ICON AND REPRESENTATION IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *Signs and symbols are basic elements in the visual communication process. Through them, multiple and inexhaustible possibilities of meaning are transmitted. Thus, what we recognize as being in accordance with nature, what we have learned to accept as natural is found under the sign of iconicity. In the process of creating icons, the real plays a secondary role. Essential are the various traditions of pre-existing representation, which interpose between real and sign and which act as mediating cognitive schemes, provided by the community in which we have integrated. The identification of visual signs is based on the emotional impact of the visual structures used, and the creation of a visual identity involves the production of a symbolism that is based on the mechanisms of perceptual psychology and produces an emotional association between the art consumer and the creator of meanings. Interaction between those who propose a visual concept and those who receive information in the form of a visual sign only occurs when cultural, social and ideological compatibility exists. For the very association between perception and emotion is based on patterns. We are talking about cultural recognition codes that represent a guarantor of our compliance with the world and they play an essential role in our cultural representations.*

Keywords: community; intercultural context; communication

1. ICONICITY AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Visual communication is the kind of communication that is made through images. It involves the existence of a language, consisting of symbols, shapes and colours, which contribute to the formation of the image. For each image at the level of thinking there is a meaning, and this can be that of a concrete object or an abstract concept.

An important aspect in visual communication is to define how this type of communication is its own language. Thus, the message does not address a receiver directly, but in an abstract manner, involving multiple codes, decodable depending on the environmental conditions and the cultural level of the receiver. Decoding involves a semiotic approach, whose purpose is to learn *to look* and *to understand* the complexity of a sign's evolution, its transformation continues, depending on context and social, historical and addressability factors. In this respect, one of the tasks of semiotics is "to say whether and how we use signs to refer to something" (Eco, 2010:20), and for the understanding of social or cultural reality, *semiosis* and *representation* have the defining role:

The task of semiotics is to understand the ability of a species to produce and understand signs and, on the human level, the work generating knowledge that ability that allows people to carry it out. First is called *semiosis*, the second is *representation*, that is the deliberate use of signs to search, classify and know the world (Sebeok, 2002:25).

In the field of visual communication, semiosis is the transmission of meanings by means of symbols. Thus, a semiotic situation is identified with a communication situation through images, the semiosis designating the process by which an artist communicates, the process of communication being made possible by the systems of significance. The meaning of the sign will be affected by the background of the viewer; its environment, education, culture, and experience will be related to how the sign will be read. One of the best examples is the use of colour as a symbol in different cultures. For example, in Western Europe, black colour is a symbol of death and sadness, and in China at funerals is used the white, which is totally opposed to European values.

The symbolic message can be understood, in terms suggested by Roland Barthes (2007) when he establishes a text / image combination reader as an encoded or non-coded iconic message. Regarding the encoded iconic message, we are talking about an interpretive process that takes place by applying one's own knowledge of the

systematic coding of an image. The image of an apple, for example, could involve the idea of life, freshness, but also knowledge or temptation; as the viewer's cultural level is more advanced the more varied the range of interpretations. A feature of encoded iconic visual messages is the alternation and amount of images that depend on what is wanted from an informational point of view.

As far as the iconic non-coded message is concerned, it works at denomination level. For example, a photo can be interpreted as a codeless message, read as such: it is a photo. Messaris (1997) argued that the purpose of visual communication is not interaction, but the forcing of the limits of understanding and knowledge of the world. Thus, the interaction between those who propose a visual concept and those who receive information in the form of a visual sign appears only when there is a cultural, social and ideological compatibility. At that time appears and the feedback, enriched with the combination of perception and emotion, the images having a beneficial social role by supporting the processes of integrating and developing a social identity. We are talking about the establishment of a cultural paradigm that presents itself as a constellation of values, beliefs and methods of questioning, shared at one point by members of a community.

