

Kristóf Nyíri:

Time As *Denkfigur* and As Reality


0. Figures of Thought: A Preliminary Outline

A workshop ushered in by a call for papers claiming that a certain term which has come to be very much in vogue lacks any definition, can hardly be expected to arrive at nothing less than a single, authoritative definition for that term. What we can at present realistically expect is the emergence of a number of distinct, but hopefully compatible approaches, perhaps even some convergent views, making up a more or less coherent overall picture. My own approach to *Denkfiguren* is to conceive of them as mediating between different dimensions of experience, thinking, and communication; such as the motor, the visual, the verbal, and even the musical. This approach, I believe, does fit well with the emphasis the call for papers laid, generally, on the non-conceptual behind the conceptual, as well as, specifically, on the figural element in metaphoric thought, and on gestural thinking as manifested in scribbles. It fits, also, with Alexander Friedrich pointing, at this workshop, to the Kantian effort of connecting reflection to intuition, or with André Reichert seeing figural movements of thought as manifesting themselves not just in language but also in images both static and moving, or with Marcus Burkhardt dwelling on the issue of information visualization.

Let me, by way of introduction, present some figures of thought selected in this spirit. First, a metaphor. I believe any live metaphor would do, but, to make my point, I am choosing a specific metaphor you have probably never yet encountered, a metaphor coined by cognitive scientist Allan Paivio. It is a metaphor designed to show that processing a metaphor relies on processing mental images. This is how it runs: "for the student of language and thought, metaphor is a solar eclipse". The meaning Paivio intended to convey is that in a metaphor, just as in an eclipse, something is obscured; but also, that both a metaphor and an eclipse enlighten while they obscure. Paivio has put

this metaphor to test subjects, and found that in order to understand it they first, indeed, had to *visually imagine* the eclipsed sun.¹ To understand a live metaphor, then, means to move from words to images, and then back from images to words. A second figure of thought I am offering: a saying conveyed via a depiction. Some hundred such depictions can be found in Pieter

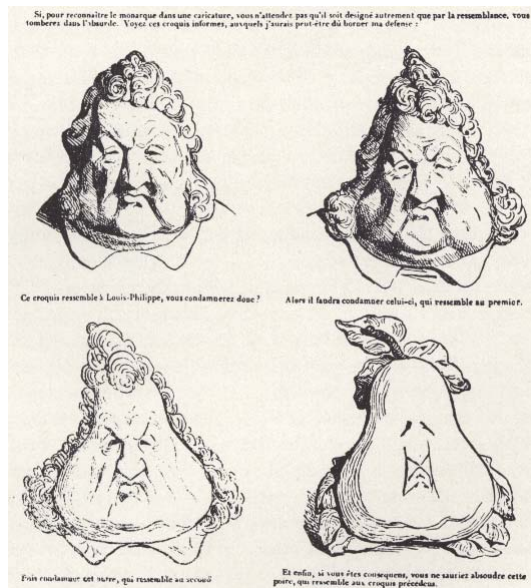


Bruegel the Elder's 1559 painting *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Take the saying "Big fish eat little fish". In the painting, you can spot the tiny bit rendering this very saying in pictorial form. 

That bit is a figure of thought, it is the result of a movement from the verbal to the visual, and itself of course triggers a reverse movement from the pictorial to the

verbal, namely the proverbial. The proverb is about powerful people or institutions defeating the less powerful ones; understanding the proverb involves forming mental images; and those mental images seem not only to

picture the literal meaning of the proverb, but also to help one grasp its broader, idiomatic meaning. And a third figure of thought: a caricature. Almost any caricature would do, but let me choose the famous sequence Ernst Gombrich reprints in his *Art and Illusion*, a sequence published in a satirical paper in France in 1834, demonstrating how a portrait of Louis Philippe can be transformed into the picture of a pear, *poire* meaning "fat-head".² This is a pictorial metaphor with the meaning *the king is a fat-head*; a figure of thought, leading from the verbal to the visual.



¹ See Allan Paivio – Mary Walsh, "Psychological Processes in Metaphor Comprehension and Memory", in Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (1979), rev. second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

² Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960), London: Phaidon Press, 1962, p. 291.

