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Visual Metaphor in Comics: An Incomplete Taxonomy

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In comics, images are much more than merely a component of a narrative. Sometimes they are also conceived to channel metaphorical information. They are built to express a kind of poetry. Visual metaphors, however, have often been studied without making a clear effort to define a taxonomy following precise and clear criteria. This commentary seeks to address that paucity and establish some guidelines towards classifying different types of visual metaphors found in comics.

In comics, images are much more than merely a component of a narrative. Sometimes they are also conceived to channel metaphorical information. They are built to express a kind of poetry. This is easy to see in strips such one of the boxing match variants that Neil Cohn drew to illustrate how metaphor works in the comics medium (Cohn 2019). A fighter is about to hit another, but instead of a punch, what we get is an atomic explosion (**Figure 1**). This image is derived from a metaphor of everyday life that is very common in journalistic language: 'sports are war,' and so much so if it is a boxing fight. Visual metaphors are often easily translated to verbal concepts. For this reason, Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor, also called *Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)*, has been frequently applied to non-verbal discourse and specifically used to analyze visual narratives or visual communicative acts.
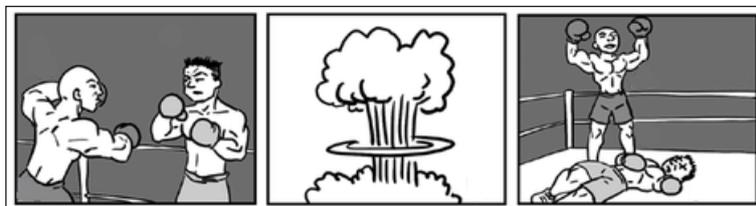
Figure 1: Cohn, Neil 2019 Being explicit about the implicit: inference generating techniques in visual narrative. *Language and Cognition, vol. 11, issue 1*, p. 83.

Charles Forceville has studied visual metaphor in advertising posters (2015), Noël Carroll in cinema (1996), Elisabeth El Refaie in cartoons (2003; 2015) and Neil Cohn in comic strips (2010; 2019); however, there is not an exhaustive compendium of the expressive possibilities of metaphor in comics. For some reason, analysis of visual metaphor has been more often than not restricted to the analysis of isolated images. One of the few authors who has taken into consideration full sequences of panels is Neil Cohn. In his writings, however, he has barely identified more than two forms of visual metaphor: the *conceptual metaphor* (Cohn 2010) and what he calls *suppletive metaphor* (Cohn 2019: 77–81). The suppletive metaphor involves using a figurative image that is external to the *diegesis* to allude to a real image that remains unrepresented in the sequence; for example, the nuclear explosion in the previous comic strip.

Of course, there are more kinds of visual metaphors in comics than these two categories which, in fact, are not mutually exclusive. *Conceptual metaphor* alludes to the nature of the signified, being an idea or an abstract concept; but *suppletive metaphor* alludes to the manner in which the signifier is presented. The fact remains, though, than visual metaphor can assume many more forms. If we stick to Lakoff and Johnson's *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, we will realize that behind any form of metaphor there is a structure of the type *A is B* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 201); as, for example, in Thomas Hobbes' phrase 'man is a wolf (to man)' (Forceville 2016: 5). 'Man' is the *target domain*,

that is, the domain which we want to describe metaphorically; for this purpose, we put it into into contact with a *source domain*, 'Wolf', that should be taken figuratively. The *source* ('wolf') lends some of its characteristics, but only some, to the *target* ('man'). Violence, cruelty, lack of compassion, and caring only for oneself or, at most, for the pack. Thus, we conceptualize human beings as predators.

Lakoff and Johnson's theory does not owe its success to its precision, but to being extremely poetic. *Source* and *target domain* have ended up prevailing over other terms, such as those used in rhetoric during the first half of the 20th century — *vehicle* and *tenor* — (Richards 1936) not only because their meanings are more intuitive, but especially because they represent metaphor as a journey in which, by moving from one place to another, from an origin to a destination, we collect things and acquire qualities, changing one concept into another and putting them at the same level. This is a very beautiful way to conceive of metaphor.

A is B represents the internal form of any metaphor, but metaphor may wear different dresses depending on the kind of party it attends. We have already seen an example of this. In **Figure 1**, only B is present in the comic strip, the *source domain*, the mushroom cloud, that is, the image with which the punch is compared. In classical rhetoric, this kind of metaphor where only the figurative term is made explicit is called *implicit metaphor* or *metaphor in absentia*. It is common to find it in sequences with metaphorical inserts, such as this one, but it is also very common in political cartoons, or isolated images that, within a longer narrative, are presented as allegorical visual commentaries.

