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Review Article

Multimodality, film, and cinematic metaphor: an evaluation of Müller and Kappelhoff (2018)

Charles Forceville

Introduction

Müller and Kappelhoff's *Cinematic Metaphor: Experience – Affectivity – Temporality* (2018) is the fruit of a collaboration in the *Languages and Emotion* project, further developed in the *Cinepoetics* Center for Advanced Film Studies, both based at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. It proposes a new framework for analyzing metaphor in film that is based on dissatisfaction with (1) Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory; (2) cognitivist-oriented applications and adaptations of this theory in the field of multimodality, specifically as operating in film (e.g., Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009; Forceville 2006, 2016, 2017; Rohdin 2009; Fahlenbrach 2010, 2016; Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012, 2015; Ortiz 2011, 2015); and (3) cognitive film scholarship (e.g., Bordwell 1985, 2013; Smith 1995; Plantinga 2009, 2013; Grodal 2009).

Given the status of the authors of this monograph, its serious criticism of the aforementioned theories and approaches deserves an equally serious response. This paper can be considered as an extended review of *Cinematic Metaphor*.

Some background

Together with Ortony's (1979) *Metaphor and Thought*, Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* galvanized the connection between metaphor and thinking. Lakoff and

Johnson introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth: CMT), and thereby profoundly changed metaphor studies. Metaphor was now seen as one of the fundamental mechanisms structuring man's capacity for thinking rather than as a purely verbal phenomenon mainly operative in poetry and rhetoric. The authors provided the following description: '*the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*' (1980: 5, emphasis in original). A crucial tenet in CMT is that humans systematically conceive of abstract, complex 'things' in terms of concrete, more basic 'things' – the latter being sensorily perceived or bodily experienced (via locomotion and via physical encounters with other bodies, objects, and the environment). Indeed, 'the "embodiment" of meaning is perhaps *the* central idea of the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor' (Kövecses 2010: 18, emphasis in original).

A key implication of Lakoff and Johnson's approach is that 'metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and only derivatively a matter of language' (1980: 153). For many years, however, almost all CMT scholars analysed predominantly verbal (more specifically: written) manifestations of conceptual metaphors. Subsequently, two branches within metaphor studies began to take seriously Lakoff and Johnson's characterization by analyzing discourses that are not, or not exclusively, verbal. The first focused on the combination of gesturing and spoken language. Cornelia Müller herself (e.g., Müller 2008; Cienki and Müller 2008) was among the pioneers in this field. The second branch examined visuals (e.g., Forceville 1996). Subsequently, combinations of visuals with other modes began to be investigated. Metaphors in which two or more modes partake were labelled 'multimodal metaphors' (Forceville 2006a; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009).

In the meantime, multimodality scholars in the cognitivist metaphor paradigm began to expand their scope. Although a big problem within the quickly growing discipline of multimodality is the lack of consensus about what counts as a 'mode' (see Forceville 2006a for discussion), there is fairly general agreement that written language, spoken language, visuals (arguably to be subdivided into static and moving ones), sound, and music deserve mode-status. The development thus ran from studies focusing on monomodal metaphor (typically: the 'written verbal' and, later, the 'static visuals' variety) via multimodal metaphor involving two modes (gesture + spoken language; static visuals + written language), and is now faced with the challenge of accommodating multimodal metaphors drawing on more than two modes. Film, of course, is a multimodal medium *par excellence*.

Although there had been some earlier work on metaphor within film studies (e.g., Carroll 1996; Whittock 1990), the analyses of metaphor in (audio)visual images that saw the light of day in the last two decades originated with metaphor scholars knowledgeable about film rather than with leading scholars working in cognitive film studies – but the two strands of research are fully compatible. Cognitive film theory was developed as an alternative to "that aggregate of doctrines derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-Structuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism" (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: xiii). Bord-

well and Carroll propose that cognitivism is best characterized as a *stance* toward whatever it is that is to be studied. 'A cognitivist analysis or explanation seeks to understand human thought, emotion, and action by appeal to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes, and (some sense of) rational agency' (1996: xvi).

