

ART AND REALITY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

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Abstract: This paper suggests the possibility of using the social representations model as the theoretical framework for the analysis of plastic creations. The idea here is to conceive works of art as social representations of a socially constructed reality. The concept of social representation is examined here in order to verify to what degree the assimilation of plastic creations to social representations, as they are understood in the model, would be correct. Whether the elaboration of an artistic image can be understood in function of anchoring and objectification processes is also debated here, as well as whether the social functions that are assigned to social representations can also be observed in relation to plastic creations. Once these general observations have been made, the paper looks at the possibility of analysing the plastic arts as social representations of space and, thus, as objectification mechanisms of space.

This paper proposes the thesis that the psychosocial analysis of artistic behaviours and the behavioural products that we call artistic objects, works of art, can be enriched through the use of the social representations model in basically two different senses.

On one hand, on a general level, we might say that works of art, like social objects, are also the object of social representations, and therefore that the way individuals and groups behave in their presence would be influenced by the social representations that the individuals and groups have of art in general, or of some aspect of art in particular. Thus, the relationship between the subject, the artistic stimulus and behaviour can be seen as a socially mediated relationship, and the social representations of art can be considered as psychosocial mediators between the artistic stimulus and the behaviour related to it. These social representations of art that individuals elaborate and use would determine both the nature of the artistic stimulus that influences the subject and the response that is elicited. This perspective (Ullán, 1993) enables us to raise questions such as: the degree to which these social representations of art relate to specific behaviours relative to matters of art, or the cultural and regulatory criteria that condition the selection of art-related information sources, to mention just a few interesting examples.

The second way in which the social representations model can enhance our comprehension of plastic creations is the central object of discussion in this article. Here we will defend a conception of plastic works of art as social representations of a socially constructed reality, "crystallisations" of certain conceptions of reality as they are defined by particular individuals or groups.

The psychological analysis of artistic creation and appreciation behaviours has, in my opinion, been very limited by the use of conceptual models incapable of assuming the more specific characteristics of this type of behaviours (of creation and appreciation), and of this type of behavioural products (artistic creations, works of art, artistic objects...). 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. In this sense, work done in art psychology expresses quite well what Moscovici (1985), in characterising the general psychological approach to behaviour, calls the "binary reading key". This key corresponds to the separation of the subject and of the object, which are both given and defined independently of each other. From this perspective, artistic responses are conceived as being affected only by individual factors, whether inherent to the individual (motivations, conflicts, personality...), or resulting from the individual's relationship with the work of art which directly influences him through his perceptive or cognitive system. The subject–object relationship, artistic object in this case, is "binary" in the sense that Moscovici proposes, since matters to do with behaviour in relation to art refer exclusively to these two sets of factors: those related to the subject (genetic endowment, nerve structure, psychological organisation...) and those related to the work of art (formal structure, colour, balance, subject matter...).

Nevertheless, this conception of artistic behaviour is not only incomplete, but it is also incorrect. The reason for this is that art is intrinsically social. Art is, in itself, a social reality (Fischer, 1985), and this very fact makes not only incomplete but also erroneous any conception of artistic behaviour that excludes or ignores this fact. It could be alluded that the functioning of the perceptive system, for example, would have to be the same in different sociocultural contexts; therefore, we could expect people from these different sociocultural contexts to "perceive" the balance, colour, light,... of a mural or of a canvas painting in the same way. This would mean ignoring the fact that perceptive functioning is "tinged" with social factors, that an object (Bruner, 1958) is perceived differently depending on the meaning that is attributed to it within a particular cultural framework.

Art, as a cultural reality, emerges and acquires meaning in the specific social contexts in which it fulfils particular social functions. Separating art from the social reality, limiting the conceptual analysis of artistic behaviour to an individual, intra-psychological level, forgetting, as Crozier and Chapman (1981) put it, the role of social context, first, in deciding what it is that makes a work of art and, second, in assigning value to these works of art, has been, generally speaking, a typical characteristic of many of the theoretical approaches, and much of the research, in Art Psychology. This, in my opinion, has helped the psychological analyses of artistic behaviour give that impression of not reaching the heart of the aesthetic experience, of not explaining the truly important things, of limiting themselves to matters that are often superficial and with no genuine relevance for artists, art educators or the general public.

