

ФИПОЛОГИЯ

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FIGURATION ACROSS ARTISTIC TEXTS

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Abstract

The article takes up the issue — discussed for several decades by theoreticians of art and practitioners of artistic semiotics — whether verbal and pictorial figuration can be claimed to draw from common resources. Specifically, I want to focus on master tropes, the leading semantic figures, which — as reflections of creative imagination — shape literary discourse. My aim, however, is to claim their presence in the visual arts. Using some chosen examples of artworks, I will argue that the neo-classical tetrad of metaphor-metonymy-synecdoche-irony (cf. Vico, Burke, White) is also discernible in the painted/sculpted media. What is more, I propose the extension of Vichian set to include such figures as, e. g., simile and antithesis (contrast). I also raise the issue of universality vs. culture-specificity of semiotic figuration. All in all, the paper is a contribution to the subject of transmediality, that is convergence of the verbal and non-verbal arts within the semiosphere.

Keywords

Semiotic figuration, verbal/visual master tropes, transmediality/convergence of the arts, iconographic vs. iconological level, symbol-metaphor-allegory, game of interpretation, universal vs. culture-specific figuration.

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The article takes up the issue — discussed for several decades by theoreticians of art (E. H. Gombrich, P. Crowther [7; 12]), Polish practitioners of semiotics of arts

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(M. Porębski, S. Wysłouch [22; 35]) and Polish stylisticians (M. R. Mayenowa, J. Ziomek, E. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [4; 21; 36]) — whether verbal and visual *texts* (in the broad semiotic understanding of this term) can be claimed to draw from common resources. A natural candidate for such an integrational category is *style*, and among the stylistic devices *figuration* seems to play an inestimable role in the creation of textual coherence. Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., within the psycholinguistic cognitive paradigm, refers to “the poetics of mind” in the following apt formulation: “We can’t help thinking about the mind in figurative terms, because the mind itself is primarily structured out of various tropes. These figures of thought arise naturally from our ordinary, unconscious attempts to make sense of ourselves and the physical world” [11].

In what follows, I reject the controversial traditional subdivision of figures into *figures of language/expression* and *figures of thought* (cf. H. Lausberg’s *rhetorical theory* of figuration [16]). To the contrary, I assume that all figures, and in particular *tropes*, that is semantic figures, are *primarily conceptual constructs, reflected in language* and functioning as indispensable instruments of our cognition. In this I agree with Gibbs’s opinion that “language is not independent of the mind but reflects our perceptual and conceptual understanding of experience” [11: 434-435]. Although the real nature of the interconnections between the human conceptualization and language remains largely a mystery, I am prone to believe that nothing can exist in language that would not have existed previously in the mind, though this relationship need not be exclusively unidirectional. Indeed, it looks like the mind and language constantly influence each other discursively, in a dialectic feedback.

Since our perspective in this article is a broad, semiotic approach, the term *language* should be taken to refer to both verbal and non-verbal signifying systems, whereas *text* is meant to designate (after B. Uspensky’s definition [27]) every semantically connected string of signs, verbal and non-verbal alike.

From now on, I intend to focus on *master tropes*, the leading semantic figures, which — as reflections of creative conceptualization — play an important role in shaping artistic verbal texts. However, I also support the claim about their presence in the fine arts, and specifically in painting and sculpture (thus in *picturing* in general), where they belong to *text-forming strategies*, on analogy to the tropical structuring of verbal texts. Hence, it will be argued that the neo-classical tetrad of *metaphor-metonymy-synecdoche-irony* (cf. chronologically G. Vico 1744/1984, K. Burke 1945/1962 [2; 28]; H. White 1978 [30; 31; 32]) should also be discernible in the visual media. As many may notice, contrary to the prevailing claims of Cognitive/Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT¹), I do not treat *metaphor* as the umbrella term for all kinds of conceptual and linguistic figuration, but as one of master tropes that shape our dealings with the world, together with other important figures that have often suffered neglect on the part of several cognitively-oriented researchers. The proposed tetrad is thus an extension of the cognitive stylistics’ approach to figuration through the *metaphor-metonymy* opposition, with its roots in Roman Jakobson’s [14] figurative dichotomy applicable to literary language, painting and cinematographic art.