1. Death, Music, and Time: Scribbles by Wittgenstein, Scribbles by Arnheim

To this day, the dominant image of Wittgenstein is that of a philosopher of language. Actually, he was a visual thinker:³ as much a philosopher of pictorial as of linguistic meaning, with diagrams and drawings abounding in his manuscripts and in the notes taken by his students. Let me first single out a scribble printed in the *Lectures and Conversations* edited by Barrett. Wittgenstein discusses the conditions under which someone can, or cannot, meaningfully speak about having an idea of something. The example introduced is the idea of death, with Wittgenstein insisting that for anyone's idea of death to be meaningful, the application of that idea must have public criteria. "If what he calls his 'idea of death' is to become relevant", Wittgenstein says, "it must become part of our game. – 'My idea of death is the separation of the soul from the body' – if we know what to do with these words. He can also say: 'I connect with the word 'death' a certain picture – a woman lying in her bed' – that may or may not be of some interest. – If he connects" – and now comes a scribble –

"with death, and this was his idea, this might be interesting psychologically."⁴ To be sure, this



scribble is not an established element of our language-game – hence the qualification "psychologically" – but it can certainly serve as a basis for making points about the idea in question. Our imagination, as Wittgenstein used to say, is a "complicated formation out of heterogeneous components – words, pictures";⁵ scribbles distil such compounds into the purely visual, and in turn give rise to verbal formulae describing what we come to see.

Another of Wittgenstein's scribbles I will show here occurs in a brief memoir written by his student John King. King had a gramophone at his student room in Cambridge, and in the early 1930s Wittgenstein visited him several times to listen to music. "I once put on", King writes, "the second, third and

³ A recent summary of mine on the topic can be found in the paper "Image and Metaphor in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein", to appear in 2011 in *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science, and the Arts*, ed. by Elisabeth Nemeth, Richard Heinrich and Wolfram Pichler.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 69.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, transl. by Anthony Kenny, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, p. 162.

fourth movements of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor, *op.* 131. ... [Wittgenstein] was rapt in his attention and most excited at the end of the playing. He jumped up as if something had suddenly struck him and said, 'How easy it is to think that you understand what Beethoven is saying' (and here he seized a pencil and a piece of paper) 'how you think you have understood the projection' (and he drew two-thirds of a circle, thus)



'and then suddenly' (and here he added a bulge)



'you realize that you haven't understood anything at all'.⁶ I doubt if this scribble, or pair of scribbles, actually expresses some important insight by Wittgenstein.⁷ As you of course know, *op.* 131 occupies a special, keystone, place in Beethoven's oeuvre. It consists of seven movements to be played without a break, the fourth movement, the central one, being a set of seven variations on a simple theme. I assume it is a sound strategy to concentrate on this theme (<http://www.hunfi.hu/nyiri/Beeth.mp3>) when trying to make sense of Wittgenstein's scribbles, and I submit that unless one takes them to allude to the fact that the basic theme is built up by an interplay of the two violins – a rather trivial allusion – they do not convey anything essential as regards the quartet in question. However, they convey the important fact that, although Wittgenstein was usually quite explicit on the dangers of attempting to describe the musical in non-musical terms,⁸ still, on at least one occasion he

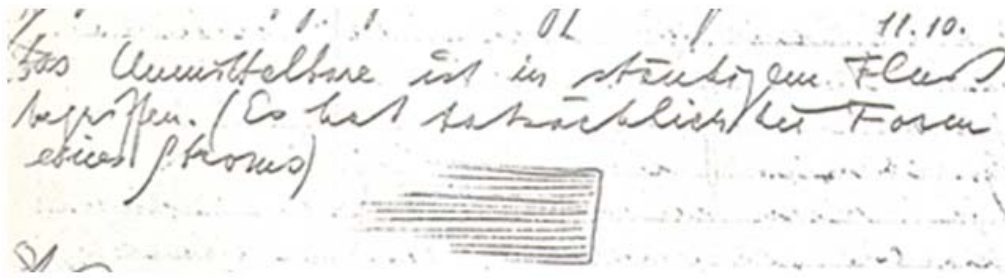
⁶ John King, "Recollections of Wittgenstein", in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 69–70.

⁷ Thus I am not convinced, although very much impressed, by what Katrin Eggers in this connection suggests in her paper, "Form und Inhalt in der Musik – Wittgensteins Beitrag zu einem zentralen musikphilosophischen Problem", in *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science, and the Arts*, edited by Elisabeth Nemeth, Richard Heinrich and Wolfram Pichler, 33rd International Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg am Wechsel: ALWS, 2010, pp. 74 f.

