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# Sic vita est: Visual representation in painting of the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes how the conceptualization LIFE IS A JOURNEY is conveyed within a series of paintings ranging from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century. While the previous research on visual metaphor generally aims to describe how the domains of metaphorical conceptualization interact or discusses the rhetorical effect that visual metaphor is able to induce, this article takes a historical perspective in order to identify the main conceptual aspects shared by the paintings under consideration. It is proposed that the concept of a JOURNEY is associated with a PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY that involves the start of the journey and its termination as two qualitatively different moments that are faced as a collective/shared experience and that are inspired by some human wish. This article also shows how the conceptual potential of metaphor tends to maintain a coherent representation although the paintings represent different historical sensitivities and artistic approaches.

**Keywords:** art, conceptualization, discourse, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, visual metaphor, painting

## 1 Introduction

The study of visual and pictorial metaphors within the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, henceforth CMT) has become an important part of how conceptualization can be expressed through modalities that go beyond linguistic manifestations.

Excluding recent exceptions (e.g. Petrenko and Korotchenko 2012; Poppi and Kravanja 2017, Poppi and Kravanja 2019a, Poppi and Kravanja 2019b) and

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some seminal works (e.g. Forceville 1988; Wollheim 1993), CMT has not yet been used to investigate artistic paintings. If, on the one hand, studies on visual and pictorial metaphors generally aim to describe the semiotic relationships between conceptual domains (see El Refaie 2003) and the rhetorical and persuasive effect that visual metaphor induces (see Phillips and McQuarrie 2004), on the other hand, very little is known about how a specific conceptual metaphor can be presented through different visual representations across different periods.

In line with a historical conceptual analysis investigating how a certain metaphorical conceptualization is visually represented at different historical moments (see Musolff 2004), this article shows how the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is conveyed by a series of ten artistic paintings ranging from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> As Johnson (2013) argues, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is one of the most important conceptualizations that people tend to use to make sense of life experiences. The importance of LIFE IS A JOURNEY has been explored, for instance, in ordinary English expressions such as “The baby will *arrive* soon,” “He had a *head start* in life,” “Look how *far* we’ve *come*” and “We’re at a *crossroads*,” which serve to conceive and represent dynamics and crucial events characterizing human existence. In order to understand how the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is conveyed by the ten paintings, we take into account the visual elements that may find expression in conceptual metaphors used in language.

Following the identification of particular conceptual structures that can be related to the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, we also aim to identify some general conceptual trends that are shared by all the paintings. In this way, we can understand which conceptual and representational aspects of the paintings maintain their function despite the different historical sensitivities and artistic approaches.

## 2 Theoretical background

Since Black (1954, 1979), Ortony (1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor been regarded as an encompassing conceptual operation instead of as a mere ornament of language (see Gibbs 2008). In particular, the role of metaphor is now largely considered central to the basic dynamics of thought (see Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2015), to communication (see Reijniere et al. 2015), to several social cognitive operations (Landau et al. 2010). Metaphor is believed to

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<sup>1</sup> Without anticipating the conclusions that we will draw, it should be clear from the start that we do not claim to provide an in-depth historical analysis of six centuries of art based on ten paintings.

represent attitudes, judgments and prejudice (see Meier and Dionne 2009) and to convey ideologies and other socio-political constructions (see Charteris-Black 2012; Goatly 2007; Musolff 2016). The permeability of metaphor in such a variety of dimensions has been addressed by discursive and experimental approaches in relation to the capacity of the human mind to be largely metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

Besides this variety of cognitive and socio-relational dimensions, other contributions have explained how the conceptual role of metaphor goes beyond verbal and textual expressions and finds expression in other modalities. Specifically, metaphor has been investigated as involving visual manifestations (see Forceville 2009; Poppi and Kravanja 2019a, Poppi and Kravanja 2019b), gesture analysis (see Cienki and Müller 2008; Poppi and Kravanja 2017), music (Zbikowski 2008; Pérez-Sobrino and Julich 2014) and multimodal representations such as film and commercials (see Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009; Poppi 2018; Poppi and Urios-Aparisi 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Conceptually, metaphor has the following function: it expresses and interprets a more abstract and unusual element (usually called *target*) in the form of a more concrete and more familiar one (the *source*). Advocates of the CMT suggest that the conceptual understanding of more abstract and unusual elements is possible only by linking these to concrete experiences that depend on *sensorimotor experiences*. Let us consider, for example, the utterance: “*I feel hot all over my body when I see him.*” As Lakoff and Johnson claim (1999), the metaphorical process of conceptualizing one experience (for instance, sexual arousal or love) in terms of another (e.g. “*I feel hot all over my body*”) can be justified in terms of a physical reaction that connects the two experiences. The sensation of AN INCREASE IN BODY HEAT as a response to LOVE or to SEXUAL AROUSAL depends on a physiological reaction of the human body by increasing its heart rate and consequently its body temperature. In other words, love and sexual arousal can be conceptualized in terms of a sensation of heat because the increase in body heat is a perceivable – and to a certain extent “familiar” – manifestation of such emotional states. The passage from the experiential level to the conceptual and then to the linguistic level is based on a process of *embodiment*. In other words, experiencing one condition (e.g. sexual arousal) in terms of a certain physical sensation (e.g. the increase in body heat) leads to the conceptualization of that condition in terms of that physical sensation. Linguistically, the conceptualization refers to the condition of sexual arousal and to other related experiential conditions (e.g. love, passion, desire, etc.) in

