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Light as a visual source domain for the divine in the 17th century painting

The aim of this paper is to explain the motivation behind the creation of religious visual art in which light plays the role of the signifier of divine presence. We will endeavor to show that representations of light in paintings from a particular socio-cultural period and context are based on metaphorization. The meaning that arises from this metaphorization establishes a connection between depicted light and the basic conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING. Our aim is to show that the understanding of these kinds of representations by the viewer as the presence of the divine is based on the fundamental human capacity to conceptualize abstract notions through concrete ones. We propose that a visual representation of light would not be completely understandable if the viewer did not possess an inherent knowledge of basic conceptual metaphors of light. The visual material selected for this article comprises samples of 17th century religious paintings of the Western artistic tradition, in which light serves as the primary carrier of divine meaning and the central element of the composition. Our proposition is based on the conjoining of two disciplines into an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing paintings from the Baroque period. The selected theoretical framework includes Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the conceptualization of abstract notions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994; 2008; Kövecses 2005; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Sharifian 2011; Raffaelli 2012; Forceville 2017), as well as art-historical insights into the utilization of pictorial elements of light in the formal visual language of the Baroque (Haskell 1963; Lambert 2007; Toman 2007; Cvetnić 2007). The significance of this kind of research lies in the prospects of interdisciplinary approaches to concepts in general. This combina-



tion of scientific perspectives could enable us to approach the concept of *light* from a wider perspective, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the concept, its use in human communication, and its significance for the structuring of the knowledge of the world by an individual, but also by the wider socio-cultural collective to which they belong.

Key words: light; conceptual metaphor theory; conceptualization; socio-cultural context; collective memory.

1. Introduction

In the theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics, the concept of *light* is considered to be one of the basic concepts used by humans. It can be understood as a physical phenomenon, but also as the conceptualization of many abstract notions, such as reason, knowledge, cognition, and the divine (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lakoff & Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994; Raffaelli 2012).

The human ability to abstract and to understand abstract notions through concrete ones is a frequent subject of cognitive linguistic research that deals with metaphor and the mechanisms of human conceptualization (Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Sweetser 1990; Žic Fuchs 1991; Gibbs 1994, 2008; Kövecses 2005). The human ability to abstract and construct links between concrete and metaphorical phenomena is important for the current subject. Here, we will aim to explain why human beings as members of a certain socio-cultural context are able to understand and read pictorial symbols they have never previously encountered or have never learned to read.

These symbols are representations of light in the pictorial language of the 17th century. Of course, we will here refer to one of the many abstract meanings of the phenomenon of light, which is the presence of the divine. The notion of the divine, in this sense, is very interesting, as it seems to integrate the conceptual domains of light and knowledge, structuring them into a single symbolic whole, represented in artworks as a beam of light, and understood thanks to the culturally, socially, and historically conventionalized links between the concepts of *light* and *knowledge*. The contexts of culture, society, and history play a crucial role here, as domains of knowledge are structured precisely according to the characteristics of the environment in which a speaker grows up, and whose historical heritage they accept as their own (Sharifian 2011).

We could say that the concept of *light* can serve as a good example for explaining the connection between the physical environment and its phenomena that become metaphorized and translated into abstract notions, entering the collective con-



sciousness of a particular social context through conventionalization (Raffaelli 2012). Speakers belonging to this context are able to recognize and understand messages that transfer some kind of meaning about that socio-cultural context, even if they have never previously encountered the exact form of the message itself. They are able to do so not only due to their membership in the particular society, but also thanks to the fact that, as members of the human race, they inherently possess basic and universal cognitive mechanisms of conceptualization (Žic Fuchs 1991).

The form of a message can be realized in various types of human communication. Hence, we can refer to language as the primary, and probably most complex system of signs used by man, and of its various forms (speech, writing). But, we can also refer to other systems of signs (like traffic signs), systems of gestures (like sign language), systems of sounds (like games of chance, or various kinds of ICT messaging), and numerous different visual systems of communication, such as (*emoticons*), comic books that use language and pictures in a multimodal system of communication, and pictorial language used by artists, which uses pure form to create a message (line, color, and texture). The latter will be considered as a system of signs not inferior to language, because our main hypothesis is that human beings understand a message on the conceptual level, where meaning resides, and meaning can be expressed through all the various types of human communication to which members of a certain socio-cultural context were exposed over time. The nature of this context conditions which systems of signs will be conventionalized, depending on the needs of the community (Sharifian 2011; Forceville 2017).

