

Interplay in Cinema's Symbolic Process: *Metaphor and metonymy in the language of film*

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the interplay of metaphor and metonymy, an often-overlooked expressive device in the production of meaning in film. Part 1 considers aspects of the theory leading to the recognition of metaphor/metonymy as a dual principle that extends across semiotic systems. It also takes into account other approaches. In most cases, the study of these tropes has been confined to linguistic examples; their particular manifestations in film have received considerably less attention—and even less so their modes of interaction. This is a significant gap. Compared to verbal systems, the meaning produced by this interplay in the intersemiotic language of film can be much more complex—conceptually and semiotically “juicier”, one might say—since it often involves the intervention of more than one form of semiosis: visual images, language (spoken or written), music, sound design, etc. Part 2 is a transartistic analysis of the creative interplay of metaphor and metonymy in three films: Satyajit Ray’s “Aparajito” (‘The Unvanquished’, 1965), Michael Radford’s “Il Postino” (‘The Postman’, 1994), and Juan Antonio Bayona’s “El Orfanato” (‘The Orphanage’, 2007). Each film allows us to see different expressions of the metaphor/metonymy interplay in the symbolic process. I consider, in particular, an aspect that I believe has not received enough attention, i.e.: some of the ways in which metaphor tends to become metonymy and metonymy tends to become metaphor.

Keywords: Film semiotics, film theory, metaphor, metonymy, symbolic process

1. The Dual Principle

1.1. Metonymy in Aristotle’s Definition of Metaphor

The history of the relation between metaphor and metonymy takes us back to Aristotle’s definition of metaphor in Chapter XXI of his *Poetics*. There, Aristotle defines metaphor as the transferring of an unusual name from one object to an object of a different type. This transference can happen in four ways: “From the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another, or else by analogy” (1457b).¹ For Aristotle, metaphor is a broad term that refers to the transference of meaning from one order to another. It encompasses figures in general, including metonymy and synecdoche, two tropes so closely related to metaphor that it is often difficult to fully understand metaphoric processes without taking them into account. Metonymy is commonly understood as a “substitution of two terms for each other according to a relation of contiguity” and synecdoche as a “substitution of two terms for each other according to a relation of greater or lesser extension (part for the whole, whole for the part, species for genus, singular for plural, or vice versa)” (Eco 1983: 219). Metonymy is usually seen as the broader of these two terms, and synecdoche is seen as a particular case or class of metonymy. I will generally refer to metonymy here in this broader sense.²

Aristotle does not mention metonymy in his definition of metaphor, but later theories of rhetoric would note various relations of a metonymic type intervening in some of his examples. They are, in fact, an integral part of the metaphors. Take for instance Aristotle’s example of the third type (from species to

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of classical authors refer to texts in the Perseus Digital Library as specified in the References.

² This distinction has been much discussed. The Group μ of Liège, for instance, went as far as to argue that synecdoche is the basis of both metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor, in their view, is the product of two synecdoches, and metonymy is an aspect of synecdoche limited to causal relations (1970).

species): “‘Drawing off his life with the bronze’ and ‘Severing with the tireless bronze’, where ‘drawing off’ is used for ‘severing’ and ‘severing’ for ‘drawing off’, both being species of ‘removing’” (1457b). The use of the property of an object to designate the object—say “bronze” for “knife”—is an example of metonymy. Perhaps the most notable illustration of the function of metonymy in the articulation of metaphor can be seen in Aristotle’s example of the fourth type—metaphor by analogy: “For instance, a cup is to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares, so he will call the cup ‘Dionysus’s shield’ and the shield ‘Ares’s cup’” (ibid.). The cup is associated by contiguity with Dionysus, the Greek god of pleasure (depicted holding a cup of wine), and the shield is associated with Ares, the Greek god of war. The metaphor here is thus the result of a double metonymic displacement.

1.2. The Primacy of Metaphor

“Of the thousands and thousands of pages written about metaphor, few add anything of substance to the first two or three fundamental concepts stated by Aristotle,” concludes Eco in “The Scandal of Metaphor: Metaphorology and Semiotics” (1983: 217–218). Few, in contrast, are the pages written about metonymy. Scarce definitions of metonymy can be found in ancient Greek rhetoric. Curiously, they are “very vague and could cover a large number of figures, or perhaps any figure (in this aspect they are like many, though not all, ancient definitions of metaphor and allegory)” (Arata 2005: 64). Since its ancient origins, metaphor has been the most discussed and valued of the two tropes. This disparity, a sort of subordination of metonymy to metaphor, would continue throughout classical rhetoric—that formidable metalanguage that reigned in the West for over two thousand years (from approximately from the 5th century BCE to the 19th century CE).