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<sup>2</sup> According to the above mentioned authors, the terms visual and pictorial can be generally regarded as synonymous.

terms that are semantically close to the physical sensation itself (e.g. fire, warmth, heat, etc.).

Regarding the study of conceptual metaphor in relation to visual modalities, we identify in the literature two main theoretical and empirical limitations that affect the development of metaphor research in non-linguistic manifestations.

Firstly, although metaphor may be conveyed by any visual representation, most of the research is focused on magazine and billboard advertisements (see Forceville 2002; Phillips and McQuarrie 2004; Van Mulken et al. 2010) and on entertainment material such as cartoons and comic strips (see El Refaie 2003; Schilperoord et al. 2009; Bounegru and Forceville 2011).

Secondly, research on visual representations tends to describe the semiotic relationships occurring between conceptual domains by generalizing (see El Refaie 2003; Forceville 2008) or by discussing the rhetorical and persuasive effects visual metaphors have (see Phillips and McQuarrie 2004; Jeong 2008).

From these perspectives, visual metaphor research should also (i) take into account artistic paintings as a base for investigation and (ii) conduct a historical conceptual analysis to investigate how a certain metaphorical conceptualization is visually represented at different historical moments. If this approach has been applied in linguistic metaphor analysis (see Musolff 2004), where, for instance, the NATION IS A BODY metaphor has been explored through its application in different historical contexts, a similar perspective has been almost completely neglected in visual metaphor studies.

Besides studies showing how metaphorical conceptualization is conveyed by a number of artistic paintings belonging to a specific cultural movement (see Green 1985; Forceville 1988; Taylor 1990), only a few studies have tried to investigate how conceptual metaphors are conveyed in paintings (see Forceville 1988; Petrenko and Korotchenko 2012; Poppi and Kravanja 2017; Poppi et al. forthcoming). Although conceptual metaphors are assumed to have the same validity in any medium (e.g. advertising, comic strips), an analysis based on artistic paintings may enable us to understand how the same visual conceptualizations are conveyed through the centuries across different artistic sensitivities. In this sense, it is important to point out how the analysis of conceptual metaphors in artistic paintings requires both the analysts' attention to the main metaphor conceptualizations and to how the stylistic and content choices made by its maker in creative ways (Forceville 2012: 262).

In theoretical terms, the present contribution falls within the discussion about the possible presence of universal (or at least culturally or historically specific) metaphors that characterize regularity about how a series of domains can be conceptualized (for further discussion, see Gibbs 2011; Kövecses 2008, Kövecses 2018). While scholars working within the original CMT framework aim

to postulate conceptual metaphors that operate at supra-individual levels, for the majority of its major critics the “goal is to identify linguistic metaphors systematically at the individual level, in the form of creative, deliberate and individualised metaphors” (Kövecses 2008: 181–183). Although both approaches are valid and complementary, the presence of different goals depends on their respective levels of metaphor analysis.

As the research for universal or culturally specific metaphors has been traditionally conducted based on textual metaphors, the novelty of working with visual data, and in particular with artistic paintings, requires us to strive for relatively humble goals. For this reason, our analysis is directed at identifying a series of semiotic and representational regularities that emerge, within a certain historical period and within a particular pictorial tradition, about the conceptualization of LIFE in terms of a JOURNEY. Specifically, this paper focuses on the way this conceptual metaphor is conveyed in a series of ten artistic paintings belonging to the European tradition and ranging from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century.

### 3 The LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor

As Johnson (2013) argues, one of the most important conceptualizations that people use to make sense of life refers to a PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY in terms of MOVING FORWARD TOWARD A DESTINATION. This construction has found many applications in metaphor studies in the formulation of LIFE IS A JOURNEY to the point of becoming one of the metaphors *par excellence* of CMT (see Ritchie 2008; Fludernik 2011; Forceville 2012).

In ordinary language, LIFE IS A JOURNEY relates to a wide set of conceptualizations that serve to represent the dynamics and events that characterize human existence. Specifically, examples such as “The baby will *arrive* soon,” “He had a *head start* in life,” “Look how *far* we’ve *come*,” “We’re at a *crossroads*,” “We’re *stuck* in this city,” “Marriage can be an *obstacle* to one’s career,” and “Our life is going in two *separate ways*” indicate how many life experiences can be conceived in terms of journey-related source domains. As Forceville (2012: 254) claims, the idea of JOURNEY domain in relation to LIFE is organized in mappings that “in most context do not consist of isolated features, but of structured networks of features, in which the relations between the features are co-mapped with the features themselves.”

