

The Interplay of the Visual and the Verbal in Visual Poems

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Abstract

The Interplay of the Visual and the Verbal in Visual Poems. Makiko Mizuno The relationship between visual information and verbal information has been an important issue in semiotic study since Roland Barthes (1964) described the relationship between the two in his analysis of the Spaghetti Poster. Advertisement was chosen as the subject of Barthes' analysis because its construction has a clear signifié a priori — it should promote consumption — and it enables the structural analysis to be simple. The present study concerns the question of how the relationship between the visual and the verbal in works of art can be described. Whereas the verbal information in normal advertising material often acts as an anchor of the visual information, to identify the figure and to guide the interpretation (cf. Eco: 1972), the verbal information accompanying artworks sometimes fulfils more diverse functions. Studies in cognitive psychology (Millis: 2001, Leder: 2006) report that aesthetic perception is reinforced when a viewer succeeds in finding a metaphorical relationship between a visual element and its elaborative title. In my talk I will analyze works of visual poetry, which has a unique position in the history of art and literature in view of its intermediality. Visual poems serve as an interesting subject for study because their essence as works of artistic expression lies in the very interplay of visual and verbal information. Several examples of visual poetry are to be examined, especially some poems by Heinz Gappmayr, whose works consist not of representational figures (image cf. Peirce: 1931-58) but of visual configurations (diagram cf. Peirce)*. I will demonstrate how such visual information is combined with the verbal information to establish metaphorical relationships, while making reference to the theory of metaphor in cognitive linguistic research. (cf. Lakoff and Johnson: 1980, Fauconnier & Turner: 2002) *Examples of Works by Gappmayr are included in the attached file. Barthes, Roland (1964) *Rhétorique de l'image*. In: *Communications* 4, pp. 40-51. Eco, Umberto (1972) *Einführung in die Semiotik*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag. Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner (2002) *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books. Joy, Annamma, John F. Sherry Jr. and Jonathan Deschenes (2008) *Conceptual blending in advertising*. *Journal of Business Research*. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.11.015. Hiraga, Masako K. (2005) *Metaphor and Iconicity. A Cognitive Approach to Analysing Texts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Leder, Helmut, Claus-Christian Carbon and Ai-Leen Ripsas. (2006) *Entitling art: Influence of title information on understanding and appreciation of paintings*. *Acta psychologica*, 121(2), pp.176-198. Millis, Keith (2001) *Making meaning brings pleasure: the influence of titles on aesthetic experiences*. *Emotion*. 2001 Sep;1(3): pp. 320-9. Mizuno, Makiko (2007) *Nichi Ou No Gutaishi [concrete poetry in Europe and Japan]*. Gengo Joho Kagaku, 6. Tokyo: The University of Tokyo, Institute for Language and Information Sciences of Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. pp. 293-309. Peirce, Charles Sanders (1931-58) *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Eds. Charles artshorne, Paul Weiss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

1. RESEARCH OUTLINE

When a picture is accompanied by or includes verbal information, such as its title, or lettering on the canvas, the viewer of an artwork is encouraged to interpret the visual and the verbal information to find a meaningful relationship between them. By intentionally manipulating the relationship between them, artists experiment and play. This is especially true of modern art. Studies in cognitive psychology report that aesthetic perception is reinforced when a viewer succeeds in finding a metaphorical relationship between a visual element and its elaborative title (Millis 2001, Leder 2006).

Beginning with Roland Barthes' structural analysis of a *Panzani* advertisement (Barthes 1977), the relationship between visual information and verbal information has been extensively discussed in semiotic studies, particularly of advertisements. This paper concerns the question of how the relationship between the visual and the verbal varies in works of art, where accompanying verbal information seems to fulfil more diverse functions.

