Literal or Metaphorical? An Analysis of Motions in Comic Book Covers

IGOR JURICEVIC

The following post is a short summary of the article 'Analysis of Motions in Comic Book Cover Art: Using Pictorial Metaphors' published on 12 April 2016 by The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship.
The citation for our article is:


Our article is an open access peer-reviewed publication and can be read online and downloaded as a PDF or in XML.

Summary of key points

Static pictures can readily depict motion, such as a person running. Pictures can contain pictorial devices (i.e., features of a picture) that are literal or metaphorical. We investigated how comic book artists combine literal and metaphorical devices to create pictures of running.

We define literal pictorial devices as those that represent features that are present in the real world, while metaphorical devices represent features that are not present in the real world (Kennedy, Green, & Vervaeke 1993).

Our analysis of 400 comic book covers indicated that comic book artists:

- prefer to use many literal devices, but
- prefer to use only one metaphorical device.

In our article we propose a theory we have called the Literal Additive Metaphorical One-And-Done (LA-MOAD) theory to account for the use of literal and metaphorical devices in comic book cover art.

The LA-MOAD theory proposes that literal pictorial devices operate additively, with more devices increasing the effectiveness of a depiction of running. However, metaphorical devices interact with each other in a non-additive, ‘one-and-done’ manner. That is, one metaphorical device increases the effectiveness of a depiction, but any additional metaphorical devices do not.

The LA-MOAD theory can be thought of as a formal statement of what comic book artists have discovered through experience. That is, the LA-MOAD theory could be describing an aspect of the “visual language” of comics. This, in turn, may parallel how our visual system processes information in a comic book picture. This would suggest a fundamental difference in the way that our visual system processes literal and metaphorical devices.

What is literal and what is metaphorical?

We acknowledge that there are many differing opinions on what is or is not metaphorical in pictures. For our research, we needed to adopt a rigorous definition of what is considered to be a literal pictorial device, and what is metaphorical. For this, we used the definition that literal pictorial devices are those that represent features that are present in the real world, while metaphorical devices represent features that are not present in the real world (Kennedy, Green, & Vervaeke 1993). We chose to investigate our specific literal devices (posture, orientation, and ground plane) and metaphorical devices (action/speed lines and multiple images) based on the work of Carello, Rosenblum, and Grososfky (1986).

We realize that our definition may be contentious to some while agreeable to others. In the tradition of James J. Gibson and Ecological Psychology, our definition tacitly assumes that pictures are effective because they provide crucial information that is present in the real world. As such, violations in a picture (i.e., information that is not present in the real world) can be readily identified. Further, if that information can be understood, then it can provide metaphorical information.

On the other hand, the tradition of Nelson Goodman and Symbol Theory opposes this basic assumption. This tradition argues that pictures are conventional and that, therefore, so too are metaphorical pictorial devices. Is one or the other correct? Are some metaphorical devices conventional while others are not? These are some of the fundamental questions that happily arise.
from research projects like ours. We hope that this research will spark discussion and debate, and lead us closer to a universally agreed upon definition of metaphor in pictures.

Further Research

We will present the latest on the LA-MOAD theory on our poster “Metaphorical Devices in Pictures: LA-MOAD Theory Predicts Depictions of Superhuman Speed” at the 28th Association for Psychological Science Annual Convention, May 26-29 2016, at the Sheraton Grand Chicago, United States (Poster Session VI, Board Number VI-059).

For other cool research on how metaphorical comic book pictures are understood, we will have another poster at APS, “How Are Metaphoric Images Understood? A Test of the Contextual and Structural Frameworks”, Poster Session VI, Board Number VI-056.

References