¹ The groundbreaking source for CMT is [15].

If the appearance of tropes is accepted as cutting across all possible artistic texts, then figuration can be claimed to function as *transmedial category* in itself and its presence in verbal and non-verbal texts alike becomes a realization of *intermediality*. This phenomenon has been traditionally described as *convergence of the arts* or *interart relations*, that is, “any transgression of boundaries between media” or, in other words, “‘heteromedial’ relations between different semiotic complexes” (W. Wolf [34: 252]).

In talking about the great foursome of tropes (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska’s monograph devoted to figuration [5] for more details), I retrace my steps to Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (*La Scienza nuova seconda* 1730/1744, cf. [2; 28]), working in the tradition of the post-Renaissance neo-classical theory of tropes that extends back to works of Petrus Ramus. Vico postulates the *tetrad* of what later Kenneth Burke ([2; 28]) called *master tropes* or *styles of thinking* (clearly, the foretokens of CMT with its concept of *mind-style*), which operate in a circle of returns across time. Hayden White, in a series of works dealing with figuration (1973, 1978, 1999 [30; 31; 32]), revitalized Vico’s theory, according to which the master tropes not only reflect the development of human discourse, but can also be seen as great patterns of historical/political/cultural and even ontogenetic development of human beings.

Metaphor, in Vico’s opinion, emerges as the superordinate trope of indirect *comparison/similarity*, of *analogy*, but also of *subjectivity* (with Aristotelian roots of this claim easily discernible).

Metonymy is classified as the figure of *dispersal*, *fragmentation* and *reduction* carried out on the basis of *objective association* (‘contiguity’ in modern parlance).

Synecdoche, in turn, is perceived as the trope of *generalization* and *reconstruction* of the ‘whole’ around some of its ‘salient’ features.

Irony is the figure of *negation*, *relativism*, *skepticism* and *self-criticism*, in fact a *figure of decadence*. And yet, both Burke and White, contrary to Vico, grant it the status of a superior trope, *metalinguistic* par excellence since being ironical often means being critical about oneself, one’s language and one’s textual productions.

In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [5], I argue that master tropes of our imaginative activities are present in natural language not only overtly (as *micro-* and *macrotropes*) but also in a covert, all-encompassing manner (as *megatropes*, cf. also P. Werth’s cognitive modelling related to *extended metaphor* [29]), thus becoming *rhetorical modalities* that underlie entire discourses. Yet, they cannot be limited to Jakobsonian duet of metaphor-metonymy (cf. D. Lodge on the application of the latter to English modernist fiction [18]) or to Vichian four-element paradigm. Following the suggestions as to a possible broadening of the list of great patterns of our thinking and linguistic expression, scattered in the vast critical output of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist current (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Geoffrey Hartman, James Hillis Miller, Paul de Man), I put forward the following new candidates for master tropes as an extension of Vichian set:

Simile — a figure of *overt comparison*, frequently underlying metaphorical thinking, but meriting a separate treatment (cf. S. K. Gasparyan [10]).

Antithesis — a figure of *oppositeness* and *antinomy*, A vs. B (cf. C. Lévi-Strauss on the concept of *opposition* in anthropological research [17] and Yu. M. Lotman on the importance of *binary contrast* in the structuring of semiotic texts [19; 20]).

Catachresis — in the broad sense of *semantic abuse/logical transgression* (according to Foucault a figure of discursive *incongruity*, *discontinuity*, *fundamental incoherence* [8]).

Euphemia — a generalized figure of toning-down, lessening an unpleasant effect.

Hyperbole — a generalized figure of exaggeration.