⁸ In the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein talks about the "illusion" that "possesses us", when "repeating a tune to ourselves and letting it make its full impression on us, we say 'This tune says *something*', and it is as though I had to find *what* it says. And yet I know that it doesn't say anything such that I might express in words or pictures what it says. And if, recognizing this, I resign myself to saying 'It just expresses a musical thought', this would mean no more than saying 'It expresses itself.'" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations": Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, edited by Rush Rhees [1958], Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964, p. 166.)

could not but yield to the urge to express a musical impression visually; could not but yield to the urge, in his excited state, to turn to a *Denkfigur*.

A third, and last, drawing by Wittgenstein I want to display here concerns the problem of the flow of consciousness and/or the flow of time. This is not, strictly speaking, a scribble; it is, rather, a drawing representing a conventional metaphor in visual form; indeed, viewed from Wittgenstein's per-



"The immediate finds itself in a constant flux. (It has in fact the form of a stream.)" Wittgenstein, MS 107 (1929)

spective, it amounts to an attempt to *draw* something one cannot *say*. I believe that Wittgenstein's perspective is wrong, and I will come back to this drawing in the concluding section of my talk. Just now I will turn to a different set of scribbles having to do with time, scribbles published in Rudolf Arnheim's 1969 book *Visual Thinking*.

Arnheim, of course, is well known as the pioneering central figure in the counter-attack on the linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy and psychology. As he put it in his seminal 1969 book: "What makes language so valuable for thinking ... cannot be thinking in words. It must be the help that words lend to thinking while it operates in a more appropriate medium, such as visual imagery."⁹ This is, incidentally, the passage Lakoff quotes by way of introduction, when recounting, in a 2006 essay, the formative and then suppressed influence Arnheim's *Visual Thinking* had on him in the 1970s.¹⁰ In his book, Arnheim dwells at length on the connection between abstract concepts, mental images, and drawings. "The prototype of drawings I have in mind", he writes, "are those diagrammatic scribbles drawn on the blackboard by teachers and lecturers in order to describe constellations of one kind or another – physical or social, psychological or purely logical."¹¹

⁹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 231–32.

¹⁰ George Lakoff, "The Neuroscience of Form in Art", in Mark Turner (ed.), *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 154.

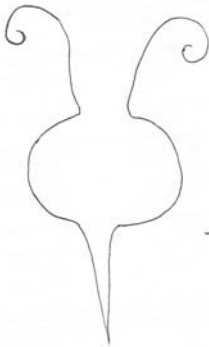
¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

In several experiments, Arnheim asked his students to produce spontaneous scribbles representing specific concepts. One group was instructed to draw *Past, Present, and Future*. Here I reproduce three of the drawings, the first two with explanations added by Arnheim. First, a continuous line. It indicates, Arnheim writes,



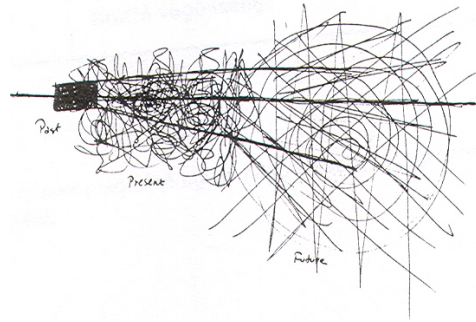
"a straight and perhaps empty past, large and articulate shapes for the present, and

some smaller and vaguer ones for the future. ... the whole of life is represented as an unbroken flow of time." Second, a pattern showing, as Arnheim



interprets it, "gradual expansion, starting with the moment of birth". There is a break maintained "between past and present ... , but the largeness of the present is understood in part as a result of the preceding growth. The undirected roundness of the present interrupts the channeling of time, and yet this static situation in the middle of the drawing is ... traversed by a current of movement initiated in the past and carried further into the open future, as a river flows through a lake." Third, a structurally very different

drawing, with the explanation given by the young draftsman himself: "The *past* is solid and complete, but still influences the present and the future. – The *present* is complex and not only a result of the past and leading to future, thus overlapping both, but is an entity in itself (black dot). – The *future* is least limited but influenced by both, past and present. – One line runs through for all have one common element – time."¹²



2. Arnheim on Gestures and Scribbles

According to Arnheim, far from being arbitrary drawings, scribbles express the very essentials of our thought processes. The argument he offers consists of two basic steps. In the first step, Arnheim relates line drawings to their "forerunners", namely descriptive gestures. He points out that "the portrayal

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 120 ff.

