ON THE ISSUE OF REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

This paper aims at revisiting the concept of 'representation', in order to discuss matters like truth value and the cultural and ideological importance of representations.

Sinopse

Neste artigo aborda-se o conceito de 'representação', discutindo as matérias do valor de verdade e da importância cultural e ideológica das representações.

Palavras-chave: representações; ficção; realidade; inscrição; convenção; inculcação.

Key-words: representations; fiction; reality; inscription; convention; inculcation; simulacra.

Introduction

This paper is but one contribution to a relatively large research line under the heading 'Representations of Portugal in Non-Portuguese Fiction'. The research line in question was started by me within the CEI (Centre for Intercultural Studies) at ISCAP (www.iscap.ipp.pt/~cei) and aims at mapping out representations of Portugal in non-Portuguese fiction. I wrote three papers on the subject: "Representations of Portugal in Herman Hesse, Philip Roth and Paul Auster", already published in POLISSEMA 8, and two more are forthcoming ("John Berger's Lisbon in *Here Is Where we Meet*' and 'Lisbon in that Summer of 1938: Antonio Tabucchi's *Pereira Declares*").

While still following the same path, I now address more closely the theoretical questions raised by the concept of 'representation'.

On the concept of representation

In a previous paper[1] I considered 'representation' as the inscription of mental images/concepts of entities of a real or possible world by means of signs, be they icons, indices or symbols (Peirce's terminology).

As we know, in Peirce's account of 1867-8, he called signs 'representations', and divided them in icons, indices and symbols. His definitions of these three types of 'representations' are, at this stage, a bit blurred, but, as this division remains throughout his work and what is intended by each of these categories is clarified as his work progresses, I shall consider, from this very beginning, their now (almost) commonly accepted definitions.

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[1] 'Representations of Portugal in Hermann Hesse, Philip Roth and Paul Auster' in POLISSEMA 8, Novembro 2008, Revista de Letras do ISCAP, Porto: Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto, pp.57-88.

According to Ransdell (1997:36),

> *If the sign's representative clue is based on, or grounded in, a*
> *similarity (resemblance, likeness) to its object, then it is […]*
> *iconic. If it is based on a dyadic or existential relationship*
> *with its object, then it is […] indexical. And if it is based on*
> *nothing but the fact that it has the power to generate an*
> *interpretant sign of itself in which it will be interpreted as*
> *being a sign of that object – that is, if it is based on nothing*
> *but the fact that it has the power to generate an interpretant*
> *sign of itself in which it will be represented as a sign of that*
> *object – then it is a symbol.*

Elgin defines icons, indices and symbols in much the same way, except for the definition of index, in which she clearly mentions correlation as an instance of dyadic relationship:

> *A sign's status as an icon, index or symbol derives from its*
> *mode of reference. Icons refer by resemblance or, as Peirce said,*
> *"mere community in some quality". Indices refer by a natural*
> *correlation or "correspondence in fact". Symbols refer by*
> *convention. Thus, a portrait is considered an icon, its reference*
> *being secured by its likeness to its subject.*
> *A symptom is an index in that it in fact corresponds to a*
> *disease. And most denoting terms are symbols in Peirce's*
> *sense, for their relation to their objects is a matter of arbitrary*
> *convention.* (Elgin, 1996:181)

In order to clear some of Peirce's terminology and ideas, it is important to point out the following: in the process of representation, as he sees it, there are

three instances – sign-vehicle (or simply sign), object and interpretant; the interpretant is, for Peirce, our understanding of the sign-vehicle/object relation[2]. Thus, our understanding of the sign /object relation, be it monadic (icons), dyadic (indices), or triadic (symbols), is always mediated by some kind of mental image. Without mental image there is no representation, be it on the part of the producer, be it on the art of the receiver[3]. Now, we know very little about mental images, but we do know a lot more about images as sign inscriptions. One problem seems to be that the word 'image' is used in multiple senses, both referring to mental images and to signs.

Mitchell (1986) addresses this issue not with the aim of producing a definition of the essential nature of images, but rather with the aim of examining the ways we use the word 'image' in a number of institutionalized discourses (ibid.:9 and ff.). According to him, images are based on the concepts of likeness, resemblance or similitude; as such, they may be divided (by means of a diagram of a family tree) in graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, 'species', appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata) and verbal images (metaphors, descriptions) (ibid.:10). This differentiation, he claims, is based on boundaries between different institutional discourses, and by 'institutional discourses' he means the discourse of intellectual disciplines[4] (ibid.:9-10). If that is so, that is, if all five types of images are placed at the same level in a family tree (he even calls them 'the family of images') and if the boundaries between them are set by means of differentiation between institutional

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[2] Furthermore, for Peirce, each of these three instances is a sign in itself. Hence the fact that Ransdell uses the designation 'interpretant sign'.