Suppression — a figure of intentional passing over/choosing not to mention certain things; a figure of ‘truth concealed’.

Euphemia, hyperbole and suppression are strongly culturally-induced tropes, related to the pragmatic concepts of politeness and ‘face’.

The total effect of applying master tropes in various combinations and density leads to the total effect of *defamiliarization* (V. Shklovsky’s *ostraneniye* [25]), a phenomenon of a broadly conceived *strangeness*, the very opposite of the technique in which tropes are meant to domesticate the world and, psychologically, an instrument with which to combat boredom.

The list of candidates for master tropes (megatropes) of human thinking and linguistic expression remains open. If they are meant to function as *tropological universals*, they have to be maximally general and not overly numerous. The suggestion I want to make at this point is that the same set of tropes discernible in verbal texts can be postulated to operate in the visual arts.

Thus, in our search of *semiotic figuration*, a rather natural query arises as to what extent the master tropes that shape the production of literary (as well as non-literary) texts/discourses, qualify as instances of *semiotic tropes*, present in the fine arts (painting, sculpture, installations, design) and architecture (also urban planning and garden design), as well as in the theatrical and cinematographic productions and performances of all sorts.

Ever since the famous paper by Jakobson (1956 [14]) on the metaphoric (paradigmatic) and metonymic (syntagmatic) duality present in the language of literature, painting and film, we have witnessed an ongoing debate among semanticists, literary critics, philosophers of language, and theoreticians of art/art critics/art historians on whether *visual figuration* exists at all and whether figures can actually be seen in the arts (cf. also the discussion on *musical figuration* and its rhetorical impact in D. Cocksey’s article [6]).

As in every debate, the *voices against visual tropes* could be heard. Foucault in his essay “Las Meninas” [8] referred to the verbal and visual as two disparate modes of expression, mutually untranslatable. In a similar vein, two well-known Polish stylisticians, Maria R. Mayenowa and Jerzy Ziomek (cf. [4; 21; 36]) treated tropes exclusively as a phenomenon of natural language. Consequently, in their view a “visual metaphor” can claim no physical existence and is a metaphorical expression par excellence. This approach states bluntly that the linguistic and the visual code should be treated as distinct and basically non-convergent.

Contrary to those pessimistic opinions, several *voices supporting the existence of non-verbal tropes* have cropped up in the literature on the subject. Yuri M. Lotman [19; 20], who perceived the entire *semiosphere* (viz. the universe of available and potential meanings of all networks of signs forming culture) as a tropical and rhetorical formation, proposed a set of three large figures shaping all artistic texts. His semiotic mega-figuration consisted of: 1) *metaphor* (including *metonymy*), 2) *opposition (contrast)* and 3) *repetition*. In a similar vein, Tzvetan Todorov [26] claimed that figures rule not only language but also other symbolic systems. Roland Barthes [1], in his discussion of Giuseppe Arcimboldi's mannerist *capriccios*, referred to them as a "kingdom of metaphor" (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [4; 21; 36] on a detailed discussion of Arcimboldi's visual tropology). In turn, Gombrich [7; 12] points to a fuzzy borderline separating *symbol*, *metaphor* and *allegory*. Importantly, he makes a distinction between a directly visible metaphor (*micro-metaphor* in my own terminology) and a metaphorical meaning that creates the underlying, dominant interpretation of the entire picture (*mega-metaphor*). Mieczysław Porębski [22; 35], an eminent Polish semiotician of art issues one caveat, namely, he rejects figuration at the micro-level of visual representation (*iconographic level*), where only symbols are bound to appear, and believes in the occurrence of figuration at the second, *connotative level* of the visual message, exemplifying this claim with metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony detectable in Polish Romantic and modernist painting. Another Polish theoretician of art, Seweryna Wysłouch [22; 35] believes in the appearance of metaphor (personification, reification, etc.) at both levels of representation in painting, the physically given (iconographic) and the connotative one. In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [4; 21; 36], while analysing in detail Arcimboldi's images-riddles of the Four Seasons of the Year/Four Elements, I basically side with Porębski, postulating the following levels of interpretation for the visual arts: 1) *iconographic (literal; possibly containing symbols)*, 2) *iconological (figurative)*, where master tropes come into play), 3) *allegorical* (either particularized to fit a specific historical context or generalized).

