Visual Metaphor: What is it? How do we use the concept?

An activity to engage students and teachers to investigate how the concept of visual metaphor is used in poster design.

Grades
The following activities are for use in a grade 9 or 10 classroom setting. They can also be tailored to other levels and adapted for individual exploration.

What You’ll Need
• Computer with Internet connection
• Word processing software, or a pen/pencil and paper to record your poster selections and analyses
• Projector (optional)
• Projection screen (optional)

Lesson
A simile uses “like” or “as” to make a comparison.

Example: The young man came into the room like a thundercloud about to let loose a storm of protest.

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares one thing to another. A metaphor states that one thing is another thing, instead of saying it’s like something else. It does not use “like” or “as” to make the comparison.

Example: The young man was a thundercloud entering the room, about to let loose a storm of protest.

A visual metaphor uses an image rather than words to make the comparison.

Images used in posters often contain interesting visual metaphors that may be witty, funny, or quite subtle.
Activities

A. Analysis and Class Discussion

The following three posters contain examples of visual metaphors. What do you see in the images? Follow the instructions below and answer the questions related to each poster.

I. In this poster for a concert by the famous pianist Radu Lupu, the poster’s source of light appears to emanate from his fingers meeting the keyboard.

1. What could this image connote? One interpretation could be that the music Lupu creates is a source of light, or enlightenment. Or that Lupu makes light.
2. What does it mean to you?

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II. This poster announces a playwriting festival. The image is of a man, lying down with an open mouth out of which grows a flower.

1. Is the flower growing?
2. Is the man yelling, speaking, singing?
3. What does the poster want us to see and understand?

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III. The name Batoche recalls an important moment in Canadian history, one that is remembered to this day for creating division and bad blood.

1. Find out what happened at Batoche, then have another look at that Maple Leaf.
2. What is splitting that important symbol: a river, lightening, a wound?

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B. Personal Exploration (solo work)

1. Exploring the ArtsAlive.ca: Persuading Presence poster collection from a personal computer, choose three examples of visual metaphors that are interesting or appealing to you. Record URLs (web addresses) or copy and paste them into a word processing document like Microsoft Word, TextEdit, or other.

2. Isolate the comparison each metaphor makes and offer your analysis as to why this image might have been chosen.

3. Does the metaphor work? What does it contribute to the poster? (Is it interesting, startling, colourful, profound, provocative?)

4. Present your selections and analyses to the class. Share your chosen posters with the class by projecting the website onto a screen where everyone can see.

5. Look for visual metaphors online, in magazines and on the television. Watch for them especially in advertisements. Find examples you can share with the class, to spark analysis and discussion.