Metonymy would be listed alongside metaphor in the long typology of tropes that rhetoric developed,³ but metaphor remained the most discussed and treasured. Quintilian calls it “the commonest and by far the most beautiful of *tropes*; [. . .] it is not merely so natural a turn of speech that it is often employed unconsciously, or by uneducated persons, but it is in itself so attractive and elegant that, however distinguished the language in which it is embedded, it shines forth with a light that is all its own” (c. 96: 8.6, emphasis mine). Metonymy, defined as “the substitution of one name for another”, is listed as one of the tropes in Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*, but the discussion is short; the few examples used give us an idea of the relative value he places on this rhetorical figure: “*Venus* is a more decent expression than *coitus*; it would be too bold for the severe style demanded in the courts to speak of *Liber* and *Ceres* when we mean bread and wine” (ibid.).

In the 20th century, the primacy of metaphor was consecrated in a wide range of different theoretical approaches: from I. A. Richards’s tenor/vehicle model (1936) to Max Black’s “interaction view” (1962),⁴ from Husserl’s phenomenology (1900-1901) to Paul Ricoeur’s transposition of meaning (*epiphora onomatos*) (1975), from Greimas’s *bi-isotopy* semantics (1966) to the Group μ ’s synecdochic approach (1970), to mention just a few. Metonymy, on the other hand, (much less its fundamental relation to metaphor) received little attention—little attention, that is, until Jakobson.

1.3. Jakobson’s Momentous Contribution

Roman Jakobson’s “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956) would put an end to the habitual subordination of metonymy to metaphor. In his study, he demonstrated the existence of two main cognitive processes at work in language and in sign systems in general. Building on the linguistic notions of *paradigm* and *syntagm*, as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, and on the semiotic notion of *interpretant*, as introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce, Jakobson describes the two elementary operations of language: “Speech implies a selection of certain linguistic entities and their combination into linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity” (Jakobson 1956: 72).

³ General overviews of rhetoric still refer to versions of this list. (cf. Ducrot and Todorov 1972: 277–279).

⁴ For early correspondences between the work of I. A. Richards and Max Black, see Black’s 1954 essay “Metaphor”.

These operations—*selection* and *combination*—provide each linguistic sign with “two sets of *interpretants*”: one that refers to the code, where the “general meaning” of the sign is revealed, and the other to the context, where “meaning is determined by its connection to other signs within the same sequence” (ibid.: 75). Jakobson goes on to show that metonymy, which is based on contiguity, is widely used by aphasics whose selective capacities had been affected, and metaphor, which is based on similarity and contrast, is used by aphasics whose capacity for combination is impaired. This insight on the particular functions of metaphor and metonymy in two types of memory loss would become the kernel of a huge contribution.

Of the long repertoire of figures of speech identified by the tradition of rhetoric, Jakobson’s analysis retained only two: metaphor and metonymy. “Jakobson saw in this dual principle—metonymy/metaphor—the basic frame of the symbolic process” (Cuperman 1993: 5). The magnitude of Jakobson’s contribution cannot be overstated. “In a stroke of genius,” writes Ricoeur in *The Rule of Metaphor*, “Roman Jakobson extended a properly tropological and rhetorical duality [...] beyond intentional use of linguistic signs into dreaming and magic, and beyond linguistic signs themselves into the use of other semiotic systems” (1975: 178). Jakobson was well aware of the reach of his discovery. As he himself anticipated, his paper would impact the fields of “psychopathology, psychology, linguistics, poetics, and SEMIOTIC, the general science of signs” (1956: 93). In fact, Jakobson’s work would have a lasting influence in psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and many other areas.

1.4. The Dual Principle in Dreams

“In an inquiry into the structure of dreams,” writes Jakobson in his paper, “the decisive question is to determine whether the symbols and the temporal sequences used are based on contiguity (Freud’s metonymic ‘displacement’ and synecdochic ‘condensation’) or on similarity (Freud’s ‘identification and symbolism’)” (1956: 95). Jacques Lacan simplifies these associations in “The Agency the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud” (1966), a lecture in “homage to the works of Roman Jakobson” (1966: 177n20). In it, Lacan links the mechanism of *displacement* with *metonymy*, “the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship” (ibid.: 160), thereby avoiding Jakobson’s confusing reference to “synecdochic ‘condensation’” and links *metaphor*, “the structure of the superposition of signifiers”, directly with *condensation*, rather than with “identification and symbolism” (1966: 160).⁵

Lacan observes that in active discourse metonymy and metaphor are “two sides of the effect of the signifier on the signified” (ibid.: 157). This action, which he calls “the sliding of the signified under the signifier”, is also present in the general distortion that takes place in the dream. “The creative spark of metaphor,” he writes, “does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through (metonymic) connection with the rest of the chain” (ibid.).

