

Designing nationality

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Abstract

Among the multiple identities that define social groups, it is the national one that gives the largest political impact globally. Thus, even though most of us malign, disbelieve, criticize or fear the national idea, the world continues to be articulated through this form of organization.

Even today there are nations who imagine and re-imagine themselves. Old and new nations, nations in construction or decline, nations that are assumed or denied, nations that respect diversity or totalitarianism. At the same time, they are all nations that are building identities.

In these nations, the Ideological State Apparatus creates certain feelings, thus producing nationality (Anderson, Gramsci, Laclau). To do so, these states distribute cultural fictions or symbolic fables, all of them images designed to obtain a monopoly on cultural norms and discourses.

However, to carry out this construction of national identity, the state must embody certain common content and have the power to institutionalize this content. In addition, there is a need for support media, channels of material culture through which to broadcast speeches of nationality such as public architecture, monuments, statues, cockades, uniforms, tickets, flags, coats-of-arms, school books and propaganda campaigns.

This occurs because the social significance of the images and objects and the social significance of the act of seeing, representing, interpreting, desiring and imagining as sources that provide power to

the images (Lacan). This way, if we accept that there is no identity without its image we can think that the construction of nationality is the result of an act of design, the design of identity, understood as a political action of the first level.

Under this framework, it is important to discover the mechanisms and resources used by States to construct national identity from the design of images, as this will help the designer to expand the options and know the effects of design image work. For example, it will help the designer understand how to contribute from their work to the democratization of the national culture.

This process described above is not included in the academic training of the designers of visual communication, even if some of them are likely to be in charge of distributing images for the government or even for ideologically based institutions and organizations. Then, the discovery of this process can be seen as an innovation.

Keywords: Design, Nationality, Identity, Images, Politics

1. Introducció

National identification design, as something pertaining to political concern, can be understood as the embodiment of images of ideological representation in specific supporting elements, in an attempt to create and re-create the identity of the citizens. This entire process is permitted because of the social importance of images.

This process is not included in the academic formation of a designer even though they could probably be designers in charge of spreading images of a government and a specific dominant ideology.

For this reason, the main motivation of this research is to fill a gap that exists in the academic formation of a image designer, a formation that makes that professional activity much more related to common sense, creativity and art rather than based on theoretical grounds.

Therefore, two main questions asked throughout the research were: “How does the production of image by the State contribute to the design of a national identity?”. In this context, “What gives power to image and design?”

2. Design, politics, State and nationality

The origin of the word “design” can be traced back to the root *disegni* which in Latin means drawing (Baxandal, 1990: 208). This act of drawing covers a metaphor of projecting new worlds to live in, or to have as a reference. Otherwise, the anthropologist Juez situates the word design closer to designation, “from the Latin voice *designare*, which means to mark, to note for a determined purpose, then to designate” (Juez, 2002:13). Nevertheless, a mix between the two concepts can be made

synthesizing design as the projection of a certain designation which transforms the way of seeing of the people involved.

Following this line of argument, it is possible to affirm that such image design is, in fact, a political action, conceptualizing politics as the mechanism by which collective action can be undertaken in any entity according to the social influence that someone can get. In this case, as Weber defines it, by politics is understood “only the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a political association, hence today, of a state” (Weber, 2001: 77). Besides, politics is the transformation of identities. According to Laclau and Mouffe, “politics is a terrain of struggle between agents whose identity, conceived under the form of interests. This essential identity was thus fixed, once and for all, as an unalterable fact relating to the various forms of political and ideological representation” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 20-21). Thus, as something political concern, national design can be understood as the embodiment of ideological representation with images, attempting to create and re-create the identity of the citizens. Besides, a national State can be defined as a political association with sovereignty over a Nation, being the entity which exercises the territorial sovereignty and government which dominates through ideology and hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony is the principle that enables a tacit consent and ideology plays an active role as a process of leadership through which dominated classes of nations consented their own domination by ruling classes. According to the same author, nationalism becomes a popular movement founded on consent.

By his side, Althusser includes civil society, associations, institutions and organizations such religion, education, the family, the political parties, the trade unions, the communications and the cultural apparatus of the State as part of this process of mass programming and part of the apparatus of the state which is in fact producing the hegemony of an ideology. He defines such Ideological State Apparatus as a representational system which

structures social life.

