

The Mapping of Meaning in Madeline Gins' and Arakawa's *Architectural Body* by Christina Makris

— Questions need to be asked in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree way. (*AB* xiv)¹

The latest instalment of the “Reversible Destiny” project by the American poet Madeline Gins and her ongoing collaborator, Japanese artist Arakawa, is the theoretical work *Architectural Body* of 2003. Since 1963 their work has been concerned with phenomenological embodiment and its bearings on epistemology, and *Architectural Body* is no exception. “Having observed near and far how the body moves through its surroundings, having thought lengthily of still other ways to surround it, and having built a few tactically posed surroundings, we now notice ourselves to have been tracing an architectural body, or at least a landscape for one” (*AB* xi), they state in the Preface. The “architectural body” is the culmination of metaphysical, aesthetic and epistemological arguments countering a passive, amodal objectivist philosophy and replacing it with an enactive, *interpretive* phenomenology where meaning depends on bodily interaction with the environment. Their exclamatory flagging up of embodied experience averts objectivist assumptions that insist on a division between “the mental, conceptual, rational... and theoretical on the one side, and the physical, perceptual, imaginative... and practical on the other side.”² However this paper will not dwell on the ontology of the embodied subject as this is an underlying assumption throughout, complying with Gins and Arakawa’s first of three theses in the text, the “Architectural Body Hypothesis/Sited Awareness Hypothesis”. It states that “[w]hat stems from the body, by way of awareness, should be held to be of it. Any site at which a person deems X to exist should be considered a contributing segment of her awareness” (*AB* 95). Instead, this paper will focus on the function and meaning of the “architectural body” as a concept and suggest an epistemological purpose for it. Three points are presented. First, Gins and Arakawa explore the subject’s experience of space in the environment and show that even though this experience fundamentally escapes cognition and propositional attitudes, it still requires some sort of conceptualisation if it is to be of any use to understanding knowledge. Secondly, this understanding of knowledge is only possible through a redefined notion of metaphor, where metaphor moves beyond being a mere linguistic construction, and permeates the comprehension of experience. Thirdly, the metaphor

becomes a way to understand all concepts, which are not mentally isolated constructs, but depend on bodily experience. In *Architectural Body*, Gins and Arakawa employ the process of mapping a metaphorical structure onto space, to expound a move from the concrete to the abstract and see architecture, an organisation of spatialisation, as the means of building concepts from the non-conceptual, spatial grounding. This way, “[t]acit knowing (knowing how) can... begin to be directly addressed, directly mapped, propositionally, even as propositional knowing (knowing that) can be investigated in regard to how it is bodily” (*AB* 60).

Traditionally in literature, linguistics and the philosophy of language, metaphor is assumed to be solely a linguistic construction. Often it is thought of as an impervious system of signification where meaning is obstructed in the comparison of two outlets. This confines the metaphor to a mere linguistic status dependent on paraphrase to ‘clarify’ and release this meaning. Such assumptions about the function of metaphor uphold a fundamental distinction between literal and non-literal language. However, attempts have been made to dismantle this position, most notably by cognitive linguists such as Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, who hold that the use of metaphor is not distinct and extraneous to literal, or real language, as our use of language is constantly infused with metaphors that are “imaginative and influence our rationality.”³ Metaphor provides insight into human cognition because “the mind has structures (categories and schemata) which [map] an interactive, [multi]layered relationship between reality and the mind.”⁴ The conceptual mapping that occurs between the two realms or the understanding of this mapping is the metaphor itself, rather than the linguistic expression that presents it. If metaphor is not reduced to having an ornamental purpose or being a linguistic deviation, it is revealed as being a function of mental conceptualisation instead, and is thus vital to the composition of human thought.⁵

According to cognitive linguistics, we understand our experience in terms of metaphor, and such metaphors are not separate to reality because they are composed of basic perceptual building blocks emanating from being and interacting in the world. These metaphors are dependent on certain orientational concepts that emanate from spatial experience⁶ that is not necessarily understood through cognition—the experience just *is*, as the subject simply finds herself existing within space. The

meaning of the spatial comes from the *acts* of balancing and the *experience* of systematic processes within the body (as the body's default state of equilibrium).⁷ If spatial orientation is based on the experience of being in the world, and if mental concepts depend on the experiential, then it follows that space underlies and is the foundation for concepts, providing the grounding for any conceptual organisation and creation of meaning.