1.5. The Dual Principle in Screens

In Jakobson, metonymy and metaphor cease to be understood exclusively as figures of speech but rather are seen as two gravitational tendencies present in language, as well as in “other semiotic systems” (1956: 93). Much like speech, making a film, or composing music “implies the *selection* of certain signs [images, words, sounds] and their *combination* into [semiotic] units of a higher complexity [filmic sequences, melodies, etc.]” (ibid.: 72). Jakobson offers a number of examples from cinema; he notices, for instance, “metonymic set-ups” in film’s “capacity for changing the angle, perspective and focus of shots,” synecdoche in close-ups, and “metaphoric montage in lap dissolves” (ibid.: 91).

⁵ The primacy Lacan gives to these two dream-work mechanisms is already evident in his response to Ernest Jones, where he considers “symbolism only as subordinate to the major mainsprings of the processes [*élaboration*] that structure the unconscious—namely, condensation and displacement first and foremost. I am confining myself to these two mechanisms” (1959: 597–598).

A sustained study of the function of metaphor and metonymy in film is among Christian Metz's many contributions to film semiotics, or cine-semiology. In *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1977), Metz builds on Jakobson and Lacan to propose a model of metaphor and metonymy that takes into account various sets of systems of oppositions: paradigm/syntagm, contiguity/similarity, condensation/displacement, and primary (unconscious)/secondary (conscious-preconscious). Rather than a rigid taxonomy, Metz proposes a model of cross-classification with different degrees of entanglement, where metaphor and metonymy can each be presented either syntagmatically or paradigmatically.⁶ I give examples of these four types of filmic rhetorical figures in my analysis of "Il Postino".

Metz's precursory work brought attention to metaphor and metonymy in film theory. An example is Linda Williams's analysis of surrealist film (1981). She uses Metz's four-part division of filmic figuration to identify, for instance, the metaphor seen at the beginning of Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), where a shot of a razor splitting open a woman's eye is juxtaposed to a shot of a thin cloud cutting across a full moon. "We can see," observes Williams, "that this is a metaphor placed in the syntagm. It is a metaphor in which similarities between the referents—moon and eye, cloud and razor, and the similar horizontal movement of the latter—are arranged contiguously (syntagmatically) in the image chain" (1981: 69). The important function played by metonymy in this figure should not be overlooked, however. The eye is a *pars pro toto* synecdoche for the woman, and the razor, by extension, is a metonymy for the man seen sharpening the razor. It is in the metonymies that one finds the sexist underpinnings of this powerful and complex image.

1.6. Cognitive Paradigms and Film

I said that the subordination of metonymy to metaphor ended with Jakobson; this balance, however, was abandoned by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which became the cornerstone text of the field of cognitive linguistics. The discussion of metonymy is relegated here to one of the thirty chapters of the book. This is curious, since Lakoff was Jakobson's student in the sixties. As René Dirven points out in the introduction to the anthology *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast*,⁷ it would take almost twenty years for a new generation of cognitive linguists to attempt to redress the imbalance between these tropes (Dirven and Pörings 2003: 1). The combined interaction of metaphor and metonymy in film, however, is not discussed in either Dirven's anthology or the two other anthologies he mentions—Panther and Radden (1999) and Barcelona (2003). In fact, the articles in these three compilations, as well as a later one by Panther, Thornburg, and Barcelona (2009), are almost entirely unconcerned with film.⁸

Metonymy resurfaces at a par with metaphor as "one of the basic characteristics of cognition" in the book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Lakoff 1987: 77). "The new view," writes Lakoff, "takes imaginative aspects of reason—metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery—as central to reason, rather than as a peripheral and inconsequential adjunct to the literal" (ibid.: xi). That is, they go beyond the mere representation of reality and are indirectly linked to our bodily experience—they are embodied. They "are central to how one constructs categories to make sense of experience" (ibid.: xii). Lakoff uses a wide variety of examples, but none of them are from film. In fact, most of cognitive linguistics today remains largely disinterested in film. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, however, contributed to a renewed interest in metonymy in cognitive studies. Drožož (2014), Littlemore (2015), and Sato (2017) treat metonymy as an independent subject, but only one of these studies includes a section on the creative use of metonymy in film (Littlemore 2015: 115–118).

There are few examples of cognitive theory applied to film. Coëgnarts's "Embodied Cognition and Cinema" (2015) is one of them. The effort is to show the embodied nature of the representation of character perception and subjective experience. A similar perceptual approach is extended to the viewer's approval

⁶ For a detailed exposition, see Metz (1977: 186–191).

⁷ The first article in this anthology is a reprint of Jakobson's "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles", part five of "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956).