Müller and Kappelhoff's (2018) criticisms of language-oriented CMT

Müller and Kappelhoff (henceforth: M&K) present cinematic metaphor as a 'poiesis of film-viewing' which moreover 'heals the break with rhetoric established by conceptual metaphor theory' (2018: 8). They continue:

Rather than conceiving of metaphors as instantiations of image schemas or primary metaphors, we consider metaphoricity to be emerging locally from the spectator's experiencing of movement-images in the moment of film-viewing. [...] [W]e lay out an understanding of embodiment that is informed by phenomenology and that has been extremely influential in contemporary film theory. Embodied experience is taken to be intersubjective, reflexive, and dynamic, and integral to cinematic meaning-making. We show how this differs from the universalist and individual model of embodiment advocated by cognitive film and metaphor theories (2018: 8).

I agree with the authors that one of the limitations of CMT, at least in its early stages (henceforth: 'classic' CMT), is that it has paid very little attention to how metaphors play a role in persuasive and aesthetic discourse. But many of its later practitioners have started to redeem this omission, for instance by forging links between CMT and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Charteris-Black 2004; Musolff 2016). And clearly, the notion of embodiment as discussed in phenomenology (a vital influence on Müller and Kappelhoff 2018) surely is not something totally different from the version advocated in CMT. Indeed, although rather late, Lakoff and Johnson express their indebtedness to 'the two greatest philosophers of the embodied mind': Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey (1999: xi). Even 'neuroscience', as promoted by Lakoff (2008), is less alien to M&K's approach than they think, particularly given the now generally accepted importance of 'mirror neurons' for human empathizing. As Plantinga states, 'brain processes involving mirror neurons enable us to understand faces and bodies in action and link us to other people's activities and feelings. Such processes allow us to understand and respond affectively to human events and behavior, whether on the screen or in the extrafilmic world' (2013: 101). In a passage in which M&K discuss a shot from Hitchcock's *Suspicion* they say that 'we experience the quality of a disturbing thought and its consequences (the [heroine's, ChF] fainting) as a quality of the cinematic movement composition. In the process of watching this

part of the scene, viewers feel the falling and fainting in their own bodies' (2018: 109). My hunch is that neuroscientists would find that fMRI scans reveal the firing of mirror neurons in spectators' brains in this instance.

But attributing the view that metaphors are 'instantiations' of image schemas (first theorized by Johnson 1987) and primary metaphors (Grady 1997) to CMT scholars is downright misleading. Inasmuch as complex metaphors are embodied, they *make use* of image schemas such as UP-DOWN, CONTAINMENT, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, DARK-LIGHT, or primary metaphors such as GOOD IS UP and GOOD IS LIGHT – but are not *reducible* to them. As formulated in Forceville (2017): 'Image schemas are profoundly embodied building blocks for meaning-making. They have minimal structure. *In a given context* the basic meanings they have can be, and usually are, enormously enriched, for instance by being deployed as source domains in complex metaphors' (251, emphasis in original).

In another passage M&K comment:

In conceptual metaphor theory and in cognitive film studies, the historical-cultural dimension of human thinking only contributes incidentally to analyses of visual representations. By explaining the meaning of visual representations through recourse to a physiological level of universal hard-wired cognitive structures [...] the concrete situatedness of meaning is turned into something secondary (2018: 19).

Leaving a discussion of CMT-applications in the (audio)visual realm until later, I grant M&K that 'classic' CMT indeed was not really concerned with the 'historical-cultural dimension of human thinking'. The historical component is largely ignored even today (for a critique, see e.g., Gevaert 2005), and this is an issue that requires remedying. But the implication that CMT disregards the role of culture in metaphorizing has simply not been true for many years. Beginning in the 1990s, CMT-inspired work has increasingly shown awareness that the study of 'nature' needs to be complemented by the study of 'nurture' (e.g., Gibbs and Steen 1999; Yu 1998; Charteris-Black 2004; Kövecses 2005, 2015; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2013; Musolff 2016).

Müller and Kappelhoff's (2018) criticisms of cognitive film studies

M&K present their own approach not only as a theory that avoids the supposed weaknesses of CMT; they also consider it as an alternative to cognitive film studies. Their approach 'replaces the idea of a spectator as information-processing computer as in cognitive approaches to film' (2018: 8) as 'there can be no understanding of the processes of meaning-making of audiovisual images which ignores the fundamental historicity of cultural processes of meaning-making' (2018: 17). For them, 'the situatedness of meaning-making is essential, as is the

character of the medium in which this happens' (2018: 19). '[T]he poiesis of film-viewing differs fundamentally from a code model idea of communication' (2018: 37).

