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Virus as Metaphor: The Art World Under Pandemia

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the role of the virus as metaphor in art, culture, and society, drawing on both historical definitions and contemporary philosophical and aesthetic interpretations of metaphor in general and visual metaphor in particular. The introductory discussion of illness (virus) as metaphor (Sontag) is followed by a brief history of metaphor theory from aesthetics and rhetoric to contemporary cognitive theory. This is followed by a chapter that considers metaphorical thinking in the context of the art world. Using the conceptualization of illness as metaphor, we examine how the metaphor of a particular illness (characterized by the metaphor of illness as war) is used in the visual arts. We are particularly interested in how viral metaphor shapes the art world at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. The treatment of examples of visual metaphors in art (metaphorizing the experience of quarantine and other consequences of the virus) through aesthetic concepts of the familiar and the strange, is accompanied by a question about the rhetoric of society and the aesthetics of politics (Laclau and Rancière on metaphor/metonymy). The discussion concludes with a reflection on what can be considered not only in the field of artistic metaphorics of the virus but in the broader field of discourse on art, aesthetics, and society.

1. Introduction

Starting from the conceptualization of illness as metaphor, we will try to show how the metaphor of particular illnesses (which is also characterized by the metaphor of illness as war) is used in the visual arts. In her first work on illness as metaphor, Susan Sontag explicitly writes

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that "illness is *not* a metaphor" (Sontag, 1978, p. 3), and in the introduction to the second work she points out that she understands metaphor in the sense that comes from Aristotle's *Poetics* (*cf.* Sontag, 1989, p. 5). Before turning to these insights of Sontag, from which one can draw significant parallels to the current pandemic situation (we will be particularly interested in the position of art as an important producer of metaphors), let us look at Aristotle's general definition of metaphor which is given as the first known systematic definition with far-reaching historical implications.

2. Brief History of Metaphor: From Poetics and Rhetoric to Contemporary Cognitive Theory

According to Aristotle, metaphor belongs to both rhetoric and poetics. The well-known definition of metaphor from *Poetics* is as follows:

> Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy (Aristotle, 1457 b 6–9).

This definition also contains a certain typology of metaphor, which will in later rhetoric becomes the basis for the decision that metaphor is only a figure related to the fourth term in Aristotle's list (transfer of meaning by analogy), which alone refers explicitly to resemblance. On the trail of this classification level of definition, Ricoeur asks us an interesting question "should we not say that metaphor destroys an order only to invent a new one /…/?" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 24). Max Black's integration of model and metaphor (an epistemological concept and a poetic concept) allows us to exploit thoroughly this idea, which is completely opposed to any reduction of metaphor to a mere "ornament" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 24).

Aristotle's definition is not the only classical definition, like the ancient Roman rhetorics Cicero and Quintilian contributed a slightly different, narrower conception of metaphor as a condensed simile, now known as the comparative theory of metaphor (a special form of substitution theory), which, along with Aristotle's conception, is the subject of critical debate within modern and contemporary theories (see, for e.g., Addison, 1993). The critical

contribution of analytic philosophy of language and cognitive linguistics, especially the proponents of so-called figurative (metaphorical) monism (metaphoricity is an essential feature of language; the main proponents include Richards, Black and Lakoff), thus also promises to consider extending the treatment of metaphor from the realm of verbal to visual language. Richards' view (1936) that metaphor is a matter of thought, not just language, directs research into the realm of conceptual metaphors. Furthermore, Lakoff (1993) points out that metaphor is essentially conceptual rather than linguistic in nature; the author also highlights the challenges that his theory of metaphor "is especially interesting for the challenge it brings to other disciplines" (Lakoff, 1993, p. 249). From here, it is only a step to efforts to systematically theorize the manifestation of metaphor in visual form or through visual (artistic) media.