For doing so, a monopoly over cultural norms is exercised to educate and re-educate their communities through the intervention of the state over all discourses. In this way, those discourses or symbolic fictions are carried out by myths. A myth is a story, a belief or credo, (Segal, 2004). It is a way of thinking that culturally reduces possibilities by offering an accepted path to the reader of stories and an instinct of knowledge that tries to find certainties by simplifying existing or non-existent possibilities from similar situations (Levi Strauss, 1964-1966). Also, it is an attempt to organize the coming into being of time, which places the person as more or less active in as much as he/she is ignorant of what life will reveal.

Therefore, discourses, narratives and symbolic fictions symbolically structures the national imagination. Hence and according to Anderson, a Nation is an imagined community constructed by new political entities which produce, reproduce and validate the figure of the Nation as the correct one for representing such communities (Anderson, 1991).

In this process, the State has an institutionalized role as mediator of nationalistic sentiments or discourses. The most important nationalistic sentiments a Nation could awaken are the following:

First, a Nation is understood as a place, a territory that generates strong attachments, feelings of belonging, like a home or like the Real. That is where an intergeneration and social experience can be lived, close to the Greek idea of *patris* or to the Latin *patria*, fatherland, a place where a member of a Nation can always return.

Second, in the case of the proprietary sentiment, a Nation is considered a framework to guarantee the interest of the proprietary of this territory, the owner’s condition resembling

that of a citizen. Solidarity grows but as pertaining to the exercise of self rights and interest. For this reason the purpose of a government is the preservation of property.

Third, the feelings of the members of a Nation are bound to one another not merely by birth but also by the common possession of a culture that is valuable above all else to each of them. That is because the consolidation and transmission of the people's culture are what encourage national sentiments.

Fourth, popular and national culture contains the essence of what is joining and what is giving each of its member the joy of being part of that group, the will of the people, a sentiment of sharing. That is constantly reinforced by the pride of having done great things together and the wishes to do more things together in the future.

Fifth, in modern times nationalistic sentiments replace past religious and spiritual sentiments, pushing into the national sphere spiritual beliefs. Therefore, to belong to a nation offers people a resource against the irreversibility of the passing of time, a kind of anti-death process and a sense of continuity with previous generations, through memories, myths and traditions. It gives a sense of destiny and mission to people by fixing certainties on the coming into being of the national life.

Sixth, a Nation gives people something to hold on to, something to be part of that acts as a principle of social organization as opposed to the nothingness. This kind of collective inter-subjectivity acts as a kind of defence against the person's fear of everything from the lack of structure, to the horror of social uncertainty, loneliness or of being in a collective fragmented body.

The relationship between those sentiments can be figured as a kind of textile or rope, using the idea put forth by Wittgenstein

who understood it as a complicated network of similarities and relationships overlapping and criss-crossing. Besides, one of its constitutive fibres only could be visible for a while before being hidden underneath another in the next segment and no dimension alone could represent or symbolize the whole collective sentiment. This is because national sentiments are formed by the weaving of the different constitutive dimensions and their inner relations.

Thus, those dimensions of nationalities and sentiments are quilted and structured by the State. The State and the dominant groups are the main authors of that idea of imagined community and responsible for the institutionalization of national sentiments. Thus, National imagination is a theatre where the constituted power is displayed, applied and maintained.

In this context, the Ideological State Apparatus contributes by action or omission, to the forming, consolidating and spreading ways of seeing the national identity and national sentiments through the creation and dispersion of stamps, banknotes, flags, shields, monuments, and statues, among others. They portray information and sense about nationality, are instruments of the imagination of that national community and make the social structure of the nation tangible and visible.

Therefore, the myth, as a speech of the collective assumption and memory, starts to speak through the individuals and circulate thanks to the existence of a support. Such national objects and images portray information and sense about nationality, are instruments of the imagination of that national community and have an active role in keeping national memory alive.

As a balance, when the relationship between images and nationality is analysed, the result is that the state becomes powerful when it enters in one or another domain of the

discourses, because the state is there questioning or reinforcing the definition of what the nation is. However, in doing so, the state needs to have an active stance from where to think, to project and to produce this action of defining which is based on the apparatus of cultural fictions. This apparatus is specialized to embody the fiction in itself, to translate the narrations, myth and fictions to the material world, producing understandable and social known images of how the nation and nationality should be seen. Therefore, the state, as an image constructor, carries out the action of modeling, supporting, defending and fixing the images that express national identity allowing some image creators, such as painters, sculptors, architects and designers to work.

