

# Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising

Charles Forceville



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# Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising

Over the past few decades, research on metaphor has focused almost exclusively on its verbal and cognitive dimensions. In *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*, Charles Forceville argues that metaphor can also occur in pictures. By using insights taken from a range of linguistic, artistic, and cognitive perspectives, for example, interaction and relevance theory, Forceville shows not only how metaphor can occur in pictures, but also provides a framework within which these ‘pictorial’ metaphors can be analysed.

The theoretical insights are applied to thirty advertisements and billboards of British, French, German, and Dutch origin. Apart from substantiating the claim that it makes sense to talk about ‘pictorial metaphors’, the detailed analyses of the advertisements suggest how metaphor theory can be employed as a tool in media studies. The final chapter of this book looks at ways in which the insights gained can be used for further research.

This book will be of interest to advanced undergraduate and graduate students of Communication Studies, Language, and Linguistics.

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*Charles Forceville*  
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# 1 Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed an avalanche of publications on metaphor. Three bibliographies on metaphor (Shibles 1971, van Noppen *et al.* 1985, van Noppen *et al.* 1990) together list some 10,000 books, articles and conference papers originating in a wide range of academic disciplines. Although there is an increasing interest from cognitive scientists in metaphor, the vast majority of the publications focus on verbal metaphors, or at least on verbal manifestations of metaphor. However, as Lakoff and Johnson claim in their influential book *Metaphors We Live By*, ‘metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action, and only derivatively a matter of language’ (1980:153). This perspective paves the way for an investigation of the question whether other media than language can manifest metaphor as well. In this book I argue that metaphor can occur in pictures, more specifically in printed advertisements and billboards, and I propose a theoretical framework within which these pictorial metaphors can be analysed. The most important aim of this study is to make a contribution to a theory of pictorial metaphor. After the theoretical framework has been outlined, a substantial number of advertisements and billboards will be analysed in the light of this theory, the analyses themselves naturally leading to further subdivisions of the concept ‘pictorial metaphor’. Accordingly, the second aim of the book is to show how the theory can be applied in the analysis of specific advertisements. Finally, it is hoped that validation of the concept ‘pictorial metaphor’ in turn will help to advance the more encompassing theory of metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon.

Whereas the order of the chapters in this book is motivated by the overall goal of developing a model for the analysis of pictorial metaphor, an attempt has been made to ensure that chapters that may be of interest to those whose primary concern is with other topics than pictorial metaphor proper—such as ‘verbal metaphor’, ‘word and image relations’, ‘Relevance Theory’, or ‘advertising’—can, with minimal difficulty, be read independently. The structure of the book is as follows.

Chapter 2 contains a detailed discussion of Max Black’s (1962, 1979a) interaction theory of verbal metaphor. This theory, enriched by the insights of later scholars of metaphor, will in slightly adapted form serve as the starting point for the analysis of pictorial metaphors in Chapters 6 and 7. Some elliptical

## 2 Introduction

passages in Black's two articles are clarified and expanded on, and the objections of Kittay (1987) to the interaction theory are examined at length. This chapter is intended to be of intrinsic interest to students of verbal and cognitive metaphor.

Chapter 3 evaluates a number of earlier studies which pertain to the concept 'pictorial metaphor'. A critical survey of these studies, some of which focus on artistic texts while others also include non-artistic texts in their corpora, highlights some of the theoretical problems attending an attempt to present a theory of pictorial metaphor. On the basis of the strengths and weaknesses of these previous approaches I explain my choice of static advertisements as corpus material.

Chapter 4 discusses in what ways context plays a role in the interpretation of advertisements generally, and pictorial metaphors occurring in them specifically. Within a communicative framework adapted from the well-known model by Jakobson (1960), a distinction is made between text-internal and text-external elements of context. The former can be further subdivided into pictorial and verbal context, drawing on Roland Barthes' (1964/1986) concept of 'anchoring'. It is argued that an examination of text-internal context does not suffice, however; in addition, text-external factors such as cultural conventions, expectations, and genre-attributions need to be considered as well.