The concept of *light* has been chosen as the subject of this article because it seems to show the connection between two types of human communication systems—words and images—on the conceptual level. We assume that, if man did not possess the ability to conceptualize and metaphorize, and if he were not exposed to conventionalized systems of signs in the context of his development, he would not be able to understand the abstraction of *light* as a symbol of divine presence. The pictorial language of religious Western-European art of the 17th century has been chosen because of the particular tendency of the time to portray the presence of the divine through the clear form of light as the basic characteristic of the Catholic Trine God. This type of art was chosen because the Catholic Church was the main patron of art throughout the centuries, and was responsible for its development both on the level of form and content. Light in the artwork draws the observer's attention to the represented topic (Rzepińska 1986).

It is interesting that this tendency was not the arbitrary volition of artists them-



selves, but a new systematized method of creating artworks in line with the resolutions of the Council of Trident, passed as a response to the Reformation that took Europe by storm during the 16th century. These resolutions heavily impacted every further development of society in the Western-Catholic socio-cultural context (Cvetnić 2007). In this article we ask the question: is a member of this context, an heir to this cultural memory, culturally conditioned to decipher visual messages composed in this pictorial language, even if they have never before encountered the exact form of the message?

The starting point for the consideration of these questions is Conceptual Metaphor Theory according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which strives to explain the functioning of human knowledge and learning as based on various processes of metaphorization, which enable us to understand abstract concepts in terms of concrete ones. Furthermore, in accordance with this theoretical framework, Kövecses (2005) expands the notion of conceptualization from concepts to conceptual domains. This theoretical framework is used here as a suggestion on how to strengthen an art-historical analysis by connecting it to the processes of basic human conceptualization, inherent to the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework. In this sense, the article will attempt to explain the connections between the concepts of *light*, *knowledge*, and the *divine*. However, concepts that structure domains of knowledge must be understood as conventionalized within a specific socio-cultural context of the speaker who uses them in everyday communication, comprised of various sign systems (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Sharifian 2011). Moreover, social, cultural, and historical contexts are not universal—they change over time and according to social events that shape a certain culture at a certain time. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the social tendencies, opinions, knowledge, and behavior of the members of a certain socio-cultural context as it developed, and is still developing (Forceville 2017).

The material chosen for the present analysis is approached from the wider perspective of the social conventionalization of the concept of *light*, from a time and within the context of very specific historical circumstances. Their consequences not only conditioned the conventionalization of representations of light as the presence of the divine, but also shaped the conceptual understanding of *light* as an integral part of the knowledge about the divine. Therefore, the illustration of this claim relies on art-historical research of the 17th century, the Baroque period.

Our aim is to determine the connection between basic conceptual metaphors of *light* and pictorial representations of light in paintings of religious subjects, suggesting that light in these representations can be understood as the presence of the



divine. We assume that the visual representation itself would not be completely understandable to the viewer if they did not conceptualize *light* in connection to basic conceptual metaphors of light. This being said, the present is by no means an in-depth and definitive study of the presented theoretical framework and the visual material that is analyzed. This article has been written in an effort to show that the disciplines of Linguistics and Art History can be combined to the extent of analyzing material created for communicating ideas that stem from the most basic human understanding of concrete and abstract notions. This kind of analysis is here suggested as an illustration of the methodological possibilities offered by the proposed interdisciplinary approach, and as a starting point for future, more thorough and in-depth analyses of artistic material, possibly even of various kinds, including sculpture, photography, film, etc. Our hope is to show that there is room for an interdisciplinary approach of this kind, in which aspects of Linguistics and Art History are merged in order to achieve a more insightful understanding of certain kinds of man-made phenomena used for communicative purposes in the widest sense.

The following section will deal with the theoretical framework in more detail, with emphasis on connecting knowledge from Linguistics and Art History, presenting it as a compatible theoretical framework for interdisciplinary research of linguistic and conceptual phenomena in the widest sense of human communication. This section will be followed by the explication of the concept of *light* from the perspective of the Wester-European cultural tradition. Finally, examples will be provided that illustrate the proposed approach.

2. Conceptual metaphor theory and embodiment

The first part of the theoretical framework used in this paper is the Cognitive Linguistic theory on conceptual metaphor according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The basis of this theory is that metaphorical structures permeate everyday language, thought and action, and that the human conceptual system is metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 6). This means that human beings understand and structure the world around them, including their experience and ideas, through what they already know. Our conceptualization of new experiences relies on their understanding through experiences that we have already gone through. In this sense, metaphor is “understanding one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). This entails that the metaphorical understanding of concepts could be one of the basic cognitive mechanisms inherent to mankind (Croft & Cruse 2004: 46).