However, to fully understand why this happens, the social role of images is developed in deep. To put the concept of an image into the aim of this research, an analysis of what gives power to images and the nature of such power is developed. For that reason, the social importance of the act of seeing, of representing, of interpreting, of imagining and of desiring as the sources that give power to images is next analysed. In doing so, in each case, the social importance of the design and designers of nationality done by the State is highlighted.

2. The social and political life of images

National identities are built in a process of identification which is related to the social life of images. For this reason, it is important first to analyse what an image is.

There are many definitions of what an image is. As Mitchell pointed out, Plato relates the definition of image to that of an idea, whose root *idein* means to see (Mitchell, 2006: 348). Likewise, the image has also been defined as imitation in itself relating its name to the Greek term *imitari*, to imitate (Barthes, 1991: 21). Later, Maimonides defines the image as likeness such as in the “man's creation in the image and likeness of God”

(Mitchell, 1986: 31), as a series of predicates, listing similarities and differences, as “this essential reality of a thing” (Mitchell, 1986: 32).

Second, there is no identity until it is materialized in some form. Accordingly, an identity would be no more than matter composed by a group of strokes, a beam of features that are summarized in a few traces that represent the “being” (Heidegger, 2002: 46). However, that traces must also contain something so valuable that it would speak in name of someone, transmit something that differentiates someone from other identities and from other marks in the self-reference within the universe of marks. This mark would produce a cut of what one thing is and what it is not, emerging from the action of assuming a particular image and leaving something aside. Thus, at the same time an image can be defined as an intentional cut-out of the world surrounding us, “a cut of interpretation” (Lacan, 1977: 270) which reaches the status of an entity in itself.

This “cut out” definition follows the idea that an image is the consequence of the crystallization of an instant and of isolating something from the visible surrounding world, framing or cutting the continuous picture that is around which appears to eyes as a whole. As Barthes describes “I am already cutting off the continuity that is before me” (Barthes, 2002: 225). Thus, an image is a cut-out that is understood as a whole, as a meaningful unit linked to the act of consciousness that accompanies it. In any case, “it is a captivating and fascinating whole” (Lacan, 1997: 3) from the natural and believable world, displaying the content that the image is performing. In a parallel way, even identities can be produced by this act of cutting.

Third, and from a psychological point of view, an image is the integration of parts of what is seen as a fascinating totality by the mind, like the one someone saw with the image of his/her body in the mirror, an image “which establish[es] a relation

between the organism and its reality” (Lacan, 1977: 4). Therefore, this totality is also working as an organizational anti-chaos mechanism that allows people to find sense. On the one hand, this sense can come from the information that each part of any image transports, acting as words which articulate information in the way of a text. On the other hand, the strength of an image arises from instantaneous, synthetic, organic and organized parts that confuse the perceptions in the spectator, naturalizing or presenting an assembly of fragments as some meaningful and a reliable totality.

However, to understand the effect that images generate in the way nationality and the national reality would be seen it is necessary to analyse the nature of the power of images. For that reason, the analysis of the social importance of the act of seeing, of representing, of interpreting, of imagining and of desiring will be developed as the sources that give power to images.

2.1. To see: my image, their image, our image

The sole exposure to a created image can influence the way someone reaches his/her order and can force someone to be in contact with a new possible order that can then produce an alternative classification of his/her daily experience.

The influence that other image can have on our sense construction process can be a non- spontaneous anchoring on the way we see reality, produced by those who wants to canalize someone else’s desires into certain particular fantasies. This can be done by those who want to define who is left outside that order, maintaining thus the capacity to define what or who is different. Those who want to have the “power to mark, assign and classify, power to represent someone or something in a certain way” (Hall, 1997: 259). Power by which that image will exercise a ‘hypnotic’ effect (Lacan, 1995: 176) on those who see, and consequently motivate people to behave in a certain way.