⁸ Two minor exceptions are Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez's reference to metonymy in film and Diane Ponterotto's use of film dialogue as an example of cognitive metaphor, both of which were published in Barcelona in 2003.

or disapproval of a character. In this context, metaphor and metonymy are understood as conceptual mappings linked to perception: “The metonymy perceptual organ stands for perception and the metaphor perception is contact between perceiver and object perceived, [which] can manifest non-linguistically by means exclusive to the cinematic medium (e.g., camera movement, editing, etc.)” (Coëgnarts 2015: 96).

In her paper “Considering the Semiotic Foundations of the Cognitive Paradigms”, Winfried Nöth argues that, in contrast to Saussure’s model, cognition is a constitutive element in Peirce’s triadic sign process since “the idea to which the representamen gives rise is its interpretant, which entails cognitive activity” (1994: 7). In *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, Warren Buckland takes Nöth’s observation into account but sees cognitive film semiotics as a continuation and, arguably, the maturation of Metz’s semiotic film theory (2004: 30).⁹ Regarding the notion of the embodiment of metaphor and metonymy, Buckland notes that these “creative strategies” (ibid.: 42) and “other schemata can also be applied to narrative films, with variable results” (ibid.: 50). In fact, however, the cognitive approach does not see metonymy and metaphor as “creative strategies” (ibid.: 42) but rather as modes of perception and cognition—and herein lie some of its limitations. Creative filmmakers use metaphor and metonymy as expressive devices open to a broad play of meaningful combinations.

Buckland concludes, correctly, that “the cognitivists take a Kuhnian approach to the relation between different film theories by suggesting that they (the cognitivists) are ‘starting again’, rather than building on previous film theories” (2004: 144). But paradigm changes do not have to exclude past contributions. In “What is Cognitive Semiotics? A New Paradigm in the Study of Meaning” (2011), Per Aage Brandt offers an elaborate view of cognitive semiotics that “combines the models of Saussure, Peirce, Fauconnier-Turner, and Greimas” (2011: 58) and in which both metonymy and metaphor serve a function in the production of meaning. Constitutive parts of this approach are the conceptual integration models (blending) and mental space theory (first introduced and developed by Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier). In *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (2002), these two authors use a wide range of examples of conceptual blending—the integration of information from different realms of knowledge—in language, games, rituals, computer interfaces, and other forms of cognition, but none are from film. Conceptual models often concern metaphoric integrations in language and can be quite complex. A single metaphor, such as “This surgeon is a butcher”, can become the subject of extended theorizing and debate.¹⁰ Due to these models’ emphasis on metaphor and its level of complexity, it is hard to apply them efficiently to the interplay of metaphor and metonymy in film—and it is in this play that one finds its beauties and the pleasures.

1.7. Interplay in Film

With difficulty, I have narrowed down my selection to three examples of the metaphor/metonymy interplay in film. They present three different types of creative expression of filmic figures. Metz observed that some filmic figures “are based more or less directly on an underlying metonymy or synecdoche” (1977: 199). This apparent hierarchical relation, however, can prove to be much more involved. Two complex figures in Ray’s “Aparajito” show that the full meaning of metaphor can be as much an integral part of the metonymies that support it as metonymies are part of the metaphor they enable. In a notable scene, Ray finds an ingenious way to thematize the overlooked importance of metonymy. This scene also gives us the opportunity to consider the relation between metonymy and indexicality, in particular, and the Peircean trichotomy of signs, in general.

Radford’s “Il Postino” gives us a beautiful example of the tendency of metonymy to become metaphor and of metaphor to become metonymy. He achieves this by setting in play a simple game of foosball through a series of symbolic metamorphoses. In the games played in Bayona’s “The Orphanage” one witnesses the same double tendency but in much faster motion. It would be hard to offer a fair description of the interaction and alternation of these two filmic figures, to describe the interplay between

⁹ Cabak (2012) elaborates on this aspect of Buckland’s book.

¹⁰ cf. Grady, Oakley, and Coulson (1999), as well as Brandt and Brandt (2005).

metaphor and metonymy; their flow would have to be interrupted to focus on complex theoretical considerations regarding either metaphor or metonymy. The study of the various expressions of metaphor/metonymy interplay in film requires a flexible and versatile approach. This is evident in the analysis of all three of the films that I discuss below but particularly so in the rapid intertwining of these figures in “The Orphanage”. The ability to swiftly distinguish metonymy and metaphor and observe their modes of interaction is essential to the pleasure of seeing how these filmic figures come into play and blend together to create exceptional forms of meaning.

To call attention to the transartistic nature of the metaphor/metonymy interplay, I start the analysis of each film with examples from other artistic and cultural modalities.

2. The Dual Principle at Play

2.1. The River and the Fireflies

A metaphor takes us from one order of meaning to another. In classical rhetoric it is described by the word *epiphora*, which refers to a movement from one location to another. In India, there are special places at which to cross the river Ganges. They are called *tirthas*, which literally means ‘fords’—shallow places where the river can be crossed. Diana Eck points out that it is written in the *Māhātmya* that there are some thirty-five million *tirthas* in the sacred Ganga. Even more broadly, she writes, “It is said that any wave of the river could be a *tirtha*” (1996: 139). But the *tirthas* could also be parts of the Earth or the Body that give ready access to the Heavens or the Soul.

