
Rethinking Metaphor

Fredric V. Bogel, *A Theory of Metaphor. Truth, Falsity, and the Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2025)

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Among the diverse studies that have explored the complexity of metaphor, that of Fredric Bogel, Professor Emeritus at Cornell University, *A Theory of Metaphor. Truth, Falsity, and the Uncanny*, distinguishes itself through the innovative viewpoint according to which metaphor is not a comparison but an expression of identity which incorporates the notions of truth and falsity, as well as the Freudian concept of ‘the uncanny’.

F. Bogel starts his book by illustrating the most relevant semantic values given to metaphor throughout time, with the implicit aim of explaining the basis on which he founds his original theory. For instance, metaphors are interpreted as: the modality of acquiring knowledge (Aristotle), the flowing movement of an idea, like a dance (Paul Valéry), the means of reflecting the endless play of meaning, generating a vast range of philosophical concepts (Derrida), the ubiquitous principle of language (I.A. Richards), or as the way to bring purpose into the world (K. Burke). The vast array of opinions on metaphor leads F. Bogel to the predictable question whether a compact yet detailed study of such an intricate and multifaceted phenomenon can be achieved. Various literary, linguistic, rhetorical or philosophical approaches to metaphor regarding its function and role within different cultural contexts have produced valuable results, but seem to be less sufficient in grasping the essence of the metaphor. According to F. Bogel, a powerful strategy to approach metaphor is to isolate one of its essential and constitutive features and follow it out from a simpler to a broader or more complex focus. This strategy proved its efficiency in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790),

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where the repeatedly return to a single conceptual core – the tension between abstract reason and historical, social circumstances – using vivid imagery, allowed for greater depth, coherence and clarity.

F. Bogel's declared aim in examining the notion of metaphor is to develop a method similar to Burke's, therefore to begin by describing the metaphor's "heart" or conceptual center. In F. Bogel's opinion, this conceptual core has two elements, the first being the structure of metaphor as a statement of identity (A is B). The connection between the two constituents of a metaphor - the *tenor* and the *vehicle*, in I.A. Richardson terms – are implied or explicit, the first element entailing the second one. According to F. Bogel, metaphors may display falsity, not only truth. His idea of falsity was inspired by the 18th century Anglican bishop, Joseph Butler, according to whom each thing is *what it is*, not something else, this assertion being in contrast with the claim of metaphor that one thing is another. If metaphor, as an assertion of identity that is simultaneously true and false (A is B, but A is also not B), invokes something new and surprising, it may be *uncanny*. The interplays between truth and falsity in a metaphor, along with the vividness, the concreteness, the novelty and the indirectness brought by metaphors in a discourse are skillfully rendered through short but dense analyses of the examples taken from the works of E. Dickinson, Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, to mention but a few. The first chapter concludes with an investigation of the similarities and differences between metaphors and similes; F. Bogel's assumption, after drawing on theorists such as Jakobson, Brooke-Rose, Blackmur and Burke is that metaphors assert identity, functioning mainly on an ontological level and reshaping phenomena, while similes merely compare things.

In the second chapter, F. Bogel discusses metaphor as a modality of knowing, as well as a temporal and experiential process that unfolds gradually, creating new realities and reshaping the way in which we think. Relying on theories devised by Ricoeur, Goodman, Empson, Barany, Levin, Stevens, F. Bogel analyzes the way in which metaphors alter language and adjust our perception of reality itself.

The third chapter combines medieval typology, Christian theological concepts and theoretical notions on metaphor. The pattern of metaphor mirrors that of Christian thought where the reciprocity rather than hierarchy prevails in the relationship between the figure and the fulfillment, each completing the other while still preserving its distinct identity. The tenor and the vehicle, or the container and the contained, the inner and the outer retain their own identity while enhancing the overall significance. They are all essential components of meaning.

Chapter four is structured around the idea that metaphor generates meaning through the interaction between the tenor and the vehicle, the old and the innovative. The tenor encompasses historical, cultural features, while the vehicle brings novelty and imagination. F. Bogel illustrates these aspects through Fielding's satire, or through Shelley's poetical redefinition of the natural phenomena, or through St. Augustine showing that, in a metaphor, falsity enables the truth.

In Chapter five, F. Bogel refers to the longstanding debate over truth and falsity in literature, tracing from Plato's critique of poetry to Renaissance and modern theorists. While Plato feared that poetry could arise irrational passion and behaviour, the Renaissance writers appreciated the imaginative and creative power of poetry and its capacity to imbue the world of fiction with greater depth, making it more than simple imitation of life.

The next chapter offers a challenging exploration of the way in which literature makes use of the imaginative falsity to brighten human experience, trying to show that the most profound truth occurs only from the impossible. Bogel provides a large range of examples to illustrate this idea: the Martian narrator created by Craig Raine to defamiliarize humanity, Ted Hughes uses the voice of animals to disclose the human egocentricity, Randall Jarell reveals the horror of war through a posthumous narrator, Charles Johnstone resorts to an inanimate narrator, the effect being the satiric view of human life, while Diderot uses magical narrators to convey hidden truths. Moreover, F. Bogel provides theoretical approaches from Blackwell, Beardsley, Fried, Vaihinger and Wittgenstein.

Chapter seven illustrates the metaphor's uncanny facets oscillating from self to otherness, balancing familiarity and strangeness, bringing into analysis a large number of authors, such as Coleridge, Ricoeur, Punter, Jaynes, Cassirer, Black, Percy, Freud, and their views upon the interaction between the tenor and the vehicle.

Chapter eight brings into discussion the metaphor, the doubleness and the uncanny. Metaphor is more than a simple association of terms; it is a continuous movement between them. This movement influences the relations between the tenor and the vehicle, as well as the tenor relation to itself, but also proves the transformative power that metaphor may contain. The idea of metaphor as opening ways to new forms of understanding is illustrated in the ingenious analysis of *Star Trek: The Next Generation – Darmok*, where metaphor is a means used for connection, shaping the way in which we understand ourselves and others.

Chapter nine deals with the concept of uncanny both in

metaphor and psychoanalysis. The uncanny in metaphor means the presence of an unfamiliar element that causes disruption and reorganization in the way we perceive the world, while, in psychoanalysis, the uncanny emerges from the return of the repressed trauma. The author conveys the idea that the power of the uncanny in metaphor lies in its dual ability to deconstruct and to renew the meaning, as well as the cultural and linguistic structures.

Chapter ten explores the way in which metaphor, an assertion of identity that is simultaneously true and false, is experienced not only cognitively, but also affectively. Metaphor is seen as containing both order and disorder, mystery and contradiction, even impurity as it brings forth the idea of otherness. The last chapter analyzes the notion of impurity and its diverse manifestations in art, philosophy and language. Impurity is regarded as having a great creative force that may lead to more profound understanding of reality.

F. Bogel's book reveals the complexities of metaphor, its ability to disclose and conceal meaning, to disrupt and reconstruct linguistic and cultural realities. Through his original endeavor, F. Bogel succeeds not only in reshaping the theory of metaphor, but also in reasserting the essential role metaphor plays in the way in which we communicate and perceive the world.