

RELATIVITY OF METAPHORICAL SUBJECT WITH SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN THE PRODUCTION OF VISUAL ARTS

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ABSTRACT

The use of metaphors in artwork production is a common tool employed by artists in delivering ideas and current issues throughout contemporary arts. Metaphor as a method to explain and visualize a meaning for an artwork in simple and concise form that is visually easy to decipher, as well as a method for symbolized representation. It is an effective tool in proposing an idea in a creative, narrated manner. The use of metaphor as a tool must always be parallel with the choice of subject and meaning intended in order to produce consistent message, for a more critical analysis to be possible. Every artist employing such method should always be concise in its execution and object implementation.

Keywords: Metaphor, Symbolic, Visual Arts

INTRODUCTION

The word metaphor is derived from Greek, “to transfer”. It means an object or item that is used as a form of symbol towards a narrative or theme intended in a particular work of art. The use of metaphors and its selection must therefore be in accordance with a certain storytelling device or narrative that is chosen by the author, in order for the comparative meaning to be useful (Donald Davidson, 1978). Third Edition of Kamus Dewan (2000) published by DBP defines metaphor (malay: metafora) as the use of words that represents a certain meaning that is different from the superficial or conventional meaning of the device, as a form of symbol or comparative meaning. I.A Richards (1936) defines metaphors as having two distinct parts: “tenor” and “Vehicle”. “Tenor” contains the main subject with the qualities and narrative intended for delivery, while “Vehicle” is a certain object that was chosen to lend a representation towards the main subject, usually because it shares some similar qualities with the main subject. In the case of an artist using metaphors in visual works of art, metaphors can happen as the work itself could act as a vehicle inspired by the author to exemplify a certain narrative.

TYPES OF METAPHOR

According to Martin (2010), the use of metaphors in art could be summarized into few categories. Among them are “extended metaphor”, “mixed metaphor”, “dead metaphor”, and “synecdoche metaphor”. All of these metaphor types have their own characteristics, with few significant differences among them. “Extended metaphor” is often symbolized by a main character with any numbers of subject or expectations. It represents a storytelling quality with a major and minor character going in parallel. “Mixed metaphor” is a shift from the first introduction of a metaphorical meaning, often inconsistent with the first meaning. Metaphors of this type often in risk of confusing the audiences or the resulting work. In a “dead metaphor”, there is no attempt for image change. It often only uses

physical action in order to convey an intended meaning. A “synecdoche metaphor” is often part of a larger whole that is chose to represent a partial element of a larger work or lore. The choice for this type of metaphor must often contain qualities and characteristics similar to the storytelling subject intended, or having similarities in visual elements relative to the whole visual piece.

All of the aforementioned metaphor types could be summarized as having their own specialisation or use-case, depending what that is trying to be achieved. Category such as extended metaphors is often found in allegories in which a certain placeholder element is used to represent a certain subject with abstract meaning. Extended metaphors, on the other hand, are often found in parables in which the metaphors are used as a device to propagate moral values, and could be used as an effective teaching tool. Mixed metaphors and dead metaphors, however, are seldom used in a context for visual art, as it is easy to dissociate the viewer from the theme and thus create inconsistencies as well as general confusion.

METHODOLOGY

The method of this research is descriptive qualitative by collecting data, analyse, interpret and explanation of data. The conclusion will be based on this research results. This qualitative research is will be use to discuss the problem of research using the metaphor subject by the artist in producing visual artworks.

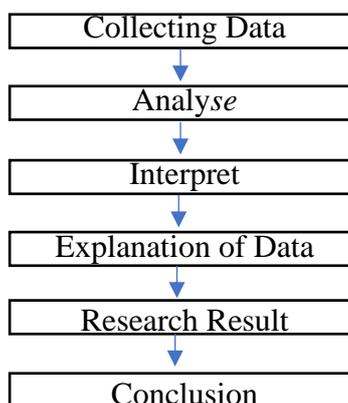


Figure 1. Qualitative Research Method Flow.

Analysis of Artwork: The Relation of Metaphors in Visual Arts

Among artists that heavily uses metaphors in their works is Prof. Jalaini Abu Hassan. He is known for heavy use of visual objects as metaphors in order to present his narrative. Among objects frequently used are local floras and traditional Malay tools with accompanying accoutrements. Examples are Kantan buds, shellfish, ferns, coconut grinder, Cockerel, coconut palms, rubber trees, traditional wooden Malay houses and more (Azman Ibrahim, 1999). Local Malay artists were often observed to use traditional Malay parables and sayings as a form of metaphor in their paintings. The conscious use of metaphors signifies the artist’s awareness towards contemporary socio-political issues, and at the same time applying its meaning and implementation in a metaphorical form. It would often also serve as a personal symbol in storytelling, which would almost always, tells a personal experience as well as the mark of a certain cultural experience. Examples by this artist could serve as a clever form of documentation on relevant contemporary issues relevant to the period of the work’s execution.