Sometimes, *metaphors in absentia* are used because of the need to suppress a certain image or scene, either to avoid controversy, or maybe because the authors want to be elegant, forced by censorship or simply because they want to make a joke. On other occasions, however, *metaphors in absentia* are more a matter of necessity than a matter of stylistic choice. When an artist tries to represent something that is literally immaterial, like, for example, an emotion, metaphor might be the only solution. This is exactly what happens in the following panel from *Joselito*, a webcomic by Marta Altieri, one of the best contemporary Spanish experimental comics authors. In **Figure 2**, the protagonist is having
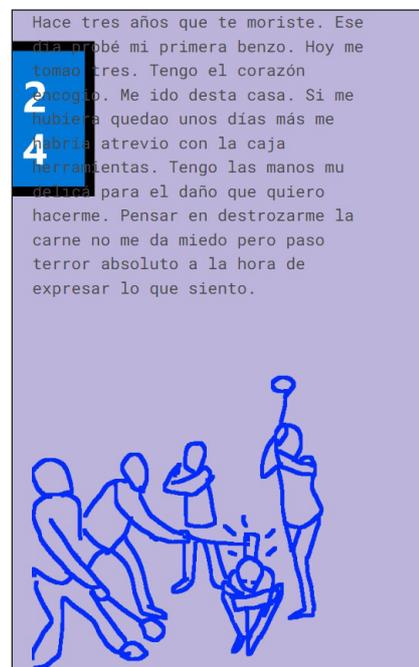

Figure 2: Marta Altieri 2018 *Joselito*, *Capítulo 1* Available at: www.137.rehab/joselito. Conceptual metaphor *in absentia*.

depressive thoughts; his heart has 'shrunken' — 'ha *encogío*' — and he has 'las manos *mu delicá* para el daño' — 'very delicate hands for the damage' he wants to do to himself. There are four identical anthropomorphic figures around him, which in fact represent Joselito's ego. They are hammering his head. If *A is B*, according to Lakoff and Johnson, then 'thoughts are my enemy' is the underlying structure here, suggesting that most of the damage we suffer is inflicted by ourselves. Altieri has provided a visual translation for something that, no matter how easy it is to understand, it is very difficult to express in a few words.

When the *source domain* and the *target domain* are both included in the same visual enunciation — it does not matter if it is a single panel or a sequence of panels — then we are talking about a *metaphor in praesentia*. Let's stick to the same conceptual structure for the next example: 'thoughts are my enemy'. Or to be more specific: 'thoughts are monsters'. *Cutlass* is an *avant-garde*, but at the same time very popular, Spanish comic strip that frequently deals with meta-representation and metaleptical effects. In **Figure 3**, Calpurnio, its author, resorted to one of the most conventionalized metaphors in the comics medium: balloons or clouds as a way of representing thought. Suddenly, balloons begin to multiply and proliferate in the strip, taking the form of a monster that threatens to devour Cuttlass, our hero. Then, he draws his revolver and finishes off his obsessive ruminations with one shot — I have not included these images so that the main metaphor, the monster metaphor, could be seen more clearly.
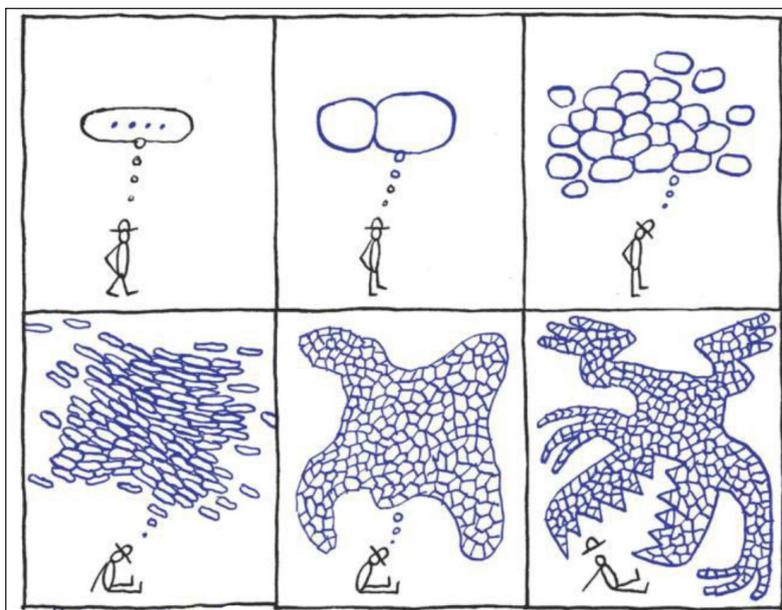
Figure 3: Calpurnio 2017 Cutlass. Barcelona: Random House, p. 288. Conceptual metaphor *in praesentia*.