It is also worth remembering that cognitive poetics has rather unconditionally recognized the existence of metaphor and metonymy in pictorial representations, which frequently function as part of multimodal texts (cf. E. Semino [24]).

One thing can be ascertained at this point — visual figuration calls for the same kind of intellectual effort on the part of its receiver as its verbal counterpart. This effort can be compared to a participation in a game. The idea of the author, the text (in the broad semiotic understanding accepted in this article), and the receiver as the players involved in a huge *game of interpretation* is invoked by Porębski [22; 35] and extensively discussed by Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [3] in her monograph devoted to language-games. Consequently, in what follows the reader is invited to indulge in the game of tracking down figuration in selected instances of painting and sculpture.

A painting by an outstanding Spanish Baroque artist Francisco de Zurbaran entitled "Cup of Water and a Rose on a Silver Plate" (Fig. 1), composed around 1650 (in the collections of the National Gallery in London) is an exemplar of the genre



Fig. 1. Francisco de Zurbarán, “Cup of Water and a Rose on a Silver Plate”, ca 1650, The National Gallery in London

Рис. 1. Франсиско де Сурбаран «Чаша воды и роза на серебряном блюде», пригл. 1650, Лондонская национальная галерея

called *still life*. Typically for the so-called *museum discourse*, a short explanatory text (the title in this case) supports the visual. The title refers to the lowest, iconographic level of representation and, actually, does not tell us anything more than can be observed directly. This elegant, terse picture, featuring only three objects, could be taken to represent solely what it literally depicts but for the contextual, historical and cultural knowledge that places Zurbarán within a devout Roman Catholic artistic milieu. This prompts us to look for a deeper interpretation of this seemingly overt representation of a tiny fragment of our physical universe. First, in search of symbolisation contained in the painting, we discover that water is an age-long symbol of purity, a life-giving element, while a rose has always stood for the feminine beauty. Silver, in turn, symbolizes a precious object. All in all, the symbols present at the *iconographic, surface level* of this pictorial text have to be recognized before leading us to the next, *iconological plane of interpretation*. The leading *religious metaphor* that permeates the authorial intention refers to the Virgin Mary — the purest, the most precious and the most beautiful among the women of the Earth. Not without reason is she called “a spiritual rose” in one of the invocations of the Litany addressed to her according to the Roman Catholic rite. As can be seen, a cultural background, a proper contextualization is a *sine qua non* of this covert interpretation that was probably much more obvious to the devout viewership of 17th-century Spain than to the present-day, often lay interpreters. Worthy of note is the fact that the pictorial representation we have been analysing is, in fact, a fragment (often reproduced in its own



Fig. 2. Andrzej Wróblewski,
“Chairiness”, 1956,
The National Museum in Krakow

Рис. 2. Анджей Вроблевски
“Ukrzesłowienie” («Креслость»), 1956,
Национальный музей в Кракове

right) of a larger composition by Zurbaran, entitled “Still Life with Lemons and Oranges”, featuring a table with a vase of the fruit located centrally. The cup of water and the rose on the silver plate appear to the right. Reproduced separately, they stand *synecdochically* for the entire composition, which has also a religious connotation, with the table pointing metaphorically to an altar.