In general terms, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor takes into account:

- the direction of the journey (FUTURE IS GOING AHEAD; PAST IS GOING BACK)
- the length of the journey (A LONG EXPERIENCE IS A LONG DISTANCE; A SHORT EXPERIENCE IS A SHORT DISTANCE)
- the kind of journey (LIFE ISSUES ARE OBSTACLES; SERENITY/HAPPINESS IS A STRAIGHT ROUTE)
- variations in the journey (A DIFFICULT TIME IS UPHILL; AN EASY TIME IS DOWNHILL)
- the presence of a beginning and a goal (STARTING AN EXPERIENCE IS STARTING A JOURNEY; REACHING A GOAL IS A DESTINATION)
- changes of perspective (A POSSIBLE LIFE CHANGE IS A CROSSROADS; CONTINUITY IN LIFE IS A STRAIGHT PATH)
- improving and worsening perspectives (LIFE IMPROVEMENT IS GOING UP; WORSENING IS GOING DOWN)
- the presence of other agents (INTIMATE PEOPLE ARE TRAVEL COMPANIONS; A LONELY EXPERIENCE IS A SOLITARY JOURNEY).

From these examples, one can understand how the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY can help to conceive of dynamics that are inherent to life and how these metaphors can make sense of aspects that otherwise would be hard to conceptualize.

Since the previous list of examples is far from being comprehensive, we do not exclude that, during the analysis of the ten artistic paintings, other metaphors related to the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor will emerge. As we have discussed in the literature review, CMT has been generally applied to linguistic and textual material and therefore it is also likely that other conceptualizations may be linked more specifically to the painting context.

## 4 Material and methods

### 4.1 Material

Since we have decided to explore how the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is conveyed in artistic paintings, we need to investigate a multitude of artworks that could be related to this metaphor. The difficulty of providing neat criteria of selection lead us to take into account a series of precautions in order to provide an analysis as precise and contextualized as possible.

First of all, we have decided to consider artistic paintings belonging to the same cultural area. Since cross-cultural research has a strong tradition in linguistic metaphor studies and presupposes methods and apparatuses that go beyond our specific possibilities for an analysis of pictorial representations, we have decided to set up a less ambitious study in which only artistic paintings from a particular geographic and cultural area are examined; specifically, we consider only painting belonging to the European tradition.

Second, although the history of painting within the European context has its roots in the Hellenic and Roman tradition, we have decided to focus our attention on a period that is short enough to perform a homogenous analysis while at the same time being large enough to enable us to draw some general conclusions. Therefore we have decided to select artistic paintings between the Renaissance (fifteenth century) and the contemporary era (twentieth century). We aim to cover this vast historical interval in as homogeneous a way as possible.

Third, we have selected ten artworks that present a certain variability of representations, themes and subjects. Since several events are portrayed in different times by different artists (e.g. the Annunciation and the Crucifixion), we aim at analyzing paintings that in different ways represent the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. In this sense, the titles of the artworks have been used as criterion for content identification. The paintings were selected because of the presence of primary references to JOURNEY such as “journey,” “voyage,” “travel,” for the use of verbs that describe dynamics of movement and motion dynamics (e.g. “flight,” “crossing,” “flying”) and for the presence of nouns as means and way of transport (“raft”; “sea”). In addition, in order to avoid elements of redundancy, we have decided to include only one painter per artwork in our analysis.

By applying these criteria, we have identified the following artistic paintings as material for our analysis:

1. *The Crossing of the Red Sea* – Domenico Ghirlandaio (?), 1481–1482
2. *Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx* – Joachim Patinir, 1515–1524
3. *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* – Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563
4. *The Flight into Egypt* – Tintoretto, 1583–1587
5. *The Flight into Egypt* – Adam Elsheimer, 1609
6. *Snow Storm, Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* – Joseph Turner, 1812
7. *The Raft of the Medusa* – Théodore Géricault, 1818–1819
8. *The Sea of Ice* – Caspar David Friedrich, 1823–1824
9. *The Voyage of Life* – Thomas Cole, 1842
10. *(Flying over) Vitebsk* – Marc Chagall, 1914

## 4.2 Methods

Although the identification of metaphors in linguistic and textual representations has been the object of debate for decades (see Cameron and Maslen 2010; Steen et al. 2010), the complexity of the visual context does not allow one to apply similar insights to paintings and other kinds of images. Excluding some exploratory approaches, research in visual metaphor studies is based on a process of identification and interpretation of relevant conceptual structures.

An illustrative example of these perspectives comes from Forceville (2002) who isolates the two domains of the metaphorical structure by investigating how the target domain generally represents the meaning of the image. For instance, following a series of analyses on advertising, Forceville (2002: 111) noticed how the target domain generally matches the promoted product, since the presentation of the product is the aim.

