

Kristóf Nyíri:

The Visual and the Motor

Abstract

The world as we see it, so cognitive science tells us, is a construct of the brain, produced every few seconds anew, in accordance with our biologically inherited model of reality, on the basis of the data received by the eyes, but also on the basis of data delivered by all other senses, in particular the tactile and the motor. Eyeball movements, and bodily movements generally, generate information upon which our three-dimensional vision fundamentally rests. Two-dimensional images rely on a process of being scanned by eyeball movements in order to become meaningful. Also, the thesis has been put forward that eyeball movements picture not merely images, but also verbal thought-processes: verbal meaning depends on imagery, and imagery is bound up with eyeball movements – patterns of eye movements and patterns of thinking mirror each other. Indeed towards the end of the nineteenth century the position was formulated that, more broadly, it is the whole body, the entire motor system, that underlies not just visual imagery, but abstract thought, too. In the last decades of the twentieth century this position was revived by Rudolf Arnheim, and – actually in Arnheim’s wake, but in a much weakened version – by conceptual metaphor theory. My planned talk will urge a return to the stronger version of the motor approach. Motor experience, I marshal arguments to show, gives rise to inner images, the inner image translates into metaphor, metaphors tell us in words about our non-verbal world. A domain in which the connections between the visual, the motor, and the metaphoric become especially conspicuous is that of architectural theory. The idea of the embodied mind has been clearly foreshadowed by German thinking on form and architecture from Vischer through Wölfflin and Lipps to Schmarsow and Hildebrand, and both this idea and the idea of metaphor as an irreducible cognitive device was explicitly put forward by Geoffrey Scott in his brilliant 1914 book relating architectural beauty to our pleasure in movements, an ease imparted to some of our “visual and motor impulses”.