This can be seen inversely. For instance, even if an image failed in dominating a conscience, it could have helped someone to clarify their standpoints and fears, humbly contributing to reconsider any reading of a subject matter. Thus, stories portrayed by images allow possible alternatives of seeing the way reality and identity are. For instance, one of the ways through which philosophy can circulate is by creating image, where this act of composing reality is forcing the spectators to answer, to think, to explain their positions.

2.2. To represent

Images are not only the reality but also representations in the whole sense, intermediaries between what is not physically present and our mind. Then, something could be represented by being conjured up in our mind’s eye, being this something a kind of resurrection, a living presence. In that way, for Stuart Hall “to represent something is to describe, to depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination” (Hall, 1997: 16). Afterwards, this representation would be internalized as a reflected double of a prototype of what the image represents, giving the beholder the mirage of making visible and alive what is absent. Thus, images can be seen as tokens, immaterial or material objects which serve as a channel to the matter and to the invisible, mediator objects between the soul and the being, between perceptions and ideas.

As a consequence of that, an image can represent something powerful for the beholder, something that can be present both before open eyes and before closed eyes. This enables the evasion of blindness in a world without images, transporting the spectator towards a likely parade of imagined scenarios, mobilizing feelings and emotions of both positive and negative kind. Moreover, images can project the spectator towards realities and illusions, their deepest desires or fears or even the materiality of what surrounds it, the recognition of something real that

makes it possible to see the world right as it seems to be. Then, it could be thought that constructing words and images is in part creating reality, where certain significant images act as supports for concepts and ideas, facilitating everything necessary for thinking.

Hence, images help to deal with known issues, to allow the recording of perceptions of what the immediate world is, of what happened and what is happening by recording and processing past experiences. Consequently, images are stored in the mind allowing the memory recall them whenever necessary. Whenever they are needed they are recalled in order to remember and understand the world where someone is living, inducing the association of ideas and connections of meanings that help to reassure, comfort, and improve someone’s relation to the world.

Besides, among those images there will be stories and memories from where we can find the initial images, the visual basis of each person’s memory, images which somehow have conditioned the classification for the rest of the material that was added next. In this sense, such as Freud argues, in the first three or four years of someone’s life certain impressions stabilize our memory (Freud, 2003: 19-21).

Accordingly and like the belonging to a nation, different events and scenarios are seen as familiar and acceptable. For instance, the world becomes fixed because images in the mind are constructed on the basis of our memories of things offering information about who someone is in time, space and sense. It is in this inter-textuality, where an image triggers off in our mind an older image that we already had, connecting both into inter-referential chains of citation. Hence, visual representation immediately shoots the association chain that would catalogue anything under the cultural parameters possessed by the spectator, determining which of its attributes, which scene and belonging contexts are part of this information.

However, the role of image as representation also involves the exercise of power that such representation can generate. Lacan highlights that the power of an image is due not to any intrinsic quality of the image in itself, but to the place which it occupies in a symbolic structure. Therefore, an image could be seen as something having an unwarranted irrational power over somebody just because it is a repository of power which someone has projected into it but which in fact it does not possess.

That implies that the meaning of an image is constructed using representational systems which generate this sort of language, where images are only a useful embodiment of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form, to be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted. In that context, created images project a picture that represents something; that is to say which publicly substitutes it, occupying the role of a narrator of the identity and contributing in fact to the transformations of the identity of the one who is dealing with this picture.

Therefore, in a world in which people are mostly known through representations more than in person, images become an essential part not only of identities but also of all aspects of social life. Then, images are important for current life, for collective identities and for men and women’s souls, because they allow people to identify, organize, classify, embody and make sense of the world. In addition, images are not something given but rather fragments of reality that have sense just by being part of that sort of language, a language understood as the place where our ideas, thoughts and feelings are given meaning, a form that is structural for social life.

2.3. To interpret

It is possible to think that images are powerful only if they succeed in being or becoming the reality rather than a masked

discourse hidden and created by somebody. For that reason, an image would evoke our imaginary world and neither an icon nor a symbol would function or be active unless or until it is interpreted by members of such culture, as well as assumed by the beholder in his or her imagination. Culture, considered as systems where there is interaction of interpretable symbols (Geertz, 1973: 27).