Regarding the identification of the source domain, Forceville (2008: 464–469) detailed how the source domain can interact with the target in a series of semiotic-compositional ways. From this perspective, source domains may refer to those visual elements that, for instance, merge into a single “gestalt” or present some visual similarities with the target domain.

Despite its simplicity, this approach effectively allows one to identify and distinguish domains, starting from a perspective that contrasts with the finality of our current contribution. While Forceville (2002, 2008) starts from visual representations to identify the metaphors conveyed by these images, we aim to identify how a specific metaphorical construction, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, can be applied to a selection of artistic paintings. To analyze the artworks, we rely on Forceville’s methodological approach (2008: 464–468) to identify as visual metaphors those constructions in which:

- “an object is metaphorized because of the visual context in which it is placed” (contextual metaphor);
- “two objects that are normally distinct entities are physically merged into a single gestalt” (hybrid metaphor);
- “[t]wo objects are represented in their entirety in such a way that they are made to look similar” (pictorial simile);
- “[a] phenomenon experienced as a unified object or gestalt is represented in its entirety in such a manner that it resembles another object or gestalt even without contextual cues” (integrated metaphor, as described following Van Rompay 2005).

In order to explain how this conceptual metaphor can relate to these paintings, we start by taking into account all the visual elements that may find expression

in conceptual metaphors also used in language. Furthermore, since it is also likely that other conceptualizations regarding the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor may be more specifically related to the context of the paintings than to linguistic counterparts, we try to explain how visual/formal aspects of the paintings convey conceptual meanings that conceive LIFE in terms of a PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY that is MOVING FORWARD TOWARD A DESTINATION.

## 5 Analysis and results

### 5.1 LIFE IS A JOURNEY in painting

Following a chronological order, we discuss each painting by introducing basic information about the content of the artwork in order to clarify which subjects and places are involved in the representation. Since paintings require some deeper and more interpretative analyses, we use as references the contributions of art critics and historians.

#### 5.1.1 The Crossing of the Red Sea – *Domenico Ghirlandaio* (?), 1481–1482

Located in the Sistine Chapel (Rome), this fresco, attributed to Domenico Ghirlandaio, in Figure 1 depicts the Biblical episode in which the Israelites, after miraculously crossing the Red Sea, saw the drowning of the entire Egyptian army that was following them.

While on the right of the painting the Egyptian soldiers are drowning, on the left the Israelites are led by a young Moses. The spatial division between the two sides is also emphasized by the representation of meteorological phenomena. If, on the left side, the Israelites' safeness – portrayed by the presence of some recreational activities – has as its background sunbeams and a rainbow, on the right side, the destruction of the Egyptian army is accompanied by a hail storm, sent by God as punishment (Blumenthal 2001).

In terms of identifiable conceptual structures, it is possible to take into account two main metaphors.

First of all, the contrasting meteorological conditions stand for different life experiences. According to the CMT, LIFE is often represented in terms of LIGHT (e.g. the sunbeams) whereas DEATH is represented in terms of DARKNESS or COLD (e.g. the hail storm). As far as JOURNEY-related metaphors are concerned, the transition from a DARK and COLD place to a sunny one stands for moving



**Figure 1:** *The Crossing of the Red Sea* – Domenico Ghirlandaio (?), 1481–1482.

from a negative life experience to a positive one (“But is there for the night a resting place?” in Kövecses [2010: 50]). In relation to the Biblical event, the negative life event is represented by the slavery, which contrasts with the Israelites’ freedom after crossing the Red Sea.

Secondly, the representation of the crossing of the Red Sea as a crucial event for the Israelites’ lives stands for a CROSSROADS that does not allow any return to the previous condition. The concept of a CROSSROADS that excludes any turning back serves to represent the importance of the change itself. As Kövecses claims (2010: 35), the notion of a crossroads is often used in literature and ordinary language to represent a crucial decision (“I’m at a crossroads in my life.”).

### 5.1.2 Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx – *Joachim Patinir, 1515–1524*

This painting in Figure 2 was produced by the Flemish Renaissance artist Joachim Patinir. It hangs in the Museo del Prado of Madrid and it portrays a classical subject related to the tradition of Virgil in his *Aeneid* and that of Dante in the *Inferno*. In the centre of the painting, Charon transports the soul of a dead person on a boat to the gates of Hades. The soul is depicted in the moment of deciding between Heaven (to his right, the viewer’s left) or Hell (to his left), showing that neat distinction that in which the left side is regarded as evil,



Figure 2: *Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx* – Joachim Patinir, 1515–1524.

weak, and worldly (Hall 2008). It seems to choose its destiny by directing its gaze towards Hell and ignoring the angel on the left side of the river that points out the path to Heaven (Falkenburg 1988).