The same should be applied to the explanation of the links between concepts that comprise the conceptual metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT. This conceptual metaphor stems from the basic understanding of knowledge as the result of the physical process of looking, further based on the even more basic understanding of the embodied mind, that is, the conceptual metaphor MIND AS BODY. Sweetser (1990) writes that this conceptual metaphor functions as the basic link between the outer and inner worlds of man, that human beings understand mental activities through concrete phenomena from their environment, through the interaction of their physical body with the world. The author explains these links through examples of English perception verbs, like *hear*, whose metaphorical meaning is 'obey,' or *get*, whose metaphorical meaning is 'understand' (Sweetser 1990: 28).

Sweetser goes on explaining that it is a common occurrence that human mental activities are connected to visual perception (1990: 37), which is the direct tenet of the MIND AS BODY conceptual metaphor. Mental processes that Sweetser calls intellectual are frequently understood through linguistic expressions connected to 'looking'. Therefore, human intellectual abilities are often characterized through expressions like *clearsighted* for someone who understand something well, or *blind* for someone who understands nothing (Sweetser 1990: 40).¹ The author concludes that the MIND AS BODY conceptual metaphor is motivated by our experiences of the world, through its understanding based on our inherent cognitive mechanisms of conceptualization and metaphorization.

An important conclusion that Sweetser (1990) points out in the sense of intellectual activity as physical perception is that looking and sight are connected with religious and spiritual experiences. The author writes that older Indo-European cultures (although she does not clarify what she means by 'older,' or to which historical period these cultures belong) connected physical reality, which was experienced through the sense of sight, with spiritual knowledge (Sweetser 1990: 40). It seems that at some point in human history sight was abstracted and began to attain metaphorical meanings related to the cognizance of the spiritual world. Real sight, or 'looking,' became understanding divine power, which could only be achieved by restraining physical sight. Therefore, inner sight was considered to be real sight, and looking was, consequently, thinking. According to Sweetser (1990: 40), this is why old poets were often blind, because they acquired knowledge through their inner sight – thought. At the time, which we can thanks to other sources determine as the Middle Ages, intellectual activity was equal to religious understanding of the divine (Rzepińska 1986). The conceptualization of looking as a mental activity,

¹ For a comparison with examples from Croatian, see Raffaelli (2012).



whose aim is the acquisition of knowledge, is important for understanding the hypothesis laid out at the beginning of this article – that light as the symbol for divine presence is understandable, and visually legible to a member of the Western-Christian cultural context thanks to not only the basic cognitive mechanisms of conceptualization and metaphorization, but also to the collective cultural memory they inherit by growing up in that specific cultural context, which has been conventionalized over centuries of conceptualizing *light* as the carrier of knowledge, and of the divine as the source of light.

3. The Baroque from an art-historical perspective

According to the established historical periodization of Western culture, the Baroque period spanned from the very end of the 16th century to the second half of the 17th century. It is a period of style exemplified by particular characteristics observable in various forms of art (music, architecture, visual arts, etc.).

The characteristics of the Baroque are not universal and can differ according to the part of the world we are observing. The part of the world observed for the purposes of this article is the one to which its author belongs—the Western-Christian European socio-cultural context. The formation of this context was conditioned by historical events from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the First Industrial Revolution, but the strongest influence was that of the Roman Catholic Church with the Vatican seat. The consideration of historical and political circumstances that gave rise to the power of the Church would be too broad and complex to fit into the boundaries of the present subject, but we should keep in mind that the Vatican, in the widest metonymical sense, greatly determined the state of society to which it was superior.

Our interest in the narrower segment of this influence begins with the Counterreformation, a methodologically systematized response to the Reformation composed in the second half of the 16th century, during the 18-year-long Council of Trident (Cvetnić 2007: 10–11). The philosophical heritage of this council was felt in Western Christendom well into modernity, as it completely transformed, and formally codified, church laws and regulations. What is more, the Council of Trident conducted a selection of holy texts, which suited the requirements of the Counterreformation program, that were included into the Old and New Testaments as we know them today. These were the only texts priests were allowed to preach to their congregation, and the ones according to which the new official iconography was established. This new iconography pertained equally to all art forms, but was



most prominent in the visual arts (Cvetnić 2007), examples of which will be shown later on. It is important to keep in mind that the general population at the time was mostly illiterate, and acquired knowledge about doctrine through sermons and artworks displayed in churches. Furthermore, it is important to stress that this was a period of history when scientific thought was equal to thought about the divine, so the knowledge of the world was actually the knowledge of god, and by god (Rzepińska 1986). Artworks were created in accordance with the official iconography, whose purpose was to instruct illiterate believers about the world through its visual representations.² Therefore, the iconography itself had to be systematic in order for the observer to be able to read its signs.³