This is because images express relations of identification and fear in the place where subjectivity rests, that is, in the imagination, in the unconscious, through fantasies, in visual scenery and language. This capacity of imagining the world, to be part of the process of “reality construction” (Cronin, 1998: 80), brings to the image a magic and mystery for being a possible medium for the creation of new realities where the society inhabits.

2.4. To imagine

Images always make it possible to see something, acting as a door that give access to contents and pieces of information that are translated as narrations, stories, myths, memories, desires, fantasies and dreams. This is because an image, as Todorov points out, is defined as a medium that always arouses in those who observe it a story. A story that will always raise a message, something between what really happened and what can happen (Todorov, 1990: 105), or “when the event happened to me and the moment when I described it” (Todorov, 2002: 151).

Nevertheless, images also help to recreate, represent and to give protection in front of the unknown. For instance, if someone thinks in other times, an imaginary planet or anything else, there will always be a blurred image giving the slightest bit of comfort in front of the unknown. In other cases, a simple image from a fiction film or book is enough to have some protection in the face of the unknown, the fear of the unknown, and especially the fear of the future.

Images also function as a vehicle where society’s latent stuff manages to be projected, visible and with forms. In this direction, as described by Jorge Luis Borges, we are not afraid because we dream about Monsters, we dream about Monsters because we are afraid (Borges, 1999: 163). Thus, from the figure of the monster it is possible to understand the need of constructing images as the action of designing monsters on the part of the interpreter’s fear. This spontaneous and personal act of dreaming about, creating or drawing a monster from a nightmare, can also be transported to the social ground as soon as the figure of the monster is produced, reproduced, taken and seen by a social group in the figure of the designer. In such a case, this situation can open up for the figure of the monster to be working as a social container of something that collectively is going on. This could be something that is integrating and going on between people of a given group, a group that needs to recognize in that monster the fear on the part of the spectators, in a communion where that drawn image articulates what many people have imagined. Accordingly, the magic possibility that an image created by someone would involve a plurality of fears together, also establishes a place where spectators’ fear can be integrated in the common monsters’ recognition with other members of their community. Here, spectators will have the shelter to share their monsters with their companions and not be alone facing their fears.

2.5. To desire

Moreover, seeing images can mobilize, encourage to do and to feel things because as Benjamin points out, “only images in the mind vitalize the will” (Benjamin, 1979: 75). In this way, a flag, the photograph of a loved person, a Virgin statue or the image of a landscape invoking our home, bring the faces of the non-present to be kept in our mind. This mirage potentiality allows the beholder to be connected with prototypical places or people providing consolation for absence, making him/her believe that

the substitute or double of the desire is present with the same capacity that the prototype has to give us consolation or anger.

In that way, images created by someone can be thought of as a kind of dream that someone is creating to condition our own dreams and our desires. Thus, constructing images can be seen as a resource which provides a screen or support that sustains the “orthopaedic experience of the collective power” (Buck-Morris, 2000: 171). These dreams and fantasies mediate between the formal symbolic structure and the objects encountered in reality. They provide a formula to which a representation can function as monsters or on the contrary as objects of desire. At the same time, it can be said that those designed images, which are vitalizing the will, show whom to desire.

3. Some conclusions

In this paper a theoretical framework has been formulated to analyse how a State designs national identities through the creation and spreading of images.

The State works over identities through a hegemonic process called the Ideological State Apparatus. Simultaneously, the State spreads symbolic fables to have a monopoly over cultural norms and discourses. In this framework, design is conceptualized as a political action and as the projection of a certain discourse or designation which transforms the way of seeing of the people involved and their identities. All of that performative action is producing national identity sentiments.

As it has been mentioned, National identities are built in a process of identification with images which get power because of the social importance of the act of seeing, of representing, of interpreting, of imagining and of desiring that images have. In this sense, first, images influence our sense construction process

and the images and objects spread by the State questions and/or reinforces the definition of what the nation is and the view of a hegemonic group. Second, images are not only the reality but also representations that offer information about who someone or a group is in time, space and sense. Then, the role of images as representation also involves the exercise of power that such information can generate. Third, images contribute to the interpretation of what reality is and is a medium for the creation of new realities where the society inhabits. Fourth, images always make it possible to see a story, a story that always raises a message from where society expresses, transmits and recognizes its needs. Last, images mobilize and encourage desire. In this way, images can be considered as a screen from where power shows whom to desire.

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