Two conceptual metaphors in this painting are related to the trajectory and the kind of the JOURNEY in which LIFE is represented. As Casasanto (2009) claims, the idea that POSITIVE valence is often conceived of in terms of RIGHT, and NEGATIVE in terms of LEFT, is expressed in English in sentences such as “He is my *right-hand* man” or “They have a *sinister* look.”<sup>3</sup> These metaphors seem to be so common because of the apparent universal association of good things with the right side, coming from the predominance of right-handed people worldwide (Hall 2008). As the painting shows, while HEAVEN is represented on Charon’s and the passenger’s RIGHT, HELL is conversely on their LEFT. If the trajectory that the boat is taking informs us that positive decisions consist of turning to the RIGHT while negative decisions are related to the LEFT, the paths leading to these destinations depend on metaphorical representations as well. Specifically, while the entrance to the gates of Hell is portrayed as a short but large mouth with calm water, the entrance to Heaven has the shape of a narrow outcrop obstructed by piles of rocks and rough waters reaching its

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of the adjective *sinister* comes from the Latin “*sinistrum*”, which means left.

destination only after a long and winding path. In this sense, an easy path leading to HELL and a difficult path leading to Heaven stand for an IMMORAL versus a MORAL LIFE EXPERIENCE. The metaphors a MORAL LIFE EXPERIENCE IS A WINDING PATH and an IMMORAL LIFE EXPERIENCE IS A SMOOTH PATH are also reported in English expressions such as “Alcohol is an *easy way* to have some fun” or “True success is a *long and difficult climb*.”

### 5.1.3 Landscape with the Flight into Egypt – *Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563*

As Figure 3 shows, this painting by Bruegel the Elder represents the Biblical event described in the Gospel of Matthew in which Joseph, Mary and their infant son Jesus fled to Egypt in order to escape the Massacre of the Innocents initiated by Herod to kill Jesus. The upper part of the painting depicts a bucolic view of nature, with a clear river and lush vegetation, whereas the lower part presents Joseph, Mary and Jesus (covered under Mary’s dress) moving towards a dark and desolate landscape.



**Figure 3:** *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* – Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563.

In terms of conceptualization, metaphors seem to operate within the contrast offered by these two antithetic depictions. If Israel represents a familiar context

to the travelers, Egypt assumes the shape of an unknown place (Silver and Bruegel 2011). This contrast between known and unknown is conveyed by the choice of colors and by the blurred tones that, in conceptual terms, are represented by the metaphors CHANGE IS A MOVEMENT FROM A STATE OF IGNORANCE TO A STATE OF KNOWLEDGE and KNOWING IS SEEING. Since the travelers are moving towards a destination that is mysterious to them, the CHANGE domain expresses how the passage from Israel to Egypt takes place. The use of dark and blurred shades in metaphorical terms stands for the unknown since KNOWING is associated with SEEING while the darkness excludes this possibility. As Kövecses (2010: 256) points out, in English and in many other languages, the domain of vision denotes various aspects of knowing. This KNOWING IS SEEING conceptual metaphor accounts for many ordinary linguistic metaphors, such as “I see,” “transparent idea,” and “murky argument.”

#### 5.1.4 The Flight into Egypt – *Tintoretto, 1583–1587*

Similar to the previous example, this painting in Figure 4 produced by Tintoretto portrays the episode of the flight into Egypt in which Joseph, Mary, and Jesus



Figure 4: *The Flight into Egypt* – Tintoretto, 1583–1587.

seek refuge from possible persecution by Herod. The painting is divided into two major sections: (1) the top corners and right bottom area depict vegetation and an inhabited place, and (2) the bottom left shows the three travelers and a donkey. In terms of representation, one of the most salient aspects of the painting is the contrast between the openness of the background and the closed space in which Joseph, Mary and Jesus are located (Valcanover and Pignatti 1985). Since they are trying to find a more intimate place to rest, this closed space – represented by the vegetation which surrounds them on three sides – can be related to the conceptual metaphor INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. In this sense, the concept of INTIMACY relates to a shelter where one can hide and rest, but it can also be extended to a more general notion of LOVE/AFFECTION. In ordinary language, several phrases relate PHYSICAL CLOSENESS to LOVE/AFFECTION or to a place representing INTIMACY such as a shelter. For instance, “He’s *close* to his grandmother,” “Our hearts are *united*,” “There’s a *tight bond* between them” and “That’s our love *nest*.” Within the LIFE IS A JOURNEY perspective, the following concept emerges: two travelers, who would like to reach a certain destination, feel that LOVE/AFFECTION is represented by PHYSICAL CLOSENESS.

The second conceptualization concerns a tension between the centre and the periphery of the painting. Indeed, Joseph and Mary are occupying a position “near the edge of the painting.” The subjects show an orientational metaphor in which IMPORTANCE/VIVIDNESS IS CENTRALITY (Arnheim 1983; Yu 2007). Since they are about to rest, hiding from the people in the background, the choice to occupy a peripheral area of the scene is functional to showing their wish to avoid any contact. As the painting shows, Joseph looks behind him to be sure that nobody from the inhabited area in the background is can see them. On the linguistic level, the idea that leaving a central space (CENTRALITY) is functional to leaving an IMPORTANT/VIVID place is conveyed by expressions such “life in the *background*,” “defiled existence” and “he prefers living off-stage,” “they prefer *living out of the spotlight*.”