Satyajit Ray’s classic film “Aparajito” (1965), the second part of the “Apu Trilogy”, begins on the shores of the Ganges. In early scenes, one can see Apu, a young boy with beautiful eyes, running at play with friends in the labyrinthine streets of the ancient city of Kashi, called “Benares” by the British (as it is as well in the film, which is set in the 1920s).¹¹ Two elaborate figures composed of metonymy and metaphor are the structural pillars of the film. In the first, a set of significant metonymies culminate in a metaphor for the death of Apu’s father; in the second, a series of craftily articulated metonymies leads to a metaphor for his mother’s death. Although the metaphoric aspect of these rhetorical figures is often emphasized, the metonymic function that makes their full artistic meaning possible is ignored. In both figures, the unfolding play of metonymies is as much a part of the spark of metaphor as metaphor is of their consummation.

Apu’s father, Harihar, a Brahmin priest, is ill and has moved with his family to die by the shores of the sacred river. About to take his last breath, he mumbles the words “water” and “Ganges”. Sarbajaya, Apu’s mother, tells the boy to go get some water from the river (Hindus believe that by drinking water from the Ganges at the time of death one can attain freedom from the recurrent cycles of birth and death). On his way back, holding a metal jar with water in his hand, Apu pauses to observe a set of heavy *gadas* (Indian exercise clubs). Earlier in the film he had watched a group of young men use them to buff up their bodies while facing the Ganges. The image of these clubs is a metonymy for youth and strength. Juxtaposed with his father’s illness, it indicates the cycles of strength and weakness, life and death. The water Apu carries in the jar is also a metonymy; more precisely, it is a *pars pro toto* synecdoche for the sacred river, a part substituted for its entirety.

When Sarbajaya pours the water on the lips of the man in agony, the metonymy turns into a metaphor: Ray cuts to a flock of pigeons taking flight off the river’s shore into the sky. The noise of the flapping wings is extended by a poignant wind passage in Ravi Shankar’s musical score. It would be a mistake to see this powerful figure as a simple metaphoric juxtaposition of images—the dying man and the flight of pigeons—as is commonly done. It is the play of the preceding metonymies that give it its force and make its complex meaning possible. Without it, the figure is incomplete.

The function of carefully articulated metonymies in the construction of metaphor is even more evident in the scene of Sarbajaya’s death. Years have passed, and Apu is now a university student in Kolkata. Miles away, Sarbajaya is hoping her son will come home during a break. Resting against a tree trunk, she opens her eyes when she hears the distant whistle of a train—a classic example of metonymy in

¹¹ The city is called “Varanasi” today.

film. Then a train is seen on the screen, which in turn is a metonymy for Apu—but her son is not on it. That night, mortally ill, she mumbles his name, “Apu”, and hears him responding, “Ma”. But Apu is not there. Her auditory hallucination is another metonymy for Apu. An expression of happiness in her face indicates that, in her mind, Apu has returned. She manages to stand up and walk outside to see the dancing lights of fireflies over a pond. Ray gradually amplifies the chirping sounds of insects as the shot becomes darker. By the end, the fireflies look like twinkling stars reflected on the water. The harmonious synchronicity (the fireflies) and vastness (the starry night) of this shot stand both for Sarbajaya’s death and for her imagined reunion with her son.

The scene of Sarbajaya looking at the fireflies is not as forceful as the marked juxtaposition of images in Harihar’s death. The implied metaphor would be unremarkable without the linked metonymies that lead up to it and give full meaning to the figure. But while metaphors are often noticed, metonymies are routinely ignored. As Linda Williams’s puts it, “We tend not to notice that metonymies are figures, because the fact that they are based on real or virtual spatial contiguities makes them seem so much more realistic than metaphoric associations based on similarity alone” (1981: 58). Metaphors become noticeable deviations from conventional discourse (the ordinary, or *zero degree* of language) by virtue of bringing, to one degree or another, the unexpected. The full beauty of Ray’s complex filmic figures, to use Jakobson’s words, is too often amputated by a “unipolar scheme which, strikingly enough, coincides with one of the two aphasic patterns, namely with the contiguity disorder” (1956: 96).

Ray thematizes the function of metonymy in a scene that critics often mention without considering its relevance to the film’s elaborate figures. To be able to study in Kolkata, Apu has to work long hours at a printing press. Exhausted, he falls asleep in a rhetoric class when the professor is defining synecdoche as a special case of metonymy. The professor asks Apu to define synecdoche. Since he cannot, the instructor gestures with his index finger towards the door to let him know that he must leave the classroom. The professor again uses the same motion of his index finger to expel a student who had whispered the answer to Apu. By foregrounding metonymy—the word is written on the blackboard—in a class where a student falls asleep, Ray is making a commentary on the often-unrecognized function of this filmic figure.

