not in the sense of the term implied by the linguistics of Lakoff and Johnson. To that extent, Richards’ work on metaphor was more interesting than the current work of cognitive linguistics, since Richards emphasized what he called the “disparity action” of metaphor, i.e. the fact that the differences between tenor and vehicle were just as relevant as their resemblances, a point made in a different context by the art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman.22 In this kind of vision of metaphor, the goal is less a mapping of generalities than an appreciation of singular events. And I think that this leads us to conclude that there is a kind of art history or literary history or history of ideas that is less interesting than artistic appreciation and pure philosophy in their richest forms. For history seeks out recurrences or even invariables, whereas close reading or attention, and pure philosophical debate engage the singularities as ends in themselves. Richards would say that the initial moment of sorting, the initial event or singularity, is a moment of metaphorical operation; I do not know if Deleuze would have said that, or if Lecercle thinks it is so. But I am certain that all would agree that the recurrence of metaphor and its transformation into a dominant mental set takes away much of the thrill of the initial encounter. As Rorty could have put it, to study metaphor in this sense means spending less time on creativity and more time on the accidents of history. It would be silly to deny the ubiquity of certain metaphors which have shaped culture and history, but one must admit that these regularities are at best only the background for the singularity of art.

IV Visual Transfer

To understand the role of one kind of metaphor in the visual arts, I intend to examine briefly an example of what I call ‘Visual Transfer’ — this being the title of the fourth section. I apologize for choosing the kitsch rather than the sublime, but I find it does the job more efficiently. One can find lost in a corner of the Vatican Museums a painting by a certain Lucas Hasegawa called either Our Lady of Japan or Introduction of Christianity in Japan (1925).23 In a sense, this representation, like all representation, is a visual theory, and it is based on the metaphorical operation of transfer. The problem, one could say,

22 For Richards, see Philosophy of Rhetoric 127; for Didi-Huberman, see Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et figuration (1990; Paris: Flammarion, 1995).
23 The painting was listed as Our Lady of Japan in the museum, but the second title appears on the website.
is Western, but the singular actualization of this problem is, of course, hybrid. First of all, the format is that of a scroll, more typical of Japanese art no doubt than of the Italian Renaissance. Second and quite obviously, there is a transfer or translation of habitual features into Japanese equivalents. Madonna and Child are, of course, Asian here, the countryside corresponds to the canons of Japanese landscape art, and the angels seem to combine the swirls of a Hokusai with the symbolism of traditional Christian iconography. There are dozens of other examples, of course, such as the two portraits of Our Lady of China listed in note 23. All of these are indeed representations of the 'Introduction of Christianity and of Christian Representation' the Orient, but I do not intend to comment further on their plastic characteristics or on the singular solutions they adopted. None of this is particularly new, and one can go back to Ernst Gombrich for much better examples.

My point is that this kind of analysis remains somewhat outside of the language game that the initial spectator was asked to play. As art historians, it is our job to see how transfer shapes a work. As art appreciators, we are forced to admit that these works warrant our attention if and only if they possess something more than the vagaries of this particular transfer.

V Room for One Colour

My fifth section is called ‘Room for One Colour’ and it is devoted to the work of Olafur Eliasson and its relation to phenomenology. I will use Eliasson primarily as a counterexample, since the point is that some artists do not want to be shaped by anything but phenomenology itself. Where an artist like Anish Kapoor will often provide his works with highly metaphorical titles, Eliasson often keeps language and paratext to a minimum. One can see an obvious transfer involved in Kapoor’s decision to call the vast red membrane he installed in the Tate Modern Marsyas (2002). The connection to the classical theme is easily perceived. Eliasson tends to give his works more purely descriptive titles, often insisting on possessive pronouns and adjectives of the second person: Your Colour Memory, Your Mobile Expectations, Your Black Horizon, Your Compound View, and so on.