This is a complete distortion of the paradigm Müller and Kappelhoff set up as antagonist. Since David Bordwell has the same status in cognitive film studies as Lakoff and Johnson have in CMT, I will here take him as representing this paradigm. To begin with, *of course* the spectator is not a computer: 'Seeing is [...] not a passive absorption of stimuli' (Bordwell 1985: 32), and 'plainly, many cognitive activities are performed in making sense of narrative' (Bordwell 1985: 37). 'Decoding' is always only part of interpreting film: 'in the course of constructing the story the perceiver uses schemata and incoming cues to make assumptions, *draw inferences about current story events, and frame and test hypotheses about prior and upcoming events. Often some inferences must be revised and some hypotheses will have to be suspended while the narrative delays payoff*' (Bordwell 1985: 39, my emphasis, ChF).

Moreover, this mental activity does not just pertain to the processing of information: 'It should be evident that emotion is not at all alien to the process of filmic comprehension' (Bordwell 1985: 39). True, Bordwell does not discuss the affective features of film viewing, but

this is not because I think that emotion is irrelevant to our experience of cinematic storytelling – far from it – but because I am concerned with the aspects of viewing that lead to constructing the story and its world. I am assuming that a spectator's comprehension of the films' narrative is theoretically separable from his or her emotional responses (Bordwell 1985: 30).

Accusing cognitive film studies of ignoring socio-historical dimensions and medium-specific manners of meaning-making is even more baffling. Bordwell (1985) devotes a substantial part of his classic study to discussing Hollywood film, Art-cinema, Soviet montage film, 'parametric narration', and Nouvelle Vague, meticulously as well as eloquently demonstrating how these types of films are each characterized by their own style and filmic techniques to make meaning. And the introduction of his co-authored 800+ page *Film History* whets the reader's appetite as follows: 'by studying how films were made and received, we discover the range of options available to filmmakers and film viewers. By studying the social and cultural influences on films, we come to understand better the ways in which films may bear the traces of the societies that make and consume them' (Thompson and Bordwell 1994: xxvi).

M&K go on to claim that cognitive film studies constitute:

a theoretical model that is secured through two hypothetical premises which mutually support each other. On the one hand, universal schemas of ordinary perception are presumed and transferred to film. The second premise refers to knowledge of poetic conventions, genres and folk psychology. Whatever cannot be explained with one premise, is allocated to the other and vice versa. What remains hidden is

the question of the relation between cognitive processes of film understanding and shifting historical, cultural, and media conditions of perception (2018: 31).

Again, this is a caricature. Yes, cognitive film theories have always insisted that spectators heavily draw on schemas of perception (and knowledge) familiar from their ordinary lives to make sense of film, particularly narrative film; and, yes, knowledge of conventions and genres is recruited by spectators. But all these are adapted, transformed, or even contradicted in their encounter with a specific film. *Of course* the stylistic techniques of the medium (including 'mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound', Bordwell 1985: 50) are crucial in the spectator's sense-making process: 'In the fiction film, narration is *the process whereby the film's syuzhet* [= plot, ChF] *and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula* [= story, ChF]' (Bordwell 1985: 53, emphasis in original). Bordwell's interest in film style led him to devote a separate monograph to its history ('the way movies look has a history; this history calls out for analysis and explanation; and the study of this domain – the history of film style – presents inescapable challenges to anyone who wants to understand cinema' [1997: 4]) and another monograph to its aesthetics (Bordwell 2008). In short, Bordwellian cognitive film scholarship (a) is fully cognizant of the socio-historical and cultural idiosyncrasies of film movements and unique films; (b) by no means considers the film spectator a 'computer' that passively absorbs a film; (c) judges emotion and affect essential for the pleasure of film-viewing; (d) emphasizes that film's medium-specific techniques are precisely what transforms a story into a plot – and thereby makes interpreting and enjoying film different from interpreting and enjoying events in ordinary life (or in other media, for that matter).

Müller and Kappelhoff's (2018) criticism of CMT-inspired multi-modal/ audiovisual metaphor studies

