

# ***Aurora musis amica*: Metaphoric conceptualization of depression in online visual representations**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, the authors analyse a selection of 30 online visual artworks in order to identify conceptual metaphors related to the target domain of DEPRESSION. While a lot of research has identified these metaphors in textual and verbal modes, they aim to understand which conceptualizations can be identified in visual and pictorial representations. Based on the analysis of their corpus of examples, they suggest that, while some visual/pictorial conceptualizations of DEPRESSION reflect research that has been carried out on the linguistic and textual levels (standard metaphors), other conceptualizations appear in order to create novel and diverse metaphors (creative metaphors). This contribution reflects the importance of analysing the role of metaphorization beyond the verbal and textual dimensions, as a large number of artworks are based on metaphors that exist on the visual level.

## **KEYWORDS**

artwork • depression • discourse • metaphor • online representation • visual metaphor

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the first attempts to examine how metaphor could help to understand and communicate ordinary experiences (see Lakoff and Kövecses, 1987), there has been a growing interest in the use of conceptualizations of illness and health (see Reisfield and Wilson, 2004; Sontag, 1989). As metaphor

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studies have also started to embrace other dimensions such as images and visual artworks (see Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009), the analysis of metaphors in the domain of illness and health is progressively gaining more attention (see El Refaie, 2018).

In this article, we will investigate the ways in which depression – a disabling disease that causes a significant burden to the individual as well as to society (Richards and O’Hara, 2014; Sobocki et al., 2006) – can be conceptualized through visual and pictorial metaphors.

As some recent studies in visual metaphor have indicated (see, for example, El Refaie, 2014: 154, 194), a range of metaphoric connotations such as darkness, descent, a heavy burden, or being trapped in a tight space have become deeply entrenched in contemporary Western discourses on depression.

To contribute to the study of how depression is represented in a creative visual and pictorial context, we have selected 30 artworks obtained via a Google Image search based on the keywords ‘depression + artwork’. Our selection has been validated by a series of raters to assess their functionality and effectiveness in representing depression.

In this article, we aim to categorize the online visual and pictorial representations of depression in two main groups. First, we consider the conceptualizations that have already been represented in ordinary English expressions, as collected by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002), Kövecses (2010) and Charteris-Black (2012). Second, we study metaphors that do not have a specific linguistic counterpart and can be considered as a result of a creative initiative of the artworks’ authors. As we will see, we address semi-otic and representational similarities that may characterize the artworks with the aim of showing that particular conceptualizations are independent of the main metaphors to which they refer.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Since the groundbreaking research by Black (1955), Ortony (1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the notion of metaphor has shifted from a perspective based on an ornamental and rhetorical function to a view that considers its conceptual and cognitive implications (Gibbs, 2008).

In the last three decades, the role of metaphor has become associated primarily with dynamic thought and action (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), communicative competence (Ortony, 1979), social cognition (Landau et al., 2010), the representation of attitudes, judgments and prejudice (Meier and Dionne, 2009) and the shaping of ideologies and other socio-political constructions (see Charteris-Black, 2004, 2012; Goatly, 2007; Musolff, 2016). The role played by metaphor in such a variety of dimensions has been addressed by linguistic and cognitive scientists to the extent that they claim that the human mind is

structured largely around metaphoric processes (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Starting from this point, several studies have explained that metaphor has an impact on human conceptualization in dimensions that go beyond the canonical verbal and textual cues and how metaphors affect other representational modalities. In particular, metaphor has been described in relation to visual and pictorial stimuli (see Forceville, 2006),<sup>2</sup> gesture analysis (Cienki and Müller, 2008; Poppi and Kravanja, 2017) and multimodal representations such as film and commercials (Coëgnarts and Kravanja, 2012a, 2012b; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Poppi, 2018; Poppi and Urios-Aparisi, 2019; Urios-Aparisi, 2010). Whatever the modalities, the cognitive and conceptual function of metaphor consists of representing and communicating a more abstract and unusual element (usually called the *target*) in terms of a more concrete and familiar one (the *source*).

The expansion of metaphor studies through various modalities and in relation to different aspects of metaphorical conceptualization can be related to the development of different research trends. Specifically, with regard to visual and pictorial metaphors – probably the most explored representations after verbal and textual metaphors – it is possible to identify three main tendencies. Firstly, although metaphor may be expressed by any sort of visual and pictorial representation, most of the research is almost exclusively directed towards the analysis of magazine and billboard advertisements (Forceville, 2002; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004; Van Mulken et al., 2010) and cartoons, as well as comic-strips (El Refaie, 2003; Schilperoord and Maes, 2009). Apart from some very recent contributions (Petrenko and Korotchenko, 2012; Poppi and Kravanja, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) or some seminal works (Forceville, 1988; Wollheim, 1993), metaphor studies have rarely addressed how metaphors are conveyed in paintings and other visual artworks such as photographs, sculptures, digital artworks or drawings. Secondly, since metaphor allows one to conceptualize abstract elements in terms of concrete domains, a large number of studies have conducted semiotic analyses of the modalities to identify a *single* target domain and a *single* source domain for every visual representation interaction and how to examine the nature of this relation. In general, these studies (Forceville, 2002, 2008) concern the theoretical level because they show how the source and target domains interact. Thirdly, visual metaphor researchers tend to use rather marginally those findings that have been recently developed by more linguistically oriented studies. Indeed, during the past few years, linguistic research has examined the use of metaphors in several socio-cultural issues (related to, for instance, healthcare) to address the way metaphoric conceptualization affects real-world issues such as the concept of physical health (Semino and Demjen, 2017) or the representation of diseases such as cancer (Semino et al., 2017). Apart from contributions such as El Refaie (2001, 2003), visual metaphor studies, on the other hand, tend to overlook how visual metaphoric conceptualizations can relate to real-world issues. As Charteris-Black (2012: 199) suggests, the visual representations of people

communicating or experiencing depression 'may be analyzed for metaphors as a source of insight into the condition, and metaphors may also be utilized by psychotherapists to engage with the condition'.

In summary, using these research trends as a starting point, this article will analyse the modalities through which metaphors are (i) conveyed in representations such as visual artworks, with the aim of identifying them in a selection of paintings, photo-montages photographs, drawings and digital paintings that share the common theme of DEPRESSION. In this context, the notion of artwork does not refer to any production that necessarily has an aesthetic or historical valence, but only that 'refers straightforwardly to the thing created by the artist, whether it be, for example, a painting, sculpture, or drawing' (Harris, 2006: 31). In order to consider how depression, a major public health problem, can be metaphorically conceived and expressed, and whether there are conceptual, semiotic and representational regularities, (ii) we will develop an overview of the main visual metaphoric representations of depression.

## LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

Depression is one of the most common and serious causes of mortality worldwide (see Lawlor and Hopker, 2001). Described for centuries as 'melancholia' by Hippocrates and the subsequent tradition, depression began to acquire part of its present meaning only at the end of the 19th century (Lawlor, 2012). As McMullen (1999) claimed, once the concept of melancholia had been replaced by that of depression, the former started to acquire more positive connotations than the latter.

Nowadays, depression refers, in a simplified way, to Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), a mental disorder characterized by a low mood that is present in most situations, low self-esteem and a loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities. Depression can negatively affect someone's personal life and work, as well as their sleeping and eating habits, and it can induce suicide or suicidal thoughts (Richards and O'Hara, 2014).

Since metaphor has been described as playing a central role in conceiving and communicating mental and socio-relational states (Landau et al., 2010), we can present some of the most common conceptualizations in language related to depression and other similar conditions. Starting from a list of metaphoric conceptualizations suggested and discussed by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002), Kövecses (2010) and Charteris-Black (2012), we can address the representation of depression in four main scenarios. As the Latin etymology of the word implies, *depressio* means 'to press down' and this earlier literal sense can also found in the 'ground that has sunk into a hollow' (Charteris-Black, 2012: 199). In line with these interpretations, El Refaie (2014: 169) also suggested that: 'when people talk or write about their experience of depression, they typically – and perhaps inevitably – draw on a

range of metaphors, many of which appear to have become deeply entrenched in contemporary Western discourses.<sup>3</sup>

Research into metaphor and depression from a cognitive linguistic perspective is generally 'based primarily around classification of individual metaphors by source domain, followed by inferences regarding conceptual metaphors' (Charteris-Black, 2012: 205). For instance, Barcelona (1986) analysed the closely related concept of sadness and identified a range of conceptual metaphors that were coherent with the results of McMullen and Conway (2002), who analysed a large corpus of tapes of psychotherapy sessions.

Depression is conveyed metaphorically in ordinary English expressions such as 'I feel so *down*' or 'He's really *low* these days.' These references to the metaphor DEPRESSION IS (GOING) DOWN are also expressed in relation to motion verbs such as TO SINK ('She is slowly *sinking* into depression'), TO FALL INTO ('He found himself *falling into* depression') and TO COLLAPSE ('They are very prone to *collapsing into* depression'). Another common conceptualization for depression in ordinary language considers DARK as a source domain. For instance, the metaphor DEPRESSION IS DARK can be found in expressions such as 'He is living through *dark* days,' 'Her mood turned *black* many years ago' and other related experiences such as 'They are not *beaming* with joy any more.' In a series of depression-related conceptualizations, Kövecses (2010: 334) reports how many other source domains can be used in ordinary phrases. Specifically, DEPRESSION can be represented in terms of A NATURAL FORCE in expressions such as 'Waves of depression came over him' and 'depression was a *storm* in her life.' The concretization of depression as a physical element can also be expressed in examples that conceive it as an OPPRESSOR, AN ANIMAL or A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR. In particular, expressions such as 'Depression is beating you up' are frequent as well as 'He *surrendered* to depression' (DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSOR), 'He became an easy *prey* of depression,' 'Her husband has surrendered to the jaws of depression and is slowly digested in its maw,' 'Depression is a *beast* that knows no boundaries' (DEPRESSION IS AN ANIMAL), 'She was *ruled* by sorrow' and 'Depression *governs* his life' (DEPRESSION IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR). In more general terms, DEPRESSION – like many other feelings or mental conditions – can be associated with conceptualizations that describe it as A FLUID IN A CONTAINER. From this, a series of phrases emerge such as 'I am filled with depression,' 'She couldn't *contain* her sadness any longer' and 'He *overflowed* with anxiety and sadness.' While these metaphors 'are to be found most frequently in people's oral accounts of the feelings associated with depression' (El Refaie, 2014: 154), there is a growing body of studies that explores which metaphors are used in the visual and pictorial context. In this regard, El Refaie discussed the use of creative metaphors in graphic memoirs, showing that among the most common images representing depression are the concepts of darkness, descent, a heavy burden, or being trapped in a tight space.



**Figure 1.** Artistic paintings and engravings related to depression.

Whereas El Refaie considered the representation of depression in two different books (Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales* and *Depresso*, by Brick, the alter-ego of John Stuart Clark), we will consider a wider set of examples coming from different sources. Therefore, we discuss a more extensive number of metaphors that seem to emerge from a more diversified corpus of examples, in which various creators can creatively represent different aspects of depression.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Material**

As Figure 1 shows, the emotional and behavioural aspects of depression, for instance lowered self-esteem accompanied by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that may be evident to others (see Seligman, 2005[1992]), have been expressed in a variety of artistic paintings or engravings such as *Melencolia I* by Albrecht Dürer, *The Absinthe Drinker* by Edgar Degas, and Vincent van Gogh's *Sorrowing Old Man*. In terms of representations, the relationship between depression and the domain of art was also established by frequent references to sensitive individuals and intellectuals. As McMullen (1999: 103) claimed, forms of melancholia in the late medieval and Renaissance periods 'were thought to be afflictions of the passive, sensitive, intellectually and morally superior male. Artists, noblemen, and intellectuals were considered especially at risk because of their heightened sensibilities'.

Regarding the study of depression in the domain of art, however, any attempt to analyse the way depression can be represented by visual/pictorial means seems to be characterized by three crucial facts.

First of all, since the concept of depression is relatively recent, older artistic paintings considered related conditions such as melancholia, sadness,



anxiety or emptiness, but they could hardly be said to represent the concept of depression as such. Secondly, since the theorization of depression is contemporary to the birth and affirmation of artistic movements such as Expressionism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, even painters such as Edvard Munch, Joan Miró, Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock – all of whom have allegedly struggled with depression themselves – have expressed this condition in a way that can hardly refer to the previously discussed metaphoric conceptualizations of depression. Thirdly, since we aim to develop a general overview of the main ways of conceiving and communicating depression through metaphors, we need to take into account a large number of online visual representations that specifically refer to it.

For these reasons, we decided to analyse the visual representations obtained via a Google Image search based on the keywords ‘depression + artwork’. From this search, we identified a group of 50 visual representations (top results according to the presentation order) that include (1) paintings, photo-montages photographs, drawings and digital paintings that present (2) only visual and pictorial components, excluding written texts and symbols and (3) that were evaluated as conveying expressions and representations of depression.

In order to work with a more coherent set of examples, we asked 20 raters<sup>4</sup> to evaluate the pictures using a 7-point Likert scale (0 = ‘Not at all’ to 7 = ‘Completely’). The raters were asked to consider not only whether a given picture ‘is functional/effective in visually representing’,<sup>5</sup> respectively, FEAR, ANXIETY, LONELINESS and DEPRESSION, ‘but also their causes and effects’. In this way, only the (30 out of 50) pictures that presented the highest level of agreement regarding the representation of DEPRESSION were included in the present study (average  $M = 5.9$  on the 7-point Likert scale).

## Methods

Following the idea of interpreting online visual representations of the selected artworks in terms of conceptual metaphors, we try to analyse the artworks in the light of conceptualizations that have been described on the linguistic level by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002), Kövecses (2010) and Charteris-Black (2012), for example DEPRESSION IS (GOING) DOWN, DARK, A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, A NATURAL FORCE, AN OPPRESSOR, AN ANIMAL, A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR or BREAKING INTO PIECES. For each artwork, we try to explain the reasons why it is related to metaphors. Since the artworks have a joint topic, the target domain will always be related to DEPRESSION, or to similar dimensions such as THE BEGINNING OF DEPRESSION, THE CAUSE OF DEPRESSION, THE CONSEQUENCE OF DEPRESSION and THE HEALING OF DEPRESSION. In case certain artworks can express other conceptualizations that were not previously described in the contributions of Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002) and Kövecses (2010), we generally talk about

‘creative’ conceptual metaphors. In this contribution, we apply a neat distinction between standard metaphor, in the sense of more conventional representations, and creative metaphors, those that present traits of unconventionality or novelty. In line with Kövecses (2010: 34–36), while standard (conventional) metaphors are well established and well entrenched within a linguistic community, creative (novel) metaphors are often the result of artistic and literary intuitions. In addition, authors such as Kövecses (2010: 34–36) and Semino (2008) have also pointed out that, while creative metaphors apply standard source domains in unconventional ways, novel metaphors are those that recruit a new source domain. Considering that the distinction between these sub-categories of unconventional metaphors can often be problematic (see Beaty and Silvia, 2013; Gibbs and Tendahl, 2006), we have decided to take them as a single, encompassing, notion. Therefore, in our attempt to develop a general overview of the main visual metaphors representing depression, we consider adherence to the conceptualization identified by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002) and Kövecses (2010) as the primary criterion of categorization and the relation to other conceptual, semiotic and representational regularities as the second criterion.

Regarding the discussion of the artworks in relation to particular source domains, it is important to clarify some aspects.

- As recently discussed by some authors (see Poppi et al., forthcoming), it is important to consider that multiple interpretations are possible for the same artwork and how the interpretations of the metaphorical structures often diverge from viewer to viewer. In this regard, our attempt to interpret artworks in the light of specific metaphors is simply indicative of developing a general overview of how depression can be represented in visual and pictorial artworks. In this sense, we suggest only single metaphorical interpretations per each artwork for which the two authors of this contribution have expressed a joint interpretation. Specifically, the two authors autonomously listed a series of five metaphors for each artwork and decided to consider only that metaphor that had been reported by both. If more than one metaphor was in common, the choice was based on a discussion of merit.
- Since several artworks share features such as the use of dark colours, in order to make our analysis as diversified and heterogeneous as possible, we have tried to interpret them also in light of other salient properties that emerge from the picture.
- The distinction between ‘standard’ and ‘creative’ metaphors (see below) does not present any specific theoretical implications, but it is functional to describing how certain visual and pictorial representations of depression have not been discussed in linguistic terms. If, on the one hand, we do not suggest any theoretical insight about how creative and standard metaphors can be defined and distinguished, on the other hand, we believe that a general use of these notions can help to understand that





**Figure 2. DEPRESSION IS (GOING) DOWN.**

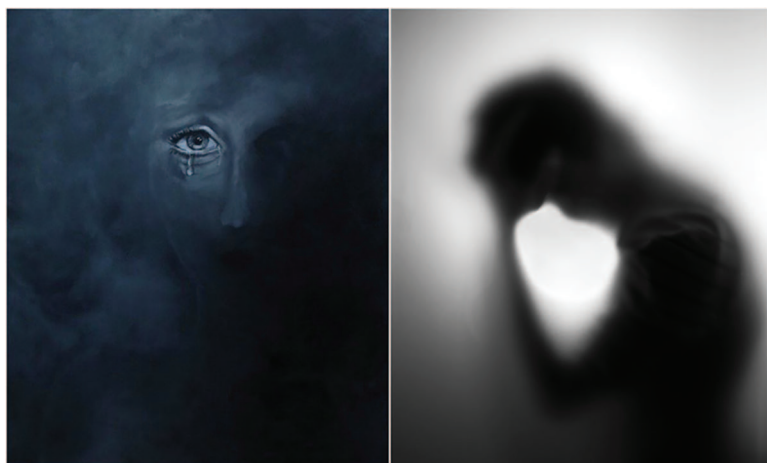
some visual conceptualizations do not necessarily reflect on textual and verbal modes. In this regard, a handful of English examples is given purely for familiarization purposes. In addition, the process of deciding whether a metaphor is 'standard' or 'creative' was based on both co-authors' autonomous interpretations. In particular, having listed the conceptualizations about DEPRESSION provided by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002) and Kövecses (2010), both co-authors of this article evaluated whether or not the artworks in the corpus under examination could be connected to these 'standard' metaphors. If not, the artwork was categorized as being related to a 'creative' metaphor.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION<sup>6</sup>**

In this section, we present the analysis of the online visual representations of depression that can refer to the conceptualization suggested by Barcelona (1986), McMullen and Conway (2002), Kövecses (2010) and Charteris-Black (2012) and to those conceptual, semiotic and representational regularities that we consider to be 'creative' conceptual metaphors.

### **'Standard' conceptual metaphors**

**DEPRESSION IS (GOING) DOWN.** As we have discussed, in a linguistic context, this conceptual metaphor is active in expressions such as 'I feel so *down*' and 'She is slowly *sinking* into depression.' As McMullen and Conway (2002) found, 90 percent of the metaphors that conceptualize depression are related to the idea of physical descent. Visually, the idea of a movement that goes down or toward a lower level is expressed in the examples in Figure 2. A movement that goes down can be conceptualized literally – with a young woman drowning inside a room full of water – or figuratively – through the



**Figure 3.** DEPRESSION IS DARK.

portrait of a face that ‘swallows’ itself in an infinite series of internal projections. In both cases, the concept of (GOING) DOWN refers to the negative side of DEPRESSION that consists of losing contact with the ordinary dimensions of life.

**DEPRESSION IS DARK.** Although the visual representations of depression tend to present sombre tones, some examples convey the transformational condition that is expressed in phrases such as ‘He is living through *dark* days’ and ‘Her mood turned *black* many years ago.’ What all studies of metaphor in relation to depression seem to share, is the importance of darkness. As Pritzker (2003) explains by quoting (Gibbs, 1994: 414), the concept of darkness is ‘associated with all aspects of babyhood, such as dependence, helplessness, and inferiority’. As the two artworks in Figure 3 show, the identity and the characterizations of the human beings veer toward an indistinct dark layer. Interestingly, the only elements that can be clearly identified are the tearful eye of the woman on the left and the hand gestures of the figure on the right: they express an idea of deep suffering. In this way, the dark colours serve to highlight the intensity of the suffering and the effect that it has on overriding the identity of the human figures.

**DEPRESSION IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER.** The domain of FLUID IN A CONTAINER can refer to a series of emotional states. The depiction of depression in these terms assumes a tragic valence since the images in Figure 4 show how dramatically and intensely the liquid can overflow and even explode from the heads of the human figures. Although the FLUID IN A CONTAINER domain considers linguistic expressions that describe the container as ‘full’ (‘I am filled with depression’) or that exceed its capacity (‘She couldn’t *contain* her sadness any longer’), these visual representations portray quite well that depression is a state that can hardly be controlled and that is meant to ‘explode’ (‘Depression *explodes* into anger’). As Charteris-Black



**Figure 4. DEPRESSION IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER.**

(2012: 207) points out, the CONTAINER scheme accounts for a large number of metaphorical expressions and ‘represent[s] the depression as a three-dimensional container that has a depth and a physical base from which the depressed person usually needs to “come out”’. As influential studies such as Lakoff and Kövecses (1987) have shown, intense emotional states such as DEPRESSION can be referred to patterns of conceptualizations that usually reflect more conventional emotional states (e.g. ANGER). In other words, the FLUID IN A CONTAINER domain can also characterize DEPRESSION both because the conceptualization is also generally used for common emotions and also because ANGER, for instance, represents a constitutive expression of DEPRESSION itself (see Benazzi and Akiskal, 2005; Fava et al., 1993). Returning to the analysis, the two examples indicate how depression can be associated with a black tear-like liquid that covers the face of the figure on the left, dripping like ink onto its body. Similarly, the image on the right shows that depression can assume the shape of an exploding dark smoky substance that clouds the figure. As Kövecses (2010: 334) claims, the FLUID IN A CONTAINER domain is functional to conveying the idea of ‘intensity’, an ‘attempt at control’ and a ‘loss of control’, three aspects that serve to highlight the tragedy of depression.

**DEPRESSION IS A NATURAL FORCE.** The source domain of NATURAL FORCE gives depression a naturalist view that reveals passivity and lack of control. The use of natural elements such as waves (‘Waves of depression came over him’) or a storm (‘depression was a *storm* in her life’) in English expressions highlights the power of depression with regard to human existence. As Gibbs and O’Brien (1990) suggested, the idea of a NATURAL FORCE is frequently communicated by verbs such as ‘hit’, ‘flip’ and ‘blow’ that are also identified as relating to the manner in which anger is frequently found in the metaphors. The visual representations in Figure 5 are in line with these cues. If, on the one hand, the artwork on the left presents depression as a storm that



**Figure 5.** DEPRESSION IS A NATURAL FORCE.

cannot be stopped and affects only the subject (e.g. the rain falls only on the umbrella), emphasizing the ideas of passivity and lack of control, on the other hand, the figure on the right shows a different type of naturalization. As we can see, the passive and inert human figure stays still in his false resting position (e.g. the stool and the contracted leg position), while the branches of a plant emerge from his back. The passivity and lack of control are associated with the phenomenon of spontaneous germination that takes place in contexts that remain in isolation from human presence.

**DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSOR.** The source domain of OPPRESSOR emphasizes that depression is a hostile entity preventing a reaction by its victim. As in ordinary English phrases, the use of domains such as BEATING UP and SURRENDERED ('Depression is beating you up' and 'He *surrendered* to depression') shows how the depressed individual is in a position of subjugation. As the two examples in Figure 6 show, the human figures suffer the hostile entities both physically – as the image on the right portrays, with a creature that weighs on the shoulders of a suffering human being – and psychologically, with the ghostly entity on the left that breathes and shouts its presence. In both cases, the two human figures do not show any form of reaction, but seem to keep to their daily activities or remain still in their suffering.

**DEPRESSION IS AN ANIMAL.** English expressions such as 'He became an easy *prey* of depression', 'His husband has surrendered to the *jaws* of depression and is slowly digested in its *maw*' and 'Depression is a *beast* that knows no boundaries' refer to an idea of depression in terms of a ferocious and predatory animal. In comparison with the more general OPPRESSOR domain, in this case ANIMAL refers to a more natural entity, associable with a NATURAL FORCE, but one that presents traits of hostility and subjugation. Here, the two visual representations in Figure 7 depict two figures that – in different ways – are victims of two animal entities. If the image on the left shows a





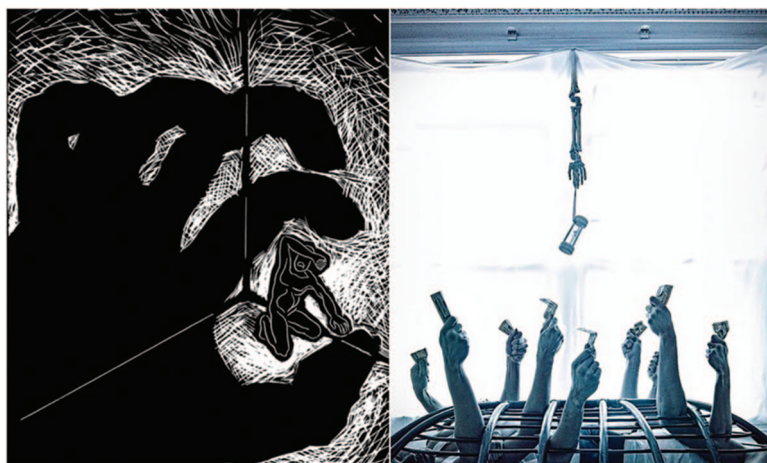
**Figure 6. DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSOR.**



**Figure 7. DEPRESSION IS AN ANIMAL.**

woman wandering in a dark and a desolate landscape, surrounded by the presence of numerous ravens that seem to be waiting to feast on her flesh, the image on the right shows a human figure that is kept hostage by a giant spider. In both cases, the visual representations show a lack of control by the subjects and a complete lack of opposition to their condition.

**DEPRESSION IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR.** The source domain that we refer to as a SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR conveys a notion of domination and passivity experienced by the depressed subject. In conceptual terms, the SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR presents traits of subjugation typical of the OPPRESSOR, a naturalist representation typical of the hostile ANIMAL, but projects the condition of victimhood toward a human-like entity. As



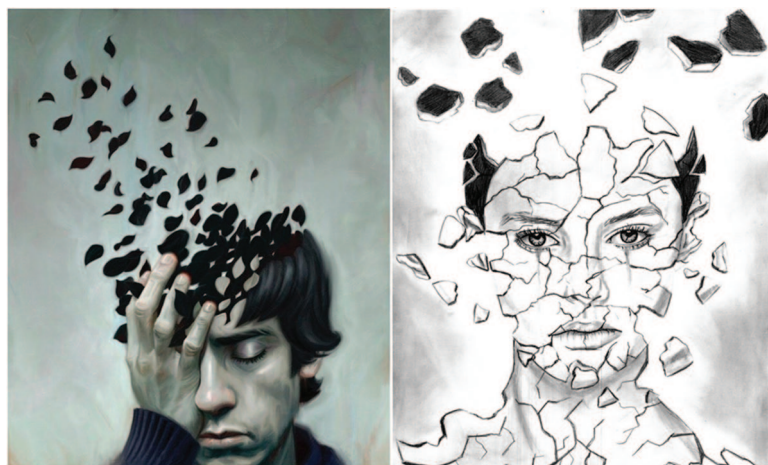
**Figure 8.** DEPRESSION IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR.