It doesn't seem like a bad solution. Why not just get rid of our ruminative thoughts like that? If thoughts are just a symbol, then the best way to get rid of them is by means of another symbol. Something any behavioral psychotherapist, or Aleister Crowley, would agree with.

Metaphors structure one concept in terms of another. Up to this point, all the visual metaphors we have discussed have been *conceptual metaphors.* However, in a 1987 article, George Lakoff introduced a new kind of metaphor in an addendum to his and Johnson's *Metaphors of Everyday Life.* Although, in this book, they discussed several kinds of metaphors (*structural*, *orientational*, *ontological*, etc.), these are actually different types of *conceptual metaphors.* But in the aforementioned article, Lakoff refers to something completely different: the *image metaphor.* Until then he had always referred to metaphor as something that relates one concept to another. Here, Lakoff claims that, sometimes, metaphor can actually structure a conventional mental image in terms of another image, normally a more unusual one (1987: 219). To illustrate this, he mentions several verses from André Breton's poem *L'Union libre* (1931): 'ma femme… ma taille de sablier'/'my wife… whose waist is an hourglass', which appeals to a simple principle of similarity between images, or 'ma femme à la chevelure du feu de bois'/'my wife with hair like firewood flames'.

Lakoff claims that when we use an *image metaphor*, we are not trying to use an image to evoke something abstract, as was the case of Calpurnio and Altieri in their comics. The purpose of an *image metaphor* is rather to highlight the similarity between two concrete images, objects or actions (Lakoff 1987: 221). Of course, as Elisabeth El Refaie warns us very thoughtfully, it is not very easy to say where concepts end and pure descriptive images begin (2015). The reasons why this is not very easy to say are two. First, because every single concept we think of can be visualized, even the most abstract and fictitious. Take God, for example. Alan Moore has published dozens of comics about him or her. The only thing we need to visualize complex concepts is to have a good imagination or to hire a great artist such as J. H. Williams III. The second reason why images and concepts are always interrelated is that, even in cases where a metaphor brings two very concrete and purely descriptive visual images into contact, such as Breton's, they always involve conceptual features or values or even ethical implications. Describing the hair of a woman using the image of a firewood flame invokes the concept of passion. It's unavoidable. And if you compare the body of a woman with an hourglass, you will be always objectifying her. That's unavoidable too.

Even if the limits between *conceptual metaphor* and *image metaphor* are not as clear as Lakoff intended, the use of both terms is an interesting way to distinguish between metaphors that are more abstract and metaphors that are more concrete

when dealing with the mere appearance of physical objects. Although Cohn does not identify it properly as an *image metaphor*, he provides a very good example when he mentions a sequence from Marvel Comics's *Deadpool* (**Figure 4**) where he makes love with a woman. In this sequence there are three metaphorical inserts that replace the only image that cannot be represented in an overly explicit way in a superhero comic: the unspeakable act of penetration during a sexual scene. Instead of drawing that, the artist, Scott Koblish, includes a train entering a tunnel, a rocket taking off and a the eruption of a volcano.
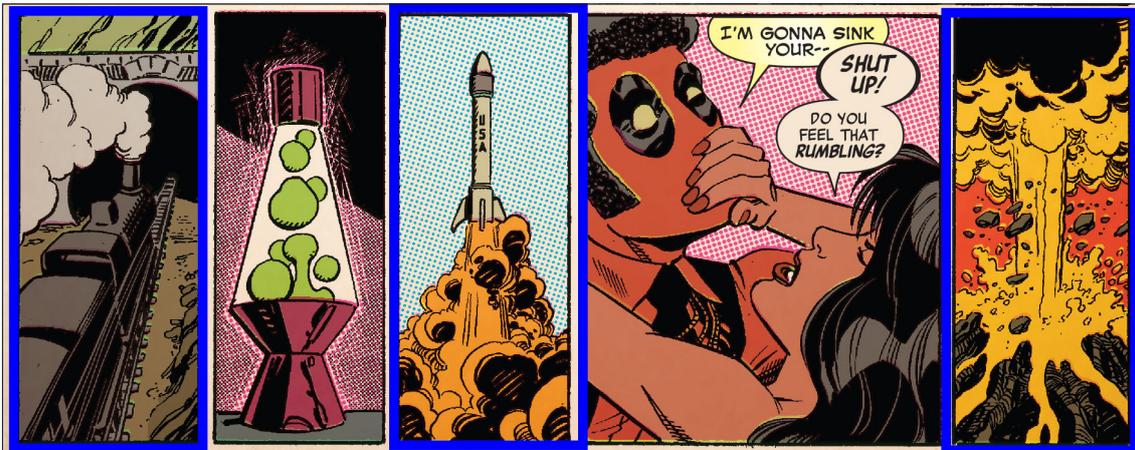

Figure 4: Scott Koblish, Brian Posehn and Gerry Duggan 2012 *Deadpool, #13.* New York, Marvel Comics, p. 16. Image metaphors *in absentia* (blue frames).

