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Mark Johnson (2007), **The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding**. Mark Johnson, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 308 pages (hardback).

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Mark Johnson's new monograph pursues the research line of the earlier books he published, together with George Lakoff and on his own (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Johnson 1987, 1993), but breaks exciting new ground by its explicit focus on the non-propositional and non-verbal aspects of cognition. A philosopher profoundly interested in aesthetics, Johnson explores the consequences for the notion of artistic meaning of accepting the embodied nature of experience – a central tenet both of the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm and phenomenological approaches. His thesis is that art is a fundamental locus of meaning-making and that humans' appreciation of art, just as of all other dimensions of making sense in life, is entirely rooted in the body. The chief aspects of this embodied aesthetics are "qualities, images, patterns of sensorimotor processes, and emotions" (p. 1). One of the serious limitations of philosophy and of much cognitive science, Johnson emphasizes, is that it tends to equate meaning with language, more specifically with propositional language. Demonstrating that it is impossible to theorize the aesthetic without discussing embodiment, Johnson makes the dual claim that on the one hand the appreciation of art is a natural extension of bodily behavior and that on the other hand cognitive science must be enriched by structural research into aesthetics. The

message is clear: Since many art forms are non-verbal or only partly verbal, philosophy and cognitive science cannot afford to neglect the manifold manifestations of the pictorial and the musical (and the sonic, the gestural, the olfactory, the tactile, the gustatory).

Part of the book covers ground that is familiar to most readers of this journal. The world as we know it does not exist in terms of ready-made meaningful chunks that only wait to be accessed with the aid of some inner language of thought (“mentalese”) that is hardwired in our brains. The latter is the infamous “objectivist” view of world-making – a stance that in Johnson’s book is attacked via Jerry Fodor’s “representational theory of mind” (pp. 115 ff.). By contrast, the experientialist approach co-fathered by Johnson claims that there are no mind-independent objects, and that human beings gradually begin to understand about the world by learning what its entities and events “afford.” “Affordances” is the term coined by James Gibson for qualities that in one way or another are relevant in human beings’ never-ending struggle for survival and – the luxury variant – their pursuit of happiness. A (wooden) chair, for instance, typically affords the quality that you can sit on it, but also that you can maybe block a door with it, step on it to reach a book on the top shelf, burn it for heat if no other material is available, etc.

Such affordances – and here Johnson discusses implications of experientialism that are largely new for cognitive science – come to us via sensory perception, enabling us to be aware of phenomena via different modalities. Depending on the time and place of perception, and the nature of the body of its experiencer, a creature can not only see a fire, but also feel its heat, and hear its raging flames. All this entails that while the proverbial objectivist would claim that learning consists in matching objects supposedly existing a priori in the world with the “mentalese” in the learner’s brain, experientialists

emphasize the thoroughly dynamic nature of such learning processes. As Johnson aptly summarizes, “infants ... learn how to regard certain kinds of stable regularities in their environment as objects and other regularities as events” (p. 48). The impressive array of strategies to negotiate the world that humans acquire is the result of a constant interaction with their environment. In the experientialist view, consequently, minds have developed both phylogenetically and ontogenetically to be optimally geared to adapt to their multifaceted environments – and hence cannot be studied in isolation from these environments. Much of this adapting occurs at a subconscious level, which is another reason that an exclusive focus on verbally conceptualized affordances misses out on most fundamental dimensions of human meaning-making. Emotions such as pain, pleasure, and disgust, for instance, are only verbalizable to a limited extent, and often are not verbalized at all – nor need they be. Given Johnson’s insistence on the importance of non-propositional knowledge for making meaning, it is not surprising that, drawing on work by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the phenomenologist John Dewey, and the gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, Johnson devotes much attention to the neurophysiological basis for the emotion part of cognition, summarizing that “emotions are processes of organism-environment interactions” (p. 66). He also recalls Dewey’s claim that for the evaluation of human experience one should not consider individual objects, but rather “situations,” which comprise physical, biological, social, as well as cultural conditions. A further key distinction in the meaning-making process, borrowed from the psychologist William James, is that between a concept’s substantive and its functional part, the former pertaining to its referential aspects as expressed in a certain modality (language, picture, sound), and the latter to its affordances. The functional part

is particularly important in abstract reasoning, Johnson claims, whereas the substantive part stresses the *qualia* of concrete objects – and it is these that non-linguistic modalities are especially good at conveying. It would have been interesting here also to discuss the Barthesian distinction between denotation and connotation (e.g., Barthes 1986/1964), since it appears to cut through the Jamesian dichotomy. Particularly if an object or event is rendered non-verbally, for instance in a drawing, it acquires *qualia* with specific connotations, which in turn trigger affordances: “the cat in this painting looks lovely, so one would want to pet it.”