of an object by gesture rarely involves more than some one isolated quality or dimension... By the very nature of the medium of gesture, the representation is highly abstract. ... Often a gesture is so striking because it singles out one feature relevant to the discourse." In the second step, Arnheim suggests that what a descriptive gesture pictures is not primarily a mental image, but rather the motor experience underlying that image. As he writes: "Gestures enact pushing and pulling, penetration and obstacle... the perceptual qualities of shape and motion are present in the very acts of thinking depicted by the gestures and are in fact the medium in which the thinking itself takes place. These perceptual qualities are not necessarily visual or only visual. In gestures, the kinesthetic experiences of pushing, pulling, advancing, obstructing, are likely to play an important part."¹³ What Arnheim says here is, I believe, of paramount importance, since it implies not only that our verbal constructs – direct designations, idioms, metaphors – are meaningful because they convey mental images, but also that those images are given rise to by bodily, physical experiences, by our physical contact with reality. Scribbles depicting the flow of time are telling us something about what time really is. This goes very much beyond the position Lakoff and his school ever ventured to take.

3. Image and Time in Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The locution "figure of thought" is not a household phrase in the Lakoff school. However, the idea of images mediating between words is of course quite central to conceptual metaphor theory.¹⁴ The notion of *image schemas*, not yet present in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, but assuming an essential role by 1987 both in Johnson's *The Body in the Mind*¹⁵ and in Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*,¹⁶ is presented as an explicitly Kantian one,¹⁷ linking perception and reason.¹⁸ Image schemas are abstract visual/conceptual structures, not to be confused, as Johnson and Lakoff again and again emphasize, with full-fledged mental images, actual mental *pictures*. But these latter images also play an increasingly important part in the

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 117 f.

¹⁴ I am deeply indebted to Zoltán Kövecses, one of the most prominent representatives of conceptual metaphor theory, for enlightening conversations on the topic of image and metaphor.

¹⁵ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

¹⁶ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

¹⁷ See *The Body in the Mind*, pp. 21 and 24, and *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, p. 453.

¹⁸ See esp. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, p. 440.

Lakoff–Johnson approach. In *Metaphors We Live By*, the authors come to discuss what they call "two subcases" of the TIME PASSES US metaphor. In one case, they write, "we are moving and time is standing still; in the other, time is moving and we are standing still." These two metaphors, as they put it, "are not consistent (that is, they form no single image)", but they are nonetheless *coherent*, they "fit together".¹⁹ The idea that metaphors can evoke visual images,²⁰ but that "a single consistent concrete image"²¹ will not necessarily emerge when several "coherent but not consistent" metaphors overlap,²² is a recurrent one in *Metaphors We Live By*; but no attempt is made here to establish a systematic connection between metaphor and imagery. By contrast, the topic of images very much comes to the fore in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, most notably in a discussion of what Lakoff calls *imageable idioms*, idioms relying on "conventional images". Lakoff provides an elaborate analysis of the idiom *to keep someone at arm's length*. "I have asked hundreds of people", he writes, "if they have an image associated with this idiom. Almost everyone does, and it is almost always the same image".²³ Then in the 1989 Lakoff–Turner volume *More than Cool Reason* there appears the notion of an "image metaphor". Quoting André Breton's lines "My wife ... Whose waist is an hourglass"²⁴, the authors refer to "a superimposition of the image of an hourglass onto the image of a woman's waist by virtue of their common shape. ... the metaphor is conceptual; it is not in the words themselves. ... the locus of the metaphor is [a] mental image."²⁵ The 1999 Lakoff–Johnson book *Philosophy in the Flesh* has a subchapter on "Metaphorical Idioms and Mental Imagery", describing a cognitive pattern where words evoke images that carry specific, conventional knowledge;²⁶ metaphorical idioms as imageable idioms are, no doubt, fundamental *Denkfiguren*. The book *Philosophy in the Flesh* is also where we encounter Lakoff and Johnson's most elaborate treatment of the philosophical problem of time. As they sum up the issue, "it is virtually impossible for us to conceptualize time without metaphor. ... Most of our understanding of

¹⁹ George Lakoff – Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 44.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. *ibid.*, p. 168.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²³ *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, p. 447.

²⁴ Translation by David Antin.

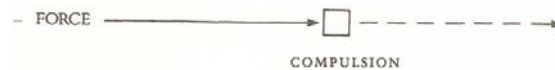
²⁵ George Lakoff – Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 90, cf. p. 93.