2. CONSTITUTION OF VISUAL IDENTITY

The constitution of a visual identity involves the production of a symbolism composed of unmistakable pictorial schemes based on the mechanisms of perceptual psychology and which produce an emotional association between the receiver or the art consumer and the producer of visual meanings (art objects or consumer objects). An important step in this direction is visual exploration. It functions as an index of mental schemes and of various aspects of cognitive and motivational-emotional processes.

When we relate to the material configuration of an artistic object, we must understand that it does not only reflect the remembrance of things seen by the artist according to an immutable order of nature, but also some imaginary structures. They depend on a network of sensitive perceptions and, at the same time, on the problematic frames of the shared thinking of the artist and his contemporaries. Thus, we are talking about a series of artistic signs and ensembles that are systems of significance and which are based on some structures that generated the general conditions of

the production and conception of the work of art. In this respect, P. Francastel notes:

The need for works of art and paintings in particular to be treated as objects of civilization that can only be known and judged after a preliminary decipherment, that is, after having been confronted with both the springs their perceptual origins - often very difficult to reconcile - and our own ways of encompassing the outer universe and, at the same time, the painting itself. A picture, like a text, can only be known and judged if we have a minimum of historical and technical knowledge. Like a text, a picture must be read, deciphered. And there are laws and methods that are still very little known to guide this study. The primordial prolongation of our culture is due to the fact that, generation to generation, our predecessors have studied in detail texts, almost unique sources of history and of the history of the spirit (Francastel, 1997:7).

The deciphering of the artistic object is closely related to the concrete reality and at the same time to the imaginary reality that the general visual environment is on it, which is characteristic of a socio-cultural space at a certain time. In this respect, the visual arts function as a system of signification that establishes a reality and which

gives both individuals and societies the opportunity to discover certain relationships between the fields of perception, real and imaginary that no other mode of activity of the senses or spirit would not allow us to penetrate or express them (Francastel, 1997:10).

For the basis of any artistic approach lies an ideological program based on a series of sensitive relations between the real and the imaginary that made possible the artistic creations at a certain time:

at the base of each large figurative ensemble lies an ideological program that determined the number, the choice and distribution of figurative schemes. But which of us is today able to settle in the cathedrals of Chartres and Bourges and to reconstruct spontaneously, reading the stained glass, the system of medieval thinking? In addition, these stained glasses are made because, through a terrible effort of mind, we find that in a game of cubes a perfectly coherent scheme starting from the identification of some reorganized combinatorial elements in a rationalized string once and for all in our spirit? Do they not have to reveal rather a kind of sensitive relationship between real and imaginary, opening our way to encompassing complex and disputable values? In the end, should we reconcile the ideological program imposed by sleeping partner on the artists, or re-enter into contact with the performers' interpretive and manual

behaviour? (...) Can we believe that Renaissance people have spontaneously understood so many allegories that presently scholarly commentaries as subtle as they are solid and contradictory? (Francastel, 1997:24).

Therefore, to talk about visual identity and its constitution means to relate to the understanding of a complex system of significance based on an ideological program, the expression of a co-determination between real and imaginary, which underlies the possibilities of material configuration of creation artistic in a specific socio-cultural space at a certain time.

3. THE ROLE OF CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL COMPATIBILITY IN VISUAL INTERACTION

P. Chombart de Lauwe defines culture as a set of models, imagery-guides, representations to which members of a society relate in their behaviours, in their work, in their roles and in their social relationships (Chombart de Lauwe *et al.*, 1970). From this perspective, every individual appears as a bearer of a particular culture, and inter-individual communication as an intercultural one. From a semiotic perspective, the basis of such communication is symbolic signs, which, organized in symbolic systems, have a defining role in the formation of collective mental representations. In this respect, Susan K. Langer (1942) concludes that each symbolic system is in solidarity with a certain mental organization through which individuals understand the world.