As an example of experimentation with the relationship between visual and verbal information by artists, this study investigates visual poems, specifically of an Austrian artist, Heinz Gappmayr. Visual poetry or more precisely *concrete poetry*, is a form of experimental poetry which uses a word not only in terms of its meaning but also its physical quality. Among the art movements in the 20th century that paid special attention to the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic forms of expression such as cubism and surrealists, concrete poetry occupied a unique position with respect to its intermediality. The speciality of concrete poetry lies in the fact that its artistic expression occurs precisely through the interplay of visual and verbal information. To see the artist's strategy of combining the two elements, I will firstly look into the motifs and words used in his works and then see the relationship between the visual and the verbal. At last I will explain how *conceptual metaphor* as proposed in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2002) are at work in his works.

2. VISUAL POEMS BY HEINZ GAPPMAYR

For the analysis, the works dated between 1961 and 1990 from his oeuvre catalogue «Opus Heinz Gappmayr» are used as data. There are 992 Works in total. Because 129 works are the foreign language versions of German originals and 28 works are three-dimensional versions of two-dimensional originals, they are not counted, leaving a total of 835 works that are considered in the analysis. The majority of the works, over 80 percent, use letters as motifs in the image aside from their title. 408 works consist only of letters and 273 works consist of letters in combination with symbols, numbers, figures and photographs.

The most important feature of his works is that linguistic and visual elements are both employed very minimalist fashion. In many cases the linguistic information is reduced to one or two words, where no syntactic information is given.

The selection of words is very important to Gappmayr. He chooses words carefully to create optimal tension with the visual information. The vocabulary Gappmayr uses is small. There exist many visual variations on the same word. He explains that he deliberately chooses

categorical concepts (Gappmayr 1993). These are, in other words, concepts in the *basic level* category or in a higher-level category, as discussed in cognitive psychology (Cf. Rosch 1975). Gappmayr emphasizes the significance of the selection of words: «The artistic relevance of the categories and the relation between perception and thinking, geometry and conceptuality is one of the most important conditions of this work (Weiermair 1991: 10)». There are some common tendencies among the words used in his works. The words used most frequently are terms for time, space, perceptual properties of objects like colour and shape, and ontological properties of objects such as existence and number.

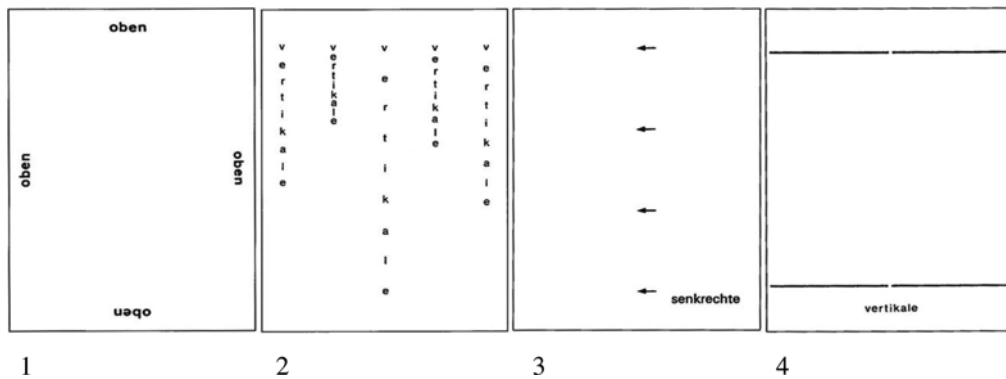
The visual information used in his works is principally non-representational figures. Gappmayr mainly uses visual configurations, what Pierce (1931-58) might call a *diagram* rather than *images*. His works are valuable subjects of study, because in most studies about visual-linguistic interaction, the visual representation is treated as representational figure: as some-*thing*, which can be paraphrased by language.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VISUAL AND VERBAL ELEMENTS

Except for some works, in which a comparison is drawn on a purely conceptual level, not on a presentational level, most of the works contain a comparison between visual and linguistic information. There are two kinds of comparisons; comparisons (a) between words and their spatial presentation and (b) between verbal and visual elements. In the former case, words used in works have two meanings, that of the concept they stand for and that of their spatial presence. In the latter case, visual symbols or diagrams are accompanied by linguistic information.

