Understanding the metaphoricity of artworks with MUCADA
(Multimodal Critical Analysis of Discourse of Art)

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A linguist walks into a museum

multimodal
cognitive
linguistic
approach
towards the
analysis of
3D artworks

http://museumgifs.tumblr.com
AIMS

MUCADA explained

CMT — Social-Semiotics — DHA

comparing researcher’s perspective with respondents’ perspective

AIMS

analysis and discussion on challenges
MUCADA - Multimodal Critical Analysis of Discourse of Art

DHA

Social Semiotics

CMT
"[a] transindividual semiotic form of social practice that is regulated by social conventions and that is both socially constituted and socially constitutive."

(Fairclough 1993: 63)
MUCADA - Conceptual Metaphor Theory

analyzing figurativeness of *artworks* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999, Dancygier and Sweetser 2014, Forceville 2011, 2013, El Rafaie 2015) which I examine along 3 levels of figurative meaning-making (Kwiatkowska 2013)
MUCADA - Discourse Historical Approach

4 layers of context allow me to analyze the discourse that surrounds the artwork (Reisigl and Wodak 2009)
Social Semiotics

3 meaning making functions of artworks (O’Toole 2011, O’Halloran 2008)
MUCADA - Multimodal Critical Analysis of Discourse of Art

- DHA
- Social Semiotics
- CMT

4 layers of context by Reisigl and Wodak 2009

3 meaning making functions of artworks (O’Toole 2011)

3 levels of figurative meaning-making (Kwiatkowska 2013)
Kwiatkowska (2013) and 3 levels of figurativeness of verbo-visual metaphor

- **figurative in general** (artwork + title)
- **figurative in component parts** (artwork + info on dimensions and materials + )
- **figurative in totality** (artwork + expert comment + info from outside the catalog, e.g. biography of the artist)

(Kwiatkowska 2013: 63-73)
Charlie Lucas, 1988
*Old Wheel Don't Roll No More*
Welded found metal (58 x 22 x 17 inches)

"Our ancestors used the great knowledge. It's up to us to be diggin' and scratchin' to bring that knowledge back. Circles and wheels were very important to them as signs. . . . a lot of people didn't know what the heck was going on, but those circles and wheels always ended up in my work. A lot of roots were planted. It was much deeper than people can imagine." —Charlie Lucas

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Kwiatkowska (2013) and 3 levels of figurativeness of verbo-visual metaphor
Reisigl and Wodak (2009) and 4 layers of context of discourse

- The linguistic (semiotic) level of co-text
- The intertextual and interdiscursive level
- Social context of the situation (producer-recipient interaction)
- Broad socio-political and historical macro-context

(Reisigl and Wodak 2009)
O’Toole (2011) and 3 functions of meaning making in artworks

- **Representational function** — abstract or concrete figure, object, place or event, either mythical, historical or contemporary
- **Modal function** — features such as perspective, framing, highlighting that attract viewers
- **Compositional function** — geometrical interplay of pieces vectors within the frame

(O’Toole 2011)
An example model analysis

- **ARTWORK**
- title + author + the year of production + materials + size
- information from outside the museum or the exhibition catalog
- short description of the artwork found in a museum or exhibition catalogue (expert comment)
An example model analysis

1st layer context

- title + author + the year of production + materials + size

ARTWORK

representational function
An example model analysis

1st layer context:
- title + author + the year of production + materials + size

ARTWORK

representational function
An example model analysis

1. 1st layer context
   - title + author + the year of production + materials + size

2. 3rd layer context
   - short description of the artwork found in a museum or exhibition catalogue (expert comment)

ARTWORK

- representational function
- compositional function
An example model analysis

1st layer context:
- title + author + the year of production + materials + size

3rd layer context:
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ARTWORK
- representational function
- compositional function
An example model analysis

1. 1st layer context
   - title + author + the year of production + materials + size

2. 3rd layer context
   - short description of the artwork found in a museum or exhibition catalogue (expert comment)

3. 2nd and 4th layers context
   - information from outside the museum or the exhibition catalog

- representational function
- modal function
- compositional function
An example model analysis

1st layer context

- title + author + the year of production + materials + size

3rd layer context

- short description of the artwork found in a museum or exhibition catalogue (expert comment)

ARTWORK

representational function

compositional function

nodal function

2nd and 4th layers context

information from outside the museum or the exhibition catalog
• The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and Alabama Contemporary Art Center’s exhibition (March 14 and May 31, 2015)