And it is not that there have not been calls for a more social orientation of the psychological research into aesthetic creation and appreciation behaviour. Munro (1975), for example, insisted that a fundamental requirement for Art Psychology was the carrying out of a historically, socially and culturally oriented approximation. Arnheim (1980), in his "Art Psychology agenda", points to the question of researching the social aspects of artistic motivation. However, there are few conceptual models that are capable, in their attempt to explain processes of artistic creation and appreciation, of integrating historical, social and cultural aspects with issues relative to individual psychological processes. In view of this scarcity of integrating theoretical models that offer a complex view of artistic behaviours and of the social functions of art, this paper attempts to put forward a conceptual development that will enable us to account for artistic phenomena in their double role, both as products of social reality and as part of the very process of creation of this reality. The conceptual framework employed for this purpose will be the social representations model.

WORKS OF ART AS SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: PROCESSES AND FUNCTIONS

The focal point of this paper is to conceive works of art as social representations of a socially constructed reality. The idea, then, is to consider plastic creations in the light of the meaning that individuals and social groups assign to reality in its different facets. This idea of conceiving and analysing plastic creations as social representations can be summarised in Figure 1.

The justification for this proposal of analysing works of art as social representations

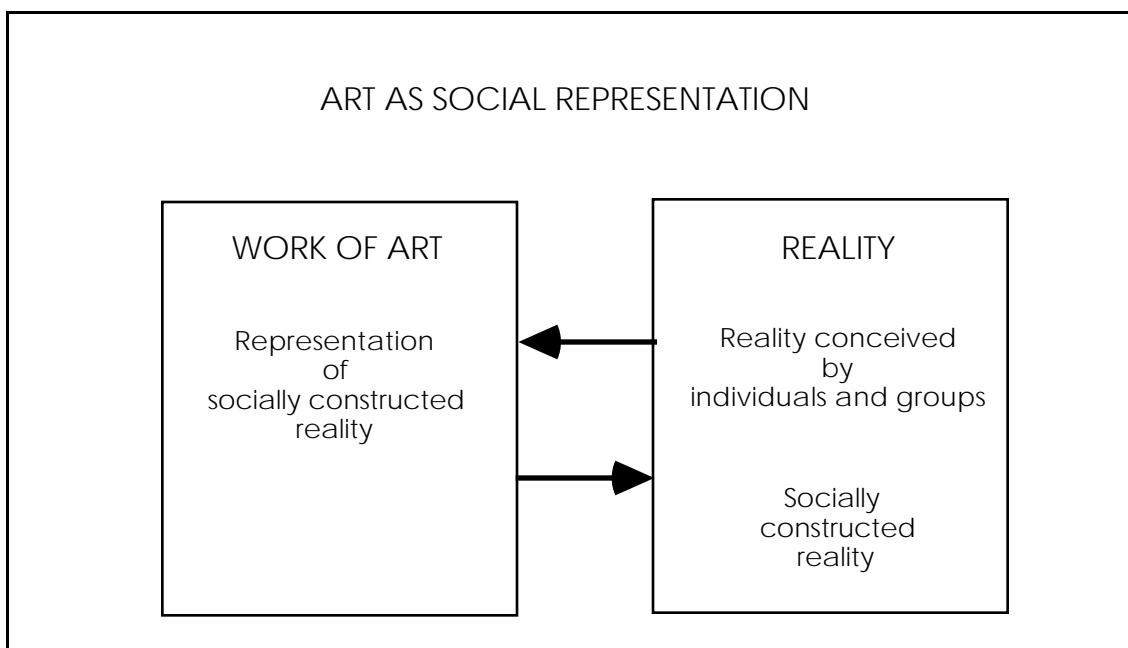


Figure 1
Art as a social representation.

of reality exactly as it is constructed in a particular social context obviously requires certain considerations. In the first place, it requires an approximation to the concept of social representation itself in order to verify to what extent this assimilation of plastic creations to social representations as they are understood by the model is correct. Likewise, it requires an analysis of the processes and functions that are set out in the general model of social representations in order to discuss to what extent, in plastic creations, we can consider these same processes and functions.