Figure 2. Jalaini Abu Hassan, *Setandan Kaseh Bunga Hati*, 84 cm x 59 cm, 2020, Mixed media on paper. (Image Source : KLAS Art Auction).

Apart from paintings, ceramic and installation works by Umibaizurah Mahir presents an ample instance for the use of metaphors. Among the subjects used are animal such as giraffe, elephant, rabbit, birds, dogs, fishes; as well as fauna such as bitter gourds and still objects such as dolls and toys. According to Noor Mahnun Mohamed (2018), the use of dogs as subject refers to qualities such as loyalty and friendship while the use of elephants signifies dignity. All the selection for metaphorical elements had been carefully chosen by the artist to reflect issues such as love, honesty and fidelity in the humanistic context of politics and economy. The use of such imagery is clearly stated in its three-dimensional form, even though artistic license had been applied in extending and modifying the original image source towards a more dramatic approach. This explains its final form that resembles toys and play figures. Ho Kay Tat (2016) remarked that the subject of giraffe and vegetables in the artist's solo show "Fragile" symbolizes individual or families that are experiencing financial difficulties, and their willingness to part with cherished possessions in order to survive.



Figure 3. Umibaizurah Mahir, *The Orchard*, 2015 - 2016, 77cm x 36cm x 36cm, Ceramic and mixed media (Image Source: Fragile By Umibaizurah Recent Works 2015 - 2016, 2016).

Another example for artist would be Ahmad Zakii Anwar. Zakii is an artist known for his innuendos and use of metaphors to represent critique on social issues, humanities, and general commentaries about life. His series of still life's using fruits arranged in suggestive fashion is known to imply such a method. Anurendra Jegadeva (2008) writes that Zakii's use of still objects such as vase and antique ceramics represents his sensitivity towards values such as love and a mysterious understanding towards life. Such a choice is an emotional one on part of the artist. The artist defines his work as having its own opinion on thoughts. He also defined the use of fruits as a metaphor for fertility and perfection. It is known that he tends to gravitate towards autobiographical in the choice of subjects. Any metaphorical subjects is just a tool to express any thought by the artist as an intellectual response towards his observation on immediate surroundings (Eddin Khoo, 2008).



Figure 4. Ahmad Zakii Anwar, *Untitled*, 2002, 64 cm x 53 cm, Acrylic on Canvas
(Image Source: KL Lifestyle).

A Bangkok based artist, Natee Utarit prefers to use arrangements of objects in a single composition as his choice of metaphors. Among objects used are animals such as birds, rabbits, ducks, dogs, snakes, goats and others. These metaphors are arranged carefully among other components in order to create a more dramatic result and also act as an interesting storytelling method. According to Natee Utarit (2018), animals were chosen as a main subject as a form of observation toward social context in his works. The use of animals as a metaphor is a common usage applied by artist in Asian and Western Art. For the artist, the animals chosen is a representation of humanistic qualities aside from recording a certain event and connotations, such as religious symbolism (Natee Utarit, 2018).



Figure 5. Natee Utarit, *Everything is Politics*, 2012, 160 cm x 140 cm, Oil paint on Linen
(Image Source: The National Art Gallery & Richard Koh Fine Art).

Ahmad Shukri Mohamad is another well-known Malaysian artist that utilizes metaphors in his works. He is known to heavily imply symbols in a pop-art aesthetic. Though western in influence, the elements used clearly implies local references. As with common in contemporary pieces, his metaphors often touch on socio-political issues as well as concerns on humanities. Among subject most often touched by the artist is the issue on nature and its relation with the political sphere of influence in Malaysia. Elements of western and local understanding of visuals are often intertwined and exists together in his works.



Figure 6. Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, *Wall Paper Series "Wing of Paradise"*, 2010, 122 cm x 122cm,
Mixed Media on Canvas (Image source: Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers).

Ahmad Shukri is known for his careful use of subjects, such that it is easy to be digested and accepted by the general audience. In his target series (1993-1998) and Diskette Series (1996-1998), the artist could be seen to heavily use the image of butterflies as his metaphorical element. The placing of butterflies in the visual frame brings to mind the arrangements of butterfly specimens in a preserved box as a naturalist would often do, implying its status as a commercialized souvenir. This is an image

that is easily recognized by the audience. The artist remarked that “Why should butterflies be killed and serve as accessories, would it not be better if they are to be left flying free” (Lukis & Idea, 2006). Helen Peters, through the publication of Lukis & Idea (2006), remarked that:

*“Butterflies are free – so do not catch them, cage them, stuff them, commercialize them!
This is what artist Ahmad Shukri seems to be saying through his work”.*

This seems to imply that Helen Ann Peters was in agreement with Ahmad Shukri’s presentation of his theme, that it carries a deeper meaning towards the understanding of human nature and its response towards nature; of its tendency to disregard the nature of the species as another part of nature to be left in its own state. The extended meaning to the use of butterflies could also be said to embody the struggle for longevity. In his Diskette series (1998), the artist shifts his attention towards the modern development of technology. This is coupled with the humanistic response of technology towards the natural elements. In this series, the images of diskettes replaced butterflies. The commentary is similar, but now with different imagery as a stand in for his metaphors. Based on the similar principal, the artist continued his work towards the Target Series (1993/1996), Barcode series (1996/1997), Tribute to Butterflies (1998) and Diskette Series (1998). All of these works follow a certain theme that is visualized as metaphors according to his choice.