Travelling several centuries in time, our attention will now focus on the composition titled “Chairiness (or “Chairification”, Fig. 2, in the collections of the National Museum in Krakow), painted by a talented, prematurely deceased Polish artist Andrzej Wróblewski in the year 1956, in the dreary times of communist regime and within the artistic current of *social realism*, with which — however — it enters into a critical dispute. It is a *genre scene*, picturing a pregnant woman, most probably queuing up to be examined by a doctor. The first, literal stratum of interpretation shows her occupying one chair, with the neighbouring one being empty. And the Lazy Viewer (on analogy to the Lazy Reader of Umberto Eco) could in fact stop at this stage if it were not for a single-word, creative, neological title “Ukrzesłowienie”, difficult to translate into English (hence two proposals mentioned above). This time, the verbal support of the title gives us every right to interpret this image at the

second, connotative level. It contains no less than a *reifying metaphor*, where a woman sitting for hours in front of a doctor's office becomes — with the passage of time — a chair itself. Interpreted in this way, the painting can be claimed to contain also a hidden (second-level trope) of *simile*, with the empty chair being compared to the “woman-chair” or the “chair-woman” (implying this time a reversed, personifying metaphor). The two chairs can also be claimed to stand in *contrast*, antithetically showing one as a pure inanimate object and the other as a hybrid object-person. Still, a tertiary level of interpretation can be invoked, seeing in the picture a sad *allegory* of life represented as the waiting in a line to one's own destination and ultimately death, or an all-pervasive allegory of hopelessness inscribed into *la condition humaine*.

The third work of art we will be considering here is a sculpture titled “Beethoven”, executed by German artist Max Klinger in the year 1902 (Fig. 3, reproduced in W. Schurian [23]). Once put on show in the Museum of Viennese Secession, it later found its way into the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig. The sculpture features a male figure, enthroned and surrounded by paraphernalia of divine statues, some of them symbolic. A second-level metaphor of a heroic superman, proud and godlike,

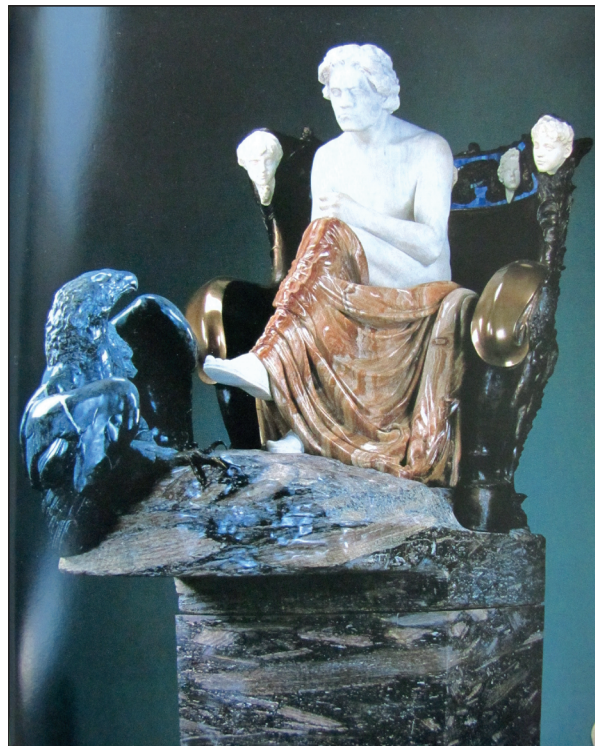


Fig. 3. Max Klinger, “Beethoven”,
1902, Museum der bildenden Künste
in Leipzig
Source: [23]

Рис. 3. Макс Клингер «Бетховен»,
1902, Музей изобразительных искусств
в Лейпциге
Источник: [23]

is easily discernible. Knowing the art-historical context of Greek antiquity, the underlying metaphor can be voiced simply as BEETHOVEN IS A HERO/BEETHOVEN IS ZEUS (among artists). The connotation with Zeus is obvious due to the pose assumed by the half-naked figure, clothed in an ancient tradition, with an eagle as a symbol of royal power being closely associated with the head of the Greek pantheon (equally symbolic is the throne). This way of depicting the much venerated composer is not only metaphorical but basically *hyperbolic* — exaggeration is present in raising him to the status of a divine personage, if not to an *Übermensch* of a somewhat Nietzschean format.