This discussion attempts to round out the historical definitions of metaphor with current insights that, among other things, allow a transition into the research field of visual metaphor by attempting to go beyond the classical definitions – a modern theory of metaphor attempts to go beyond analogy or resemblance. Visual metaphor is generally understood as open (Black, Carroll) and generative (Lakoff, *et al*.), able to consider different domains simultaneously (conceptual mapping according to Lakoff), which also supports the so-called interactive understanding of metaphor (Black). Following the contemporary cognitive view of metaphorical thinking, the structure of visual metaphor is also conceptual (Forceville), which, following linguistic metaphor, means a kind of visual surplus expressed only in visual form. Otherwise, the treatment of the concept of visual metaphor is necessarily pluralistic and may contain contradictory claims in which the historical view of metaphor as figurative linguistic expression still plays an important role.

This is followed by a chapter in which metaphorical thinking is considered in the context of the art world. We understand the art world more broadly as Danto formulates it in his famous article 'The Artworld' (1964) and Dickie develops into an institutional theory of art. While they are interested in the art system as general and abstract, we are concerned with its integration into the broader socio-political and cultural-historical context. For further consideration, we proceed from the tradition of continental philosophy and its assumption that a philosophical argument cannot be separated from its social context. In mentioning Danto, we should also mention his systematic treatment of metaphor and its role in art in his work *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, where the concept of transfiguration contains the

reference to metaphor as essential in art (see Danto, 1981, pp. 165–208).

Among the most important findings of recent studies is the definition of metaphor as primarily conceptual, not only verbal but also visual. Moreover, modern metaphor goes beyond its validity in analogy and thus dissolves the laws of representation. Metaphor creates a kind of aesthetic relationship between two completely different realms – especially in experimental poetic, artistic contexts.

3. The Art World Under Pandemia and the Rhetorics of Society

We are particularly interested in how the viral metaphor shapes the art world at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. The reality of the biological virus has shaken the foundations of the world order by demanding social distancing and isolation. Measures derived from scientific discourse are necessary to stop a pandemic, but behind these measures lies an existential fear that affects everyone in the face of current social insecurity, accompanied by feelings of groundlessness and futility. What follows is a brief analysis of an exemplary online exhibition under quarantine conditions, which can also be defined as a dispositif of information and communication technologies or a contemporary biopolitical mechanism of knowledge and power that allows technological virtuality to invade our everyday life in the form of an online exhibition. Nevertheless, within this dispositif, alongside neoliberally tailored modes of subjectivation, certain practices of freedom, alternative self-fashioning and social connection are also possible.

Our example was conceived by the Slovenian Museum of Modern Art and Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, MG+MSUM Ljubljana, which organized an online exhibition entitled *Viral Self-Portraits* in May 2020. [79] These portraits are not artistic representations of the disease or actual self-portraits, but rather a multi-dimensional artistic exploration of the ways in which the coronavirus is associated with various images/metaphors that help shape contemporary subjectivities, focusing on our understanding and experience of the pandemic. The main focus is on the personal and social consequences, as the organization of the exhibition into sets (Faces, Masks, Political Landscape, New Public Spaces, Intimate Relationships,

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[79] For more information see <ONLINE EXHIBITION | Viral Self-Portraits - MG+MSUM (mg-lj.si)>.

Everyday Things, Memory, Waiting) makes clear. The exhibition as a whole showed that the disease manifests itself as an "epidemic of meaning and labelling" (Treichler in Fink, 2010, p. 416).

2.1. Viral Visual Metaphors

Charles Forceville has provided a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of visual or pictorial metaphors (see Forceville, 1996). This occurs when a particular visual element (*frame*) is compared to other visual elements (*focus*) that fall into a different category or framework of meaning. Concrete objects are often used in visual metaphors to represent more complex ideas. To figure out what the object used represents, we need to connect it meaningfully to a more complex abstract idea. To understand visual metaphors, it is important to know the pictorial context, the aesthetics, the culture, the genre of the artwork, and the images or symbols the work contains. According to Forceville, we can find examples of different types of montage in a surrealist painting, among other works (Forceville, 1988; Forceville, 1996, p. 59). Many contemporary collage artworks are also in the spirit of surrealism, as the reference online exhibition also proves. Particularly appropriate collage techniques and photo and video editing have been tried out for the visual metaphorization of the experience of quarantine and other consequences of a pandemic, operating on the principles of hybridization, perverted contextualization, integration, pictorial examples, or juxtaposition of two or more heterogeneous (physically similar) elements in the pictorial field (so-called techno-images).