This kind of system of signs was represented through the formal language of Baroque art, which developed in two main directions. The first was strongest in paintings of the early 17th century, prime examples of which were created by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, whose personal style strongly influenced his followers, spreading across Western Europe, where it reigned until the end of the century (Toman 2007). The second direction was luxurious and courtly, and mostly applied to grand architectural structures. However, it was the first direction of the style that took the firmest grip on painting practices, embodying what is usually called the spirit of the time—a tendency toward spiritual enlightenment, understanding the divine and approaching it through introspection – looking inward (Rzepińska 1986). This was the philosophy of the Counterreformation. Its aim was to prove the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic Church as opposed to the unorthodoxy of the Protestants.

The Baroque style became a reflection of the times, and consequently the style with which believers were in constant contact.⁴ According to Toman (2007), the formal pictorial language of the Baroque consists of a composition clear of superfluous form (reduced number of figures, decoration, and architectural elements), as well as a strong opposition between light and shadow (so-called *chiaroscuro*). The opposition between light and shadow is precisely the element of most interest for this article, as it transfers the symbolic message of understanding the real truth through divine presence, which is in line with the philosophy of the time.

² More on Church practices of education and the importance of positioning artworks inside the church space in Cvetnić (2007) and Haskell (1963).

³ More on the subject in Cvetnić (2007).

⁴ For an example of the style, see the Appendix.



If we take a look back at Conceptual Metaphor Theory, conceptual domains structured around the concept of *light* are based on the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, which stems from the Embodied Mind hypothesis, and integrates the conceptualization of *light* with that of *knowledge*, *understanding*, and *cognition*. Since conceptualization as a cognitive process is socio-culturally conditioned, and members of a certain socio-cultural context structure their knowledge of the world according to cultural conventions (Sharifian 2011), we propose that the understanding of pictorial representations of light as the symbol of divine presence is enabled by the context that produced them. If we consider the concept of *light* as tied to divine presence from a wider angle, we will find linguistic expressions that point to the same connections between the concepts of *light*, *knowledge* and the *divine*, all of which are based on the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING: “he saw the light (of God),” “God sees everything,” “it finally dawned on me,” etc. Examples such as these that come from everyday language use are ingrained in our cultural memory, where they have been conventionalized during a long period of time, when the concept of *light* expanded its domain to include notions of the divine. The reason behind our ability to understand the concept of *light* in this way is that concepts are not just parts of knowledge belonging to an individual, but are socially, culturally, and historically conditioned and shared. They structure the collective knowledge of the world of a certain socio-cultural community, at a certain point in time (Sharifian 2011). The following section will deal with the concept of *light* within the Western-European socio-cultural tradition in more detail.

4. The concept of *light* within the Western-European cultural tradition

While considering any one aspect of a concept that is shared in the collective consciousness of a community of speakers, or even by a wider cultural circle, we should keep in mind that concepts change over time and that the lexical items used to express their sometimes multiple meanings often go through semantic change. In the case of the concept of *light*, this would entail the change, or expansion of its meaning, from a physical phenomenon to various kinds of mental activities, often through certain conceptual metaphors (Raffaelli 2012). The various semantic changes connected to the concept of *light* caused the conventionalization of certain phrases, like “it’s clear,” “he became enlightened,” etc. (Raffaelli 2012).⁵ The con-

⁵ Raffaelli (2012) writes about these changes in the various lexemes in Croatian that express mental activities, which are based on the concept of light. We can draw parallels to the English Language based on the research conducted by Sweetser (1990).



cept of *light* in the collective memory of the described socio-cultural tradition has spread to include abstract notions, such as reason, knowledge, cognition, and the divine.

Light as a symbol for the divine can be followed in Biblical texts, especially in the Gospel of John, one of the four Gospels chosen to form the New Testament at the Council of Trident:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with
God, and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things were made; without him nothing
was made that has been made.
In him was life, and that life was the *light* of all mankind.
The *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not
overcome it.
There was a man sent from God whose name was John.
He came as a witness to testify concerning that *light*, so
that through him all might believe.
He himself was not the *light*; he came only as a witness to
the *light*.
The true *light* that gives *light* to everyone was coming into
the world.⁶

Ever since the earliest Christian rituals, pictures were used to explain the faith, since most believers could not read Latin – the only official language of Christianity until the early 16th century. Therefore, for poorly educated people, pictures really did speak a thousand words. Language and various forms of pictorial art evolved over a long time of human creativity, both as a kind of communication, both expressing meaning through shared concepts. The value of the message is seen in the efficiency with which it transfers meaning, which is true for all kinds of human communication, including language and images. Since they draw on the same sources to structure meaning, each in its own forms, in the sense of communication they should be seen as equally valuable.