In general terms, a social representation is conceived as the result of a socially-rooted psychological process with the ability to conform reality precisely as it is going to be "lived" ("experienced") by the individuals and groups. Taking Di Giacomo's synthesis (1987) as reference, we can understand a social representation as being: a set of ideological orientations, structured, exemplary type, involving emotional elements and linked to specific behaviours. According to this, we can ask ourselves firstly, whether a work of art possesses a structured character. The answer, evidently is that it does. A work of art presents a structure both at the formal level as well as at the content level. The structured character, one of the distinctive characteristics of a social representation, is present, then, in those products of human activity which we call "artistic". The exemplary character, another distinctive feature of social representations: can this be of use to characterise a work of art? Once again, the answer is, yes; it can. A work of art implies an exemplary character in that different relations between its various components, both in form and content, are specified in it. Moreover, it is clear that works of art represent different ideological orientations. More explicitly (e.g. socialist realism) or more implicitly (e.g. 15th century court painting), works of art function as ideological instruments that take up and reflect assumptions and power relations between the different social groups. The ideological character of these works of art has been systematically exploited throughout history, inasmuch as this medium has contributed essentially to the diffusion of different conceptions of the world and social life (religious, political, etc.... conceptions). And if we feel that this is something of the past, peculiar to other periods of history, we have only to think for a moment about the role that the cinema or television, for example, plays in present-day social life to be convinced otherwise.

Two defining points remain to be commented on in relation to works of art which refer, respectively, to the implication of emotional elements and to specific behaviours. When art is conceived above all as expression, when the purpose assigned to an artistic realisation is that of serving as a means of expression, can there, then, be any doubt as to whether art does or does not involve emotional elements? The emotional elements of art have been, together with the informational elements, the focal points around which the greater part of views or aesthetic perspectives have been constructed. Lastly, art also implies specific behaviours, in the processes of both production and consumption, a matter which, in turn, serves to complete this review of those points which, as we have seen, defined what a social representation was and which, as we can verify, also conform to what a work of art is.

PROCESSES OF OBJECTIFICATION AND ANCHORING

Can we take the formation of an artistic image as corresponding to those same processes which, according to the general model of social representations, are typical of the formation of an image of any social representation? The answer is: basically, yes. The elaboration of this type of image implies, in the first place, a selective construction –phase one of the objectification process– in which the possible information on the object of the representation is selected and decontextualized. The selection and decontextualization are essential elements in the process of creating artistic images.

In a plastic representation one part of information is selected and used to form an image. An artistic image, at the informative level, is a partial selection of elements. A selection that is partial, but not random, since the elements selected are those that "coincide" with the meaning that one wishes to give to the image. The selection of information, as occurs in social representations in general, is also made here based on cultural and prescriptive criteria, which partially explains why the same object of representation, for example, the human figure, can be represented in radically different ways.

In this same fashion, a historical event such as a battle can give rise to two such different images as Altodorfer's "Battle between Alexander and Dario" or Picasso's raw "Guernica". The informative elements that have been selected to create the two images are essentially different. Only at the content level can we indicate how, in one case the composition of the army, the military strategies, the "action", have been considered whereas in the other image the elements of information take us to the pain and the misery of war, to suffering and to death. This is so because the selection of elements that we are commenting do not take place in a social void, but rather quite the contrary. The position held by individuals, and thus, also held by artists within the social fabric, conditions both the informative elements available to them, as well as, obviously, their interests and values; interests and values that are oriented toward the selection they make of this information, their particular way of "reading" reality.

Just as the formation of an artistic image means a selection of informative elements, it also involves a decontextualization of those very elements. A landscape painting hanging on a wall is a decontextualized piece of information. It is not true scenery; the most, we can say is that it is a "scenic picture" (not a real landscape) situated in a place (a wall) where it would be impossible to have a real landscape. The paradigmatic example of how an image acquires artistic value through , in fact, a process of decontextualization may be seen in the works of Marcel Duchamp. His work is a radical example of the process of decontextualization in artistic images that we have been referring to. We could surely state that one particular characteristic of modern art is this maximum exploitation of the processes of selective construction, of selection and decontextualization of information to create images.

After the selective construction, the second phase of the process of objectification refers to the structuring schematization, to the organisation of the different elements of information selected which, once conveniently articulated, makes up the figurative nucleus of the representation. In plastic representations the informative elements selected are organised and structured both at the content level and the formal level. The result, the image, is just that, a result, a structured, organised product. It is in this phase of the

process of objectification where this hierarchical ordering of elements, both of content and form, takes place, enabling us to conceive of works of art as organised structures even when it is disorder, entropy itself, that the plastic manifestations may allude to.

The exemplary nature that works of art possess is derived from precisely this structuring process which their different elements undergo and which constitutes an essential part, together with the selective construction of information, of the process of objectification.

The third phase of the process of objectification is known as ontologization. The image, created from the organisation of different informative elements selected according to cultural and prescriptive criteria, is given real being, it is "introduced" into the world of real things, of things that actually exist, its symbolical nature is left behind and instead it comes to be understood as a reflection of a reality existing in its own right. The process of ontologization that takes place in these artistic creations becomes evident when we observe that these images are considered by individuals and groups. Artistic images are not treated as symbols, but rather as "things". If they represent a divinity, they are prayed to, since the image is taken for the god it represents; if they represent a king, they are hailed for the same reasons. Hasn't art been a form of endowing ideas with reality? Is it not through artistic manifestations that gods, paradise and hell, love and madness, scenery and villages have been made real for the public throughout history? And, what is that, if not a process of ontologization?

This process of "making real", of believing a symbol, an image, to be "real", that takes place in the process of objectification, is dialectically linked, as we have already noted, to the process of giving meaning to this image endowed with reality, to attributing a meaning to it, which is basically carried out by means of the process of anchoring. Indeed, anchoring is understood as the process by which we assign an object to an existing category and give it a name; we categorise it and we name it. Can we conceive this process as taking place in the sphere of artistic creations? Certainly. From the very moment the artist confronts the task and considers painting a landscape or portrait, making a film poster or installation he is including his behaviour and the results of that behaviour in a category, and he is labelling the results with a group name (landscape, portrait, film poster or installation), with all that implies in assigning a meaning and a use to these results. The anchoring process takes place within the sphere of artistic creations, since both the creator and the viewer assign the work, the product, and its referents to an already established category, although on occasion they may have to modify their previous ideas in order to be able to take in the new object. We must bear in mind that it is through this process of anchoring, functioning in dialectical relation to objectification, that we are able to cognitively integrate new developments, to interpret reality and to orient behaviours and social relations.

A work of art, as a symbolical reality, cannot be conceived as separate from a meaning, separate from a referent. The process by which that image, arising, as we have pointed out, from a selection and organisation of informative elements, acquires a meaning and becomes accessible to our knowledge, our interpretation, is precisely the process of anchoring: by assigning the image to a category and giving it a name, we are able to integrate it into our socio-cognitive schemata, interpret it, make it "familiar". This meaning that we attribute to it, derived from the category to which we have assigned it, will orient our behaviour.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF ARTISTIC CREATIONS

The processes of anchoring and objectification, dialectically linked, appear, then, as dynamics essential to artistic creations, which reaffirms the viability of conceiving them from the conceptual point of view of the theory of social representations. As we have seen, a work of art can be understood as a social representation because it has the same inter-related elements and the same processes (objectification and anchoring). Can we also take it that works of art fulfil the same functions assigned to social representations in general? Certainly. Ibañez (1988) lists in detail five important functions fulfilled by social representations. These refer to social communication functions, functions of integration of new developments in social thought, functions of confirmation of personal and social identities, as well as functions of expression and group configuration. To these Ibañez adds those functions that social representations fulfil by constituting "stance-adoption generators" ; lastly, he adds that social representations fulfil an important function of legitimation of the social order, both at the symbolical and practical levels, given their capacity for orienting behaviour.

By any reckoning it is evident that works of art are important elements of social communication. The expression of feelings and ideas has always found one of the most privileged means of transmission in art. Literature, music, painting or cinema can be understood as collective means of communication through which information circulates among social groups. Likewise, throughout history works of art have constituted such a means of integrating changes and innovations in social thought; they have been a means of making familiar new elements of the social environment, whether they be new devices, new power relations or new scientific ideas. All of these elements, novel in certain periods of history, have produced a response in artistic activity and have contributed to making them more familiar, to integrating them into the individuals' socio-cognitive schemata.

On the other hand, art is an important element in the shaping of group identity. The characteristic architectural makeup of a particular geographical or cultural group, its literary forms, traditions in ceramics... constitute a "crystallisation" of its group identity. Furthermore, once again, it is clear that they contribute to the shaping of that identity. Is there any doubt that rock music has been a decisive element in the identity of certain groups of young people in our social environment?

Moreover, art, in agreement with the last two functions pointed out by Ibañez, is not a neutral element in social environment; on the contrary, it represents a "stand-taking", a particular view of things and relations within society. Art, then, fulfils the "orienting function" typical of social representations. It is basically for this reason that art maintains its own peculiar relationship with the social order, capable of contributing to its symbolical and practical legitimation, as Ibañez points out, but also contributing to its change, in that, as we have said, it represents a way of introducing new elements (ideological, political, religious, scientific...) into social thought, thus precipitating new ways of looking at things, new dimensions of thought and behaviour in social groups.

So far, what has been posed here is the general viability of using the social representations model as a conceptual framework for the analysis of works of art, and more precisely of plastic creations. A conception of this type of artistic images as social representations of certain general conceptions of society or of specific aspects of society

(ideological, scientific, religious, etc., concepts) has been defended. What does this conception of works of art have to offer within the theoretical model of social representations? Basically, this conception enables us to analyse artistic creations from a complex perspective from which it is possible to integrate historical, cultural, sociological, psychological, and even physical elements into the explanation of a phenomenon as human as art. This conception refers us, fundamentally, to two essential ideas. On one hand, the social character of art. Art is the social part within us, according to Vygotsky, although this is not meant to imply that works of art can be reduced to a mere mechanical reflection of the sociocultural conditions in which individuals and groups evolve. The concept of social representation applied in the sphere of artistic creations enables us to understand how art, being a psychological product, is socially rooted, and how, being inseparably linked to certain historical and cultural circumstances, it cannot be mechanically derived from them.

Works of art, just as social representations in general, are essentially conditioned by the cultural and social situations of the groups that produce (and also consume) them, but at the same time they are an important element in the configuration of these cultural and social situations. Works of art, conceived as social representations, can be understood as social products that reflect their own production conditions, but also as processes of social and psychological elaboration of the reality in which people live, which is, fundamentally, a symbolical reality. The second basic idea which the conception of works of art as social representations refers us to is precisely that— their symbolical character. It is quite clear now that art does not refer us to a physical reality but rather to a reality of a social nature. It is not possible to find the final objective referent of the artistic image because there is no such thing. "The image must be understood, on the other hand, as a vehicle for the expression of what a particular community of viewers knows as reality. The term "realism", therefore, cannot refer to an absolute conception of "what is real", because such a conception cannot account for the historical and changing nature of "what is real" in different periods and cultures. The validity of the term needs to be qualified, and it would be more precise to say that 'realism' consists of the coincidence between a representation and what a particular society proposes and supposes as its reality: a reality that involves a complex aggregate of codes of behaviour, laws, psychologies, social uses, fashions, expressions, attitudes, all of those practical norms that govern the installation of the human being in his particular historical setting. It is in relation to that body of codes determined by society, and not in relation to an immutable "universal visual experience" that the realism of an image should be understood" (Bryson, 1991, p. 31)

Art is social and symbolical, and any perspective for its study that ignores these two essential aspects will not only be incomplete but also fundamentally incorrect. For its analysis and comprehension, art requires instruments that take these two basic characteristics into account. It is in this sense that the social representations model is especially pertinent. The social representations model makes it possible to account for these essential aspects of works of art at a general level. Moreover, it would be interesting to use the conceptual tools that the social representations model provides (the general model and the proposal to conceive plastic artistic creations as social representations) to carry out more specific analyses of particular questions. Following this line of thought, our interest will focus on the analysis of conceptions of space as

they are reflected in plastic creations and as they are formulated in the sphere of scientific thinking. The thorough development of this topic surpasses the limits of this paper; nevertheless, a superficial look at the problem and some general propositions may serve, to some degree, to illustrate the conceptual and methodological possibilities of the proposals that have been made thus far.

CONSTRUCTED SPACE

The central idea that will be put forward under this heading is that plastic arts, which are spatial arts, do not just reflect the "spatiality" of objects and the relations between them, but actually construct it. What's more, plastic creations are fundamental mechanisms of the objectification of space, since they are essentially concretions of abstract conceptual notions about space. Thus, one does not paint the space that is perceived, but rather the space that is conceived. Once again we end up perceiving the conceived space, the painted space.

The analysis of space, as it is represented in art, as it is conceived by science, and as it is considered in social life, exemplifies the complexity of the conceptual problems, allowing us to take on the theoretical model social representations model that we are dealing with here. Space is a concept and as such evolves and changes. It evolves as the cognitive and social capacities of individuals develop and it evolves as the societies and contexts of the human beings who cognitively elaborate and employ it change. Therefore, together with the individual evolution of spatial conceptions a historical evolution is also observed. Conceptions of space vary from one period to another. The concepts of space and spatial relationships are fundamental to philosophical and scientific thought. So, it is no surprise that these concepts change as changes take place in philosophy and science in certain contexts and in certain social groups. Furthermore, the concept of space is not independent of the general conceptions about man and the world that make up any scientific and philosophical undertaking. The particular concept of space that develops in a certain historical and cultural context refers us to the philosophical and scientific intellectual creations of that context and, therefore, to the general conceptions underlying the philosophy and science that develop in that context.

Treatment of space in the plastic arts cannot ignore the conceptual developments on space and spatial relationships that are created in a particular historical context. In every different period plastic creations represent a particular elaboration of spatial concepts which in no way is foreign to the elaboration that is made of these concepts in that same period in philosophy, mathematics or natural sciences. Panofsky, after analysing the transition from Ancient spatial representation to Renaissance spatial representation, refers to the Renaissance's central perspective as a "concrete expression of what, contemporary, theorists of knowledge and philosophers of nature had discovered." (1991, p. 47, first edition, 1924–25). Francastel shares this same view when, in his analysis on the creation and destruction of plastic space in the Renaissance, he affirms the constructed nature of plastic space: "It is men who create the space in which they move or where they express themselves. Spaces are born and die as do societies; they live and have a history. In the fifteenth century human societies in Western Europe set themselves to organise, in the material and intellectual sense of the term, a space which was totally different from the space of previous generations; and these human societies,

as a result of their technical superiority, progressively imposed it on this planet" (Francastel, 1984, p. 110 first edition 1970). What space is "discovered", and therefore painted, in the Renaissance? At the risk of simplifying, we can characterise this concept of space as a space that is infinite, constant and homogeneous, three-dimensional, static, invariable, continuous and frozen in time. This is the space that for four centuries has shaped plastic creations and the reflections of philosophers and scientists. It is the space invented in science and art. Yet, it is also the space that forms people's way of seeing things. It is the socially constructed space, the objectified space.

This three-dimensional, a-temporal, homogeneous, invariable, continuous and infinite space is the space that, transcending the spheres of scientific thought, reaches peoples' conceptions; it is the space that we expect to see and do see, the space in which we move. A Euclidean space that serves as the frame for men and objects. However, this space is not a given space, as we have said, but rather a constructed space; it is a concept, and as such, an artificial elaboration, but one which, despite this, shapes our experience. How can this concept of space acquire the objectified nature that is typical of it? An examination of the historical relationships between the conceptual elaborations of space (philosophical and scientific) and plastic creations leads us to suppose that plastic creations are exceptional mechanisms of objectification of space.

In keeping with the model put forward in the previous section, to conceive artistic creations as social representations of space enables us to see the artist's treatment of space as the result of his own creative process of cognitive elaboration of a set of notions and spatial relationships, although with this we are at no time implying that this psychological process takes place out in a social void. We can conceive the space represented as the result of a process of psychological elaboration on the part of the artist, but a process of psychological elaboration rooted in a social substratum made up of those spatial conceptions peculiar to a particular historical and cultural context.

Were this not so, it would not be possible to explain the coincidence in the treatment of space by artists of a same period, artists who, in other aspects, are notably different. Thus, we can speak of a social reference of plastic space. Does this mean that the social and cultural context unilaterally conditions plastic representations? From the social representations model this affirmation would represent only a partial view of the phenomena we are dealing with. The social representations model conceives these not only as products but also as processes of social and psychological elaboration of reality. From this conceptual perspective we can see that works of art not only reflect the spatial conceptions prevailing in a particular cultural context, but are actually capable of creating these conceptions. Especially interesting in this sense are Panofsky's observations on the prior establishment in the artistic sphere of a system of coordinates that permit the metrical expression both of the bodies and the intervals that separate them— the chequered tiles beneath the figures of a painting— before being postulated by abstract mathematical thought. Panofsky himself points out that the projective geometry of the seventeenth century arises from perspectivist investigation. Thus, a bi-directional relation is observed between space conceived and space painted. The concept of social representation applied to plastic creations provides us with a theoretical model for understanding this articulation of the individual and collective social and psychological processes that are expressed in art and this "double" nature of plastic creations with relation to space, as the

synthesis of spatial conceptions and, at the same time, and without resulting contradictory, mechanisms for the conformation of new spaces.