It has been pointed out by Lambert Wiesing [33] that a metaphorical exemplification in the visual arts can be carried out in two ways: 1) through *the image object* (content) and 2) through *the image carrier* (material, or medium in which an objet d'art is executed). Wiesing's observation can be expanded to cover other master tropes (megatropes) postulated here, hyperbole included. It is definitely worth considering the material used in making the analysed sculpture: Greek marble for the body, onyx for the garment, bronze for the throne and the eagle's claws, mosaic for the decoration of the throne, amber for the eagle's eyes, ivory for the heads of young boys adorning the throne and a piece of the Pyrenees marble for the pedestal. The excess of content, heightened by the opulence of the material applied, may result in a *caricature*, obviously not intended by the sculptor but striking the contemporary viewers as a far-fetched and exorbitant representation (cf. Schurian [23]).

The limited scope of this article does not allow me to consider other works of art, but the three instances selected for the discussion should persuade the reader that the topological quests are involved in our dealings with all kinds of artistic texts — verbal and visual alike. Similarly to the case of a verbal text, a visual is more often than not a multi-layered construction from the perspective of its interpretation, starting with the most obvious, physically given representation, moving through symbols potentially couched in it, to higher levels of topological and allegorical reading, with many intertextual allusions present on analogy to the transtextuality of verbal texts. It may have been noticed that the borderline between *the symbolic*, *the tropical* and the most complex *allegorical interpretations* are fuzzy and not always easy to delimit, the problem of which Gombrich was fully aware.

Another important question arises to what degree figuration across various artistic media is *universal* and to what degree it remains *culture-specific*. Arto Haapala [13: 148] rightly points out that “[a]esthetic experience is a cognitive experience in that in the fusion of the horizons, the horizon of the person involved acquires new aspects”. The term *cognitive* means here *epistemic* as well as *grounded in an environment*, conceived not only in physical but largely social and cultural terms. The reader is kindly asked to ponder to what extent the interpretative layers couched in the works of art analysed above would remain closed to the viewers if they lacked an access to specific contextualizations required to fully appreciate those painted or sculpted texts. On condition an interpretative process has ended successfully, Hans-Georg Gadamer's [9] *fusion of the horizons* (alluded

to by Haapala) is bound to appear in the game played between the author and the receivers of the text.

I sincerely hope that by bringing together the ideas from such fields of study as literary semantics, cognitive poetics, philosophy of language, as well as literary and art criticism, a talk about the universally and/or culturally shared poetics of mind, language and the visual arts will be continued across all the disciplines involved.

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ФИГУРАЦИЯ В ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫХ ТЕКСТАХ

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается утверждение (уже обсуждавшееся теоретиками искусства и исследователями художественной семиотики в течение нескольких десятилетий), что вербальная и изобразительная фигурация во многом опирается на общие средства выразительности. В частности, автор сосредотачивается на основных тропах (ведущих смысловых фигурах), которые в качестве отражения творческого воображения формируют литературный дискурс. Авторская цель при этом состоит в установлении их присутствия в изобразительном искусстве. Используя некоторые выбранные примеры произведений искусства, автор собирается доказать, что неоклассическая тетрада «метафора-метонимия-синекдоха-ирония» (см. Вико, Бурке, Уайт) также различима в живописи и скульптуре. Более того, автор предлагает расширить предложенную Вико тетраду и включить в нее сравнение и антитезу (противопоставление). В статье также поднимается вопрос о противопоставлении универсальности и культурной специфичности семиотической фигурации. В целом данная статья дополняет предмет трансмедиальности, т. е. сходимости вербальных и невербальных искусств в рамках семиосферы.

Ключевые слова

Семиотическая фигурация, вербальные/изобразительные основные тропы, трансмедиальность/конвергенция изобразительных искусств, иконографический и иконологический уровни, символ-метафора-аллегория, интерпретационная игра, универсальная и культурно-специфичная фигурация.

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