In the conception of Susan Langer, a certain age is characterized by a certain way of putting problems through a "technique" of people to formulate questions about the surrounding reality. This question-making technique determines the ways in which answers are obtained, which means that it predetermines the way in which ideas, ideologies, and conceptions about the world are produced. By drawing attention to the various levels of awareness, the author concludes that while ideas are always aware, it is quite rare to be aware of the questions that they answer, and in terms of the "problem-solving" technique less frequently, almost never, even never, for example, with regard to the ordinary man.

The answers to questions and questioning are a tribute to the same "technique" of asking questions or problems and at the same mental organization. But they will vary from one age to another and from one culture to another depending on other

"techniques" of problem-solving of the world and other *mental organizations* (intellectual, imaginary, symbolic) valid for a certain time. We are talking about a "technique" of problem-solving and mental organization that determines any hermeneutic act in the socio-cultural sphere, including the visual. In this respect, Geert Hofstede locates the "infrastructure" of a culture in so-called *mental programs*, by which he understands "ways of thinking, feeling or acting" that were "imprinted in a person's mind" (Hofstede, 1996:20). These *mental programs* functions as a "technical basement" of cultures:

> The sources of individual mental programs come from the social environments where someone grew up and gained life experience. (...) The mental programs are varies as much as the social environment in which they are acquired" (Hofstede, 1996:20).

The social psychologist thinks culture as "mental software", speaking in this sense of a "secondary culture" which he defines as "collective programming of thought that distinguishes members of a group (or category of people) from another" (Hofstede, 1996:21).

The idea of understanding "secondary culture" as a collective programming that distinguishes members of one group from another can be understood in the sense that American philosopher Thomas Kuhn proposes the concept of "scientific paradigm" (Kuhn, 1976). Only in our sense will we use the concept of "cultural paradigm", which has been used more and more lately, both in social philosophy and in anthropology, psychology and sociology.

For Th. Kuhn, the central concept in characterizing the nature and dynamics of science is *paradigm*, and the criterion of distinguishing between science and non-science is problem solving. Unlike the knowledge contained in the abstract statements of the theory and in the general methodological rules, knowledge in paradigms is a *tacit knowledge*. Paradigms guide the members of the scientific group in solving new problems without their awareness of the step-by-step paradigm. They apply it, and sometimes even creatively, but can not talk about it through general formulations. This results in a quasi-conscious character of paradigms that derive from their *collective character*, although the formation of a paradigm is usually related to the name of a great thinker. The fact that members of a disciplinary group share a paradigm explains that they communicate almost completely and without major difficulties, and also explains the unanimity of

professional judgments. This is not the case with researchers who share different paradigms, as *paradigms are immeasurable*; they can not be compared, because there is no common "unit of measure" for them.

The incommensurability of the paradigms stems from the fact that the observations made by the researchers on the same reality are also immeasurable, and the paradigms involve *incompatible assumptions* about the basic entities of the studied domain and their behaviour, and they imply different criteria of delimitation of "real" problems and "legitimate" solutions. The communication jam, from Kuhn's point of view, occurs because the followers of a paradigm can not convince the followers of the competing paradigm with the superiority of their point of view, nor will they be able to understand and accept the point of view of others. Therefore, the arguments of the two sides will be circular they will only be understood and accepted by researchers already working in the same paradigm. Kuhn also rejects the assumption that there are criteria for assessing paradigms and these would be independent of the adoption of a paradigm:

> Just because there is a transition between immeasurable, the transition from one paradigm to another rival can not be done step by step, constrained by logic or by a neutral experience (Kuhn, 1976:195).

The transition from one paradigm to another is through *conversion*, a term that Kuhn uses to suggest the non-rational character of adopting a paradigm.

Kuhn's theory highlights the relativity of any communication, which stems not from the "communication incompetence" of the interlocutors, but from the very nature of language and knowledge. It can also be applied in terms of the cultural dimension of reality, namely when we talk about "cultural paradigms". Thus, within a community, it is sufficient to have two different, competing cultural paradigms for the same for the same area of the real, so that obstacles may arise in the communication. And the obstacles are caused by the incommensurability of the two paradigms.