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Black Horizon (2005) is more or less just that, a light installation in black and white at the Venice Biennale in 2005. Your Colour Memory (2004), another very famous project on the borderline between art and phenomenological research, is similarly restrictive in scope. Its goal is to provoke the experience of retinal after images, and it does so via the installation of a room where a screen gradually changes colour. There are no allusions to classical mythology or religious experience here; just a call to pay attention to things themselves and more specifically to our sensation of colour.

Now unless we are ready to claim that all of this is not art, then we may be forced to admit that metaphor is not as ubiquitous as some may think. We might also want to impose restrictions on Gadamer’s concept of ‘Sprachlichkeit’ and all of its attendant notions, if we mean by this term that absolutely all mental life is inherently linguistic. If ‘Sprachlichkeit’ means the ‘linguistic’ality of all understanding, then we should admit that it is false. I think it is fair to say that I understand an experience provided by Eliasson without being able to, or even necessarily wanting to, put it into words. A compromise would be to preach an intermediate doctrine that would defend ‘the linguisticality of verbal understanding’ – i.e. a doctrine that claimed the linguistic character of everything that can be put into words. But that does not seem a very useful or informative middle ground. Were Wittgenstein here, I would goad him as follows: Indeed, one cannot speak of what one cannot speak, and the limits of my language are indeed the limits of my linguisticity. But they are not the limits of my world, nor of my thought. Experiencing a work by Eliasson might push me to try to formulate words that are adequate to the phenomenology; then again it might not, but we would still want to say that the awareness that it provokes is part of my mental life and part of my world. “What you see is what you see,” Frank Stella famously said in 1964, which means that minimalist art resists the inevitability of language. Of course, like anything else, a minimalist work may suffer the assault of metaphor — but that does not mean that any one particular metaphor is particularly relevant. This is art concerned with the singularity of experience.

Another good example can be found in a piece called Room for One Colour (1997), a room saturated with yellow light to the extent of negating all of the other colours of the spectrum. Here the desire for singularity and concentration is palpable. In a sense, Eliasson is interested in privation and literalness as a means of giving intensity to experience. This is in many ways the opposi-

te of metaphor, the opposite of transfer, and the opposite of metaphorical art. Where Fra Angelico says, in effect, “See this particular dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit,” Stella says “What you see is what you see,” and Eliasson adds, “See yourself sensing.” This is indeed one of his often-repeated slogans, and it captures his phenomenological and non-metaphorical urge. Eliasson notes that in Room for One Colour “our brain has to handle or digest less visual information” but this means in fact “that we see more details than usual.” The work is thus both a perceptual experience and a non-linguistic reflection or consciousness of experience, all of this taking place without the operation of language. The work would be “a room for one colour” and would be perceived and problematized as such even if it were called Untitled 1997. The phenomenological dimension would be the main interest even if Eliasson had decided to call it Our Lady of Bryn Mawr. The point is that the experience itself is the goal, and whether or not the experience is shaped by metaphor – at one level it is impossible for experience not to be so shaped – the linguistic elements that may or may not be attached to the experience remain a surface phenomenon. In other words, and in his own way, Eliasson is interested in the bounds of sense.

VI Conclusion: The Bounds of Sense

This brings me to my sixth and final part. I return to Strawson, author of The Bounds of Sense and of an influential volume called Individuals (1959) that deals with the concept of singularity in its own way. It is here that I will certainly part ways with some or most of my readers since like Strawson I believe it is wise to temper our metaphysics and epistemology with a dose of realism:

It is possible to imagine kinds of world very different from the world as we know it. It is possible to describe types of experience very different from the experience we actually have. But not any purported and grammatically permissible description of a possible kind of experience would be a truly intelligible experience. There are limits to what we can conceive of, as a possible general structure of experience. The investigation of these limits, the investigation of the set of ideas which forms the limiting framework of all our thought about the world and experience of the


world is, evidently, an important and interesting philosophical undertaking. No philosopher has made a more strenuous attempt on it than Kant.\textsuperscript{33}

As I mentioned at the outset, Strawson wants to turn Kant into a stricter realist, and his emphasis on the limits of experience is a way of giving credence to the idea that there are bounds of sense. But if there are bounds of sense, then there are bounds of metaphor as well, and that would mean that before metaphor can shape culture, it will be shaped itself, at least to some extent.