As for the relationship between the visual and linguistic elements, their meanings coincide, contradict each other or can be simultaneously contradictory and complimentary. There are few works where the two elements are completely the same, and thus tautological, or not related at all. The viewer is faced with the challenge of how to relate the visual and the verbal elements of the picture. Art critic Dorothea van der Koelen writes «This question is comparatively easy, when Gappmayr deals with objects of perception, which evoke in an abstract form a imitated field of reference, as for example in the text horizon, visualized by a black horizontal line. It becomes a more complex question, when the visual aspect at first sight does not correspond to the conceptual one, when the spectator can no longer find the intended contents by means of association, but has to transform the phenomena by means of an expansion of consciousness through an indicator, in this case through a title (Van der Koelen 1993: 12).»

Let us look at some examples in the category of SPACE to see how the relationship between visual and verbal information is manipulated. In figure 1 (*oben*: WVZ.194/1969), the correspondence between verbal meaning and the spatial relationship of the words is ambiguous. The German word «oben» (above) is located at the top, bottom, and on the left and right. When we first look at the work, only the word «oben» (above) at the top holds the truth and other three «oben» (above) are wrong. But if we change our way of looking at the picture, other «oben» (above) can also appear to be correct. Figures 2 to 4 deal with the concept of verticality. In Figure 2 (*Vertikale*: WVZ.756/1988), the word «Vertikale» (verticals) is written vertically. In Figure 3 (*Senkrechte*: WVZ.232/1971), the title «senkrechte», a synonym for «vertikale»

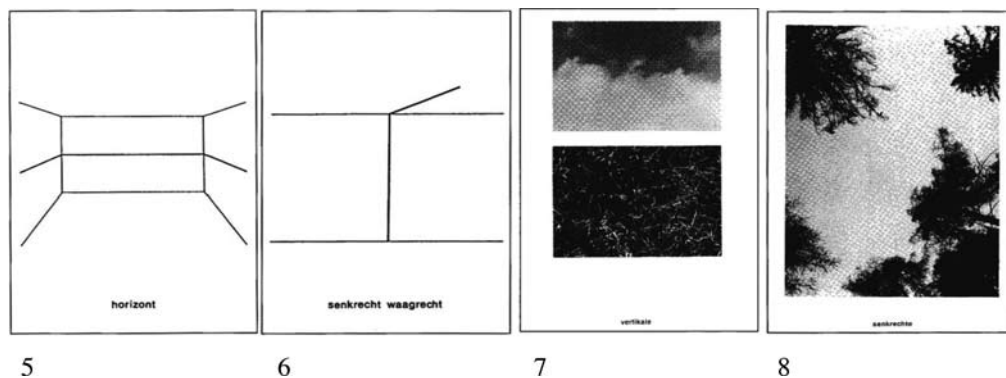


(vertical), draws attention to the vertical arrangement of the left-pointing arrows. In Figure 4 (*Vertikale*: WVZ.850/1989), the vertical line is invisible: you have to imagine a vertical line following the linguistic instruction and the subtle visual clue.

Figure 5 (*Horizont*: WVZ.406/1989) and Figure 6 (*senkrecht waagrecht*: WVZ. 411/1980) make use of the difference between three-dimensional space and its two-dimensional representation. Directed by the titles «horizont» (horizon) and «senkrecht waagrecht» (vertical horizontal), the viewer interprets two-dimensional figures as three-dimensional spaces. In Figure 7 («*Vertikale*», WVZ.387, 1979) and Figure 8 («*senkrechte*», WVZ.385, 1979) spatial relationship in natural environments is brought onto the canvas; they use photograph of ground and sky to imply the spatial relationship expressed in the title «vertikale» (vertical).

One interesting feature in the examples we have seen is that, linguistic information changes our perspective or our interpretation of what is presented. In other words, we conceptualize what is presented new and see things differently. In his analysis of the relationship between text and image in advertisements, Roland Barthes writes «The text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance (Barthes 1977: 40).» In the case of Gappmayr's visual poems, this dispatching is often far from subtle, and the resulting change in perspective often very drastic.