In hybrid metaphors, for example, a phenomenon represented as a single object or figure consists of two elements, usually understood as two distinct domains rather than as a whole. By visually merging the two domains (which contain metaphorical equivalents) into a single whole, the effect of hybridity is achieved (for example, between a human and an animal. Contextual metaphors are found in a situation where a phenomenon is understood as something else because of the visual context in which it is presented. In a pictorial example or comparison, one phenomenon or object is juxtaposed with another, emphasizing the (physical) similarity between the two objects. In an integrated metaphor, on the other hand, a phenomenon that we see as a single object or figure is presented as similar to another object or figure, without the

need for contextual cues. Such metaphors can be seen, for example, in the form itself, where the context is reduced to the form of the product and acts as a whole with the target domain in terms of fit.

2.2. The Familiar/Strange: Back to Aristotle and Forward Beyond Analogy

Aesthetic and rhetorical figures are especially topical as labels when a phenomenon has no firm basis in reality, as is the case with political rhetoric at the time of the current pandemic. Diseases are perceived not only as more or less fatal but also as dehumanizing; their horror stems from the appearance of a mutation of man into an animal; and *vice versa*, with which we are associated, for example, by Maja Smrekar, including works from the exhibition *Viral Self-Portraits* (hybridization of woman and dog). Even more frightening than a certain disfigurement, hybridization, metamorphosis, etc., however, is that the body/face reflects the progressive dissolution of personality (e.g., in the works of the artists Albina Mohrjakova and Jule Flierl). Illness as a metaphor of war is very convenient for constructing the differences between "us" and "others": such otherness is addressed, for example, in the works of the duo Nora Chipaumire and Ari Marcopoulos (they thematize the African continent as the Other), etc. This line can be followed up to dystopian visions on the one hand and interventions in public space on the other. The specific imaginary that surrounds viruses is a particular challenge for artists and helps us to illuminate certain aesthetic concepts, especially the familiar/strange conceptual pair.

Already in *Poetics*, when Aristotle was dealing with metaphor, he contrasted the literal and the transferred meaning: the prevalent in ordinary language with the transferred, figurative, metaphorical, unfamiliar, or foreign one; he contrasted a current, common word (i.e., it is sufficiently common and as such expresses a literal meaning) with a foreign word used by people in a foreign country (the same word can be both current and strange, but not to the same people).

Ricoeur in his work on metaphor draws particular attention to the (four) main features of Aristotle's definition of metaphor (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 19): one of the characteristics is that "*metaphor is the transposition of a name* that Aristotle calls 'alien' (*alloitros*), that is, 'a name that belongs to something else'" (*cf.* Aristotle, 1457 b 7), "the alien name" (*cf.* Aristotle, 1457

b 31). "This term is opposed to 'ordinary,' 'current,' /.../, which is defined by Aristotle as 'used by everybody,' 'in general use in a country'" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 19) (*cf.* Aristotle, 1457 b 3). Metaphor is accordingly defined in terms of deviation (*cf.* Aristotle 1458 a 23; 1458 b 3); the use of metaphor is thus "close to the use of strange, ornamental, coined, lengthened, and shortened terms" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 19). Ricoeur argues that

> in these characteristics of opposition or deviation and kinship are the seeds of important developments regarding rhetoric and metaphor: (1) First, the choice of ordinary usage as point of reference foreshadows a general theory of 'deviations'. /.../ Hence all the other usages (rare words, neologisms, etc.) that metaphor approximates are themselves also deviations in relation to ordinary usage". (2) Beside the negative idea of deviation, the word *allatrios* implies a positive idea, that of *borrowing* (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 19).

Ricoeur further wonders, (3) if one must say "that ordinary usage has to be 'proper', in the sense of primitive, original, native, in order for there to be deviation and borrowing" (*ibid.*, p. 20). This questioning he sees as a step that leads to the eventually customary opposition between *figurative* and *proper* (later rhetoric takes this step, but for Ricoeur, there is no evidence that Aristotle took it). (4) Another, contingent development of the notion of "alien" usage is, according to Ricoeur, represented by the idea of *substitution* (an *interaction* theory is readily contrasted with the substitution theory by English-language authors). "Thus, the idea of substitution appears to be bound up firmly with that of borrowing; but the former does not proceed from the later by necessity, since it admits of exceptions" (*ibid.*, p. 21). Ricoeur concludes that the Aristotelian idea of alien (*allotrios*) tends to assimilate three distinct ideas: the *idea of deviation* from ordinary usage; the idea of borrowing from an original domain; and the idea of substitution for an absent but available ordinary word (*cf.* Ricoeur, 2004, p. 21). The rejection of the consequences of the treatment of metaphor in Aristotle and in classical rhetoric will follow the rejection of the concept of substitution that drives the development of the theory and artistic applications of metaphor beyond analogy.

This common/alien or strange opposition Aristotle is distinct from the strange in the sense of the other, to which the transference of the metaphor refers. However, the moment of metaphorical transference to something other or new maintains the current shaking of the polarity of familiar and strange, common and uncommon, and alike. On this point, we can

agree with the statement that metaphor does not so much reflect existing similarities as creates them (Black, Forceville). In terms of the emphasis on moral judgements associated with illness, Sontag shows that aesthetic judgements about the beautiful/ugly, the clean/unclean, the familiar/alien, or uncanny are also associated with (we will return to this below).

2.2. Metaphor/Metonymy: From a Poetics of the Visual Arts to a Rhetoric of Society and an Aesthetics of Politics

Thus, in addition to the aesthetic and the broader philosophical (ontological) dimensions of metaphor, we are also interested in its political dimension. In defining the latter, we refer to Ernesto Laclau, who draws on modern arguments, i.e., binaristic position of structural linguistics, which is extremely inclined to simplify the complicated table of tropes, to the point where only metaphor and metonymy are in play. The coupling of them has been linked with the name of Roman Jakobson, who has connected this properly tropological (poetic) and rhetorical duality with a more fundamental polarity that concerns the very functioning of language and not just its figurative use. From now on, "metaphor and metonymy do not merely define figures and tropes; they define general processes of language" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 206). According to Jakobson poetic forms show a predominance sometimes of metonymy, as in realism, and sometimes of metaphor, as with romanticism and symbolism. Polarity is also so general that it finds a parallel in non-linguistic sign systems. In painting, one can speak of metonymy in connection with cubism, of metaphor with surrealism, etc. (see Jakobson, 1978) "In rhetoric or poetics, the act of establishing links where there are none /.../ is referred to as making a figure; and it is a figure that is needed in order to open up such a common world" (Benčin, 2017, p. 60). Jakobson pointed out that metonymy and metaphor can be extended beyond the realm of rhetoric or poetics to broader theoretical uses. In political philosophy, these categories have recently been explored by Laclau, according to whom "[r]hetoric, as dimension of signification, has no limits in its field of operation. It is coterminous with the very structure of objectivity" (Laclau, 2014, p. 65). He explains politics through rhetorics and even calls the rhetorical tropes, i.e., metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, etc., "ontological categories" for describing objectivity as such (*cf*. Laclau in Šumič-Riha, 2011, p. 89). He presents both metaphor and metonymy as two ways of connecting the heterogeneous elements that structure

the political field. Metonymic or horizontal integration, based on the contingency of proximity, goes beyond metaphorical, vertical, or hierarchical connection that disguises its contingency and leads to the hegemony of one of its actors. Thus, he defines political hegemony as a movement from metonymy to metaphor (Laclau, 2014, p. 75). Subversive political movements that resist hegemony initially establish a metonymic sequence, but one of their actors re-establishes hegemony. On this basis, Laclau sees the possibility of emancipatory politics "at the point at which metaphor and metonymy cross each other and limit each other's effects" (Laclau, 2014, p. 88). If we follow Šumič-Riha, we find in the footsteps of Laclau's thought the important premise that "only metaphor, by providing a new master signifier, is capable of rendering a given situation legible /… [by]/ the crossing the bar that separates two incommensurable orders: the symbolic order and the order of the real" (Šumič-Riha, 2011, p. 93). One might add that this is no longer an analogical metaphor, but a contemporary one that combines heterogeneous or incompatible elements.

At this point we can refer to the aesthetics and politics of Jacques Rancière: His wager on both implies that the task of artistic and political subjectivation is to demonstrate the groundlessness of any order, any closure, and thus to establish a metonymy that subverts metaphor. In *Disagreement*, Rancière analyzes a typical statement from a position of power that establishes a social field by introducing a division between those who understand and command and those who do not and must obey: "It's not up to you to understand; all you have to do is obey" (Rancière, 1999, p. 45). In doing so, he understands the establishment of a common language as an aesthetic or the metaphorical moment of political subjectivation – political argumentation requires an "aesthetic languages", "opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact" (Rancière, 1999, p. 56). "Aesthetics" is the name of a capacity that "allows separate regimes of expression to be pooled" (Rancière, 1999, p. 57) and that, in a world of inequality, allows one to act on the assumption of *de facto* equality, that is, on the basis of the metaphorical "*as if*" (Rancière, 1999, p. 58). "Politics occurs wherever a community with the capacity to argue and to make metaphors is likely, at any time and through anyone's intervention, to crop up" (Rancière, 1999, p. 60).

With the help of rhetorical figures metaphor and metonymy, we can get a different view of Rancière's notion of equality in both the political and aesthetical domains. "Rancière's aesthetics of politics presents a different dialectics of metaphor and metonymy, in which both

figures intensify rather than limit their mutual effects" (Benčin, 2017, p. 62).

4. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Sontag shows that aesthetic judgments about the beautiful/ugly, the clean/unclean, the familiar/alien, or the *uncanny* are also linked to moral judgments that have to do with illness. Particularly revealing is the discovery of connections between individual diseases and foreignness, rooted in the archaic notion of wrong as non-us, foreign, or alien (even impure, according to the terminology of Mary Douglas; alien, exotic places as sources of important diseases, etc.). Moral laxity and political deviance are common signs of foreignness; further foreign associates disease with sinners and the poor. From here it is only a step toward racial stereotypes associated with a particular disease (an example of speculation about the geographical origin of AIDS). Authoritarian political ideologies have a strong interest in spreading fear of foreigners, for which real diseases lend themselves (epidemic diseases usually provoke a ban on foreigners and immigrants entering the country). Illness as a war metaphor is very convenient for constructing differences between "us" and "others". But epidemic disease, in particular, is potentially everyone's disease, with others from the at-risk groups of the homeless and refugees being particularly vulnerable. The current viral disease thus directly or indirectly affects everyone and is a marker of individual and societal vulnerability. The works in the exhibition mentioned here also address this circumstance in a particular way with their multidimensional metaphors, often driven by bold experimentation with media and form. By loosening and suspending the standardized laws of representation, artistic metaphor strives to create a new relationship between two more or less distinct domains, which in our observed case refers to the phenomenon of a virus or its effects in society. In order to visually metaphorize the experience of quarantine and other consequences of a pandemic, following the principles of hybridization, perverted contextualization, integration, pictorial similes or juxtaposition of two or more heterogeneous (physically similar) elements in the visual field, etc. (Forceville), particularly appropriate collage techniques and photographic and video montages are explored. The engagement with examples of visual metaphor in art (metaphorizing the experience of quarantine and other consequences of the virus) through aesthetic concepts of the familiar and the strange, which lead us to address the rhetorical and

political aspects of metaphor (Laclau, Rancière), should be accompanied by the critique of contemporary capitalism with a call for solidarity (Žižek) and the question of the possibility of a new ethics and politics of care (Krasny). To do this, we should leave the world of art or art institutions and take to the streets, in the midst of protests against repressive authoritarian politics, where art and it's metaphorical/metonymic language/gestures are also among the actors.

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