It is easy to see in the professor’s gesture the close relation between metonymy and indexicality (in the Peircean sense); both involve a causal relation between expression and content. Due to the fecundity of Peirce’s thought, however, framing metonymy in terms of his trichotomy of signs is much more complex. I may just mention here that metonymy is also related to iconic signs, which “never involve a full representation of the thing being signified, and only ever involve a schematic or partial representation. Therefore, they nearly always involve some sort of part for whole metonymy” (Littlemore 2015: 120). As Brandt notes, symbols, too, have a metonymic quality: “An interesting aspect of symbols is their derivation: if an idea allows a foregrounding of a visible or otherwise perceptible aspect, taking a part of that aspect and reproducing it (the principle of *metonymy*) produces a symbolic signifier” (2011: 53).¹²

2.2. Beatrice and the Foosball

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante writes that, when he was almost ten, he saw Beatrice Portinari and fell in love with her at first sight. She was almost nine. “Behold, a god stronger than I am is coming and will rule over me” (Alighieri 1292-1294: 28). Exactly nine years later, he sees Beatrice crossing Florence’s Ponte Santa Trinita. She is holding a yellow rose in her hand.¹³ This is the second time Dante has seen her, and he is again left speechless.

There are only two English texts in Borges’s *Complete Works (Obras Completas)* (1974). They are simply entitled “Two English Poems”. The second, dedicated to Beatriz Bibiloni Webster de Bullrich, evokes the memory of Dante seeing Beatrice crossing the Ponte Santa Trinita: “I offer you the memory of a yellow rose seen at sunset, years before you were born” (Borges 1974: 862). The yellow rose is, by contiguity, a metonymy for Dante’s Beatrice; her hand is touching the stem of the rose. It is also, by analogy,

¹² The question of metaphor in Peirce has been much more extensively discussed. See, for example, Sonesson (2008).

¹³ Cf. Henry Holiday’s painting “Dante and Beatrice” (1884).

a metaphor for Dante's love for Beatrice and for the fulminating power of love in general. Metonymy has turned into metaphor. With the memory of a yellow rose, Borges is not only indicating Beatrice Portinari but also offering a lasting symbol of ideal love.

Beatrice—another Beatrice—is a main character in Michael Radford's film "Il Postino" (1994).¹⁴ Exiled from his country due to his activity in the Chilean Communist Party, the acclaimed poet Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde land on a sleepy Italian island. There, he meets and befriends Mario Ruoppolo, a humble man hired to deliver mail to the poet. Mario wants to know what makes Neruda so popular with women because Mario is eager to gain the affection of Beatrice Russo, a beautiful young woman who lives in and works at her aunt's inn. The poet offers Mario some examples of metaphor. The power of the poetic metaphor is one of the main themes of the film. Although there is no verbal mention of metonymy, it is one of the film's main unifying elements.

An ordinary foosball—that small white plastic ball used in table soccer—brings together many aspects of the film. The foosball makes its appearance when Mario sees Beatrice for the first time in the inn and, like Dante, falls instantly in love with her. They play a game of foosball. Aware of his feelings, Beatrice puts the ball in her mouth and spits it out. Despondent, Mario goes to Neruda and asks him to write a poem for Beatrice. The poet objects, arguing that he does not even know her. Mario takes the ball out of his pocket and shows it to him. "Beatrice put it in her mouth," he says. Here is an example of what Metz calls metonymy presented paradigmatically, where one of the elements is evoked *in absentia* (the ball for Beatrice). Earlier, when Beatrice put it in her mouth, the ball was presented syntagmatically, or *in praesentia*.¹⁵ Like Dante's yellow rose, the foosball is also a metaphor for love. When Beatrice spat it out, it became a symbol of desire and rejection—of unrequited love.

Later, the image of the ball is juxtaposed with a full moon and, by association, with a circle that Mario drew on the first page of a leather-bound journal (a gift from Neruda to encourage him to write). All three of these elements—the white foosball, the moon's burnished sphere, and Mario's drawn circle—are metonymies for Beatrice Russo; condensed, they become a metaphor for the love of a woman whose name itself—Beatrice—is an old metaphor for love. The foosball is seen several times throughout the film. In a scene of amorous ardor, Beatrice places the foosball between her breasts before placing it in her mouth. This *in praesentia* association of contrasting images is an example of metaphor presented syntagmatically.