Within each paradigm, the way of thinking and knowing is structured around a *referential*, and its understanding depends on the possibility of decrypting as appropriate as possible the meanings that define a cultural product, including in the visual. In a study proposed in 1971 for the *University Magazine of Moral Sciences*, Ferdinand Gonseth brought attention to the idea of a perceptual individual referential, on the basis of which he explained the predetermination of our observations. The so-called "inclined fir tree parable" formulated on the basis of a personally heuristic episode during his train journey to Zürich - the perception he has when the train stops in front of a group of fir trees with their parallel trunks seemed to slash the entire surface of the glass - this illustrates an epistemic fact, namely the existence of an *a priori* in the described experience, namely *the belief that the train is on a horizontal road section*, based on the vertical relationship of the compartment as an absolute vertical. What struck the Swiss philosopher in particular was the sudden way in which the illusory referential made room for a more realistic reference.

Commenting on the episode narrated by Gonseth, Vasile Tonoiu considered that comparisons and analogies can be established with a large number of psychological phenomena, including phenomena of social psychology, as well as numerous cultural and ideological phenomena. It can happen to us, for example, that, from one day to the next, to be able to judge altogether a set of problems, a conduct or a whole set of values or ideas, and "in all these experiences there seems to be something that suggests a referential change" (Tonoiu, 1978: 33-34).

If the concept proposed by Gonseth targets an individual perceptual referential, whose importance lies in the ability to explain how observations are pre-determined, the sociologist Raymond Budon (1992) proposes the concept of "position effect" and brings to the forefront the idea of an ideological referential that operates at a cultural level. Thus, the French sociologist is questioning about the predetermination of the ideas of a knowing subject in relation to an "overall situation" that gives rise to a kind of perception based on illusion. The position of the subject in the "overall situation" is not confused with a certain social status, although often the membership group plays an important role in this. The illusion is shared by several social groups and is determined by the "position effect" (Boudon, 1997: 555-600). Thus, we speak of an ideological and cultural referential that functions as a system of fundamental representations and attitudes whose assumptions we are not aware of and which common people do not realize, but only follow. This ideological and cultural referential embraces cultural horizons and life horizons in general, contributing to the development of a cultural paradigm that establishes a specific language and specific grids of interpretation.

In the same way, Michel Foucault speaks of *episteme* as about the conditions of possibility of a cognitive field accessible to a culture:

the assembly of relationships that unite, at a certain moment, those discursive practices that give birth to epistemological figures, sciences and virtual systems [of knowledge] (Foucault, 1997:250).

Foucault postulates the uniqueness of the episteme within a culture. But a culture can also be presented as a "paradigm game" as a network of paradigms, sub-paradigms and meta-paradigms. Thus, although one can not speak of a "unifying paradigm", one can observe the existence of *dominant* paradigms and of some *dominated*, which predetermines in different degrees the conditions of constitution of any possibility of knowledge.

Edgar Morin considered that theories and reasoning, as well as the cognitive (intellectual and cultural) field in which they are formed, are controlled by a great paradigm. It controls the epistemology itself which, in turn, controls the theory and even the practice to which the theory sends. Thus, the individuals of a community know, think and act according to the paradigm that their culture has enlisted in them. Morin does not postulate the uniqueness of a particular paradigm in a culture (in an era or in a community), but speaks of "big" and "small" paradigms of "adverse" or "intolerant" paradigms. In his conception, within a culture there may be several paradigms, between which several types of relationships can be established, from cooperative implications, juxtaposition and competition, to mutual ignorance, mutual indifference, complementarity, antagonism or intolerance. Within these paradigms we identify "a technical and cognitive capital - of sciences and skills - which can be transmitted in principle to the whole of society" (Morin, 1999: 179) and "a specific capital", which shapes the features of the original cultural identity and "maintains a particular community by reference to its ancestors, to its dead, to its traditions" (Morin, 1999: 179). This double capital, on the one hand, controls the phenomenal existence of society, and on the other hand it is self-perpetuated through the succession of generations, reproducing itself in every individual. Thus, even at birth, each individual receives a cultural heritage that provides for social formation, orientation and development:

> it is the cultural heritage that, by assuming the integration of the individual into a particular society, complements the heredity and ensures the perpetuation of society" (Morin, 1999:181).