Reception study

Q: to what extent the model of meaning-making resulting from a semiotic analysis (analyst’s perspective) correlates with the meaning as constructed by the visitors to the exhibition (recipient’s perspective).

analyst’s perspective VS recipient’s perspective
Reception study

- 100 respondents
- students of English
- dimensions only
- three questions:
  1. What do you think or feel when you look at the artwork? **MODAL**
  2. What do you think this artwork represents? What makes you think so? **REPRESENTATIONAL**
  3. Which parts of the artwork are the most important according to you? Why? What do they represent? **COMPOSITIONAL**

*Old Wheel Don’t Roll No More* by Charlie Lucas (1988). Welded found metal (147 x 56 x 43 cm).
“I think that the artwork looks like an old invention, which was meant to be used for something a long time ago. The artwork represents old machinery parts which were used by people in the past. You can see that there are old, rusty elements. It is hard to tell which parts are the most important because the piece is made of many elements which altogether form a whole. However, you might say that the wheel is the most important. Because it is the biggest and it catches the attention. It reminds me of an old bike wheel.”
“I think: engineering, machines, steampunk, bicycle, screws, parts, peculiarity. I feel a bit of amusement, sympathy, concern and a bit of anxiety, because of the fact that the installation has a fairly humane shape, but it is built of machine parts. I think it represents a human who tries to lift something up, and that something is a part of him/her, it’s attached to him/her and is made of same material. Maybe it represents loss, adherence, work, effort? Maybe this work and effort interpretation is influenced by the parts which remind of a garage. It’s hard to keep my eyes off the “head” of the piece which has adorable wholes, like eyes, which do not express anything special, as if that “person” was not aware and could not care less about what is happening around him/her. What catches my attention is the rusty sprocket right at the “heart” of the art piece, probably due to it jagged edges which stand out among the smooth lines.”
"The artwork makes we think futuristic thoughts about robots. (...) It resembles a fairly primitive, but accurate, creative and symbolic, a sculpture of a man. Undoubtedly, it is the top part of the piece which is the most important. In my opinion, it symbolizes the human brain, which is the most amazing computer on Earth. What points to such reading is the fact that this part reminds me of some sort of a mechanism. A horrible fact is that this element seems to be obsolete. I really hope that a human being itself will not be only an obsolete prototype of something else."
Reception study - first takeaway

**QUESTION:** is step-by-step analysis of MUCADA relevant to the viewers’ experience and reflected in their verbalized responses?

**IDEA:** meaning construction takes place through dynamic interaction on all of the described levels simultaneously, where art’s functions come together in most diverse configurations.

**CHALLENGE:** how to create such a model of analysis that would resemble the more natural flow of interpretation
Reception study - analysis

researcher’s perspective:

1. HUMAN IS OBJECT, HUMAN IS MACHINE
2. BODY PARTS ARE MACHINE PARTS, AGING IS RUST, WHEEL IS MOVEMENT
3. DEVELOPMENT IS MOVEMENT, MOTIONLESSNESS IS DECAY, AGING IS USELESSNESS, OLD PERSON IS A BROKEN MACHINE

respondents’ perspective:

1. HUMAN IS MACHINE, HUMAN IS CONSTRUCTION, WORK AND EFFORT ARE MACHINE, HUMAN IS MUSICAL INSTRUMENT
2. HUMAN PARTS ARE MACHINE PARTS, WORK IS MECHANICAL ELEMENTS, EYES ARE ABILITY TO CHOOSE, PASSING IS RUST, WHEEL IS MOVEMENT + series of metonymies: holes for eyes, sprocket for heart, chain for enslavement, chain for human spine, wheels for legs, head for thinking
3. NEW LIFE IS NEW FUNCTIONS, SOCIETY IS MECHANISM, PEOPLE ARE PARTS OF THE MECHANISM, SOCIAL HIERARCHY IS DIFFERENCES IN VOLUME AND PLACEMENT OF PARTS OF A MACHINE, CIVILIZATION IS PROCESSED METAL
**QUESTION:** does the contextual information that comes from outside the art piece narrows the possible range of meanings?

**IDEA:** personal experience and knowledge, as well as embodied cognition play a crucial role in the interpretation of artworks

**CHALLENGE:** will the viewers narrow down their interpretations when given access to fourth layer of contextual information
Challenges

- less prompting, but different kinds of contextual information in experimental research
- more natural flow of the MUCADA
- future respondents should be surveyed for specific information
- study has to be conducted in the museum-setting, in order to account for the compositional function as well as modal function, and avoid the problem of resemiotization
Thank you

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