Desire and the night, poetry and the nostalgic tango score, the rhythms of the ocean and the faces of the moon, all create a dreamlike atmosphere. Mario pays Neruda the ultimate compliment by appropriating his metaphors in poems to woo Beatrice. Donna Rosa, Beatrice's aunt, finds a folded paper with one of these poems hidden in Beatrice's bra. One of the poem's metaphors is also a metonymy for its hiding place: "Your breasts are like a fire with two flames." Donna Rosa interprets this image as evidence that Mario has fondled her niece's breasts. Here is an example of metaphor presented paradigmatically. A censored act is associated by means of an alternative image, such as when a shot of a crackling fireplace replaces the act of making love.

Mario and Beatrice marry. At the wedding, Pablo Neruda receives news that he has been allowed to return to Chile. One day, after a long absence, he and Matilde return to the island. As they walk into Beatrice's inn, a foosball rolls to the poet's feet. Someone calls out the name Pablito. A boy comes chasing after the ball. The couple learn that Mario was killed by the police at a communist demonstration in Naples where he was to recite some poetry. It was his son, Pablito, who had released the ball that rolled to Neruda's feet. The foosball now evokes Mario *in absentia*. The ball has also acquired a new metaphoric dimension: it now stands for the memory of a past romance and for the void left by Mario's death.

2.3. Playing in the Haunted House

¹⁴ The film is based on Antonio Skármeta's novel *The Postman* (*Ardiente paciencia*, 1985).

¹⁵ In his typology, Metz refers to metonymy and metaphor presented either paradigmatically or syntagmatically (1977: 189–191); he does not use the notions of *in praesentia* and *in absentia*, however, which I find useful.

A *matryoshka* or *babushka* doll is a set of Russian painted wooden dolls that fit snugly one inside the other. It is a traditional metaphor for the mother (and, by extension, the family) as represented by the largest doll, typically in the form of a woman in a colorfully decorated *sarafan* dress. One doll vanishes inside another doll; those vanish inside another, which, in turn, vanishes inside yet another, etc. *Matryoshkas* have also become a common metaphor for the interpolation of texts within texts, a metonymic process by resemblance and subordination that André Gide called “*mise en abyme*” (1889-1939: 41).¹⁶—the ‘abysmal image’. By condensing the principle of contiguity by familiarity made evident when its sequential elements are displayed, the *matryoshka* is a metaphor for a metonymic arrangement or *dispositio*.

There are games within games and stories within stories in Juan Antonio Bayona’s film, “The Orphanage” (2007). Two of the games are beautiful examples of a brisk interweaving of metaphor and metonymy. Marketed as a horror film, it is in fact a *tour de force* of fantasy. There is a haunted house, yes, but the film also sets in play some of the most common devices of the fantasy genre: the theme of the double, the journey in time, and the story within the story. Highly constructed, the film is open to a number of natural (could Laura be hallucinating?) and supernatural (are there are ghosts in the house?) readings. There is also a mystery that needs to be resolved involving the death or disappearance of a small boy, Simón, whose body has never been found. All these elements are interpolated within the portentous structure of what used to be an orphanage.

Simón, an adopted seven-year-old boy, his mother, Laura, and her husband, Carlos, live alone in the refurbished orphanage. Laura had been one of the orphans who lived there. The film starts with a group of children playing a popular game in the garden, a flashback to a time when the orphanage was functional. These children will play the game again in the final scenes of the film. Between the first and last game, Simón and his “imaginary friends” will play several other games. Simón teaches his mother the rules of a game which will ultimately hold the key to his disappearance. He plays it with his mother twice; the first time in person, the second—presumably—as a ghost. The game is a sort of treasure hunt: something that one loves very much has been stolen, and one has to find it following the clues. The prize is a wish granted, the fulfillment of a desire.

In the first game, Simón tells Laura that he has lost a treasure—“some very valuable, gold coins” he says he found in a park. Mother and son start by looking for them within the house. In a box within a box in Simón’s room they find an “El Dorado” ice cream wrapper, a metaphor—by analogy—for the gold coins (*dorado* means ‘golden’ in Spanish). Beneath the wrapper they find some of Simón’s baby teeth. This leads them (metonymically, by contiguity) to the place where the teeth were kept: a vial in Laura’s bedside drawer. Instead of the teeth she finds sand. In a sand garden just outside the house, they dig up a thimble, yet another indexical sign, which leads them to a small treasure in a sewing box. There they find a broken Celtic cross—a metaphor for Christ. This takes them to the orphanage’s chapel. In a drawer beneath a statue of Christ crucified, they find a small, stray *matryoshka* doll, which, in turn, points to the set of dolls from whence it came. In one of the dolls within the dolls, they find a large key. It opens a drawer that contains a folder with two secrets Laura and Carlos have been keeping from Simón. One concerns the fact that they are not his parents (he is adopted), the other that he is HIV positive. Simón takes out the folder from the drawer. The gold coins fall from it. A series of metonymies has led them to find the “treasure”, wrapped in a metaphor for suppressed information. Simón simply calls it all lies.