Since M&K grant me the honour of calling me 'one of the leading figures in applying conceptual metaphor theory to audiovisual media analysis' (2018: 20), I will take the liberty of holding high the flag in *this* arena. They begin by claiming that cognitive film-metaphor scholars 'refer to audiovisual images as sequences of static images, rather than as *moving images*' (2018: 20, emphasis in original). There are no bibliographical references here – unsurprisingly, since no film scholar I ever met holds this view. A second objection M&K raise is that CMT film-scholars 'typically refer to "content" as if it was "contained" within the image and readily interpretable. Instead of considering the image in its media and aesthetic composition, it is immediately identified as an audiovisual *representation* of some real-world circumstances' (2018: 20, emphasis in original). I plead guilty to often using the word 'representation', but this self-evidently does not mean that I subscribe to a naïve idea of film as being a mere copy of

reality – only that spectators recognize and understand a large part of what they see in a film because it resembles persons, things, and events they know from the real world. Coëgnarts and Kravanja, and Forceville, are claimed to believe that ‘the identification of a universal cognitive schema would fully answer questions of meaning and function’ (2018: 21). This is simply untrue. Coëgnarts and Kravanja (e.g., Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012) are intent on laying bare the role of image schemas and conceptual metaphors in understanding film in order to persuade both language-oriented CMT scholars and cognitivist film scholars unaware of CMT of the pertinence of such schemas and metaphors, but they would agree that there is much more to film than identifying schemas and metaphors. M&K specifically mention that ‘what gets lost is a reflection of the media-specific [...] character of [...] film’ (2018: 21). In fact, Coëgnarts and Kravanja are highly sensitive to medium-specificity. They distinguish between filmic information that transpires in the *mise-en-scène* (and thus would also work, for instance, in a theatre play), and ‘the antifilmic reality as transformed by the exclusive capacities of the cinematic medium’ such as ‘montage or editing, superimposition and cinematography’ (2012: 103). The latter techniques are also the focus of attention in Ortiz (2011, 2015). All the metaphors identified in the films Ortiz analyses result from combining *mise-en-scène* with the affordances provided exclusively by the medium film. The same can be said of Fahlenbrach’s discussion of the metaphor *TIME IS A PHYSICAL FORCE* in Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run*: ‘in the running-sequences the tempo and rhythm of Lola’s movements, of the camera, the editing, and the music merge to create cross-modal gestalts of a dynamic force resolutely moving forward along linear paths’ (2018: 85). All these analyses meet the desiderata of M&K’s ‘poiesis of film-viewing’.

M&K refer to only a few of the 20+ studies I (co-)authored that pertain to metaphors in moving images (both commercials and film scenes) – or the “movement-image” as they call it, using a Deleuzian term. If they had read more of these (see my Google scholar profile for details), they would have had to acknowledge that many, perhaps most, of the supposedly new aspects of the ‘cinematic metaphor’ approach they advocate are commensurate with, and often anticipated by, my analyses – although my terminology and emphasis sometimes differ from theirs. But let me here limit myself to my analysis of Ruth Lingford’s short animation film *Death and the Mother* in Forceville (2017), which M&K contrast with their own ‘cinematic metaphor’ approach (2018: 22-29). Again, they vastly exaggerate the differences, partly by misrepresenting my analyses and partly by selectively quoting from them. Here are some details.

M&K continually insist on the dynamic nature of metaphorizing (e.g., Cameron et al. 2009; Cameron 2018). They refer to my proposal for the modes that operate in film (visuals, language, music, sound, Forceville 2006a) as if I suggest that these modes work in isolation (2018: 22). *Of course* they don’t! But to see how they function in creating metaphorical and non-metaphorical meaning, it is vital to decide what counts as a mode; assess the affordances and constraints of each mode to generate meaning; and then chart how combining them creates meaning not cued by the modes on their own. The goal here is pattern-finding and develop-

ing well-defined analytical tools – not to do justice to the persuasive, affective, and aesthetic qualities of the commercial or film under discussion. So stating that it is ‘the additive understanding of multiple modes which typically characterizes research on “multimodal metaphor”’ (2018: 23) is another unfair criticism.

By calling Forceville (2017) ‘a conceptual metaphor analysis’ (2018: 23) of Lingford’s film, M&K make it look as if I consider charting cognitive schemas and conceptual metaphors as amounting to a full-blown analysis of *Death and the Mother*. No unbiased reader of my chapter, I trust, would think this was my goal. What I set out to show was that even making sense of a high-art, complex animation film requires viewers to draw, largely or completely subconsciously, on image schemas. I go on to argue that the literal use of the various FORCE schemas (first theorized by Johnson 1987) crucially invite additional *metaphorical* interpretation in Lingford’s film – much more so than these schemas do in a Bugs Bunny cartoon that I also analyse. For instance, the various instantiations of the FORCE schemas in *Death of the Mother* enable us to construe the metaphor SELF-SACRIFICIAL LOVE IS FORCEFUL SELF-MUTILATION.