[3] This can be corroborated by ethnographers' reports on the fact that peoples who have never seen photographs have to learn how to decode what is depicted in them (Mitchell, 1986:65).

[4] Thus, "mental imagery belongs to psychology and epistemology; optical imagery to physics; graphic, sculptural, and architectural imagery to the art historian; verbal imagery to the literary critic; perceptual images occupy a kind of border region where physiologists, neurologists, psychologists, art historians, and students of optics find themselves collaborating with philosophers and literary critics" (ibid.:9-10).

discourses, then, when he talks about mental images, he is within the realm of discourse, or, as he says, institutional discourses, and so he is talking about *inscriptions of mental images*, i.e. representations and not about mental images "proper". He himself acknowledges that when he says that *people may report experiencing images in their heads while reading or dreaming, but we only have their word for this* (ibid.:13). In spite of the fact that the aim of this categorization is not to advance the theoretical understanding of the image, and Mitchell is very clear about this, it nevertheless poses a number of theoretical questions, the most important of which is that one thing is a mental image, say, a dream, a memory and so forth, and another thing is its inscription: without inscription the whole edifice of the family of images would fall apart, as there is no way to test the principles of likeness, resemblance or similitude that are at its basis; on the other hand, if we are within the realm of discourse when talking about mental images, then we need to make use of other members of 'the family of images', say, graphic or verbal, to inscribe the mental image, and this somehow makes Mitchell's diagram of the family of images not very adequate, because the inscription of a mental image in graphic or verbal terms would automatically shift it respectively into the categories of graphic or verbal image.

Now from this reasoning on Mitchell's approach it does not follow that I am against it. In fact, what I am doing here is exactly within the line of his aim, which is "to open up for inquiry the ways our 'theoretical' understanding of imagery grounds itself in social and cultural practices, and in a history fundamental to our understanding not only of what images are but of what human nature is or might become" (ibid.:9).

But to do so, I think we should leave categorizations of images aside and take a leap to concentrate on images as representations, i.e., we should concentrate on trying to answer the question: by what means does the inscription of a mental image/concept of an entity represent that entity?

From what I have written so far about Mitchell one would expect his answer to be by likeness, resemblance or similitude, but things are not that simple. In fact, his views on the matter are much broader than the diagram of the family of images – in which, as explained above, I see some problems – seems to suggest. It is worth noting his consideration that

> *instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparence concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification* (ibid.:8).

What, then, is the basis of this mechanism of representation? Well, he does not seem to be very interested in giving a concise, straightforward answer to this question, for he his more concerned with differentiation and collaboration, for instance, between graphic image and text; but, if we were to infer such an answer from his reflections on the subject of representation I think the touchstone to that answer would be that the mechanism of representation is based on inculcation (cf. ibid.:64 and ff.)[5]. This would be consistent with the quote above and with his general approach to the matter, which is both historical and ideological.

Baudrillard (1994:6), in turn, stresses that representation is based on equivalence (and not on concepts such as likeness, resemblance or similitude). In his words, *representation stems from the principle of equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if the equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom)*. In putting equivalence at the core of the process of representation and in admitting that even if equivalence is utopian it must be accepted as an axiom, he dismisses similitude (or likeness, or resemblance) and makes it a matter of convention. This axiom makes

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[5] This is, in fact, Nelson Goodman's position, and the inference that it is also Mitchell's position stems from the fact that Mitchell seems to be in favour of it in the eleven pages he dedicates to 'Goodman's Grammar of Difference' (Mitchell,1986:63-74).

categorizations, such as Pierce's or Mitchell's, somewhat redundant and shifts our attention to successive phases of the image. According to Baudrillard, these successive phases of the image are:

> *It is the reflection of a profound reality;*
> *It masks and denatures a profound reality;*
> *It masks the absence of a profound reality;*
> *It has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure*
> *simulacrum.* (Baudrillard, ibid.:6),

Baudrillard is, in fact, more interested in simulacra than in representations, and so, he hardly pays any attention to the first two 'phases of the image', which would fall into the concept of representation, and concentrates more on the third and fourth phases, which would fall into the concept of simulacrum. However, it is worth noting that, even so, his views on the subject of representation are to be taken into account, particularly in what concerns the issue of the truth value of representations.

On the truth value of representations

Following the line of reasoning so far, I think it might be concluded that in representations, whatever their type may be, there is always some kind of convention. If that is so, it seems, at first sight, there would be no point in arguing about the truth value of representations. Philosophically, this is supported by Wittgenstein's propositions 2.201, 2.202, 2.22, 2.221 and 5.6 of the *Tratactus*; ideologically and culturally, the prevailing thesis of an extreme conventionalism leads us somewhat in the same way. Mitchell, for instance, when commenting on Nelson Goodman's position on the matter, writes:

> *He [Goodman] denies that there is a world to test our*
> *representations and descriptions against; […] he reduces all*
> *symbolic forms, and perhaps even all acts of perception, to*
> *culturally relative constructions or interpretations. And this*
> *reduction of symbols to referential conventions seems to*
> *eliminate all essential differences between different types of*
> *signs.* (Mitchell, 1986:65)

Theoretically, this position is sustainable, and it is also consistent with my remark above that without mental image there is no representation, be it on the part of the producer, be it on the art of the receiver. At this point I think it is useful to make an incursion into the theory of reference, which I think is quite enlightening for the issue of representation: Searle (1969) puts forth three axioms - the axiom of existence, the axiom of identity and the axiom of identification:

> *Axiom of existence*
> *Whatever is referred to must exist.* (Searle, 1969:77)

> *Axiom of identity*
> *Whenever two expressions refer to the same object, one can be*
> *substituted for another without changing the truth value of the*
> *corresponding sentence.* (Searle, 1969:97)

> *Axiom of identification*
> *If a speaker refers to an object, then he identifies or is able on*
> *demand to identify that object for the hearer apart from all*
> *other objects.* (Searle, 1969:79)

In spite of the fact that Searle is of course referring to verbal signs, and moreover, to verbal signs as used in the speech act of reference (and not of

predication), I think one should pay some attention to what is implied in these three axioms.

Starting with the axiom of existence, Searle clearly points out that it does not imply ontological existence:

> *References to fictional (and also legendary, mythological, etc.)*
> *entities are not counter-examples. One can refer to them as*
> *fictional characters precisely because they exist in fiction.*
> (Searle, 1969:78)

Now the possibility of creating fiction, and with it the possibility of making reference to entities without real-world counterparts, opens up the scope of the axiom of existence to almost anything. This is further corroborated and clearly spelled out by Polenz (1985), who sustains that one can refer to what does not exist, and who considers the creation of objects of reference is an elementary right of any speaker/writer (Polenz, 1985:119). Although Polenz is also referring to verbal signs, I think that what he sustains can be applied to any type of sign: sign inscriptions/representations are creations, with or without real-world counterparts. In my view, this clarifies the issue as follows: the inscription of any sign, be it iconic, indexical or symbolic, is an act of creation; as such, it has its own truth value. The difficult question left to answer remains then: how do we measure that value in case there is a real-world counterpart? The answer to that question involves two instances: the producer and the receiver of the representation and here there may be a mismatch, i.e., the producer may think there is a relation of likeness, resemblance or similitude between representation and real-world correlate where the receiver may find none. This is where convention and inculcation step in, as they make likeness, resemblance or similitude irrelevant. But at this point we must be aware of one thing: if the touchstone is convention, then it must be shared by producer and receiver alike and inculcation (of that convention) must have taken place; otherwise, the receiver will not find any relation whatsoever between

representation and real-world correlate. He may, then, act, according to Searle's axiom of identity ask the producer to substitute that representation for another, or, according to Searle's axiom of identification, ask questions to the producer, but this is, of course, only possible if the producer is available and in most cases he/she is not.

This leaves us again with the issue of convention and inculcation, which implies shared knowledge, and when we talk about shared knowledge of this kind we are within the realm of culture.

On the cultural and ideological importance of representations

How important are representations for a culture? Following the reasoning so far, one can give a very simple answer: they are important in that they imply shared knowledge, and that is an aggregative element not to be despised in any culture.

But how is that knowledge shared? As we have seen, by the mechanisms of convention and inculcation. And who is in a privileged position to master those mechanisms? Those who have the power, namely political, religious, economic or other, and, of course, the media, which are, in one way or the other, dependent on those powers.

By mastering those mechanisms, the powers referred to can either fabricate representations or appropriate representations. Examples of fabrication of representations in politics, religion or economy are to be found everywhere: in political campaigns, in the liturgies associated with religions, or in the forms of expression of late capitalism as a system[6]. A good account of appropriation of representations can be found in Sarmento (2010: 14 and ff.), where the case of 'folk' is analysed, and it is demonstrated that 'folk' was a genuine cultural

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[6] See Jameson (1998: 30), who considers the new cultural production as 'a general modification of culture itself'.

representation, which was then domesticated and used in Portugal by Salazar's regime against the working class movements and trade-unionism of urban areas.

Fabrication and/or appropriation of representations by power turns them into simulacra, in that, in Baudrillard's words, they either mask the absence of a profound reality or have no relation to reality whatsoever, or, in Mitchell's words, they are the result of a process of ideological mystification.

Coda

The aim of this paper was to revisit the concept of 'representation' in order to shed some light into the process by which it is said that *x* represents *y*. To do so, matters like truth value, culture and ideology had to be called upon. Theoretically much has been advanced in recent years, and much more is expected to come, particularly if we bear in mind the swift developments and the sophistication that characterizes the use of representations in the aftermath of 9/11.

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