As a generative system, culture it is constituted in a cultural quasi-code, which appears as a kind of sociological equivalent of what is the genetic code for living beings. It

> maintains the integrity and identity of the social system, assures self-perpetuation or invariant reproduction, protecting it from uncertainty, danger, confusion and disorder (Morin, 1999:182).

The constitution of culture in a cultural quasi-code is an expression of an ideology that structures the collective mentally and provides interpretation schemes that form the reading grids of reality. At visual level, these interpretive schemes function as ways of creating meaning in a dual perspective, namely, on the one hand, we are talking about the creative approach and the way in which it is intrinsically reflected in its results, and on the other hand we are talking about the approach interpretive applied to the visual, in the attempt of an interpreter to capture its most intimate meanings.

4. THE CULTURAL CODES OF RECOGNITION AND THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD

The signs that we recognize as iconic are not directly related to a referent and our perceptual experience related to this, but rather to everything we knew about it in culture. In constructing the icon, the real is not essential, but the various traditions of pre-existing representation that interpose between the real and the sign, assuming the role of cognitive mediation schemes provided by the community in which we live, and which have the role of mediating the perception of reality. In this respect, Umberto Eco brings attention to the phrase "recognition code, by designating the rules according to which a form is loaded with meaning by reference to a number of variables such as repertoire, convention or context" (Eco, 1982:271). The "recognition codes" become a guarantor of the compliance of our representations with the world, since what is totally unknown to us is in fact imperceptible. Thus, we can say that the signs are "according to reality" only to the extent that they collide with the recognition codes of a particular context.

The way we perceive and represent the likeness is dependent on a "perceptual guide" that Eco calls "cognitive type" or "cognitive scheme":

> We have a cognitive type of the Moon and it has to be very complex. Indeed, we recognize it in the sky, whether it appears all over, whether it appears from

it only a sickle, or it looks red or yellow like a polenta, even when it is covered by clouds and guessing it after the light it scatters. The fact that it is spherical and that even if we see them, only one face, it has another part that we never see and never saw, it is part of a more complex molar content (Eco, 2010:315).

In addition, Eco signals that the confrontation of signs, icons with natural reality has never led to mutations in their artistic representation. For example, in the European medieval art, the rhinoceros was represented as an animal with scales, as this was how his image was fixed in painting of Dürer, which in turn used a cultural prototype:

This is why the iconographic techniques were preferred, because (to resort to the classic example of Gombrich) Dürer's rhinoceros presented scales by virtue of a cultural type (Eco, 2010:325).

The relatively late confrontation of painters with a true rhinoceros did not result in the modification of his cognitive scheme, which was commonly used in painting. This is explained by the fact that the signs that create the illusion of resemblance operate on the basis of rules and conventions, and in the establishment of similarity a process of interpretation takes place. In this respect, Richard Woodfield emphasized that

what has been called the history of seeing is really the history of a learning process through which a socially coherent public was trained by the artist to respond in a certain manner to certain signs (Woodfield, 2011:11-13).

Therefore, the cultural representation of the world is based on a hermeneutical process that is based on the existence of cultural recognition codes that function as perceptual guides and on which we base our knowledge, including when we are in the realm of vision.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Understanding visual communication means referring to the particular language that it involves. This is a language based on icons and symbols, whose understanding is closely related to the interpretation schemes offered by ideologies that at a certain moment contribute to structuring the collective mentality of a socio-cultural space. In this context, the purpose of visual communication is to force the limits of understanding and

knowledge of the world, since the visual environment, characteristic for a socio-cultural space at a given moment, is constituted by both elements of concrete reality and elements of imaginary reality, both working together to define the ideological and cultural referential that frames and defines a certain cultural horizon.

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