Summarizing their critique, M&K state ‘What is being analyzed is the narrative that the researcher has produced by watching the film, not the process of film-viewing. In this way, audiovisual representations are considered self-evident. The crucial question of how we get to those media representations at all when viewing audiovisual images remains completely disregarded in such a restricted focus on those representations’ (2018: 28). I am confused about what I am being charged with here. For reasons of space I did not detail every step in how I see the FORCE schemas and the various metaphors as contributing to meaning-making, but what else is my report than the academically formulated result of my ‘poiesis of film-viewing’? And how does this differ from what M&K themselves do in their own case study reports in the book?

I fully agree with M&K that the woodcut print style is ‘extremely important for the poetics and aesthetics of the short film’ (2018: 24), and indeed briefly acknowledge this (Forceville 2017: 254). I also accept that ‘there is an uninterrupted connection between the metamorphoses of the animated woodcut pattern and the dynamics of the transforming perceptual sensations of the viewer’ (2018: 25). Describing these dimensions, however, was simply not the aim of my chapter. My brief was to highlight how embodied FORCE schemas constitute building blocks for the creation and apperception of the highly accultured elements of meaning that make the film so aesthetically impressive and moving – and thus worth watching in the first place. Being able to access a wide network of background assumptions is clearly essential for the interpretation of *Death and the Mother*, but I certainly do not claim that these assumptions are ‘automatically accessible, fixed, cognitive inventories of cultural-historical knowledge’ (2018: 29). After providing a non-exhaustive list of assumptions an ideal viewer possesses I add: ‘not all viewers will (be able to) access all of these assumptions, myths, and beliefs. Indeed, it is precisely because, by definition, cognitive environments among viewers vary that any discourse will yield minor or major divergences in interpretation by different recipients’

(2017: 253), and ‘metaphorical construal *always* takes place in a highly specific context: in *this* discourse, in *this* genre, in *this* medium, at *this* moment, in *this* place, issued by *this* creator, to *this* audience’ (Forceville 2017: 255, emphases in original).

Conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) versus creative metaphor (Black 1979)

M&K point out that due to the enormous impact of *Metaphors We Live By*, modern metaphor scholars all but forget the crucial contributions made by Max Black. Praising Black’s model, they ‘argue that Black’s idea of metaphors as cognitive instruments and creating new realities applies equally to metaphors in audiovisual formats’ (2018: 49). I am truly happy with the authors’ rediscovery of Black (1962, 1979); I consider myself a Black man. In fact, I start *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (not quoted in M&K 2018) by acknowledging that ‘the theory of metaphor upon which I will ground my account of pictorial metaphor is Max Black’s (1962, 1979 [...] interaction theory’ (Forceville 1996: 4), and devote an entire chapter to explaining and commenting upon this theory.

Until quite recently, Black had disappeared from the radar of most cognitivist metaphor scholars. I suspect this is due to several things. In the first place, although Black intuited that metaphors might be ‘cognitive instruments’ (Black 1979: 39), it was Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who first explored this idea systematically. Second, Lakoff and Turner (1989: 131-133) summarily dismiss Black’s interaction theory because they claim (incorrectly, as I argue in Forceville 1996: 4-12) that he understands the target and the source domains of a metaphor as reversible (cf ‘that surgeon is a butcher’ versus ‘that butcher is a surgeon’). Thirdly, Black’s most important insight was that metaphors may create rather than capture pre-existent similarity between a target and a source. Metaphor thereby becomes an instrument to model novelty: it can provide truly new perspectives, both in poetry and rhetoric (as Aristotle of course had realized a while before). For Lakoff and Johnson (1980), however, Black’s focus on metaphorical creativity ran completely against their insistence on the ordinariness, pervasiveness, and systematicity of metaphorical thinking. Lakoff and Turner (1989) acknowledge that, indeed, there are metaphors that are truly novel (which, unfortunately, they baptized ‘image metaphors’) and thus are not rooted in conceptual metaphors, but they imply that these are rare. It would take too much space to dig deeper into this issue (for some discussion, see Forceville et al. 2006: §3), but there are good reasons to postulate a continuum between Black’s creative metaphors and Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual ones. In my view, it is useful to distinguish between them (as I do in Forceville 2007, 2016), if only because studying creative metaphors helps remedy CMT’s ‘break with rhetoric’ (Müller and Kappelhoff 2018: 8).