the artworks in Figure 8 show, the human figure on the left is dominated and depicted in a condition of inferiority, and a gigantic shadow of a human hand seems to grab the entire victim. The dimensions of the hand and its terrifying appearance stand for a SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR entity that overwhelms the single individual. Conversely, the unusual representation on the right portrays a series of hands holding money that are coming out of a cage. As Charteris-Black (2012: 207) suggested, the SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR metaphor seems to be connected to the concept of CONTAINER. Specifically, SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR implies physical emergence from depression as leaving a CONTAINER, and this is expressed by verbs such as ‘come out’, ‘pour out’, ‘escape’ and ‘release’.

The hands seem to want to beg for the purchase of a product that resembles a packet of antidepressants pills. These artworks may be interpreted in terms of the passivity and lack of control that people with depression have in regard to their treatments. The drama of the scene is highlighted by the skeleton arm holding the product. Considering the artificiality of the scenario and the captivity in which the human figures are kept, in this representation, the sense of a SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR is particularly evident.

**DEPRESSION IS BREAKING INTO PIECES.** In metaphoric terms, the concept of BREAKING INTO PIECES, or analogous constructions such as FRAGILITY, is usually associated with the conceptualized HUMAN MIND in expressions such as ‘Her ego is very *fragile*’, ‘You have to *handle him with care* since his wife’s death’ and ‘He *broke* under cross-examination.’ As Charteris-Black (2012: 212) suggested, the notion of BREAKING INTO PIECES entails that there is some solid structure in the first place. The idea that the HUMAN MIND IS A BRITTLE OBJECT (see Kövecses, 2010: 91–92) can be projected onto the domain of DEPRESSION to highlight its possible consequences. The two visual representations in Figure 9 show how breaking into pieces can refer





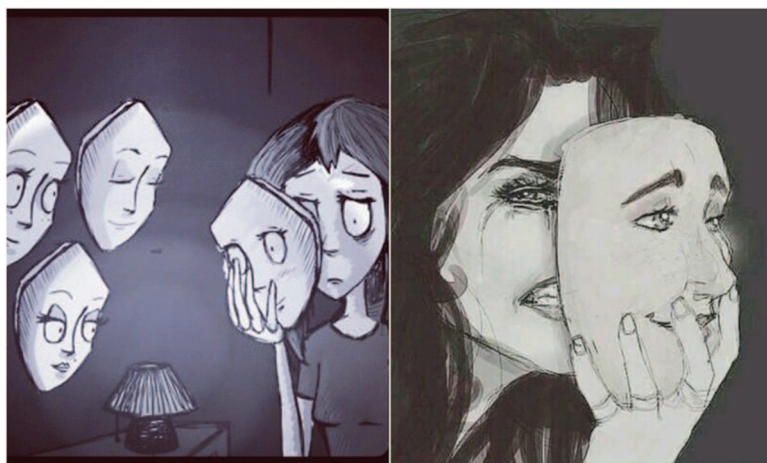
**Figure 9.** DEPRESSION IS BREAKING INTO PIECES.

to depression. The image on the left portrays a man who is progressively falling apart. It shows how the first part to break into pieces is his head, the locus where depression is prototypically placed. Similarly, the image on the right presents a human figure that breaks as though it is a glass-like object, with an analogous emphasis on the head, the part of the figure that is more damaged than the rest of the body.

### **‘Creative’ conceptual metaphors**

**DEPRESSION IS WEARING A MASK.** A conceptual representation that has not been described in linguistic terms relates DEPRESSION to WEARING A MASK. According to Biggs (1997) and Scheibe (1979), the mask metaphor is generally used in social contexts with the aim to ‘protect the self and deceive others.’ The function of this metaphor seems to highlight how people affected by depression tend to hide their condition by pretending to be happy or joyful. The contrast between depression and similar feelings is conveyed by the examples in Figure 10, where the two human figures wear masks that deny their true psychological state. If the artwork on the left shows a subject that seems to adapt the mask to different circumstances, the image on the right focuses on a single mask to emphasize the difference between her social image and her condition. In linguistic terms, the conceptualization of WEARING A MASK is used to describe a person who lies or pretends to be someone else (‘Take off your *mask* and show me who you are!’), but it is not usually associated with the concept of depression.

**DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED.** The impossibility of expressing the pain of depression is a trait that also concerns the conceptualization of DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED. WEARING A MASK implies the need to show a false condition, denying any form of communication with the outside world. In this metaphor, the lack of communication assumes the shape of a more



**Figure 10. DEPRESSION IS WEARING A MASK.**



**Figure 11. DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED.**

violent and forced condition. As several studies such as Isometsä et al. (1994) have pointed out, this representation is certainly related to the lack of communicability, regarded as one of the distinctive conditions related to DEPRESSION. In the structurally similar artworks shown in Figure 11, the two female figures are BEING MUTED by a terrifying and unknown entity that keeps a hand on their mouths, blocking a potential cry for help. While the figure on the left looks more passive in this coercion, in the other representation the woman sketches a sort of reaction. The non-human traits of the hand covering their mouths are highlighted by the unnatural colour of the hands, blue in the example on the left and dark red in the one on the right.