In the second game, Simón has vanished and efforts to find him have been unsuccessful. Laura stays alone in the orphanage in a last attempt to make contact with him. Suddenly, a window falls closed and shatters in the bedroom where she and the other orphans used to sleep. The second game has started. A treasure has been taken from Laura, and the treasure is Simón. A series of *matryoshka*-like metonymies propel the search. Beneath the window there is a flip-top storage bench. Laura removes the shattered pieces of glass and opens it. Inside, she finds a false bottom made of wooden boards with the names of the orphan children carved into them. There is yet another compartment beneath the boards where she finds a group of dolls lined up beside each other. There is an open space among them. A doll is missing from the set—a metaphor for Simón who is also missing. Earlier, Laura had found a rag dog beneath the covers of Simón’s

bed. She now runs to get the doll to fill the gap. Beneath it, she finds a set of photographs. One of them is a picture of Simón in her arms. He is gesturing playfully. “Do you want to play?” she asks. The picture is a synecdoche for the photo album that it was a part of. In the album, she finds a dried red rose—a metonymy—that takes her to a rose bush outside the house. In it, she finds a small, folded piece of quilted cloth. She opens it. It depicts the front of the orphanage. She rushes to a closet where she keeps some quilted bedspreads. Inside one of them she finds the “El Dorado” ice cream wrapper that she and Simón found in the first game. However, what was then a metaphor for the gold coins now becomes, by contiguity, a metonymy leading to the place where the wrapper was first found: the box within a box in Simón’s room.

After this, the two games blend together. The box now contains an old brass doorknob. This is the final clue of the game and the solution of its central mystery. The doorknob is a metonymy that points to a place that reveals awful secrets, and it is a metaphor for the secrets themselves—for the revelation and the resolution. Laura’s search for the door to which the missing knob belongs will lead her to find the remains of the orphans she lived with who were poisoned by a caretaker, Benigna, to avenge the death of her son, Tomás. The missing knob also opens a basement door that Laura had accidentally jammed closed. Inside, she finds Simón’s dead body.

As in dreams, the two games set in play a seamless interweaving of displacements and condensations where metonymies tend to become metaphors and metaphors tend to become metonymies. The key found at the end of the first game and the doorknob found at the end of the second game are metonymies, by contiguity, to what they open—respectively a drawer and a basement door. However, they are also metaphors for what the drawer and the basement door disclose. With an almost imperceptible gesture, two lost-and-found objects—a key and a doorknob—blend the two games together and solve a dreadful puzzle.

3. Conclusion: A Versatile Device

The examples I have offered show three distinct ways in which the metaphor/metonymy interplay has been used as a powerful device in the production of artistic meaning in film. As has been seen, ever since Aristotle’s definition of metaphor, the integral role of metonymy in some types of metaphor has gone unrecognized. “Aparajito” gave us two emblematic examples of the key function of metonymic processes in the articulation of complex filmic figures culminating in metaphor—an often-unrecognized function that Ray thematizes in the memorable scene described above. Metonymy may appear to be thematically subservient to metaphor in “Il Postino”, but with a small foosball, Radford sets in motion the gradual metamorphosis of a simple metonymy into a metaphor that encompasses a love story and even a life; the foosball becomes a sign of Mario Ruoppolo’s love, political values, and death. In “The Orphanage”, Bayona shows the narrative plasticity of games in which the main pieces at play are metaphor and metonymy. These figures are part of a child’s game, yes, but it is a game with tragic implications, and the polarity game/mortality merges with the quick interplay of the gravitational tendencies of the symbolic process that extends across semiotic systems.

Metaphor and metonymy are inherent principles in every film, but they are almost always unmarked and hence go unnoticed. The interplay of these filmic figures is rarely deliberately used as a tool of creative expression. Some filmmakers, however, recognize it as a rich source of creative expression, and the results are often striking. I have examined at least three different ways in which this interplay can be used as a powerful artistic device open to a range of expressive possibilities. There are many other notable examples. Those, however, I must leave for another study. (One for, instance, involves some of the remarkable cases where the interplay is generated primarily in the registers of sound and music).¹⁷ When these and other

¹⁷ I am thinking, among others, of Jorge Sanjinés’s “Ukamau” (1966), Sergio Leone’s “Once Upon a Time in the West” (1968), Robert Rodriguez’s “El Mariachi” (1992), Michel Hazanavicius’s “The Artist” (2011), and Jane Campion’s “The Power of the Dog” (2021).

examples are studied, a flexible model will be found—one based on elements of film theory and film semiotics—that is best suited to both describe and appreciate the range and versatility of this insufficiently recognized artistic device.

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