In his presentation of Kantian epistemology, Strawson writes: “If any item is even to enter our conscious experience we must be able to classify it in some way, to recognize it as possessing some general characteristics.”\textsuperscript{34} Note how close this is to “all thought is sorting.” This capacity to see the general in the particular (and vice versa) is what Kant calls “intuition” and it is this that leads Kant to his famous dictum: “[T]houghts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”\textsuperscript{35} But Strawson insists that the content is not provided only by the mind itself – the so-called “noumenal” world is indeed there as a foundation. And even some more recent theorists of metaphor end up saying the same thing. Richard Boyd’s project, you may recall, was the study of “Metaphor and Theory Change,” but in fact he argues “that the use of metaphor is one of the many devices available to the scientific community to accomplish the task of accommodation of language to the causal structure of the world.”\textsuperscript{36} And we can find a similar position in the writings of a more recent epistemologist and metaphysician, Robert C. Stalnaker. Stalnaker is a “possible worlds theorist,” someone who has participated in a kind of limited renewal of metaphysics within the strict confines of analytic philosophy. In \textit{Ways a World Might Be}, he defends what he calls “a more robust conception of property” which yields “not just a grouping of individuals” but implies the existence of “something about the individuals in virtue of which they are grouped.”\textsuperscript{37} This goes beyond ‘all thought is sorting’ to imply that the sorting is never arbitrary. If there is something about the individuals that helps putting them into certain groups, then there are not only different ways a world might be, but also certain ways any world has to be, in order for the groups to make sense.

Ultimately, and from a different perspective, I suppose I am being bold enough to argue that, perhaps more often than we think, metaphor does not shape theory or culture in any essential way. Take, for instance, the title of Strawson’s essay on Kant. Speaking of the “bounds of sense” involves indeed

\textsuperscript{33} Peter Strawson 15.
\textsuperscript{34} Peter Strawson 20.
\textsuperscript{36} Richard Boyd 358.
speaking metaphorically, but that does not mean that Strawson is taking his metaphor seriously. One need not imagine that these bounds or borders have customs officials checking the passports of symbols seeking exile from their original domains. The whole problem is that the indubitable omnipresence of metaphor does not mean that metaphor is always extended, intended to be re-applied, or worked out in its finest details. Sometimes it is just a figure of speech, a façon de parler, and nothing more. Indeed, humour often comes from interpreting literally things that were only meant figuratively, and with no ramifications, or from interpreting figuratively things that were only meant literally. And it may be that metaphor is really, more often than not, the omnipresent shorthand of thought, rather than its omnipresent and fundamental principle.

Now I admit that I have not demonstrated the eternal validity of realism in the limited space allotted. I have done little more than use the singularity of Eliasson as an example of what the reign of metaphor would have to exclude, and to argue that this would be unfortunate. More importantly I have done little more than invoke an outdated philosopher of the bounds of sense to support my point. But, if I may finish peevishly and with a bit of acrobatics, I should like to ask, Why and how does a philosopher become outdated, and what proves him to be so? Is there an injunction against quoting thinkers whose works went out of fashion thirty years ago? One might as well insist that we only refer to philosophers who have an “s” in their name, a measure the Monty Python group would certainly endorse. To say that Strawson is “outdated” is to support implicitly the very realism that he defended. One could claim, indeed, that his ideas have been refuted by subsequent philosophies, but that would imply positing a world that is not just a jumble of open-ended metaphors shaping culture and theory in any way they want. If there is a structure of the world which language and philosophy can somehow partially conform to, then some kind of realism is indeed justified, and metaphor, like everything else, will need to respect the bounds of sense.

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38 See “Part IV: Middle Age” in Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life (1983).
Works Cited