Therefore, pictures can also be used to transfer messages based on conceptual metaphor, and in our particular case the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, because they use the same conceptual material as language—the concepts of *light* and *knowledge*, which are connected to the *divine*. Deciphering a pictorial message will be achieved thanks to the same cognitive mechanisms that operate behind lan-

⁶ Kaštelan, Jure and Duda Bonaventura (eds.). 1968. *Biblija: Stari i Novi zavjet*. Stvarnost, Zagreb.



guage; it is only the form of the message that is different – the knowledge of the world is the same. Therefore, we argue that when observing a picture of religious character in which light is emphasized by using pictorial language (composition elements, color, texture, etc.), members of the Western-Christian socio-cultural context will interpret this light as the presence of the divine. This interpretation is based on the shared and conventionalized conceptualization of *light*, which includes its abstract meaning based on the conceptual metaphors KNOWING IS SEEING and, consequently, KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT.

Since human conceptualization is socio-culturally conditioned, our knowledge is usually a reflection of the culture to which we belong, the context in which we grow up, and the communication to which we are exposed. The term *cultural cognition* used by Sharifian (2011) means that “complex cognitive systems arise within a socio-cultural community over time,” that “conceptualization operates on the level of culture,” and that “culturally conditioned schemas and categories are patterns of distributed knowledge of a certain cultural group.”

The following section will present the methods and materials, and illustrative analysis of examples, used to demonstrate the possibilities offered by the proposed interdisciplinary approach.

5. Materials and methods

Examples of Baroque painting are analyzed according to the proposed integrated theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics and Art History. The Cognitive Linguistic understanding of conceptualization, metaphor and conventionalization is used to explain the pictorial language form of the examples. It is important to emphasize at this point that the Western-European cultural tradition comprises a far wider specter of human creativity than is presently considered, and that the following examples are only a small part of the totality of communicative forms that could be analyzed according to the proposed framework. We will presently not consider the various architectural, written, or other forms of art that use the contrast of light and shadow in their formal languages, but we suggest that these too could be analyzed according to this approach.

6. Analysis and discussion

Religious paintings in the Baroque style use light as a sign for the divine. According to Toman (2007), the style's formal language is comprised of simple composi-



tions with few figures, an unidentifiable space, and a strong contrast between light and darkness (*tenebrism*). The simplification of the composition was a sign of the times, when the search for truth from within was the dominant philosophy in the religious doctrine of Catholicism. The search for truth was basically the search for the divine, which was achieved „closing one's eyes to the world, and opening the inner eyes of knowledge“ (Rzepińska 1986). This means that the painting itself should only depict what is most important. For example, while a Biblical text could contain numerous details about a certain holy event, its representation on canvas would depict only the event's crucial characters and details (Toman 2007). Quite often, the most important characters are personifications of the Triune God, the Saints, and angels, while the element that always builds the composition, resting most heavily on the main character, is light (Cvetnić 2007).

6.1. *The Calling of Saint Mathew*

The first example is *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Caravaggio⁷ from the year 1605. It depicts the New Testament tale of Saint Matthew, who had been a tax collector named Levi before becoming one of Christ's Apostles. The tale tells the story of how, one day after collecting taxes from the poor, Levi sat at a tavern with a group of gamblers, counting the taxes he had collected that day. At once, a bright light entered through the tavern window, and from it emerged a figure pointing a finger at Levi. The figure was Christ, and he was calling on Levi to be his Apostle. The light shone on Levi, he answered the call, and was from that moment on called Matthew.⁸ Although the original text is more complex than this, Caravaggio's pictorial interpretation is simplified, emphasizing only those details that are crucial to the story, which was in line with the new official parameters set by the Council of Trident.⁹

The painter situates the event in an unidentifiable indoor space, in which he positions two groups of figures, one to the right, and the other to the left. A thick column of darkness acts as the boundary between the two groups, separating them both physically and metaphorically, into the left worldly group, and the right oth-

⁷ For ease of understanding, see Appendix, Picture 1.