Metaphor as dynamic and affective rather than as static and informative

Throughout their book, M&K deplore CMT's lack of attention to both the affective and the dynamic nature of metaphor in film. Inspirations here are both Müller's work on gesturing and dance – as intermittently discussed in Müller and Kappelhoff (2018) – and Cameron (e.g., Cameron et al. 2011, 2018). M&K point out that a metaphor can develop over time, both in spoken discourse (often accompanied by gesturing and facial expressions) and in film. Once a metaphor has been introduced it can be picked up, modified, or criticized later on, both by the agent that initially proposed the metaphor and by others. It is true that 'classic' CMT has never been much interested in the role of emotion and affect in metaphor. But in my own CMT-inspired analyses this is something I have always emphasized ('not only factual properties can be mapped [from source to target], but also emotions, connotations, and valuations', Forceville 2012: 116). It is worth adding here that nowadays the link between affect and moral evaluation is increasingly being acknowledged within CMT (Musolff 2016; Abdel-Raheem 2019).

The conventional A IS B formula, as M&K point out, downplays the fundamentally dynamic character of the trope. I think so, too (Forceville 2002), and have suggested as an alternative 'to conceive of metaphor as A-ING IS B-ING, since metaphor is always metaphor in action' (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009b: 11). Moreover, I concur that a metaphor may develop, in the sense that a metaphor, or its uptake, may change in the course of a conversation or film. Whereas I have not explicitly addressed this issue, my analyses demonstrate my adherence to this idea. For instance, in a BMW commercial the latest model is metaphorically compared to a peacock. A mini-narrative develops in which the car is personified, and a 'contest' ensues between the car and the peacock about who is more beautiful, whereas the metaphor gains the additional meaning of a dialogue when the Papageno aria from Mozart's *Zauberflöte* is heard (Forceville 2003: 45-46). Obviously, a feature film enables much more resonance in this respect. In Forceville (1999) I argue that attentive viewers get multiple cues, via a variety of film-techniques, that they need to construe the metaphor COLIN IS A CHILD in Schrader's *The Comfort of Strangers*. While here it could be objected that this metaphor itself does not develop, analyses of films in terms of the metaphor PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS SELF-PROPELLED MOVEMENT TOWARD A DESTINATION (e.g., Forceville 2006b, 2011; Forceville and Jeulink 2011) and DEPRESSION IS A DARK MONSTER and DEPRESSION IS A DARK CONFINING SPACE (Forceville and Paling 2018) clearly testify to my awareness of the dynamic nature of the metaphors under consideration.

‘Cinematic metaphor’ analyses: case studies in Müller and Kappelhoff (2018)

M&K’s monograph contains analyses of German TV news items and of film scenes. The ‘cinematic metaphor’ approach, inspired by studying gesture in face-to-face communication and a tango dance lesson, is captured by the idea that with the ‘staging of a temporal course, a cinematic movement is created that involves the viewers via its temporality in an affective experience’ (2018: 141 *et passim*) – a cinematic movement that can be metaphoric. As long as it is accepted that the experience is not *only* affective, and also involves mental activity to understand what is communicated (e.g., in TV news) or to construe the story from the *syuzhet*/plot (in narrative film), I have no problem with this formulation.

The analyses are conducted meticulously, and in great detail, and I find them by and large interesting, convincing, and sometimes very insightful. However, many aspects of these analyses go beyond what has hitherto been considered ‘metaphor’ or ‘metaphorizing’. In order to retain ‘metaphor’ as a useful analytical instrument, the term should not be over-stretched. Black (1979) warns against the tendency ‘to regard all figurative uses of language as metaphorical, and in this way to ignore the important distinctions between metaphor and such other figurative uses of speech as simile, metonymy, and synecdoche’ (1979: 20). M&K insufficiently heed Black’s caveat. What does not help either in trying to evaluate their proposals is that the authors seldom verbalize the metaphors they construe in the customary A IS B form (or a form that does more justice to metaphor’s dynamic nature). Moreover, they do not explicitly signal image schemas, although they heavily draw on this concept, so maligned by them. The price for this is that in many analyses it is unclear where ‘doing metaphor’ ends and ‘doing other tropes’ and even ‘doing film studies’ begins.

Let me first say a few words about ‘doing other tropes’. I have repeatedly insisted on the importance of linking metaphor studies and rhetoric (e.g., ‘the analysis of multimodal metaphor ties in with the study of rhetoric’, Forceville 2006a: 394). We need indeed to go back to Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero to study, and redefine, classic tropes from a cognitive perspective, as the dominant focus on metaphor leads both to tunnel vision and to over-stretching its meaning. ‘Classic’ CMT has gradually broadened its interest to include metonymy, and proposals have been made for other tropes (Gibbs 1993). More recently, cautious attempts have been made to apply these insights to non-verbal and multimodal discourses within the print-ad genre (e.g., Teng and Sun 2002; Forceville 2009; Pérez-Sobrinó 2017). This work is still in its infancy. Extending it to film, to be sure, is an even bigger challenge.