Although Chapter 4 outlines various aspects outside the advertisement text proper that affect interpretation, two major factors are there left out of consideration: the role played by the communicator of the advertisement message, and its addressee, respectively. Chapter 5 delineates how the identities and interests of the originator of the advertising message and its envisaged reader/viewer crucially co-determine its possible interpretations. In an application of the theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986), who claim that the principle of relevance is the key concept governing human communication, it is shown what consequences their approach has for the analysis, first of metaphors, and then of advertisements. Of particular importance are their claim that relevance is always relevance to an individual and the distinction they propose between strongly and weakly communicated aspects of a message. Apart from constituting a vital step in the elaboration of a model of pictorial metaphor, this chapter can also be read independently as an application of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory beyond the realm of language, namely to messages that are (partly) non-verbal, and mass-medial.

Chapter 6, a key chapter of the book, combines Black's interaction theory with the insights of Sperber and Wilson to analyse pictorial phenomena in some thirty advertisements and billboards in terms of pictorial metaphor. On the basis of the various text-internal (verbal and pictorial) contextual levels that can be distinguished, a subdivision is proposed into pictorial metaphors with one pictorially present term (MP1s), pictorial metaphors with two pictorially present terms (MP2s), verbo-pictorial metaphors (VPMs), and pictorial similes. While the discussions of the advertisements and billboards are first and foremost intended to substantiate the validity of the concept pictorial metaphor in itself,

the analyses hopefully are of independent interest to students of advertising, and of word and image relations more generally.

Since the advertisements and billboards discussed in Chapter 6 are all interpreted by myself, the analyses—in line with Sperber and Wilson's claim that relevance is always relevance to an individual—necessarily suffer from a degree of subjective bias. By way of a modest counterbalance, Chapter 7 reports the results of an exploratory experiment testing the responses of some forty people to three billboards all purportedly containing a verbo-pictorial metaphor. Apart from assessing whether the participants are capable of identifying the metaphors as such, the experiment gives some idea of the degree of freedom in interpretation a pictorial metaphor allows. In addition, the results provide evidence that some viewers, when given a chance to do so, are happy to volunteer interpretations that run counter to those in all likelihood intended by the advertiser. This latter finding suggests that there may be a discrepancy between how viewers realize they are *supposed* to respond to the billboards and how they *actually* react. In view of the exploratory character of the experiment, the chapter reflects amply on methodological matters.

Chapter 8, finally, briefly hints at ways in which the insights of this book may give rise to further research into issues concerning pictorial metaphor, word and image relations, advertising, and other pictorial tropes.

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## SOURCES OF ADVERTISEMENTS AND BILLBOARDS

- Reclame Jaarboek 1976* (1977) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.11).
- Jahrbuch 1978* (1978) Düsseldorf: Art Director's Club Deutschland (Figure 6.26).
- Jahrbuch der Werbung, Marketing-Kommunikation in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz 18* (1980). Düsseldorf/Wien: Econ (Figure 6.10).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1980* (1981) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.12).
- 10 Ans de Publicité* (Stratégies no. 294, 30 October 1981) Paris: Stratégies (Figure 6.5).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1981* (1982) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.23).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1982* (1983) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.24).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1983* (1984) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.20).

- Reclame Jaarboek 1984* (1985) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.21).
- Dossier Agences 1985* (1985) Paris: Stratégies (Figures 6.1, 6.3).
- Dossier Campagnes 1986* (1986) Paris: Publications Professionelles Françaises (Figures 6.6, 6.7 and 6.13).
- Gesamtverband Werbeagenturen* 1987 (1987) Moisburg: Siegmund (Figure 6.17).
- British Design and Art Direction 1988* (1988) London: Polygon Editions SARL (Figures 6.9 and 6.16).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1990* (1991) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figures 6.8 and 6.14).
- Volkskrant* 6 April 1991 (Figure 6.22).
- En Toen Ging er een Lampje Branden: Het Beste uit 25 Jaar Nederlandse Reclame en Grafische Vormgeving* (1991) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figure 6.27).
- Vrij Nederland* 14 December 1991 (Figure 6.18).
- Reclame Jaarboek 1991* (1992) Amsterdam: Art Directors Club Nederland (Figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3).
- Kunst en Wetenschap* 1:2, Summer 1992 (Figure 6.19).