Conceiving plastic creations as social representations of space, as concrete images of abstract notions about space, allows us to explain in what way ideas about space belonging to a particular historical and cultural period are related to another series of ideas (religious, political, scientific, etc....) of that same historical and cultural context. Moreover, the social representations model enables us to understand that artistic productions synthesise these "spatial ideas" but, at the same time, contribute to socially defining what and how space is, since they give objective character to an abstract intellectual production.

By what processes would this psychological and social elaboration of space capable of giving objective and real character to an intellectual creation be produced? Can we look to the processes of objectification and anchoring proposed by the general model of social representations to account for the elaboration and objectification of spatial representations in plastic works of art? Indeed. Returning once again to the spatial conceptions that, since the Renaissance, have prevailed for four centuries in Western culture –both in art, as in science, as in everyday life– we can speak, in relation to them, of a selective construction, a structuring schematization and an ontologization of spatial elements and relations.

Systems of spatial representation –any of them– do not take into account all of the information available on the spatial relations between objects in order to represent them plastically. Furthermore, the key nucleus of each system of spatial representation is precisely the selection of information that is to be taken into consideration. Thus, for example, as opposed to the geometry of antiquity which based its representation of the world on the appreciation and calculation of the angles of sight, in the Renaissance, a system is taken from Euclid for the representation of objects by means of the proportional calculation of distances. Directly related to this selection of informative elements that will be taken into account in the elaboration of the plastic image we can also observe a process of structuring schematization, a particular organisation of the different informative elements selected. The linear perspective of the Renaissance involves a system of organisation of the flat surface of the plastic screen on which all of the elements represented are considered from only one sole point of view in which the relative dimensions of the parts are mathematically deduced from the calculation of the relative distance between the visible objects and the unmoving eye of the viewer. This conception of the painting (painting–window) as a flat intersection of the "visual pyramid" that is formed by the fact of considering the visual centre as a point, a point that is connected to the different points of the spatial form that one wishes to obtain, does not take into account the fact that we do not look with one unmoving eye, but rather with two moving eyes, nor that the projection of the shaft of light on the retina is not projected on a flat surface, but rather on a curved surface. In other words, we observe a process of decontextualization of the selected spatial information that loses its partial, and even hypothetical (it is based, among other things, on the hypothesis of a sole and fixed point of view), character in order to acquire an objectified character. The process of ontologization is probably one of the most striking, analysing as it does the construction of the social representation of space in plastic creations. It is a wonder that a conventional form of spatial representation like that developed in the Renaissance and

reduced to linear perspective has been attributed such a degree of realistic character, to the extent of identifying this term of "realism" with such a form of spatial representation of objects. Why is this form of representation considered more realistic than others? Basically, because through a process of objectification, it has shaped people's way of seeing, disseminated an objectified, rather than an objective space, become an instrument of knowledge and interpretation of spatial reality which, from then on is conceived as three-dimensional, homogeneous, infinite, continuous, unchangeable, We are, in short, before an authentic psychological and social elaboration of spatial reality.

Yet, the model of social representations is not a static model, but rather a dynamic one, and for this reason, it enables us to account for not only the process of construction of certain spatial conceptions but also for the changes of these conceptions. From the model, as we have been explaining, the forms of plastic representation of space have been dialectically related to the scientific and philosophical conceptions of space, scientific and philosophical spatial conceptions that, in turn, are not different from the general conceptions of man and the world typical of a particular cultural context. From this perspective we can, therefore, expect the historically significant changes in scientific and/or philosophical undertaking to be closely related to changes in the forms of plastic representation of space. This process has been pointed out in relation to the Renaissance forms of spatial representation. However, it is not the only historical example that allows us to illustrate this hypothesis of the close connection between the forms of plastic representation of space typical of a specific period and the scientific notions of space in that same period. The systematic analysis of the relations between the plastic arts of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century and the new conceptions of the physical world that have been made in the sphere of scientific thought since then exceed the limits of this paper. Even so, we must mention the coincidence of the emergence, in art, of what are referred to as historical vanguard movements (cubism, surrealism, abstract art, ...) and in science, the development of new physical-mathematical theories on space. If, to assess the former, we could use Francastel's expression of "destruction of the Renaissance plastic space", for the latter we could also speak of a destruction of the Euclidean spatial model on which classical physics and geometry were based.