To clarify my problems with M&K’s analyses, I will briefly focus on their examination of the German ‘report Mainz’ news item on the winners and losers in the 2008 banking crisis. An observation such as ‘elaborating on the metaphorical vertical axis, the losing bankers are metaphorically described as “fallen” bankers’ (2018: 199) shows that the UP-DOWN schema is

used here in the primary metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN. Similarly, stating ‘we see groups of [successful bankers] gathering around tables, all directed towards a shared center, an interior, forming a kind of “closed circle”’ (2018: 200) is perfectly rephrasable in terms of the CONTAINER schema. The news item also shows those ‘outside’ of the CONTAINER – a group of panicking account holders ringing the doorbell at a bank in an unsuccessful attempt to get “inside” so as to obtain access to their money. This scene is described as follows: ‘the camera movement establishes a sensation for walking as a group movement, which eventually transforms into a kind of tunnel-shaped goal-oriented forward motion’ (2018: 202). Fair enough – but, again, this can be fruitfully formulated in terms of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema and its use in the PURPOSIVE ACTION IS SELF-PROPELLED MOVEMENT TOWARD A DESTINATION, or JOURNEY, metaphor. In the subsequent portrayal of the group of unfortunate bank clients, ‘everything is directed downwards: heads, eye gazes, perspective. This downward orientation continues in the following short montage’ (2018: 203). Both the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL and the UP-DOWN schemas are cued here. The authors end by referring to the contrast between the bankers and their clients as a ‘metaphorical opposition’ (2018: 206). This last phrase suggests that construing metaphors alone cannot do justice to the fragment. Indeed, much of the analysis suggests that we need a richer ‘tropical’ vocabulary – and my suggestion in this case would be to include a discussion of ‘antithesis’ (Tseronis and Forceville 2017).

In the analysis of Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, M&K convincingly show how we need to pay attention to the director’s cinematic hints in order to construe both the metaphor of a psychiatric patient’s traumatically suppressed memory as a locked door (a construal that is facilitated by a superimposed text over the image of a closed door at the film’s beginning) and a metaphor that could be verbalized as ‘non-remembering a traumatic event is experienced as expression of successively intensifying experiences of downward immobility’ (2018: 211). In this latter case, the film viewer has little choice but to construe the metaphor, on penalty of not understanding the traumatized protagonist’s behaviour, and thereby the film’s revealing climax. But in other cases, there is more freedom to either ‘do metaphor’ or not to do so. Cues may be subtle or ambivalent, and often a scene or scenario can still be enjoyed and/or understood by the spectator even if no metaphor is construed. In Forceville (2008a), I discuss such pleasurably subtle scenes in *La Strada* (Fellini, 1954) and *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000). And a viewer who fails to construe the metaphor Bavaria beer is Olympic torch in a commercial discussed in Forceville (2008b) will still get the general message.

In short, I can happily go along with M&K’s analyses. My problems are of a different kind. In the first place, whereas for me ‘metaphor’ is no less, but also no more than one instrument among others to account for meaning in discourse, for M&K the trope needs to do so much work that it collapses under its burden – and thereby runs the risk of losing whatever theoretical or explanatory power it may have. Secondly, in my view unless a metaphor’s creativity requires Black’s (1979) perspective (as in *Spellbound*), M&K’s analyses could easily have been

presented in terms of the image schemas and metaphors that are the bread and butter of CMT, as their allegedly different “cinematic metaphor” approach yields few new theoretical insights. Although its analytical procedure is claimed to be ‘methodologically rigid in terms of accounting for temporality as producing an affective engagement that permeates processes of meaning-making (and of metaphor as a specific form of meaning-making) at any point of the analysis’ (2018: 227), I find the guidelines in the appendix (2018: 226-247) not very helpful. Instructing users, for instance, to ‘select scenes/sequences with candidates for metaphorical themes (foregrounding of metaphoricity)’ (2018: 230) presupposes precisely what I would expect the model to do for me: help identify a metaphor in the first place. The difficulty is that *anything* can be candidate for a metaphor, even more so if the analyst is not (just) interested in conceptual or structural metaphors but also in the creative type examined by Black (1979). Similarly, encouraging analysts to ‘describe the trajectory of expressive movement units that orchestrate a metaphorical theme or the temporal parcours of a cinematic metaphor’ (2018: 231) suggests a degree of clarity about what constitutes an ‘expressive movement’ that I cannot find justified. Fahlenbrach, a fellow-cognitivist, shares my doubts about the applicability of the model: ‘there seems to be a gap between the rich and convincing analyses of cinematic expressive movements [...] and the identification of cinematic metaphors’ (2018: 73).