### 5.1.5 The Flight into Egypt – Adam Elsheimer, 1609

Figure 5 shows another example of the Biblical event of the “Flight into Egypt” as depicted in a painting by Adam Elsheimer, which can be admired in the Alte Pinakothek (Munich). In this artwork, the dark and nightly tone of the representation is only interrupted by a series of isolated bright elements such as the moon and its reflection in a water course, a fire in the background where some shepherds find rest and a little torch that seems to help Mary, Joseph and Jesus



**Figure 5:** *The Flight into Egypt* – Adam Elsheimer, 1609.

to follow their path. In conceptual terms, the painting’s central idea moves around the notion of LIGHT/FIRE, which contrasts with the surrounding darkness (Howard 1992). What characterizes the three sources of LIGHT/FIRE is the positive effect that they produce. For instance, the fire that the shepherds are using and the torch for Mary and Joseph are functional to keeping them alive. The fire keeps the two shepherds warm and safe while they are resting. Similarly, the torch helps the three travelers to reach their future destination. Within the LIFE IS A JOURNEY perspective, LIGHT/FIRE represents an element enabling travelers to rest for future duties or hopefully to take the right path. The idea that, in order to UNDERTAKE A FUTURE LIFE EXPERIENCE, a LIGHT/FIRE should be used is expressed in phrases such as “It’s up to us to *keep the torch of hope* alive,” “The *candle of hope* we light in this hour” and “*bright future.*”

#### **5.1.6 Snow Storm, Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps – Joseph Turner, 1812**

This painting by Joseph Turner, shown in Figure 6 and located in the Tate Gallery (London), depicts the struggle of Hannibal’s army to cross the Alps in 218 BC,



**Figure 6:** *Snow Storm, Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* – Joseph Turner, 1812.

opposed by the destructive forces of nature. In structural terms, the artwork is divided into two parts that form a single gestalt. In the lower part one discerns Hannibal's soldiers being overwhelmed by a curving, black, violent storm cloud coming from the sky and by an enormous white avalanche that falls down the mountain from the top right corner of the painting. Hannibal is not visible in the painting since his presence – likely identifiable by an elephant barely visible far away in the bottom right corner – is dwarfed by the power of the storm and the hostile landscape. The force of nature is represented in its capacity to annihilate human beings to the point that figures hit by storm are absorbed by its dark colors. Since Hannibal was trying to cross the Alps, conceptual meanings emerge from the notion of OBSTACLE and from the modalities through which the journey takes place (Turner and Kelly 2007). First of all, the extreme difficulty of Hannibal's journey is proportional to the grandeur of his aim: the conquest of Rome. From that perspective, the conceptual metaphor A GREAT (LIFE) ACHIEVEMENT IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY is suggested. The difficulty of the journey is represented by two main natural forces amounting to an insurmountable obstacle: the storm and the avalanche. The metaphor relating a LIFE OBSTACLE to a NATURAL FORCE is a common conceptualization that also finds a widespread application in ordinary English language. For instance, phrases such as “Our adventure is *on the rocks*,” “After a very *stormy* relationship, they decided to separate” and “this project is

*frozen*” express how a LIFE EXPERIENCE can be metaphorically affected by natural forces that – in different ways – block its path.

### 5.1.7 The Raft of the Medusa – *Théodore Géricault, 1818–1819*

The painting by Géricault, shown in Figure 7, depicts a moment after the wreck of the French naval frigate *Méduse*, in which the remaining survivors notice a



**Figure 7:** *The Raft of the Medusa* – Théodore Géricault, 1818–1819.

ship approaching from a distance. In compositional terms, the artwork is structured according to two pyramids. The first one is outlined by the ropes, the mast and a heap of bodies waiting to be swept away by the surrounding waves at the base; conversely, the second pyramid is represented by the group of survivors that seem to be asking for help, while two men at the top are shaking their clothes in an attempt to attract the attention of the distant ship. Within the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, the painting evokes one major metaphorical interpretation. The survivors are facing a situation that could worsen at any time. Since the black clouds in the top right corner forewarn the arrival of a storm, the raft might be destroyed and the survivors might face death (Alhadeff 2002). The

representation of a similar condition is conveyed in English by a series of metaphors concerning sinking scenarios, for instance, in phrases such as “Our hopes are *sinking*,” “I was slowly *drowning* in depression,” “He *drowned* his sorrow in alcohol,” and “Europe is *adrift* because its politicians refuse to make hard choices.” In this way, the concept of a NEGATIVE LIFE EXPERIENCE is represented in terms of a SINKING/DROWNING/ADRIFT BOAT or SAILOR. Géricault’s painting is particularly effective in representing a similar domain because the raft of the *Méduse* is adrift and sinking and simultaneously some of its survivors are portrayed as likely to drown.