Another local artist that follows the practice of visual metaphors is Din Omar. Din Omar employed a lot of traditional elements as a stand in for his metaphors. Muliyadi Mahamood (2006) describes Din Omar as an innovative artist that made excellent use of local symbolisms and storytelling. It is clear that Din Omar employed the method of applying metaphors towards his visual elements. The elements used throughout are consistent with local narratives and qualities – often referring to the traditional community spirit and togetherness. An author is never be able to not give meaning towards any that they visually represent (Ahmad Rashidi Hasan, 2006). An author is always in the act finding meaning to their elements. This symbolic representation could be categorized into Conventional symbols or Individual symbols. A conventional symbol is a symbol that is readily understood by the general audience, while individual symbols are visual elements that are specific to a certain artist or author. Din Omar could be said to employ conventional symbolisms as he is fond of using symbols that are readily understood and familiar to the general public. This could be clearly seen in his work titled “Nasi Bungkus: Antara Dua Hidangan” (Packed rice: between two meals). Muliyadi Mahamood, in his book “Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia” (Malaysian Modern Paintings) remarked that Din Omar had elevated the local subject towards a new storytelling level that relates to the local context. This particular work is considered successful for its use of difference between western and eastern elements; seen as happening during a sit-down dinner session familiar to the local practice. Visual objects such as “tikar mengkuang” (Mengkuang carpet), finger washing bowl and kettle, as well as western elements such as spoons, forks, cups and plates. This could be interpreted as the clash of multiple cultural elements that could be observed and happening during a typical local dinner session.



Figure 7. Din Omar, “Nasi Bungkus: Antara Dua Hidangan”, 1991, 214 cm x 107 cm, Mixed Media on Canvas (Image Source: Seni lukis Moden Malaysia).

Din Omar applied multiple metaphors in order to better convey a language that is universally understood in his cultural sphere. The decision to use “Nasi Bungkus” was a conscious one, as the artist believe it to be an intimate element relevant to his society (Seni Lukis dan Idea, 2006). It could also carry a meaning of prosperousness and “Rezeki” or material blessing for the members of community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Donald Davidson (1978), metaphors do not rely solely on its meaning, but rather also on its method of use. The use of metaphors in artworks often serve as an illustration for the topic at hand, in order to stimulate critical analysis and visual engagement for the particular work. This depends on how effective the author utilizes said metaphor in order to better illustrate their point of view and storytelling course. Metaphors also serve as a most often used method for synonyms and its delivery in visual arts. It could be seen as a method of communication better suited for nuanced delivery - a cushioning of sorts for harsh meanings, particularly in cases of moral parables. It would be an excellent method in implying cynical language meant for commentaries, perhaps particularly better exemplified in the use of metaphorical subjects in visual arts. (Hamidah Abdul hamid, 1995). It is therefore paramount for artists to be selective in their choice of metaphors, to avoid unnecessary connotation of sensitive subjects, and also to make sure the choice of vehicle suits the narrative. The correct use of metaphorical elements could provide a strong impact for critical appreciation and encourage debate and further discussion. It could also better serve the meaning intended for a particular piece, rather than diluting it. In I.A Richards' "The Philosophy of Rhetoric", he remarked that Aristotle considers metaphors to be a special and higher form of language, with its attempt to provide indirect meaning than normally implied. Aristotle sees metaphors as a form of camouflage for a true meaning, and serves as an implication of a real meaning. This views metaphor as a vehicle for unspoken or unspeakable words – meanings that are not able to be conveyed directly. Aristotle's views influenced Max Black (1954) and Monroe Beardsley (1962) to see metaphors as an effective use for comparative meanings. According to Max Black, metaphor is a process of comparing meanings and referencing subjects separately, but in unison it achieved a balance of representation by means of comparison. This is a former acknowledgement towards the unity of object as metaphors and meaning as a complimentary form. The use of metaphors must therefore be considered carefully before execution in order to better achieve such effect.

CONCLUSION

The involvement of artists in Malaysian contemporary art could be seen clearly and concisely through their use of metaphors in their respective works. The choice of subjects could reflect a positive understanding towards symbolical meaning and messages that they try to convey. By scrutinising these metaphors, researchers could better interpret their works and their decision in applying metaphorical elements. It is entirely up to the artists to apply or choose the desired metaphors and further rearrange them to suit a certain storytelling narrative that is consistent with the intent of the artwork.

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