Strengths and weaknesses in M&K’s model

Does this make the ‘cinematic metaphor’ approach redundant, then? No, I do think M&K emphasize aspects that are neglected or downplayed in other theories and paradigms. One worthwhile aspect of their approach is that they resolutely encourage studying ‘expressivity’ as a crucial element of both ‘doing metaphor’ and ‘doing film studies’. Metaphor-users as well as film-makers often want not just to inform their audiences of something, they also want to emotionally affect them, and focusing too strongly on image schemas, structural metaphors, and cognitive uptake may make analysts oblivious to this essential dimension of communication and (narrative) art. The authors also healthily insist on the dynamic, often changing, meaning of a metaphor. Particularly analyzing complete films one can rarely be content with simply identifying a metaphor occurring at one moment in a cinematic narrative or argument; the analyst should be keenly aware how a metaphor’s meaning may transform in the course of a film, often by its interaction with other meaning-generating elements. Furthermore, it is helpful that M&K propose not only to talk about embodiment in the CMT sense that human beings conceive of COMPLEX, ABSTRACT TARGET DOMAIN A in terms of BASIC, EMBODIED SOURCE DOMAIN B, but that people also respond physically to whatever they perceive and experience in both face-to-face communication and film scenes. Importantly, this enables the authors to talk about subconscious aspects of film-viewing without taking recourse to the

Freudian, psycho-analytic models that particularly many cognitive film scholars are so allergic to. M&K also usefully remind us of German scholars that have provided insights from which CMT can benefit, often long predating Lakoff and Johnson (1980), such as Helmuth Plessner (1982 [1925]) and Hans Blumenberg (2010 [1960]). And, as said, I really enjoyed the precise and persuasive case studies.

However, my problems with M&K's approach override what I like about it. Most importantly, the authors misrepresent or fail to acknowledge central aspects of CMT, cognitive film studies, and multimodal/audiovisual metaphor approaches. As a result, most of the time they attack straw men. Inasmuch as the analyses pertain to metaphor, they turn out to discuss image schemas and primary metaphors in a way that is not really different from what is customary in CMT. Criticisms that are to some extent justifiably raised against 'classic' CMT, such as insufficient awareness of the dynamic nature of metaphor and of medium-specificity, do not apply to multimodal and film metaphor approaches adopted by myself and colleagues such as Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, and María Ortiz. For the larger part, the kind of close-reading analyses M&K perform are moreover perfectly compatible with the kind associated with key cognitive film studies scholars such as David Bordwell.

Concluding remarks

M&K claim that their model can do justice much better to 'expressive movement' in film than various rival theories, but this claim depends on vastly over-stretching the concept 'metaphor'. They do fine film analyses but often without making clear which part of these analyses should count specifically as *metaphor* analyses. Their criticisms of CMT and multimodal metaphor scholars fail to acknowledge that these scholars try to do something different from what M&K present them as aiming for. CMT scholars argue that, and show how, metaphor plays a crucial role in meaning-making in *all* kinds of media and discourse genres. But while we live by metaphors, we live by many other things as well – by narrative, for instance, and by beliefs, and by the urge to survive and have meaningful relations with fellow human beings. CMT-inspired multimodal/audiovisual/film metaphor scholars do not at all hold that the analysis of metaphor (or any other trope, for that matter) in film alone amounts to a full interpretation of that film. In my understanding of their work that does not bother them in the least, since they consider analysing metaphor one instrument among others to make meaning.

Cato the Elder invariably concluded his speeches to the Roman senate with 'Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam'. Analogously, I will end with my mantra that M&K's insistence on *doing* metaphor, taking into account socio-cultural context, and being aware of medium-specificity makes clear once again that textual analysis in all media and genres is in dire need of a full-blown theory of communication (which can include, *pace* M&K, artistic varieties).

The contours of such a theory already exist, namely in relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) – but its development still requires a lot of work (Forceville 2014, in prep.).

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