### 5.1.8 The Sea of Ice – Caspar David Friedrich, 1823–1824

Located in the Kunsthalle (Hamburg), *The Sea of Ice* (Figure 8) is a painting that portrays the shipwreck of the HMS *Griper* in the middle of a desolate broken



**Figure 8:** *The Sea of Ice* – Caspar David Friedrich, 1823–1824.

ice-sheet, whose shards have piled up after the impact to resemble a sort of dolmen with sharp edges jutting into the blue-grey sky. In structural terms, the

painting is divided into two main parts. The first part presents the crushed ice-sheet forming a pyramid occupying the base of the painting and its central area, whereas a second part concerns the ice-sheet background blending into a single gestalt with the sky. The parts of the ship are barely visible since they are visually overwhelmed by the ice, whereas some icebergs are visible on the horizon (Wolf 2003). Regarding the use of metaphors, the painting conveys two main conceptualizations. First of all, within the LIFE IS A JOURNEY perspective, since the shipwreck refers to the tragic end of the journey, it translates as the END OF LIFE IS THE END OF A JOURNEY. In English, several expressions report the END OF LIFE as THE END OF A JOURNEY, for example “his journey on Earth is *over*,” “at the *end of this path* we will face God’s judgement” and “her life was a *journey* toward freedom.” The second main conceptualization conveyed by the painting considers a modality through which the JOURNEY ends. Since the shipwreck of the HMS Griper was caused by violently crashing into the ice-sheet, the CRASH source domain, as a conceptual element for interpreting a NEGATIVE LIFE EXPERIENCE within a JOURNEY-related metaphor, seems to be pertinent. In ordinary English, many linguistic expressions convey the idea that a NEGATIVE LIFE EXPERIENCE IS A CRASH DURING A JOURNEY, for example “my noble ideals *crashed* into reality,” “these hopes *crashed* with the financial collapse” and “dozens of species of giant mammals *crashed* into extinction.”

### 5.1.9 The Voyage of Life – Thomas Cole, 1842

*The Voyage of Life* (Figure 9) is a series of four paintings by Thomas Cole that represent the four stages of human life: childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. The artworks depict a voyager who travels in a boat on a river, through different landscapes, accompanied by a guardian angel. The landscapes, each related to one of the four seasons of the year, have a central role in conveying the metaphorical conceptualization of LIFE IS A JOURNEY. In *Childhood* (top left), early human life is portrayed as a voyage through a lush, calm landscape basked in warm sunshine. The voyage of childhood is also characterized by the smoothness and narrowness of the river expressing the sheltered experience of childhood itself and by the figure of the guardian angel holding the tiller. *Youth* (top right) is placed within the same lush and rich landscape, but the river looks wider as it represents the viewer’s experience of the voyage. The boat is now guided by the voyager and the guardian angel bids farewell from the right-hand bank. The river seems to lead straight to a destination (the castle), but on the line of the horizon the river becomes less linear and choppier, and it is full of rocks. On the bottom left, there is *Manhood*, a representation of the trials and



Figure 9: *The Voyage of Life* – Thomas Cole, 1842.

difficulties of life, where the adult voyager faces the rush of the water full of menacing sharp rocks and dangerous currents with a damaged and tiller-less boat. The warm sun of *Childhood* and *Youth* is replaced by a dark and stormy sky, whereas the lush vegetation makes room for gnarled and leafless trunks and rocks. Here, the guardian angel is far from the voyager and observes the situation without him noticing so. Finally, in *Old age* (bottom right) the voyager is old and he has survived the difficulties of life. The river is as calm as in *Childhood* and *Youth*, but it flows into an indefinite dark space that seems to represent the Eternity or Afterlife. The landscape is essentially gone and only some rocks are left, representing the last images of the earthly world. In this final painting, the guardian angel is descending from the sky and points out to the old voyager the direction that he will take (Parry 1988). From a LIFE IS A JOURNEY perspective, the four paintings convey some common representations. First of all, while LIFE is specifically conceived of as a JOURNEY ON A RIVER, the POSITIVE LIFE EXPERIENCE domain reflects a JOURNEY THROUGH A CALM, LUSH and CLEAR LANDSCAPE whereas the NEGATIVE LIFE EXPERIENCE is represented in terms of a MENACING, DESOLATE AND DARK LANDSCAPE. A second shared metaphor is INNER LIFE SPIRITUALITY conceptualized as a JOURNEY WITH A GUARDIAN ANGEL. The explanation of this conceptualization

lies in the presence of the guardian angel that – in different ways and in different locations – accompanies the voyager on his JOURNEY, passing from holding the tiller of the boat to observing him from the sky and finally to showing him the way to reach Eternity.