Throughout *Architectural Body*, Gins and Arakawa impose such a conceptual order onto the nonconceptual chaos of space. The move from the solid and experiential to the conceptually abstract is facilitated by metaphor, as this allows the subject to process the “patterns” acquired in experience.⁸ Any system that uses concepts employs metaphor because the mind uses the mapping of mental spaces to organise meaning. Thus, because metaphorical mapping becomes an embodied “state of location”,⁹ it enables Gins and Arakawa to avoid the extreme of idealism (because concepts need the experiential to be realised), and to avoid direct or naïve realism (where the subject experiences the properties of the object in an unmediated manner). Instead, experience is an interactive combination of the two: “[a] chair as pictured or held in place by perceptual landing sites (direct perception) with the assistance of imaging landing sites (indirect or imitative perception) has for its perceiver a distinct position in relation to everything else in the room—the work of dimensionalizing landing sites (part direct, part indirect perception)” (*AB* 21). When one encounters object x, both direct sensory perception and indirect rationalisation are involved. The interplay of the two creates the mapping of meaning. Hence a metaphorical concept is a quantitative model because one does not have direct access to the object—the sense data mediates between the two.

Space can only be understood or properly appraised when conceptualised through metaphorical mapping. “Constructed to exist in the tense of *what if*, [architecture] presents itself as intentionally provisional, replacing definite form with tentative form, the notion of a lasting structure with that of an adaptive one” (*AB* 29). The notion of embodied space is instead translated to a cognitive mode where its function and repercussions for epistemology can be gauged. Kinaesthesia, the “body feel or bodily feeling—can never be had apart from imaging. To begin with, to move at all...One needs to image, for example, where to place one's arm prior to moving it” (*AB* 35).

The way we “move and interact in different physical domains is structured... by image schemata” Mark Johnson writes, and “that structure can be projected by metaphor onto abstract domains.”¹⁰ We bring the body to our understanding of concepts because the body inherently contains the spatial and orientational feel of existence. The sensory data gathered from the body’s placement in space is projected as its understanding of concepts. Cognition is not a disembodied process, and “[p]ersons... field their surroundings kinaesthetically, tactilely, visually, aurally, olfactorily, and gustatorily all at once, with each modality having a direct or perceptual component and an indirect or imaging one” (AB 13), in Gins and Arakawa’s terms.

A cognitive metaphor is composed of a source domain (a) and a target domain (b). The source domain is mapped onto the target domain (b) to produce a new understanding of the target domain (c).¹¹ In the text, Arakawa and Gins propose the analogy between snails and the “organism-person” (a metaphor taken from Francis Ponge’s poem, “L’Escargot”):

*Their medium: sited awareness
All that a human snail disperses: (its) ubiquitous site.
Call all that a humansnail disperses: (its) architectural body.
An interpenetration in the best possible taste
because, as it were, of complementary tones:
passive and active elements. The one simultaneously
bathes and feeds the other,
which covers the distance it breathes in and out and forms. (AB 31)*

Snails are the source domain and their “dispersing” an existence based on the architectural structure mapped onto the poets’ “organism-person” or target domain. This produces the new meaning “of complementary tones” they wish to expound: that of the humansnail and its “ubiquitous site”. Metaphor maps out the understandings from one domain of experience onto another. This does not mean the two domains exist in a state of perpetual tension (the snail undermining the human or vice versa), nor does it favour a resolution in terms of one being translated into the other (it is not to personify the snail or reduce the human to a gastropod). Rather, such a cognitive metaphor is based on the original notion of analogy, i.e. an analogue system, where one tries to understand the way one object functions in terms of another. It provides conceptual access to what one cannot have direct access to because one can mentally

construct a complex concept that is the analogue of object x because it has the idea or properties of that x. The analogy is not just a qualitative linguistic construction or expression, but is “one of the chief cognitive structures by which we are able to have coherent, ordered experiences that we can reason about and make sense of.”¹² Gins and Arakawa term such analogical orderings, “landing sites”:

A multiple, complex siting process or procedure would seem to be in effect as organism-person-environment; or posing it more neutrally, the world one finds in place lends itself to being mapped by means of a multiple, complex siting process or procedure. Human action depends on attributing of sites and takes place in large part through sequences of sitings. In determining her surroundings...she makes use of cues from the environment to assign volume and a host of particulars to world and to the body, complying with what comes her way as best she can. Her fielding of her surroundings never ceases, continuing even in sleep. Whatever comes up in the course of this fielding should be considered a landing site. (AB 7)

Existing in the world means the “organism-person-environment” constantly constructs meaning by analogical mapping of what it receives from and projects onto the environment. These “sitings” are a way of conceptually positioning and organising the information gathered from perception. This process of analogical mapping composes the “landing site” which Gins and Arakawa believe is the fundamental purpose of perceptual experience:

A landing-site configuration can, then, be thought of as a heuristic device with which to leaf through the universe, never mind that it is unpaginated. This heuristic device, a set of apportioning-out capable of reading what else has been and is being appropriated out, leafs through the universe to determine its arrangement and its contingences. Leafing through the universe turns it into the world (AB 9).