**Figure 12.** DEPRESSION IS BEING BLINDED.

**DEPRESSION IS BEING BLINDED.** If DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED depends on the impossibility of communication, the conceptual metaphor DEPRESSION IS BEING BLINDED seems to express the lack of awareness that depressed people may have of their own condition. The two artworks in Figure 12 portray two human figures that are prevented from seeing, as a deliberate act (the woman on the right places her hands on her face and a subsequent dark cloud covers her face) or as the result of constriction by a non-human entity. Certainly, this metaphor seems to express a further interpretation of the DARK metaphor, which previous research had shown to be associated with people experiencing depression (McMullen and Conway, 2002). If the artwork on the left can be related to the previous examples, albeit different due to the sense that is occluded, the image on the right can be associated with the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (structurally, this example seems to be a combination of the two artworks that we have discussed for the A FLUID IN A CONTAINER domain), but it seems to convey a more evident cue regarding the impossibility of seeing, given the representation of some sort of fluid coming out of the figure's head.

**DEPRESSION IS LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY.** Another conceptualization concerning depression regards depersonalization. In metaphoric terms, this aspect can be summarized by the construction DEPRESSION IS LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY. It can assume different visual shapes. The two examples in Figure 13 depict some of the possible ways of representing this conceptualization. While, on the left, the human figure is transmuting its identity by altering the components and the composition of its face with its hands, the artwork on the right presents the identity as being concealed through the use of vivid and confused colours hiding the subject's face in some sort of mask. In representational terms, LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY can be related to the metaphor DEPRESSION IS WEARING A MASK, since both metaphors present a change in the social perception of the subjects. The impact of the LOSING



**Figure 13.** DEPRESSION IS LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY.

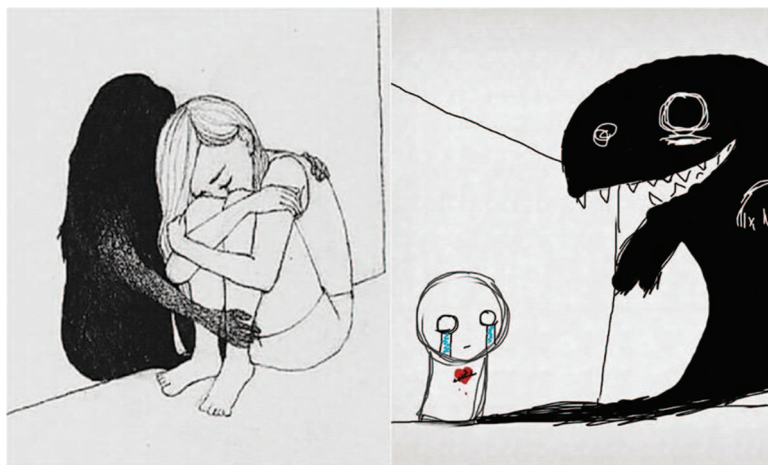


**Figure 14.** DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED.

ONE'S IDENTITY domain on the linguistic level has been not explicitly addressed although one may cite phrases such as 'Depression *changed* him' and 'After her depression, I don't *recognize* her anymore.'

**DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED.** As a consequence of the impossibility of showing one's authentic identity (e.g. DEPRESSION IS WEARING A MASK, DEPRESSION IS LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY) and of communicating (e.g. DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED), depression can be represented as an oppressive condition of captivity. In this sense, the BEING TRAPPED domain is a way of expressing this notion. As the artworks in Figure 14 show, BEING TRAPPED can be associated either with a sort of tentacular entity that blocks and suffocates the victim in its coils or with a more prototypical view of





**Figure 15. DEPRESSION IS A SHADOW.**

BEING TRAPPED in terms of a cage. In the latter image, the cage and the mind of the human figure blend into a single gestalt that can also be associated with English linguistic expressions such as a '*Prison of the mind*' and '*Trapped in his thoughts*'. In general terms, this conceptualization can be considered as an expression of the SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR and CONTAINER metaphors, as implied by the ideas of 'escape' and 'release' (Charteris-Black, 2012: 207). In addition, the example on the right takes the form of a hostile creature, in line with conceptualizations such as DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSOR. In both cases, the most crucial aspect that emerges is the lack of freedom implied by depression and the impossibility of finding a way out.

**DEPRESSION IS A SHADOW.** In line with the conceptualizations that consider hostile entities (e.g. DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSOR; DEPRESSION IS AN ANIMAL), this metaphor represents depression in terms of a shadow putting the subject in a condition of fear or captivity. As the two artworks in Figure 15 show, the shadow derives from the subject itself and presents some frightful features such as holding the human figure in a dramatic hug, or taking the shape of a monstrous entity. Interestingly, the shadow – that can also generally refer to other metaphors such as DEPRESSION IS DARK (see Barcelona, 1986; McMullen and Conway, 2002) – seems to have features that the human figures lack. If, on the one hand, the passivity of the human figure contrasts with the more active shadow that tries to hold it, on the other hand, the caricatural smallness of the human figure on the right creates a sort of monster that overwhelms it in terms of dimension and attitude (the human figure is depicted crying and with a broken heart, whereas the shadow-monster has teeth and claws).