⁸ This part of the tale is told according to the New Testament edition by Kaštelan and Duda (eds.): *Biblija: Stari i Novi Zavjet*. (1968).

⁹ This painter is interesting for his frequent violations of the new official painting style, such as painting saints with dirty feet, but he nevertheless followed the guidelines pertaining to simplification. Furthermore, Caravaggio's personal interpretation of chiaroscuro, so-called *tenebrism*, largely influenced his contemporaries. For more on this subject, see Cvetnić (2007).



erworldly one. The left side of the composition is enveloped in darkness. At the center of this darkness sits Levi surrounded by a group of men at a table, across which money has been thrown. Levi's hand gesture—pointing to himself—and surprised and, almost fearful facial expression, let the viewer know that something sudden and unexpected has happened. Levi's eyes are turned toward the face of the man pointing at him from the right side of the composition. The bright beam of light coming from above this figure's head, from outside the painting's frame is extended from the top right corner, over the face of the figure and following his outstretched arm and pointing finger, landing brightly on Levi's astonished face. The quizzical gesture Levi is aiming at this figure reveals that the two are communicating. The other portrayed figures are not participating in this communication—two of them are simply observing the scene, and two are oblivious to it. The two observers are partially touched by the beam of light, while the faces of the two figures oblivious to the scene are enveloped in darkness. The light acts as a communication channel across the two parts of the composition divided by a column of darkness. Metaphorically, the light of knowledge about god bridges the worlds of heaven and earth.

Caravaggio makes it clear that the source of light is not the tavern window, which is clearly depicted in the upper right part of the composition, and whose height and positioning are inconsistent with the direction of the light. Therefore, it is clear that its source is not natural, but metaphorical, since it corresponds to the position of the male character on the right pointing his finger at Levi. In other words, the beam of light is the element of the painting's composition that symbolizes the divine character of the male figure on the right, recognized further through other conventionalized elements of iconography (beard, red drapery, etc.) as Jesus Christ. The identification of a divine character is only the first metaphorical layer of the role of light in the composition. The second layer is what the light signifies, and this is the quite literal moment of clarification Levi has as Christ is calling on him to be his messenger. In that moment of clarification, Levi is completely enveloped in light, which stands for his gaining understanding about his purpose in the world through coming to know the way of god, by communicating with him through the light itself. The beam of light, and the communication it accompanies, is how the viewer reads the language of the painting and deciphers its meaning—the divine figure brings light (knowledge) to those who want to see it (to understand). What we propose is that the viewer understands this message through the basic conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING.



6.2. *The Last Supper*

The second example is *The Last Supper* painted in the year 1594 by Jacopo Comino il Tintoretto.¹⁰ The well-known subject of this painting is presented in a diagonal composition that seems to portray a perpetual space, divided into two areas by two separate sources of light. The left-hand side of the composition is occupied by figures of saints, which is revealed by haloes, as well as by the highly conventionalized positioning around a table, recognized through contextual cues as the last supper of Christ. The light source on this side of the composition space emanates from the head of the main figure in the composition—again, through this and other elements of iconography recognized as Christ. The other source of light is a chandelier adorned with candles positioned on the right-hand side of the composition. A second glance at this source of light reveals figures of angels flying around it, created out of a mixture of smoke and light coming from the candles themselves, endowing them with the mark of divine presence as well. What ties this source of light to the meaning of divine presence is that the angels, created out of the physical light of the candles, shower figures on the right hand of the composition with the divine light that they carry in the name of Christ, standing at the table to the left. Furthermore, the figures adorned with haloes are saints, or holy people, who own the divine light, which is represented by the haloes themselves. By having that light, these figures have the knowledge that it represents.¹¹ Again, what we suggest is that this interpretation of light stems from the conventionalized imagery of light based on its conceptualization through the KNOWING IS SEEING basic conceptual metaphor.

6.3. *Adoration of the Kings*

The *Adoration of the Kings* by the brothers Bassano was created in the year 1580.¹² Once again, the well-known subject is represented according to texts found in the New Testament. In this example, the contrast between light and shadow is not as strong as in the previous two examples, but what is strongly emphasized is a beam of light coming down from the sky and landing on the figure of a baby held by its

¹⁰ See the Appendix, Picture 2.

¹¹ It is interesting to note here that the change in philosophy in the 16th century lead to a change in the representation of haloes in paintings. Until the 16th century, these pictorial elements were painted as golden crowns, tiaras, or circles, while after the Council of Trident they started to be depicted as rays of light emanating from the heads of holy figures (Toman 2007).