Johnson insists on the importance of “movement” in embodiment: “movement is life” (p. 19). It is thus no coincidence that the “source-path-goal” schema (Johnson 1987, 1993; Turner 1991, 1996) is such a rich and productive one, giving rise to metaphors like LIFE IS A JOURNEY and CHANGE IS MOVEMENT. The manifestations of this schema are by no means restricted to verbal ones. Movement and its expressive forms are part and parcel of infants’ pre-verbal learning experiences (Tomasello 2003: 30). “Manner of movement” is also essential in the musical modality (Johnson & Larson 2003, Zbikowski forthcoming), and it can be made productive in the interaction of language and visuals in journey documentaries (Forceville 2006a), and visually in animation film (Forceville & Jeulink 2007). A recurring pattern in these various genres is that – and here I quote Johnson again – “there is powerful meaning in the buildup and release of tension, in the speeding up or slowing down of the pace of an event, in moving smoothly in connected steps versus jumping rapidly across wide intervals. This is true of all types of our experience, whether in music, painting, sculpture, dance, lovemaking, having a

conversation, or taking a walk” (p. 45). Indeed, already Aristotle (1987: 1) pointed out that rhythm is fundamental to a wide variety of arts.

Johnson repeatedly warns against the use of the term “representation,” because he sees it as fostering the mistaken idea that the mind somehow is a storehouse of images mirroring a pre-existent reality. But he acknowledges that the term has some useful meanings. One of these is “external systems of symbolic interaction,” including “linguistic signs and other symbols” (p. 133). I single out this meaning because the cognitivist community urgently needs to expand its scholarly scope to attend to these “other symbols,” as Johnson’s book makes clear. Increasingly the meanings that individuals and communities ascribe to things going on in their world, and preserve in their personal and public histories, take on forms that are not, or not exclusively, verbal, which forces cognitivists to address non-verbal and multimodal discourses. Shore (1996) extensively discussed the intricate intertwinings of metaphor and metonymy in Western and non-Western rituals, and much work is currently being done on multimodal metaphor and metonymy in contemporary discourses involving moving and static images, such as advertising, cartoons, comics, and film (Forceville 2006b, Forceville & Urios-Aparisi submitted). And since the pioneering studies by McNeill (1992, 2005), no analyst of oral discourse can afford to neglect gesturing.

Along with celebrating the importance of aesthetics and art for the human species with contagious enthusiasm, Johnson thus lays out a program for the cognitivist community whose pertinence can hardly be overestimated. While acknowledging that the embodied, experientialist view of cognition is still largely a theory, he points out that it is at the very least compatible with neuroscientific findings (and, we may add, with the

results in psychological experiments as summarized by Gibbs 2006). In addition, Johnson's book provides bridges for the study of narration, a discipline that has much to offer to cognitive science, but has hitherto largely been ignored (but see Strack 2004). If I were nonetheless forced to lodge a complaint, I would say that Johnson tends to repeat his major points quite often, but I am happy to forgive him for doing so; reiterating the same point from a different angle, or for a different art form or modality, will help readers let sink in his innovative views.

An issue that Johnson touches upon only in passing but that deserves thorough attention is the matter of falsifiability of experientialist-oriented claims. Although the book is not specifically about metaphor, the assertion that human beings think metaphorically remains one of its pillars. However, the degree to which this claim can be falsified remains a matter for concern. Pertinent questions in this respect are under what conditions a metaphor must or can be construed; what conditions determine which features must or can be mapped from source to target; and whether metaphor construal is the only, or the best, option to make sense of a given stretch of discourse. If even the identification of what counts as verbal metaphor can in many cases only be agreed on after discussion among the raters (Pragglejaz Group 2007), this means that the cognitivist community must redouble its energies to fine-tune and improve such identification procedures. In the case of non-verbal and multimodal metaphors, particularly those of the conceptual variety that Grady (1999) calls "primary" – such as the ones relying on the source-path-goal schema and EMOTION IS FORCE (Kövecses 2003; see Forceville 2005, Eerden forthcoming, Shinohara and Matsunaka forthcoming) – this issue is even more thorny. To convince scholars outside of the cognitivist metaphor paradigm that cognition

is substantially rooted in metaphor, it is essential that non-metaphorical construals of allegedly metaphorical discourses are seriously considered before being repudiated (see also Gibbs & Perlman 2006, Geeraerts 2006).

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