**DEPRESSION IS IMMOBILITY.** Conceptualizations of depression in terms of immobility offer a possible interrelation with metaphors such as DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED, SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR and



**Figure 16. DEPRESSION IS IMMOBILITY.**

CONTAINER (see Charteris-Black, 2012: 207; McMullen and Conway, 2002). While, in the BEING TRAPPED domain, the subject was subjugated to an entity (e.g. the tentacular entity) or to a condition (e.g. being in a cage) in its captivity, in the artworks in Figure 16 the condition of immobility seems to be self-inflicted. The human subject on the right seems to be stuck in its condition, whereas the room – deprived of details, colours and characterizations – represents a sort of ‘still life’ in which the figure is totally absorbed. Conversely, the immobility of the figure on the left presents such a radical expression that its body has progressively become a sort of tree that has placed its roots in the ground. This gestalt between a human being and a tree represents the way immobility can also be associated with a view of depression as a natural force. As we have discussed in relation to an artwork that portrays the branches of a plant emerging from the back of its subject, the presence of roots is an expression of a naturalization of depression.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the analysis has shown, the concept of depression has been a common theme of artworks that highlight different dimensions and pursue different representational goals. Despite the conceptual differences, some regularities can be found in our selection of online visual artworks.

Firstly, and unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the representations are characterized by dark and sober tones. Secondly, if we exclude the example of DEPRESSION IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR/CAPTOR in which no less than nine hands holding money are coming out of a cage, depression is invariably portrayed as an individual condition of solitude. The victim of depression is essentially represented alone, in a state of desolation or accompanied by the visual representation of its lonely suffering. The exclusion of other affective subjects (e.g. family, friends, peers) reflects the intrinsic condition of solitude





**Figure 17.** Overview of the visual and pictorial representation of DEPRESSION.

that is depression, a condition that visually excludes the presence of supporting figures and that focuses its tragedy on the victim and his or her suffering.

A third element shared by most of our examples is the posture of the subjects, who bend their legs and place their arms on the heads or around their legs while bending their backs forward (see Figure 17). This presentation of the body can be prototypically considered as a common representation of depression. The presence of crouched figures is coherent with conceptual metaphors expressing involvement and/or intimacy between subjects and their suffering (seen as external). Related conceptual metaphors are, for instance, INVOLVEMENT IS CLOSENESS and INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS (Kövecses, 2010: 260, 332). As we can see, metaphors can also add additional layers of meaning to those visual representations that can already be interpreted in a straightforward way in relation to linguistic conceptualizations.

Regarding the metaphor identification, our analysis has enabled us to identify the visual counterparts of source domains such as (GOING) DOWN, DARKNESS, FLUID IN A CONTAINER, NATURAL FORCE, AN OPPRESSOR, AN ANIMAL and SOCIALLY SUPERIOR that seem to characterize the vast majority of the ways in which depression is conceptualized. As we wanted to show how visual metaphors could represent linguistic conceptualizations, we have used ordinary English expressions as examples. In this regard, we have then shown that source domains within the conceptualization of depression that do not present a linguistic equivalent can be identified. Among them, we have described domains such as WEARING A MASK, BREAKING INTO PIECES, BEING MUTED, BEING BLINDED, LOSING

ONE'S IDENTITY, BEING TRAPPED, A SHADOW and IMMOBILITY. Although some of these conceptualizations can indirectly refer to known linguistic metaphors (e.g. BREAKING INTO PIECES and THE HUMAN MIND IS A BRITTLE OBJECT), most of these sources have been expressed specifically on the visual level and can be considered as the result of the creative ability of the artworks' creator to present novel and even thought-provoking representations. As we have claimed regarding the analysis of the creative metaphors, while some of these conceptualizations seem to be based on the interaction between more standard metaphors (e.g. DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED; DEPRESSION IS A SHADOW), other examples do not seem to derive from other metaphors, but most likely represent the abstraction of symptoms of depression (e.g. DEPRESSION IS BEING MUTED).

In other words, our analysis has allowed us to discuss at least two main issues that characterize the relation between the concept of depression and its visual representations. Since some of the metaphors are particularly evident on the visual level but are not shared by either the linguistic or the visual representations, we agree with the approaches that understand conceptual metaphors not as a primarily linguistic phenomenon, but instead as a general cognitive process of conceptualization. This aspect is particularly relevant because, although in metaphor studies there is broad agreement on this issue, most of the research still focuses on finding non-linguistic counterparts to linguistic metaphors, rather than trying to identify metaphors that are predominantly used in non-linguistic contexts. In this sense, we have explained that several conceptualizations are not used linguistically, but exist and are specific to the visual dimension. Considering that this article has tried to project visual metaphoric conceptualization into the realm of depression, we believe that more studies should take this direction in order to show how similar socio-cultural topics are affected by this central cognitive process. From these considerations, future studies should explore metaphors beyond their semiotic and conceptual implications, aiming to explore issues – such as depression – that play an important role in society.

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## NOTES

1. *Aurora musis amica* (dawn is a friend of the muses): Metaphoric conceptualization of depression in online visual representations

2. According to the previously mentioned authors, the terms 'visual' and 'pictorial' can be regarded as synonymous.
3. For seminal cross-cultural comparisons, we recommend the research by Yu (1995) and Pritzker (2007) concerning metaphor use related to depression in the Chinese context.
4. The raters are Italian university students, aged 19–23, 12 women, 8 men. They were randomly assigned to two randomly created groups of 25 artworks, in order to have 10 raters for the first group of 25 artworks and 10 raters for the second group of 25 artworks.
5. Original: 'Credi che questa immagine sia funzionale/efficace nel rappresentare visivamente ... ma anche le sue cause e gli effetti'.
6. As the material of the analysis is obtained via a Google Image search and it often belongs to online artwork, videography and photography communities such as DeviantArt (DeviantArt.com), information about the artworks and the intentions of the artists is rarely made explicit. For this reason, our analysis will not include other aspects apart from the visual and semiotic elements of the artworks.

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