Once the systemacity of “landing sites” is established, and the non-conceptual spatialisation recognised, the architectural structure changes into what Gins and Arakawa call “bioscleave”, a dynamic process expounded in their second hypothesis the “Closely Argued Built-Discourse Hypothesis” which states: “Adding carefully sequenced sets of architectural procedures (closely argued ones) to bioscleave will, by making it more procedurally sufficient, reconfigure supposed inevitability” (AB 96). “Bioscleave” is a process of intentionality, a rationalising and composing of sensory data:

Against the environment of the new territory that is her extended I, a person throws tentatives that land as functions and schemata, most of which join up with her, becoming of her by reprogramming her. Although the organism-person has the potential to become a person, it does not necessarily become one, or remain one. Everything begins for these organisms with *a tentative constructing toward a holding in place*. The environmental communal, which has everything to do with how an organism persons, can, when reworked in a concerted manner, lead to persons being able to supersede themselves. (AB 46-7)

The “organism-person” must supersede themselves to counter the basic principle of Cartesian space, that is the *res extensa* of “whatever has breath, length and height” to which the extension in the passage refers to.¹³ Descartes held that substances are composed of this extending principle: in other words, the substance simply extends its physical self onto the pre-existent environment. This means that the object or substance is purely based on a static quantity, having no recourse to motion, and therefore lacking the “up-down” orientation of an embodied conceptual grounding.¹⁴ Alternatively, Gins and Arakawa argue the “tentatives” of intentionality are “throw[n]” out, becoming “schemata” that effectively “reprogram” the subject. Unlike the Cartesian extension of the substance’s solidified certainty, Gins and Arakawa base their structure solely on the “tentative constructing”. However it is important to note that this is not a one-way process of a realist consciousness creating the environment—“[p]roviding a neutral zone of emphasis, landing sites simply bypass subject-object distinctions” (AB 22). Gins and Arakawa stress the “kinaesthetic-proprioceptive” schema because of its equilibrium: the kinaesthetic stresses how you feel in your body and the proprioceptive how this body feels in relation to space. “All points or areas of focus, that is, all designated areas of specified activity, count as perceptual landing sites” (AB 10). The “environmental communal” is there to assure the stance of enaction and interaction is not compromised, but rather that the closed self is. This leads to their third and final hypothesis, the “Insufficiently Procedural Bioscleave Hypothesis”. It states that “[i]t is because we are creatures of an insufficiently procedural bioscleave that the human lot remains untenable” (AB 96).

To conclude, the model of conceptual schemata is successful then, because it retains an overall fluidity in structure. Metaphorical analogies enable one to explore and see relationships between things that may have been missed before. The analogy works as a three-dimensional means of mapping properties and stimuli onto cognition to gauge the effects in the third way that is generated in terms of a concept. The mapping of

metaphors allows the understanding of conceptual categories to be formed “on the basis of imaginatively structured cognitive models” which dismantles any correspondence arguments of concepts existing objectively, to “anything in reality external to human experience.”¹⁵ Gins and Arakawa’s *Architectural Body*, then, can be seen as a manifesto for an enactive, embodied understanding of the mapping of metaphorical meaning.

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¹ Gins, Madeline. and Arakawa. *Architectural Body*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002. Hereafter abbreviated as *AB*.

² Johnson, Mark. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990, pp. xxxvi.

³ *ibid.*, pp. xii.

⁴ Diepeveen, Leonard. “Reading Nonsense: The Experience of Contemporary Poetry”. *Genre XXIV*, Spring 1991, pp. 27.

⁵ Lakoff, George. and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003, pp. 6.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 56.

⁷ Johnson, 1990, pp. 75.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. xv.

⁹ Lakoff, George. and Turner, Mark. *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1989, pp. 30.

¹⁰ Johnson, 1990, p.xv.

¹¹ Lakoff and Turner, 1989, pp.38.

¹² Johnson, 1990, pp. xv.

¹³ Honderich, Ted. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 122.

¹⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, pp.56.

¹⁵ Johnson, 1990, pp.xi.