These are *image metaphors*. Relatively conventional *image metaphors*, in fact, like those in Breton's poem. But in this case, the charm of the sequence lies precisely in that. When we read it, we can recognize the meaning of these images immediately, for the simple reason that we have seen them thousands of times. The sexy train-into-the-tunnel image is, in fact, a recurring metaphor in visual language since Alfred Hitchcock popularized it in *North by Northwest* (1959). The same happens with the orgasmic rocket from *Deep Throat* (1972). By repeating them so often, these images have become fossilized, they are almost stock metaphors like light bulbs over a character's head to indicate an idea.

In *image metaphors* there is always a certain degree of conceptual transfer between the *source* and *target domains*; in this sense, they do not work very differently from *conceptual metaphors*. Conceiving sports as a fight between two or more persons is not a trivial consideration, nor it is to represent sex by means of mechanical artefacts that are basically symbols of masculine potency. Innocent metaphors are like unicorns: they

do not exist. Although some metaphors may seem like a product of a stylistic whim or an arbitrary convention, in fact they always carry with them a particular way of understanding the world, implying very specific ethics and poetics.

Within *image metaphors*, we can once again distinguish between *metaphors in absentia* and *in praesentia*. The *image metaphors* in the *Deadpool* sequence are *metaphors in absentia*, since the *source* of the metaphor is not represented. *Image metaphors in praesentia*, on the other hand, usually take the form of a *visual simile*, like for example the one in **Figure 5**. These *visual similes* are extremely common in the field of editorial cartoons. We can almost say that they are connatural to caricature, because its stylistic devices are based on the deliberate exaggeration of physical similarities; a type of graphic language that is, in itself, metaphorical.
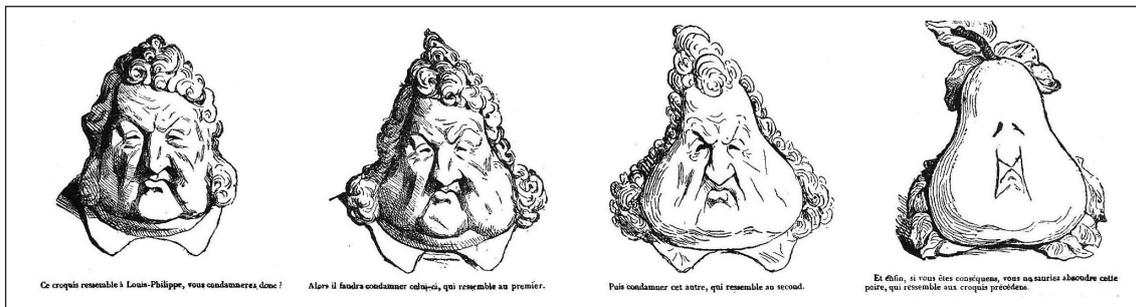
Figure 5: Charles Philipon and Honoré Daumier 1832 *Les poires*. La Caricature, Paris. Image metaphor *in praesentia*.

The famous 'Les poires' sequence is a landmark in the rich tradition of French satire and is especially remarkable for its malice. It is based on some drawings the editor and journalist Charles Philipon made after he was charged with a crime of injuries against Louis Philippe of Orleans, the last king of France. He was sitting before the court when he tried to prove where the limits of humor lie using this sequence as an example. Where is the crime? In which of the phases of the drawing? In the second, the third or maybe only in the last panel? Once again, we can see how even the most banal and apparently innocent visual metaphor holds a very precise ideological and political vision of the world. So much so that, as soon as the trial was over, Philipon asked his friend Daumier to make a fair copy of the sketches he had made in order to print them on the cover of his weekly *La Caricature* so that his offence against Louis Philippe would be as public and notorious as possible.