²⁶ George Lakoff – Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, pp. 67 ff.

time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space."²⁷ Hence "spatial metaphor for time" is part of our "cognitive unconscious" that structures, Lakoff and Johnson write, "not only the way we conceptualize the relationship between events and time but the very way we experience time".²⁸ However, the authors do not seem to have the courage of their convictions. They conclude that "we cannot take the commonsense understanding of time at face value from a cognitive perspective", and that the question "does time exist independent of minds?" should be rejected, rather than answered along the lines common-sense metaphors would suggest.²⁹ It is this conclusion I venture to take issue with.

4. The Reality of Time

In their 1980 book, Lakoff and Johnson had already emphasized that the ultimate source of our fundamental metaphors are the experiences we have with physical objects, especially the experiences relating to our own bodies.³⁰ By 1987, their stress on the role of the kinesthetic, the motor, had become even more pronounced. Lakoff, in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, points out that "much of mental imagery is kinesthetic – that is, it is independent of sensory modality and concerns awareness of many aspects of functioning in space: orientation, motion, balance, shape judgments, etc.", and that the same holds even more for "image schemas, which are sufficiently general in character to be prime candidates for having a kinesthetic nature".³¹ Johnson, in *The Body in the Mind*, defined image schemas as "recurring, dynamic pattern[s] of our perceptual interactions and motor programs",³² offering, as an example, the COMPULSIVE FORCE schema, underlining that the concept "force" emerges from our *bodily experience* of force, from our encountering obstacles that exert force on us, from "the experience of being moved by external forces, such as wind, water, physical objects, and other people",³³ the experience that, say, "[w]hen a crowd starts pushing, you are moved ... by a force you seem un-



²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154 and 167.

³⁰ *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 25.

³¹ *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, p. 446.

³² *The Body in the Mind*, p. xiv.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

able to resist",³⁴ and from our experience that we too can exert force on, in some cases even penetrate through, the objects resisting us. I believe that our experience of *the passing of time*, too, amounts to an experiencing of some external force. We are all acquainted with what can without exaggeration be called the feeling of brute muscular tensions when struggling against time.³⁵ I suggest that a plausible metaphor to associate with the COMPULSIVE FORCE schema might be this one: THE PASSAGE OF TIME IS A PHYSICAL FORCE.

The passage of time means that the present becomes past, and that the future becomes present. However, the second part of this formula is misleading. The future, strictly speaking, does not exist. Instead of saying that the future becomes present, we should say that ever new presents come into being, or, still more precisely, that so far as the course of our own life is involved, ever new presents are created by us. Creating new presents is what struggling with time means. Metaphorically speaking, creating the future requires physical force.

Let us now come back to Wittgenstein's drawing on the flow of consciousness and/or the flow of time. Another of his remarks may help us interpret this drawing. "It is strange", he wrote in 1930, "that in ordinary life we are not troubled by the feeling that the phenomenon is slipping away from us, the constant flux of appearance, but only when we philosophize. ... The feeling we have is that the present disappears into the past without our being able to prevent it."³⁶ What we see in the drawing, then, is the present represented as a vertical line, with the horizontal lines, moving to the left, representing the present as changing into an ever more distant past. The later Wittgenstein became increasingly unhappy with the flow of time metaphor; he came to see it as an instance of the sickness of language that philosophy amounts to. I believe he was wrong. I very much agree with what Walter Mesch says: "talk about the passage of time is in no way restricted to philosophers ..., but is in many variants an element of everyday language... This would hardly be understandable if it would not express experiences one can make in everyday life".³⁷

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ I have treated this issue in some detail in my paper "Film, Metaphor, and the Reality of Time", *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 109–118.

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, § 52.

³⁷ "[D]ie Rede vom Vergehen der Zeit [ist] keineswegs auf Philosophen beschränkt ..., sondern [findet] in der gewöhnlichen Sprache in vielen Varianten Verwendung... Dies dürfte kaum zu verstehen sein, wenn darin nicht Erfahrungen Ausdruck verliehen wäre, die man im gewöhnlichen Leben machen kann." (Walter Mesch, "Wittgenstein über das Vergehen der Zeit", in Uwe Meixner and Peter Simons (eds.), *Metaphysik*

So what are these experiences? I am coming to the conclusion of my talk. Let me sum up my argument by saying that the metaphor of the flow of time is a specific, complex, *Denkfigur*, synthesizing the experience of the passage of time as a physical force on the one hand, and the experience of the present as gradually receding into the past on the other. Both these experiences are veridical. The metaphor of the *flow of time* is a figure of thought expressing, in a unique way, an aspect of reality itself.