The objectified space of the Renaissance is questioned both from science and from art. Non-Euclidean geometries, Reimann's or Minkowsky's proposals, the space-time conceptions derived from Einstein's theories of relativity, are all, even chronologically, closely related to the models of plastic creation by Picasso, Braque, Malevitch, Mondrian or Kandinsky. In what light can we understand this relation? So far as our discussion is concerned, we can understand that, in both cases, the Euclidean conceptions of space are surpassed, making way for new conceptions of space (n-dimensional spaces, curved and finite spaces, spaces which are non-homogeneous, perspective...) that contradict the established modes of thought regarding space in science, of representation of space in art and of the way one lives space in the everyday experience of social life.

How can this relation be explained among contemporary scientific developments—clearly related to the socio-historical conditions of the period in which they take place—and plastic developments? The conception of plastic creations as social representations of constructed space offers us the possibility of understanding them as products and as process of creation of spatial conceptions and, therefore, offers us the theoretical

possibility of explaining some of the complex relations between art science and everyday life that take place in any historical period. Without mechanically deriving art from science nor, of course, science from art, the model situates both aspects of intellectual creation in the common background of a historical and cultural reality. If Romanesque capitals put into images the Christian conceptions of good and evil, of nature and of society, giving "reality" to such conceptions, and if Renaissance paintings objectify a model of space that ended up becoming confused with spatial reality, the abstract paintings of the nineteenth century can be understood as "epistemological metaphors", structural resolutions of a diffuse theoretical conscience (...) that represent the repercussion, in formative activity, of certain acquisitions of contemporary scientific methodologies, the confirmation, in art, of the categories of indetermination, of statistical distribution, that regulate the interpretation of natural facts" (Eco, 1985).

What has been said here so far in no way means to imply that artists paint Minkowskian spaces nor that geometricians and topologists turn to museums or art galleries to elaborate their propositions, but rather that both share a common historical and cultural reality that explains the existence of a relation that is closer between the art and science of a given historical moment than between the artistic developments of two markedly differentiated historical and cultural periods. Twentieth century art is more related to the science of this century than to medieval art. Reciprocally, twentieth century science has more to do with contemporary art than with the scientific productions of the Middle Ages. Social Sciences are faced with the task of offering an explanation for these mutual connections between scientific and artistic creations and reality as it is conceived by individuals and groups, an explanation of how art and science, arising as they do from a particular social reality, contribute to the construction of this social reality and to its transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude here by insisting on various points. First, on the viability of using the social representations model as the theoretical framework for carrying out various analyses of plastic creations. Accustomed as we are to conceiving social representations as "socialised mental images", the conceptual development and methodological rigor of the model can be improved upon, if, by broadening the perspective with which social representations are usually studied, we conceive plastic creations also as social representations. As has been shown, the model makes it possible to offer an explanation of the psychosocial process of elaboration of an artistic image without reducing this process either to an autonomous psychological process independent of the context in which it takes place or to a mere mechanical result of the social and cultural conditions in which the artist evolves. Moreover, the model enables us to account for the social functions of art in the very process of construction of the reality as it is lived by individuals and groups.

On the other hand, use of the social representations model within the sphere of artistic phenomena means, in practice, the need to develop new methodological orientations that permit the systematic study of artistic creations. Thus, works of art become new "methodological resources" that broaden the research possibilities of the model.

I finish here, stressing the challenge that is involved for Social Sciences in facing this particular sphere of culture and human experience that is art. As we have seen, the theory of social representations enables us to situate art in its historical, social and cultural dimensions, furnishing us with the conceptual tools with which to elaborate a conception of the human experiences related to art, a conception that goes beyond the dichotomies and clashes between the psychological and social aspects in theories and explanations of artistic behaviour by providing us with important keys to understand in what way plastic creations are not only behavioural products related to the social reality in which they are produced and/or consumed, but (and what is most interesting) are also social construction mechanisms of this reality.

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