¹² See the Appendix, Picture 3.



mother, recognized as Christ the Child and the Madonna according to other elements of iconography. By illuminating the child, the artists indicate its divine nature, recognized by the observers in the composition – the three kings. The Biblical tale of the Adoration is interesting from the point of view of conceptualizing light as the symbol of divine presence, since the kings in the tale were told to follow the light in the sky (a shooting star) to reach their king and savior, where they will come to know the truth of all things. The end of their journey is represented as a beam of light, symbolizing the knowledge they have gained by following light. Therefore, the highly conventionalized meaning of light as knowledge is based on the generalization of physical light to cover metaphorical meanings according to the MIND AS BODY and KNOWING IS SEEING basic conceptual metaphors.

6.4. *Saint Joseph*

The final example we will examine is *Saint Joseph* by George de la Tour, from the year 1642.¹³ This very intimate painting is based on the iconography of Saint Joseph, which was established and systematized during the Counterreformation when the cult of this saint started to be venerated (Cvetnić 2007). Our example uses the tenebrous manner to represent a moment in which Joseph is teaching his son about carpentry. What is interesting for the subject at hand is the strong contrast between the source of light—depicted within the centralized composition as a candle held by the child—and the darkness that surrounds it, making the viewer unable to clearly define the space of the composition. The symbolism behind the source of light is based on the knowledge about Christ as the bringer of light to the world. The child in the painting is also holding the light in his right hand, directing it toward his father's face with his left. The child's face is completely illuminated by the light of the candle, making it seem as if his face were the very source of the light. Also, by directing the light toward the old man's face with his hand, in a gesture not unlike a blessing, the artist is alluding to the ability of the child to manipulate light—to give it to someone, or to take it away. Joseph, instead of looking at the task he is performing, hammer and nail in hand, is looking instead at the illuminated face of his son, as if seeing only the light. What the artist has captured here is the moment in which Joseph came to know the truth through the light given to him by his son, the source and master of the light itself (Rzepińska 1986). This example stresses the importance of knowing conventionalized iconography as a system of signs that the viewer can read in order to understand the meaning of the message.

¹³ See the Appendix, Picture 4.



This system of signs operates under rules specific to the skill of painting, which had first been codified and then conventionalized over centuries. What we suggest here, is that this system of signs can partially be understood thanks to the human ability to conceptualize certain phenomena through metaphorical mappings.

6.5. *Summing up the analysis*

In these four examples we have tried to show that sight, knowledge, cognition, understanding, and the divine are intertwined in the conceptual domain of light that can be communicated through non-linguistic systems of signs. This kind of communication has been conventionalized in the Western-Christian socio-cultural context, whose members are culturally conditioned to understand these kinds of representations, at least in the most basic terms. The understanding of the underlying meanings behind pictorial representation seems to stem from the cognitive mechanisms of conceptualization and metaphorization; in this particular case, from the basic conceptual metaphors KNOWING IS SEEING and MIND AS BODY. The physical experience of sight (enabled by the existence of a source of physical light, as seen in all of the analyzed examples) is translated into metaphorical ‘looking’ that brings knowledge through abstract light, whose source is the divine. Therefore, the conventionalization of concepts is here based on extensions of the embodied mind metaphor—KNOWING IS SEEING, KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT, GOD IS LIGHT, and GOD IS KNOWLEDGE. The concept of *light*, whose conceptual domain is structured this way, has been expanded over time in this particular socio-cultural context. Thanks to these processes, it is possible to understand various visual representations in terms of their own formal language – elements of composition that draw on conventionalized conceptualizations. It seems that the concept of *light* is crucial for our conceptualization of *knowledge*. In the words of Arthur Zajonc (1993), “it seems that the characteristics of a culture are mirrored in the figure of light that it has constructed.”

7. Conclusion

It seems that *light* is one of the most basic concepts through which humans understand abstract notions such as knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Basic conceptual metaphors of *light*, like KNOWING IS SEEING and KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT, are used in everyday communication as metaphorical expressions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics assumes that humans possess an inherent system of conceptualization mirrored in language (Lakoff 1987), but



also in other forms of communication (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009). Language is not the only type of human communication. Other types, such as visual art forms, also rely on the conceptual system dependent on the socio-cultural context of the speakers. Therefore, concepts that we understand through language can also be understood in other communicative systems, as long as they draw on the same conceptual system. According to Johnson (2007), behind the concentration on language lies the prejudice that meaning can only be found in words. But meaning processes in various forms of art are equal to those that enable linguistic meaning (Johnson 2007). In order to fully understand our conceptual system, including its abstractions, we must show that it is not only mirrored in language, but also in other non-linguistic means of expression (Forceville 2017). Therefore, when we see an image, we start to decipher its meaning just as we would decipher the meaning of a text—the human cognitive system processes concepts that can be represented in the most various forms. Whether it is a painting representing a divine presence through the symbol of light, or a written sentence “I finally saw the light“, we are relying on the same cognitive mechanisms to understand the concept of *light* and what it means in the given context. Both forms of communication will ultimately lead to the conceptualized abstraction of physical light, based on the conceptual metaphors KNOWING IS SEEING and KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT, and in the examples provided here to GOD IS LIGHT and GOD IS KNOWLEDGE.