Conceptual metaphors versus *image metaphors*, *in absentia* mode versus *in praesentia* mode… We can introduce a third variable in this taxonomy of visual metaphors if we take into consideration the level of the narrative in which the metaphor occurs. Is the

metaphorical image *diegetic* or *extradiegetic*? Does it exist as an entity of its own within the narrative, or is it an external image introduced as some sort of visual commentary, or maybe a mental image that has no materiality in the world of the narrative? This distinction is clearly seen in the *Deadpool* sequence: the panels framed in blue in **Figure 4** are nothing more than humorous visual comments that do not represent objects within the narrative world. There is no train in the room where the characters are having sex (*extradiegetic image metaphor in absentia*). But what about the lava lamp? This panel contains a very interesting detail. The background of this image has the same color as the only panel of the sequence that takes place in the diegetic world of the narrative: the fourth, in which we see the two lovers. The symbolic value of the lava lamp is identical to that of the train and the tunnel, since the movement of the liquid wax reminds us of how fluids mingle during sex. However, the color of the background suggests that the lava lamp really exists within the setting of the sexual encounter. And, indeed, if we look at the panel that opens the sequence (**Figure 6**) — that I have carefully omitted until now—, we will discover that the lava lamp is actually on a nightstand in the same room. Despite the symbolic value of this object, it also exists within the narrative level, so it works both as a metaphor and a metonymy: it is symbolic, but also a part of the dramatic setting —and it stands for the whole setting when we take it in isolation in a single panel. Of course, this distinction between the *diegetic* and *extradiegetic* nature of images only makes sense in narrative comics. It is useless to ask whether Louis Philippe's pear is *diegetic* or *extradiegetic*, or if an image in abstract comics is symbolic or must be taken literally.
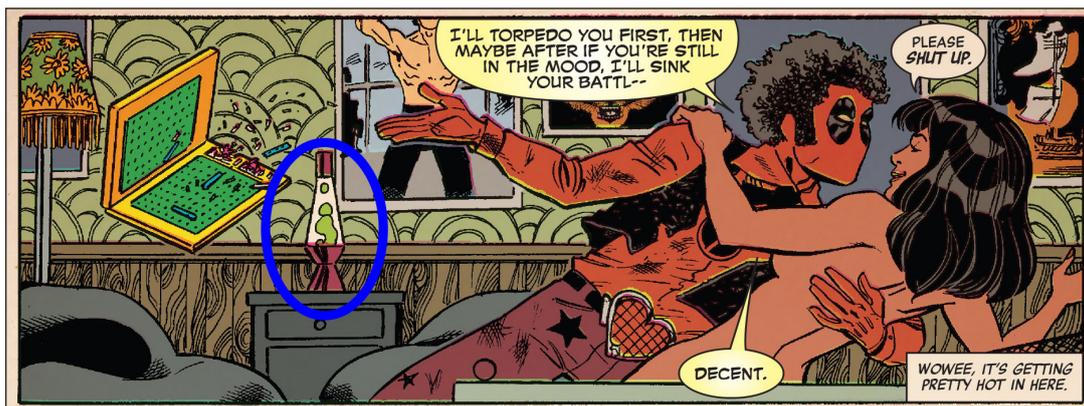
Figure 6: Scott Koblish, Brian Posehn and Gerry Duggan 2012 *Deadpool*, #13. New York, Marvel Comics, p. 16. Extradiegetic image metaphor *in absentia*.

All the examples I have presented so far have been extracted from more or less linear newspaper strips and comics, in which the page layout has no influence on the way we read them. The images they present are linked together like bricks stacked

row after row along a wall: A + B + C + D; or, to put it another way, like words along a sentence. Therefore, all the metaphors expressed in these examples are easy to translate into a verbal statement. 'Thoughts are monsters', 'the king is a pear', 'my obsessions beat me up.' Even in the case of the image of the train and the tunnel we can find very approximate equivalents in everyday speech. For example, the expressions 'to score a home run' — as opposed to 'hitting first base' —, or 'to do a number two' when we need to go to the bathroom, are image metaphors that we use on a daily basis so as to avoid description of scenes that, in certain contexts, would seem inappropriate.

If we stick to linear sequences of images like these, where one graphic sign is related to the next one on a panel-by-panel basis, and as long as these signs are presented in more or less standard graphic style, it is not very risky to say that visual discourse behaves in a similar way to verbal discourse. That is why it fits so well with the concepts of cognitive linguistics that I have just used. However, not all comics are so simple. Especially when we take into account that images are, by their own nature, polysemic and that, in addition, the relationships between the different visual elements on a page do not necessarily have to be linear like words and sentences on a book page. Graphic signs can interact with each other in a much more complex way than words. That is when linguistics stops working and Lakoff and Johnson can no longer explain everything.

Author's Note

This is an English translation of 'La metáfora visual', originally published in Spanish in https://narracionesgraficas.substack.com/.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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