

# FrameWork 9/16

## Aryen Hoekstra on *and, something like fire dancing*

Sometime during my first semester of school a classmate shared a story with me, told to her by a former professor, which explained the difference between ‘good art’ and ‘bad art’ by comparing the effectiveness of metaphor to that of simile. To paraphrase, simile is weak because it can be separated back into its constituent parts, whereas metaphor is strong because it elicits a third [new] thing that is distinct from its initial terms. Upon first inspection this logic makes sense; simile sounds like a hedged metaphor. When simply written as an equation (X is Y or X is *like* Y) this thesis holds up, but when real terms are substituted in place of the X and Y variables, *like* instigates a contingent processing that better lends itself to novel interpretations, often radically so. For example the following equation, which is likely familiar and often cited in linguistics studies:

(1) My lawyer is [like] a shark.

One of the common, and classical, praises of metaphor is its brevity; by eliminating the preposition *like* it provides clear, direct access to its audience. This was one of the virtues that Aristotle listed in his preference of metaphor use over simile and I believe the same might be true of my classmate’s former professor. Efficiency aside, in contemporary linguistics research there seem to be two camps that are divided as to *like*’s effect. One views metaphorical comprehension (this includes both metaphor and simile) as a process of direct comparison, where metaphor and simile function equivalently, both serving to locate a feature-match between two named concepts. A second view holds that while simile refers to the actual, literal concept SHARK, metaphor conjures the amorphous category of “SHARK” that may be applied to actual sharks, but equally applies to all other shark-like things, even lawyers. In this categorical conception simile and metaphor must be processed differently, thereby modifying interpretability and meaning.

To return to this example from a categorical perspective, “My lawyer is a shark” draws the lawyer into the category “SHARK” ascribing to them all the attributes contained therein, whereas “My lawyer is like a shark” evokes the more literal properties of an actual shark. Because this is such a well-worn metaphor, the literalness of the concept SHARK in the form of the simile is somewhat minimized as it is generally accepted which features lawyers and sharks might share, but the latent potential of the simile is already evident; a lawyer that is *like* a SHARK shares with it only particular characteristics; these might include the possibility that the lawyer can’t stop swimming, lives underwater, or that their teeth are embedded into their gums instead of directly into their jaw. An alternate example might be something like:

(2) Sally is [like] a beanpole.

Again another common metaphor, Sally as “BEANPOLE” produces the image of *Sally The Beanpole*, perhaps even being climbed by *Susan The Bean Plant*. The metaphor produces in effect a type of linguistic reasoning that follows Sally as she morphs from human woman into her new, beanpole-like [hybrid] self. The admitted power of metaphor lies in its conjuring of this ontological soft edge, where the specific Sally loses both her identity and autonomy and is transformed into a third [new] subject. When Sally is like a BEANPOLE however, the listener must instead begin to think what are the specific features of an actual beanpole that Sally might share – her proclivity toward shoving her toes deep into topsoil being one such possible feature. But this processing must also go further than to only include the beanpoles physical attributes. What makes the feature-match between lawyer and shark effective, if also cliché, is that lawyers and sharks are both viewed as predators, and this conception implies something of a consciousness of being. While the shark is observably a physical predator (and a very simple food chain can be constructed to support this claim), the type of predator that a lawyer might be perceived to be also includes affective, economic, and psychological relations. Again, it is this conflation that makes metaphor powerful, but in so doing it sequesters potential unintended feature-interpretations (both physical and psychic) that

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are more presently available within simile. Specifically, because it functions at the categorical level, metaphor skirts the thought, what is it actually like to be a Y?

In comparison, simile, while also attempting to inventory all the physical attributes of Y in search of a feature-match, also offers to its audience Thomas Nagel's famous thought-experiment, *What is it like to be a bat?* Nagel's paper, originally published in the October 1974 issue of *The Philosophical Review*, argues that, "an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism." Nagel uses the example of the bat because the bat's perception of the world is so obviously alien to human cognitive processes. He begins:

*I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt that they have experience than that mice or pigeons or whales have experience. I have chosen bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all. Bats, although more closely related to us than those other species, nevertheless present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours that the problem I want to pose is exceptionally vivid (though it certainly could be raised with other species). Even without the benefit of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally alien form of life. I have said that the essence of the belief that bats have experience is that there is something that it is like to be a bat. Now we know that most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat.*

Simile potentially takes this thought-experiment one-step further, as it may include both the conscious and the non-conscious. If Sally is like a BEANPOLE, then what is it actually like to be a beanpole? Like Nagel, this audience too would have difficulty creating a notion of what that might be, but in asking the question the revelation of a world that doesn't solely correlate to human experience is manifest. Nagel holds that however inaccessible it may be, "to deny the reality or the logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance."

Immanent to simile is the thought-experiment, what is it like to be a Y? While this equation might leave itself vulnerable to critique in terms of its clarity of intention, I think it's worth investigating if there might in fact be something potentially productive about a practice (or an exhibition) that operates at the level of simile. Not as a hedged metaphor, but rather as an equation that acknowledges autonomy, difference, and a world beyond human cognition. I would suggest that the exhibition organized by Ella Dawn McGeough, *and, something like fire dancing*, which includes work by Amy Brener, Patrick Cruz, Barbara Kasten, and Scott Lyall, and is itself titled as a simile, attempts to form itself around just such a logic.

While not explicitly cast, each artwork included in *and, something like fire dancing* is somewhat substituted as a subtle cipher for a relation between a set of four non-human actors within the Peruvian Rainforest: a parasitic plant, a species of caterpillar, a colony of ants, and a type of butterfly. Together these actors form a micro-ecosystem that begins each rainy season when a dormant parasitic plant from the Apodanthaceae family suddenly flowers, producing a series of yellow bulbs that burst through the bark of its host tree. These bulbs then nourish the caterpillars, whose larvae are in turn protected from predators by the ants. As a reward, the ants feed on the nectar that is secreted by the caterpillars following their drumming on the caterpillar's back. Finally, and perhaps most remarkably, when the caterpillar is reborn as a butterfly, an image of the yellow bulb is stamped on each wing. Despite the intimate interconnectedness of these four species, it is highly unlikely that the ant knows what it is like to be either the caterpillar or the parasitic plant. In *The Ecological Thought* Timothy Morton describes this intimate

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interconnection as one that in fact implies separateness and difference. He labels these actors Strange Strangers; those beings that are right next to us, but that we can never fully know – or ever know that we fully know. As such, when trying to think what is it like to be an actual CATERPILLAR we are presented with an inexhaustible list of potential responses, drawing us into a vast alien darkness.

Group exhibitions often falter when too heavy-handedly prescribing the interrelation of particular artworks and artists' practices, however *and, something like fire dancing* turns this irreconcilability into a strength by embracing this contingency, and proposing a gaze that stares further into these depths where BAT, BEANPOLE, SHARK, and LAWYER, PARASITIC PLANT, CATERPILLAR, ANT, and BUTTERFLY are all separate yet interconnected. Posed as a rhetorical simile that asks, "What is it like to be any of these things?" to speculate on what such an experience might include is a first gesture toward thinking a world beyond its correlation to the human, one in which we might instead ally ourselves alongside other cognitive formulations.