The aim of this article was to show that this kind of interdisciplinary theoretical framework, in which two disciplines that deal with very different material that is nevertheless a kind of communicative system, might prove useful in analyzing multimodal human communication, since there seems to be theoretical grounding for some of the questions and consequent answers provided here. These examples have illustrated that some parts of the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework could be useful for some art-historical analyses that deal with the communication of ideas to the viewer. In some cases, the implementation of theoretical views from Cognitive Linguistics could enable a deeper and more thorough understanding of the symbolism depicted in a work of art, based on the workings of basic human cognition. Therefore, the importance of this kind of interdisciplinary approach is in the integration of knowledge from different disciplines and points of view. However, for a fuller understanding of the conceptual system as a repository of concepts attainable by various modalities of form, a more thorough study should be conducted.



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SVJETLO KAO VIZUALNA IZVORNA DOMENA ZA BOŽANSKO U SLIKARSTVU 17. STOLJEĆA

Cilj je ovoga rada ukazati na motivaciju iza likovne umjetnosti vjerske tematike u kojoj svjetlost igra ulogu označitelja božanske prisutnosti. Pokušat ćemo pokazati da se prikazi svjetlosti u slikama nastalima unutar specifičnoga društveno-kulturnoga vremena i konteksta temelje na metaforizaciji. Značenje koje proizlazi iz takve metaforizacije povezuje prikazanu svjetlost i temeljnu pojamovnu metaforu ZNATI JE VIDJETI. Ovaj rad pokazuje da promatrač može razumjeti ovakve prikaze svjetlosti kao božansku prisutnost zahvaljujući temeljnoj ljudskoj sposobnosti da apstraktne pojavnosti opojmljuje putem konkretnih. Predlažemo da ovakvi prikazi svjetlosti ne bi bili u potpunosti razumljivi promatraču kada ne bi posjedovao znanje o temeljnim pojamovnim metaforama svjetlosti. Vizualni materijal odabran za ovaj rad obuhvaća primjere vjerskih slika iz sedamnaestoga stoljeća nastale u zapadnoeuropskoj umjetničkoj tradiciji. U njima prikazana svjetlost služi kao temeljni nositelj značenja božanske prisutnosti te kao središnji element kompozicije. Rad se temelji na spajanju dviju znanstvenih disciplina u interdisciplinarni pristup analizi slikovnog materijala nastalog u vrijeme baroka. Odabrani teorijski okvir uključuje Teoriju pojamovne metafore i opojmljivanje apstraktnih pojavnosti (Lakoff i Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994, 2008; Kövecses 2005; Forceville i Urios-Aparisi 2009; Sharifian 2011; Raffaelli 2012; Forceville 2017), te povijesno-umjetničke uvide u uporabu slikovnih elemenata svjetlosti u formalnome slikovnome jeziku baroka (Haskell 1963; Lambert 2007; Toman 2007; Cvetnić 2007). Značaj ovakvoga pristupa ogleda se u mogućnostima interdisciplinarnih istraživanja pojmova, a spajanje znanstveno-istraživačkih perspektiva moglo bi omogućiti nove uvide u pojam svjetlosti. Takvi novi uvidi mogli bi dovesti do dubljega razumijevanja samoga pojma svjetlosti, njegove uporabe u ljudskoj komunikaciji svih vrsta, te njegova značaja za gradbu znanja pojedinca unutar širokoga društveno-kulturnoga kolektiva kojemu pripada.

Ključne riječi: svjetlost; teorija pojamovne metafore; opojmljivanje; društveno-kulturni kontekst; znanje.



Appendix



Picture 1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1605). *The Calling of St. Mathew*



Picture 2. Jacopo Comin il Tintoretto (1594). *The Last Supper*



Picture 3. Jacopo Bassano & Leandro Bassano (1580). *The Adoration of the Magi*



Picture 4. George de La Tour (1642). *Saint Joseph*