

COMMENT' ON A. M. ULLAN

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I am always attracted to articles which sound original or at least not conformist, both in terms of the chosen topic and of the adopted perspective. In a scenario of social psychology mostly dominated by a 'discourse' on the 'discourse' and fully oriented towards the use of the verbal and textual communicative oral-audio channel as 'source' and 'means' for collecting data, a proposal to refer to the figurative, plastic and iconographic visual channel is welcomed, because it sounds at least as an invitation to further the linguistic monotheism.

In few words the theses proposed by Ana Maria Ullán may be synthesised in the following points:

1) not only the social representation model (she explicitly uses the word model instead of theory, paradigm or construct) can be interesting as a theoretical framework for the analysis of plastic creations, but the works of arts themselves can be conceived as social representations of a socially constructed reality;

2) the justification for this proposal is based on the isomorphism of the principles, processes and social functions which define, characterise and produce social representations as well as artistic works;

3) an analysis of conceptions of space as they are reflected in plastic creations and as they are formulated in the sphere of scientific thinking is offered as an example of the possibility of analysing the plastic arts as social representations.

As I said, my first reaction was curiosity in receiving this article, that - thanks to a synchrony of events - came to my hands just some days after I had accepted this topic as proposed object for a master's thesis from a student of mine. Due to this unexpected coincidence I discussed this article with my student Paola Berteá ¹, who too expressed interest for the Ullan's proposal, although she identified the risk implicit in a full identification of art with the social representation. According to P. Berteá, whilst in the social representation. theory the processes of objectification and anchoring are pragmatically oriented and the production of social representation. represents a solution to the problem of meaning and communication, in works of art often the possibility itself to express a meaning and to communicate is in doubt. In other words my student's opinion

¹ I have also discussed this paper with Dr. Andrew Smith, a post-graduate student of mine with whom I am developing the controversial topic concerning the relationship between social representation and image, particularly with reference to the applied field of advertising. I would like to thank him as well as Paola Berteá, for their comments on Ullan's article.

was that the artists are often not engaged in 'making familiar somewhat unfamiliar', but on the opposite into 'making unfamiliar somewhat familiar' (i.e. like in Magritte's picture: 'This is not a pipe'), so that the relation with the world appears problematic (and, perhaps, for this reason, 'aesthetic').

I disagreed with my student as regards the last point, due to the fact that, even when the artist does not seem interested or intentioned to communicate, any artistic expression (included those forms which explicitly break the standard communicative rules) is a way to communicate something to somebody by somewhat for some reason. However I too have some reservations in identifying completely social representation and works of art, as well as any other ways for expressing social representation either figurative (such as by advertising, cinema, photo etc.), or verbal (such as by interview and discourse, or textual, such as by press, etc.).

But let me start by underlining the reason of my primary positive impression. First of all the anti-conformism of the topic, at least within the thematic horizon of social psychology. Although psychology of art represents a specific sector of our discipline, it is completely split from social psychology and, as Ullan underlines, 'art psychology has traditionally viewed the processes of artistic creation and appreciation as if these were resolved within the individual's 'inner self' or in an exclusive relationship between the person-creator or viewer - and the work of art".

To be honest not only psychology of art is characterised by an individualistic approach, in agreement with the conception of art anchored in the romanticism's tradition, but also other sectors of psychology (including social psychology) widely dominated by the cognitivist approach or by a series of micro-paradigms produced in laboratories where knowledge and its analysis are socially decontextualized.

However the large unpopularity of plastic art as object opposite to 'science' is not only 'thematic', but also 'methodological', due to the de-evaluation of the instruments and techniques based on the figurative codex compared with those based on the verbal or textual codexes. A confirmation of this could be found in the poor credibility that social psychologists usually assign to drawings and figurative tests compared with the reliability assigned to the traditional interviews and structured questionnaires. The under-estimation of the drawings among the social psychologists is probably guided by a social representation (as well as by scientific theories) of the figurative language as children's skill and for this reason considered as area of expertise at the most of the developmental psychologists, due to another erroneous misconception of social psychology as science of adult's social relations and of the developmental psychology as realm of the child. Figurative and plastic works are sometimes used in clinical psychology, much more than in social psychology: so it seems that children and psychopathic people can be studied by the figurative channels much more than adults socially adapted.

This under-estimation of the non-verbal channels, for expressing ways of representing reality corresponds, therefore, to a methodological option which reflects an epistemological option about the discipline. This option is so incomprehensible, so far as social psychologists we should know how powerful is the knowledge produced and transmitted by the images in our multi-media society (cinema, television, computer, advertising which widely overlap press, radio, and other traditional channels of spreading knowledge). The importance of image in producing and transmitting knowledge (and for that reason in analysing the way of representing knowledge) should be taken into account

in a civilisation dominated not only by images grounded in the physical reality, but moreover by images which construct the 'virtual' reality. I deeply believe that in a multi-media society it is no more time to focus our attention only on the press (which in the literature on Social Representation has been until now widely assumed as the most important source of information, mostly analysed for its written contents and less as a figurative channel of information.)

Discussing elsewhere the methodological monotheism vs. polytheism (de Rosa, 1994b) in social psychology and in particular in the area of social representation, I have already emphasised that, despite the fact that language is a powerful instrument of structuring and symbolic communication of social representation, the proposal of radical methodological monotheism to turn to 'linguistic repertoires' (Potter & Litton, 1985) and argumentative discourse to be analysed by a rhetorical approach (Billig, 1993) implies a unidimensionality that impoverishes the definition of social representation. Moreover discourse analysis is not without its critics who, by their own advocates, underline its limits. Of the thirty-two problems identified by Parker & Burman (1993) regarding discourse analysis, the first 14 points concern in fact questions of method, easily extendible to various approaches of qualitative research (time-consuming research modalities, procedural constraints linked to a conversational, verbal, textual and medial nature etc. of the data and to the spatial and temporal context of the research, limits in the generalisability of the results, objectivity-subjectivity in the selection and interpretative construction of the data, consensual legitimisation of the schemes and interpretative strategies, etc.). Furthermore, as the new conversational approaches and the rhetorical analyses of conversation have shown, very often verbal productions are treated in an a-problematic and a-critical way by researchers.

That linguistic productions cannot be the only means of access to social representations is a methodological issue which I have discussed elsewhere (de Rosa, 1987a, 1990, 1994b) and my proposal for the adoption of a multi-methodological approach (de Rosa, 1987, 1990) with the goal of studying the interaction between method and results, and with various dimensional levels of the SR (images, opinions, behaviours evoked, evaluations, emotional polarisations, symbolic conducts, etc.). is sufficiently known to come back to it.

In my own studies the use of the figurative channel and the iconographic code was able to show the more archaic dimensions of social representations, linked to social memory (by articulating collective representations and social representations created around a fully symbolic object as madness as themata); whilst the verbal code was more suitable in revealing the peripheral elements of the representational system. (de Rosa, 1994a).

By taking into account the theory of Paivio (1986) on the double codes of communication (visual thinking and verbal thinking) and some suggestions from Eco's semiotic approach (1975, 1984, 1988), I believe it would be possible to develop Abric's conception, by recognising the figurative nucleus in the representations transformed into an image (assumed as privileged vehicle of the emotional and symbolic components of social representation) and the peripheral elements in the verbally expressed representations, more sensitive to the cognitive processes of rationalisation, to the effects of social-desirability criteria and of socio-normative processes of identification tied to group membership. Together with Abric, I believe that the nucleus of representations

(reified into an image) is strongly linked to social memory, historically determined, more deeply stable, widely consensual and relatively independent on the present social and material context in which the representations occur, with the functions of generating the meaning of the representation and determining its organisation; while the peripheral elements of the representational system are more sensitive to the external reality, more flexible and adaptable to the present context, more heterogeneous with the function of protecting the central system of the representation and of facilitating the adaptation to the concrete reality.

According to Grice (1989) too new emphasis should be recognised in the iconic component of representations:

"We might be well advised to consider more clearly the nature of representation and its connection with meaning, and to do so in the light of three perhaps not implausible suppositions:

- 1) That representation by means of verbal formulation is an artificial and non-iconic mode of representing.
- 2) That to replace an iconic system of representation by a non-iconic system will be to introduce a new and more powerful extension of the original system, one which can do everything the former can do and more besides.
- 3) That every artificial or non-iconic system is founded upon an antecedent natural iconic system" (Grice, 1989: 358, quoted in Moscovici, 1994: 175)

For this reason I appreciate very much the invitation of Ullan to consider the figurative artefacts (and not only the linguistic artefacts) as means for studying social representation

However - and this is the controversial point I can identify in the theses of Ullan - I am not sure we are allowed to identify in so extremist way social representation and the means (figurative as well linguistic) for expressing them. In other words, even if I agree with Robert Farr that 'representations are in the media as well as being in people's minds' (Farr, 1994), and although the authentic interactionism which inspires the social representation theory allows us to believe that the representations are much more 'between' people rather than 'inside' their minds, I am not sure that we can identify representations and systems of communication tout court, neither we can reduce totally representation to its figurative components. If I agree with Ullan that artistic productions, as cultural reality emerging in the specific social context, can be fully studied as source, expression and vehicle of social representations (and moreover as crystallisation of collective representations linked to the social memory), I still have some doubts about the radical isomorphism between social representation and iconic artefacts, defined by Ullan as mental images shared within a particular community.

According to Moscovici (1984) the social representation is not simply a 'socialised internal image' as Ullan affirms (although the relationship between representation and image is very strict due to the importance of the figurative nucleus and the processes of objectification), but a much more complex structure which includes (both at conscious and at unconscious level) elements of various nature (verbal and iconic) sometimes in contradiction between themselves.

Also admitting that the images might reproduce exactly the iconic component of social representation (i.e. the figurative nucleus), we cannot exchange a side of the coin for the coin itself. If we cannot reduce the representations to the verbal way of expressing them

(exchanging the part for the whole), for the same reason we cannot reduce them to their figurative expression.

The risk is double: the first is that we exchange the part for the whole, losing the complexity of meaning deriving when we study the representations as the results of the intersection (and in many cases of the contradiction) between the different levels of analysis (verbal, figurative, behavioural, etc.).

In order to make more explicit what I intend to say, when I affirm we cannot lose any side of the coin if we really want to know which kind of coin it is and which value-meaning it expresses, please go back to the historical analysis of the collective representations of madness deeply made by Michel Foucault by comparing the double source: the painting (Bosch, Brueghel, Dürer) and the literature (Brandt, Erasmo da Rotterdam) which reproduces two different universes of images-discourses around madness.

In my own work on social representations of mental illness, it was extremely useful to put the verbal methods traditionally used in psycho-social research (semi-directed interviews, questionnaires, scales of social distance, semantic differential, free associations) side by side with both non-verbal instruments, less popular in psycho-social research (figurative drawing trials and textual tests) and the analysis of sources habitually used in research of a historiographical nature and – unfortunately – not used by psycho-social research, such as textual sources (from the official scientific and institutional culture, such as classic texts regarding the history of psychiatry and legislative texts, and sources from popular culture, such as proverbial sayings and expressions, turns of speech, etc.) and iconographic sources (artistic images, popular prints, ethnographic exhibits, ex-voto, etc.). Hence I suggested adapting the methodological approach to the polyvalence of levels of dimensional analysis implicit in the definition of SR and making the results obtained during the investigation problematic through an interactive reading of methods used, data, and statistical analyses. The interest for a multi-method approach lies in the consideration of the symbolic nature of the social object under examination, if we expect to adopt a more complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic construct, like the Social Representations one compared to those more narrow, one-dimensional and static, like 'image' and 'attitude'.

Abric (1994) too has recently emphasised the necessity to adopt a multi-method approach to the study of social representation with the aim of studying the articulation between contents, their structure and their central nucleus.

"The analysis of a social representation according our definition - set of information, opinion, attitudes, beliefs, organised around a central meaning - needs to let be known three essential components: its contents, its internal structure, its central nucleus. At the moment, no one technique allows us to bring together these three elements, so that this means that the usage of a unique technique is not sufficient for studying social representation, but an investigation of social representation has to be necessarily based on a multi-methodological approach, articulated in the following phases: 1) to collect contents (...) 2) To investigate its structure and the central nucleus (...); 3) To verify the centrality (...); 4) To know how the social representation functions within a contextualised situation (analysis of argumentation) " (Abric, 1994: 18-80)

The second risk, implicit in the underlying theory of the reality and representations adopted by Ullan, is the confusion between representation, of symbol and reality, If the representations express symbols grounded on the reality and which contribute to construct the reality, they are not the reality. If I evaluate too extremely the thesis of the

discourse analysis 's theorists who do not make any difference between discourse and reality, implicitly adopting a dogmatic and fundamentally religious presupposition: 'At the beginning it was the Verb (= God)', for the same reason it seems to me too much radical the full identification between art and the reality., although obviously there exists a link between them and although art is a part of the reality itself. What I am saying means that, for example, when Dürer (1489) painted 'The madman and the devil' it did not mean that the madman is in fact a devil, but that the picture expresses, as a figurative metaphor, the demoniac mediaeval representation of the madness. The powerful role of the images and plastic works of art in constructing and transmitting a cluster of symbolic contents and in attracting 'other ideas like a magnet into their sphere once they have been created and then suddenly forgotten and recalled to memory after centuries of oblivion" (Saxl, 1957), can help us to understand the recurrence of some figurative forms representing the 'madman' - just to quote the same example - in drawings and pictures produced by adults and children today, as well as in various sorts of iconographic material (popular prints, artistic and anthropological documents, etc.) of various periods (de Rosa, 1987).

Furthermore if we fully identify the representations with the processes which contribute to create them, we risk to reify them and to lose their dynamic and constructivist character, which takes into account not only the creators of art, but also its viewers, who can rebuilt totally the meaning attributed by the artist to his works on the basis of other socially shared criteria. In other words, I believe a plastic work - as well as a text or a discourse (if we shift towards other channels, written or verbal) - cannot be reduce to a social representation tout court, but it can be used as a 'source' of social representation

In summary, if I enjoyed the Ullan's contribution as a challenge against the verbal monotheism, I would like at the same time to avoid to end in a figurative or plastic monotheism, hoping that the increase in investigations based on a meditated multi-methodological plan can help research on social representations to leave behind an eminently descriptive view of the objects studied and move towards an interpretative dimension which takes into consideration the articulation among the various individual, social, historical-cultural levels that intervene in the structuring and differentiating of social representations as complex symbolic systems through different (verbal, figurative, behavioural, etc.) communicative channels.

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