### 5.1.10 (Flying over) Vitebsk – Marc Chagall, 1914

The last painting is (*Flying over*) *Vitebsk* by Marc Chagall (Figure 10), an artwork that seems to recall a wandering Jew, represented with the stick and sack in which he has gathered what he owns. The man is fleeing from Vitebsk, the artist's birthplace, because of the persecution of the Jews by the Tsar, which influenced the youth of the Belarusian artist (Walther et al. 2000). Since the wandering Jew is depicted as fleeing from Vitebsk, a possible metaphorical interpretation consists in conceptualizing ESCAPING FROM A NEGATIVE LIFE CONDITION in terms of FLEEING. Since Chagall conveyed his representations in a dream-like and fairy-tale style, these tragic events (persecution and fleeing) are shown in terms of a bad dream. In this sense, another conceptual metaphor



Figure 10: (*Flying over*) *Vitebsk* – Marc Chagall, 1914.

may consider how a LIFE TRAGEDY is an IMAGINARY JOURNEY, because of the dream-like representation of the Jews' migration. The relation between tragic events and an imaginary representation is expressed in English phrases such as "Europe is barely emerging from this *nightmare*," "this journey has been like waking up from a *bad dream*" and "that was a *nightmare journey*, in a country where roads are almost non-existent."

## 6 Conclusions

In our attempt to identify how the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is represented within a determined historical and pictorial context, we have discussed some of the conceptualizations that shape a series of European paintings ranging from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century.

In general terms, our analysis of these paintings shows that some conceptualizations are recurrent, presenting semiotic and representational regularities. Conversely, other representations can only be found in some paintings or seem to gradually disappear as the centuries progress. This can be explained both in terms of stylistic and content changes. While stylistic changes refer to the individual creativity (see Martindale 1990), content changes often reflect values and aesthetics belonging to a certain cultural and historical context. An example of this variability has been described by Hall (2008) in relation to conceptualizations of LEFT and RIGHT in terms of BAD and GOOD. Traditionally, in almost every cultural and historical context, the LEFT side has been interpreted in terms of INFERIORITY, EVIL, WEAKNESS, WORDLY or FEMININE, in opposition to concepts such as SUPERIORITY, GOOD, STRONG, SPIRITUAL and MASCULINE as expressions of RIGHT. As Hall (2008) claims, starting in the late Renaissance, this hierarchy was questioned and represented in art as never before. The LEFT, mainly because of the presence of the heart, was reinterpreted in terms of authentic and deep human feelings, for example in abstractions such as LOVE and PASSION. Additionally, with the rise of interest in occultism and spiritualism that took place in Europe in the nineteenth century, the LEFT had become associated with the concept of TABOO, MYSTERY and with the UNCONSCIOUS.

Regarding those conceptualizations that have maintained semiotic and representational regularities, we can identify three main elements that seem to be shared by all the artworks that we have discussed.

First of all, the concept of JOURNEY is associated with a PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY that considers the start of the journey and its conclusion as two qualitatively different moments. As also discussed by other studies (see

Forceville 2012), inasmuch as human LIFE consists of searching of identity, it is plausible to conceive it in terms of the metaphor PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS MOVEMENT TOWARD A DESTINATION. In this sense, the concept of JOURNEY is centrally one of its more specific manifestations. This aspect seems to be expressed by all the paintings that we have examined. It refers to dyads such as SLAVERY/FREEDOM (*The Crossing of the Red Sea*), MORAL/IMMORAL (*Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx*), KNOWN/UNKNOWN (*Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*), LIFE/DEATH (*The Sea of Ice*), CHILDHOOD/OLD AGE (*The Voyage of Life*) and STABILITY/MIGRATION (*Vitebsk*).

A second element emerging from the paintings considers the conceptualizations of LIFE IS A JOURNEY as a collective/shared experience. Every painting conveys either the presence of two travelers (Charon and the dead soul; the Guardian angel and the voyager), or three travelers (Joseph, Mary and Jesus) or larger units such as the Israelites, Hannibal's army, HMS Griper's crew and Méduse's survivors. To a certain extent, Chagall's *Vitebsk* may refer to a collective representation as well. Although the painting presents only one Jewish man fleeing, it is likely that the painter wanted to consider the migration from Vitebsk as a collective tragedy, for which the single man depicted assumes a *pars pro toto* symbolization.

Finally, a third aspect expressed by the paintings refers to the causes that push the journey forward toward its end. Excluding the two allegorical representations of the sense of life and death such as *Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx* and *Voyage of Life*, the other paintings present a scenario that – in different ways – was triggered by some human wish. If Joseph, Mary and Jesus were forced to leave Israel because of Herod's persecution, Hannibal's army was forced to face the force of nature in the Alps because of Hannibal's will to conquer Rome. Similarly, if the Jew must leave Vitebsk to escape the Tsar's persecution, the destinies of the HMS Griper and the Méduse were inevitably marked by the human will for exploration and trading. In this sense, nature does not seem to affect the representation of LIFE IS A JOURNEY in the same way the human will does.

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