Another important feature of his works is that relationship between the linguistic and the visual information is most effective when it contains an element of contradiction. The viewer is forced to find a new interpretation which reconciles the apparent contradictions in



the relationship between text and image. René Magritte's famous work «This is not a pipe» provokes a similar reaction: The sentence evokes different interpretations, because it appears to be either a contradiction or a deeper truth.

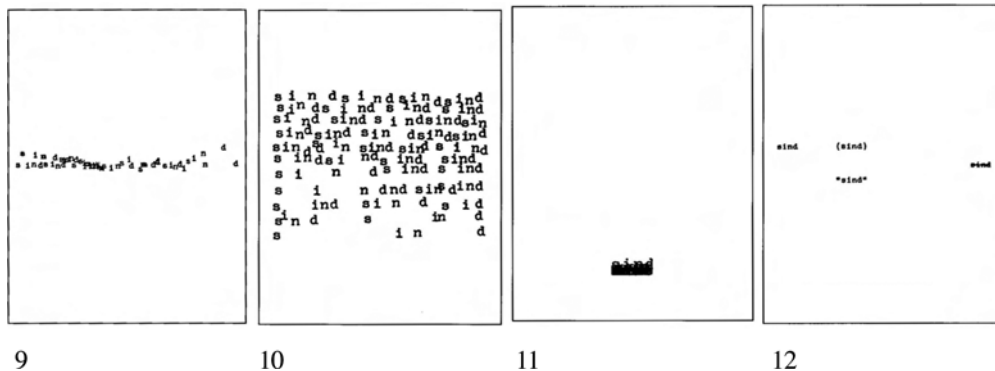
4. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR AT WORK

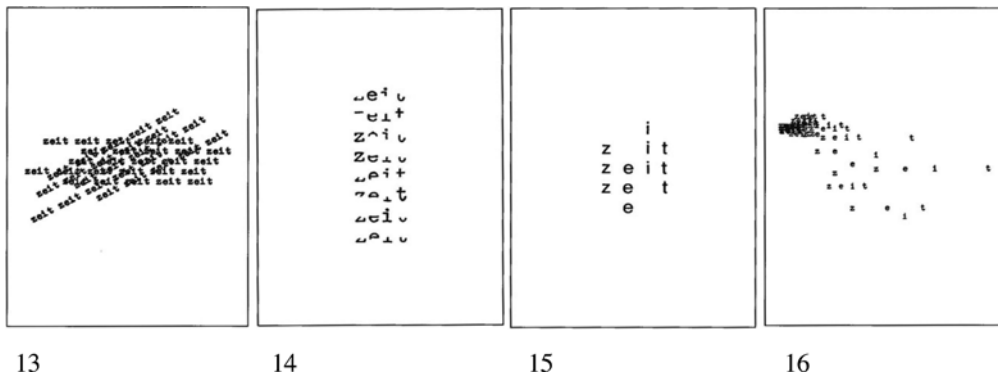
One of the strategies that Gappmayr employs to combine visual and linguistic information is the use of conceptual metaphor. Since Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discovered that metaphor is not merely linguistic rhetoric but is substantially conceptual, studies in Cognitive Linguistics have handled various subjects including non-linguistic metaphors. The most famous example of a conceptual metaphor is «Life is a journey». There are many expressions about life that are originally about a journey. Although expressions like «We came so far» and «I'm at a crossroads» are literally about spatial movement, we often use these expressions to describe our lives. These examples show how we understand abstract concepts such as life, using the knowledge structure of more concrete concept based on our everyday knowledge, such as a *journey*. In this example an «image schema» of the concept *journey*, which has a linear structure, provides a framework to understand the concept *life*. An image schema is an abstract skeletal image, which is multi modal: not restricted to their linguistic manifestations.

In Gappmayr's works, each letter of word used as material in the image is frequently treated as the concrete realization of a concept: Each letter is presented as if it showed the way the concepts exist. This kind of personification is defined in cognitive linguistics as a kind of conventional metaphor called an *ontological metaphor*, with which an abstract concept is treated as a physical object.

4.1. Example 1: «sind» (are)

The ontological metaphor is most obvious in the examples using a German word «sind» (are). These works deal with the topic *existence*. In Figure 9 (WVZ.81/1963), Figure 10 (WVZ.105/1964) and Figure 11 (WVZ.87/1963), the word «sind» (are) is repeated. They stand in line, or gather to form a rectangle. Sometimes they overlap or lines are collapsed. In Figure 12 (WVZ.109/1964), the word, its meaning or its existence is modified by the use of symbols such as brackets or quotation marks.

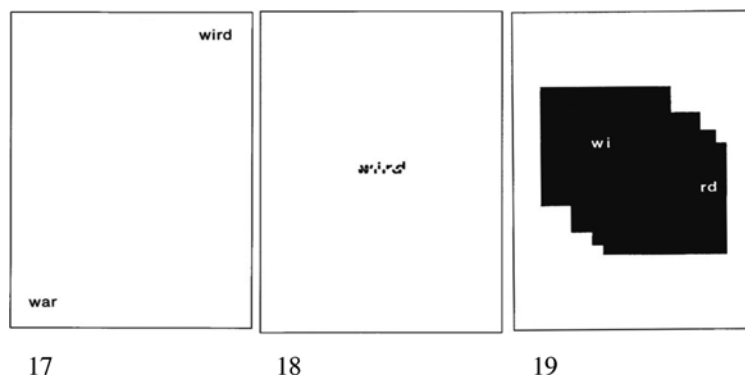




4.2. Example 2: «Zeit» (Time)

Like the works which deal with the concept of existence, for example, Figure 13 (WVZ.728/1987) and Figure 14 (WVZ.15/1961) use also ontological metaphors: that is, «Zeit» (Time), a concept which is non-physical, is treated as a concrete object. The lines of words overlap or have holes. Not only ontological metaphors but more complicated conceptual metaphors are used in the examples of TIME. The Concept of Time is structured according to motion and space: we understand time in terms of some basic elements: physical objects, their locations, and their motion. In the next examples, in Figure 15 (WVZ.939/1990) and Figure 16 (WVZ.52/1962), each of the letters is handled as a particle of time; it represents the flow of time. This can be seen as a realization of the conceptual metaphor «Time is motion». Following reading direction, time moves in these works from left to right. The directionality from left to right or from front to back appears as motif in many works.

The directionality is also used to visualize the aspect of tense. Past is normally represented in the left or front and future is represented in the right or back. In Figure 17 (WVZ.542/1984) the word «war» (was) is located in the left at the bottom and the word «wird» (will be) is located in the right at the top. In Figure 18 (WVZ.132/1966) and Figure 19 (WVZ.196/1969), the visual of the word «wird» (will be) represents the movement towards right. This can be understood as modification of the conceptual metaphor «Future time is in front of the observer, past time are behind the observer.»



5. CONCLUSIÓN

We have seen the strategy how the artist combines visual and linguistic information as a means of artistic expression. His strategies are, (a) to employ both elements in a minimalist way, so that the interplay between two elements are optimized, (b) to choose concepts that are sufficiently basic and are suited to visual and spatial presentation, (c) to draw a comparison between the visual and the linguistic elements, in which a viewer can read a metaphorical relationship. Furthermore we found that (d) concepts are visualized using conceptual metaphor. Gappmayr prefers non-representational visual constructions that represent spatial relationships and concepts of time and space, perceptual properties of objects, ontological properties of objects.

Although the study has focused only on Heinz Gappmayr, other artists share his strategy of integrating the visual and the verbal elements. For instance, works of visual poetry by other artists, such as Paul Klee, Ezra Pound and Eugen Gomringer also frequently employ the similar categories Gappmayr uses. To find the general strategy of visualization of linguistic information, investigation into the strategies of other artists to combine the visual and the linguistic elements in artworks are planned.

FIGURES

All figures from «Opus·Heinz Gappmayr. Gesamtverzeichnis der visuellen und theoretischen Texte 1961-1990». Mainz: Drothea Van Der Koelen Verlag.

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