Figuration across artistic texts – master tropes in language and the visual arts

The presentation takes up the issue – discussed for several decades by theoreticians of art (cf. Gombrich 1996, Crowther 2009), practitioners of artistic semiotics (Porębski 1980/2009, Wysłouch 1994/2009) and stylisticians (Mayenowa 1974/2000, Ziomek 1974, Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 2012, 2015 forthcoming) – whether verbal and visual texts (in the broad semiotic understanding of this term) can be claimed to draw from common resources. A natural candidate for such an integrational category is style, and among the stylistic devices figuration seems to play an inestimable role in the creation of textual coherence.

The author intends to focus on master tropes, the leading semantic figures, which – as reflections of creative conceptualization – shape artistic verbal texts. The author supports the claim about their presence in the fine arts, and specifically in painting and sculpture, where they belong to text-forming strategies, on analogy to verbal texts. Thus, it will be argued that the neo-classical tetrad of metaphor-metonymy-synecdoche-irony (cf. Vico 1744/1984, Burke 1954/1962, White 1978/1985) should also be discernible in the visual media. If this is the case, then figuration can be claimed to be a multimodal category in itself, whereas its presence in verbal and non-verbal texts is a realization of intermediality (convergence of the arts).

The proposed tetrad of master tropes is an extension of a limiting cognitivist approach to figuration through the metaphor-metonymy opposition (with its roots in R. Jakobson’s figurative dichotomy). It is also worth considering a somewhat different set of three large figures proposed by Y. M. Lotman (1970/1977), as present in artistic texts: 1) metaphor (including metonymy), 2) opposition (contrast) and 3) repetition (cf. Shukman 1977: 50). The author agrees that opposition, known as antithesis in traditional rhetoric, should be added to the list of master tropes as one of basic ways of perceiving and cognizing the world. This agrees with Lotman’s (2007/2008) arguments about the importance of binary oppositions in the structuring of semiotic space. Repetition, a figure of form and an important cohesive device rather than a trope proper, has a different status in stylistic description but is, undoubtedly, important in visual texts.
Selected References:


