Comment

SCIENCE AND THE INTERNET: BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY?

Social networks, a populated Picture

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ABSTRACT: *Man, by his very nature, puts things between himself and the environment, turning the latter into a place, a space. He arranges the environment around him on multiple levels, by projecting parts of himself and shaping the frontiers and the horizons that surround, define and represent him. This was learnt a long time ago, but a trace and a memory remain in the way man acts: when mapping reality (both physical reality and the reality explored through digital means), we observe it and find a way through it by adopting behaviours that have always been similar. What has changed in this mapping is the ability to recognise, especially the ability to interpret maps and creatively work them.*

Since when has an architect dealt with the study of research methods?

How come an architect has started to be concerned with how research is carried out?

And, what's more, what can it be said about Social Networks in science, and about science in general?

The answer is connected to a basic fact: man puts things between himself and the environment, turning the latter into a place, a space. He arranges the environment around him on multiple levels, by projecting parts of himself and shaping the frontiers and the horizons that surround, define, represent him.

As we all know, in order to govern the complexity that surrounds it, the human mind has it in its nature to generate specific images called mental maps: they basically reduce the complexity of reality within simple cognitive systems. Though they are generated unconsciously, they are matched by a conscious process of physical mapping that proceeds along with the exploration of the environment. The purpose of this process is domesticating, building a well-known "landscape", able to express itself through words which are known and recognisable. All of the different minds are put together to build a horizon to be recognised.

The new commitment towards things has this conceptual nature: we should become aware that our environment is made up of a multitude of minds, which are to one another according to fractal rules. The things we have around us combine following a fractal system: each part of the system is a simple one and is made up of equally simple parts.

The space that we individually build has the purpose of making complexity simple, making other types of intelligence recognisable within a perspective of meaning. The space we live in has a mental dimension and generates there. The experience of Social Networks makes all of this possible: they are systems not only communicating what we think, but simultaneously building reconstructed maps of the various minds.

Social networks are multi-dimension maps illustrating a new socialisation form which has moved from a *participation* and *collaboration* phase to a new *immersion* and *sharing* phase. They are maps meant to guide people just as they represent a set of people, always with an underlying common thread: professional Social Networks, scientific Social Networks, etc.

But what does this point mean? Is mapping either a creative or communicative action?

Lately, there have been many meetings, festivals, round tables about art and science, and how art and creativity reinterpret scientific contents, drawing inspiration in order to process "shapes" justified by a scientific theory.

In general, I am not very interested in all of this. The thing I would like to point out and observe is our thinking ability, when making its way through space, does nothing but building visions turning into identifiable and recognisable "images". In other words, each individual builds all around themselves a

space which mediates with the rest of the world. That space is a projection of the mental space, of the building of its knowledge. It is a reconstruction of one's "research" work into the environment.

To quote Alva Noë, "The place of consciousness is the dynamic life of the whole person or animal immersed in their environment. (…) The phenomenon of consciousness, like the one of life, is a process involving the entire world. We are out of our heads."[1] Here, "consciousness" approximately means "experience", an experience taking up its space, building and shaping the environment around us. And the environment that shapes up encloses in its image thinking and feeling with all of its derivative forms of reasoning and sensibility.

Beyond this point, in each individual space and its representations one cannot but recognise a quality intrinsically linked to a simultaneously declared creative action and another viewpoint to be *research*, to be *read*, in other words to be *interpreted*.

A constant mutual reference between the author of a research and the environment built around him, passing through his products (books, essays, images, etc.).

With respect to his long observation and research work, Goethe wrote: "I have to admit and postulate myself without even knowing how I am built, I constantly study myself without really catching myself, myself and the others and yet we happily proceed further and further! And so the world goes too!"[2]

The work Goethe carried out on the world is a path of research of one's inner meaning. The knowledge and the command of one's environment contribute to the building of a more defined self. His studies reveal the structural connections existing between the scientific world and the world of art and science in connection with the existential, autobiographic dimension of the writer himself.

This composite view of research becoming an image as it makes its way reminds us of someone who awoke the world on man and self-sense building: the great explorer of the mind, the archaeologist of psyche, Sigmund Freud.[3]

Freud not only studied man immersed in his environment, but also what is immersive within man himself, the psyche, discovering its unconsciousness. The extraordinary importance of his work is demonstrated by the countless derivations it has had in contemporary thought.

In her book "Installation Art"[4], Claire Bishop summarises in a few sentences the importance of the work by the founder of psychoanalysis, providing us with the instruments to observe all of this in terms of space and image. In particular, she dwells on the interpretation of dreams.

The first characteristic of this work is its visual nature, also when she writes "dreams think essentially by images, […] dreams construct a situation that we appear not to think but to experience". The second characteristic concerns the quality of the vision offered by the dream, namely a picture made up of parts. The vision manifesting itself in a dream is apparently a nonsense. This image should be undone and its single parts should be reinterpreted. Its interpretation requires free thought association, replacements relating to the affective and verbal qualities of a person. And this replacement of parts with elements hinting at other things, the search for the real meaning of a specific image is the third characteristic of dreams according to Freud's interpretation.

This long introduction is to explain the type of work I have been carrying out on the space for years, and after I met Sveva Avveduto, Director of IRPPS – CNR: a reinterpretation, not only at a descriptive level, of the spaces that shape up around the people doing research, but a reinterpretation work on the relations between mind, body and the space. In addition, the ability these spaces have to become an *image to be inhabited* by anybody else.[5]

This type of observation has a first starting point not wanting to acknowledge a merely scientific culture as opposed to a merely cultural view. Let alone an artistic view as opposed to a utilitarian one. And it does not even carry out research within an opposition between nature and culture. Let's say that the outlook of this way to proceed has an holistic vision. The activity of each person is made up of many intentions, many elements. Researching on how this reproduces in the environment has much in common with what has been previously said on the theory of the interpretation of dreams. This is because building one's own space is not always and only a conscious activity. It comes from afar, as other scholars of our visual culture would point out, in relation to our culture and our psyche, such as Aby Warburg and Carl Gustav Jung.

As we know it today, the mind is the result of a long path. "Geosphere and biosphere have been the evolutionary ground of the mind, not only because they have determined the evolution of its organ, but also because they have been for hundreds of years the permanent object of its activity, thoughts. Cognitive structures, namely they way to think things, were not born as abstract strategies in a virtual

space, but they are the direct consequence of *what* to think. […] the mind has evolved through thinking and to think the landscape". Indeed, reading, knowing how to recognise, interpreting the landscape made a difference between life and death (Meschiari 2010). All of the activity of building a landscape around us by ourselves has this purpose: not only building a functional dimension or a self-communicating dimension, but also a chance to domesticate the environment around us, to give it a well-known shape allowing us to live there feeling safe, and consequently, strong.

This is the basis to build a vision of the world, a vision that builds a sense in relation to the continuity of the world outside us, which would otherwise be meaningless.[6]

At least 15,000 years ago, man started to build a first type of vision of his world through a pictorial form. I am referring to the cave paintings and engravings which can be found in French caves such as Lascaux. The history of humankind is approximately four million years old. Homo sapiens appeared approximately 40 thousand years ago and this type of paintings date back to 15 thousand years ago. They have been too hurriedly ascribed to an artistic sense. They are great compositions, which cannot be summarised as a single vision. They seem to highly express that characteristic Freud talks about when dealing with dreams: they are compositions showing animals, humans and other everyday events of the time. The meaning of those pictures is unknown to us, but the fact itself they were drawn is the most important thing.

They all are acts of representation; they question reality and the environment in order to reveal it, to domesticate it.

Social networks share many of these characteristics: they are sets of things which have to be interpreted from within to be understood. A superficial evaluation of the system is not possible. The architecture on which the relations between contents are build is the key to the mapping of the aspect of society for which that network exists. It is a map as it unites contents in a horizontal way, reproducing the aptitudes of a collective life: evaluations, aggregation of data and people.

The point is not connecting everything with everything, but to recognise the different "everything" in all of it. Exclusively in this sense, differentiating is a must if one wants to be able to know and to recognise. Within Social Networks, sight is not enough to recognise. One also needs mind and consciousness which not always and only lie in the brain. They are mental spaces made up of things which speak about their way to see society where differences are individually exercised.

To conclude with, Social Networks have made many aspects of contemporary society explicit. Certainly, with regard to contents. However, what is most interesting to me is observing the way spaces have shaped up, the type of picture they have produced. By picture I do not necessarily mean something visual. What is interesting here is a mental picture of the Social Network, a symbolic representation of it which turns into a vision that can be inhabited by the users.

People always talk about their communication element. However, in the case of Social Networks it is not only information exchange. It is a new model of the space where our thoughts meet one another; it is a new landscape now being built within our way of thinking and finding our way within this environment of ours which is increasingly sophisticated. In order to be inhabited at best, it should have mapping methods to facilitate exchanges, to make different minds meet within spaces meant for that purpose. Here, social-network mapping plays a reactivating role for our attention. It is not only about implementation – a very popular word on the web that does not rightfully express the powers at play. Social networks are not our new landscape we have to populate in a metaphorical sense. They are a part of us as projections of our consciousness. Only if one considers them as such, their potential can be fully appreciated. It is a landscape made up of minds not only connected but also making their way through it, building a new (composite) picture of reality. Within these composite pictures increasingly crowded with new elements, the paths to grasp and know contemporary reality can be made out. In this sense, they are maps. After all, the main purpose we would expect from a map – and in this case from a Social Network – has always been 'finding a way', i.e. finding easy paths out of complexity, roads to guide our research activity.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Notes and references

[1]   A. Noë (2010), *Perché non siamo il nostro cervello*, Raffaello Corina Editore, Milano. Original version: *Out of Our Heads, Why you are not your brain and other lessons from Biology of Consciuosness*, © 2009 Alva Noë.

[2]   J.W. Goethe (1983), *La metamorfosi delle piante*, edited by Stefano Zecchi, Ugo Guanda Editore, Parma Italy.

[3]   S. Freud (1986), *L'interpretazione dei sogni*, Rizzoli, Milano Italy.

[4]   C. Bishop (2005), *Installation Art, A critical History*, Tate Publishing, London U.K.

[5]   Avveduto and I are currently writing a long paper delving deeper into these subjects.

[6]   P.K. Feyerabend (1975), *Against Method. Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London, NLB. Italian translation, *Contro il metodo. Abbozzo di una teoria anarchica della conoscenza*, Milano, Feltrinelli (1979).

[7]   M.-L. von Franz (1989), *Sguardo dal sogno*, translated by Stefani S., "*Psicologia*" n. 22, Cortina Raffaello.

[8]   E.H. Gombrich and A. Warburg (2003), *Una biografia intellettuale*, , Feltrinelli, Milano Italy.

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