



Certificado:

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ha presentado la comunicación titulada

**"Building interpretative models: abstraction in prehistorical art",**

en el

***II Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Semiótica Visual  
International Association for Visual Semiotics  
Association Internationale de Sémiologie de l'Image***

y

***IV Jornadas Internacionales de Semiótica***

sobre

***1. Semiótica y Nuevas Tecnologías  
2. Estilo e identidad visual***

organizadas por la Asociación Vasca de Semiótica,  
la A.I.S.V.-I.A.V.S.-A.I.S.IM.  
y el Departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y de la Información  
de la Universidad del País Vasco,  
en Bilbao, en los salones de actos de la Cámara de Comercio, Industria y Navegación,  
durante los días 11, 12, 14 y 15 de diciembre de 1992.

Los temas tratados han sido:

**1. Semiótica y Nuevas Tecnologías:**

- 1.1. Arbitrariedad, motivación, simbolismo, semisimbolismo, etc. en las Nuevas Tecnologías.
- 1.2. Abstracción, figuratividad profunda y superficial, categorías plásticas, ilusión referencial, etc. y Nuevas Tecnologías.
- 1.3. Relaciones entre los diferentes lenguajes en los discursos sincréticos —fotográficos y lingüísticos escritos; fílmicos, lingüísticos orales y escritos, con sonido ambiental y musical, etc.— de las Nuevas Tecnologías.
- 1.4. Nuevas Tecnologías y modificación de las relaciones intersubjetivas.

**2. Estilo e identidad visual**

(cinematográfica, fotográfica, pictórica, publicitaria, de diseño, etc.)

La comunicación aparecerá publicada en las actas oficiales del congreso.

# **BUILDING INTERPRETATIVE MODELS: ABSTRACTION IN PREHISTORICAL ART.**

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1.

A correct understanding of prehistorical art needs an analysis that follows the logical and psychological processes on which this art is grounded. To reach this aim, we must drop the idea of approaching prehistorical art by the same criterions used to interpret either realist-figurative art, or also abstract modern and present-day art, though this last one has many aspects in common with the early artistic attempts, more or less intentionally.

In any case, the modern artist has behind him a background which is difficult to get rid of. Even when his work is aimed at recovering the mental and emotional processes belonging to the "infancy" of mankind, he must always bring knowledges and models, that have been amassing during centuries and millennia, into account, as "given reality" of a tradition that the artist himself has inherited and with which the environment surrounding him is imbued. If he wants to start from naught, he is forced to erase, to destroy, however having what he rejects as a landmark. The revolt - against the past and against society - that abstract modern art has carried out (at the beginning, at least) starts from a social message: it wants to be a proposal of change, since as it cannot be an attempt to interpret an unknown reality.

According to Gombrich (1985:8), there is a kind of development or progress easy to recognize, that is the evolution from childhood to maturity, old age and death. This general experience suggests a metaphor that leads to prefer ways of life different from ours own. In our mind, the yearning for

childhood expresses itself by the longing for past ages and far lands, that seem to be more savage, thoughtless and innocent than present life. This idealization leads to a revolt against society, and the artist expresses it in his work, whereas prehistorical art is social cohesion, above all because the rituals that those pictures served were moments of social gathering, of life in common.

When we talk of prehistorical art, we usually refer to the age to which the early available documents (graffiti, statuettes, objects, etc.) date back. For us it is expected that in the aurignacian-périgordian age the first attempts of artistic expression were done; anyway, we always make reference to hypotheses, as regards either mental and emotional processes, or social organization and everyday life.

Lévy-Bruhl talks about a pre-logical way of thinking and he supposes that a different logic directed the conceptions of man in that age (Giedion 1965:51).

Undoubtedly, psychological processes were grounded on images. Writing presupposes a logical space-time sequential process, whereas the superimposition of images in the caves, as well as the bad rendering of perspective, presupposes a worldview in which everything comes forward on the foreground, just like in dreams. The linkages among these images would be of an associative, more than of a logic-sequential kind. Value can be meant by the size of the figures, but this is an associative, not a spatial, perspective value. The same logic belongs to the child who draws the figure of his father, or of his mother, or of himself, bigger or smaller than the other figures, according to the importance he assigns to each of those persons. That animals - objects of vital and everyday interest - are represented more and better than human beings - even the size of animals is always greater than that of human beings, in these representations - might be explained by the importance

given to the animal, at first as a source of food, then as a sacred being.

The participation mystique that binds man to natural environment prevents him from acquiring consciousness by placing a distance between himself and the external world. This total immersion in the action - man does not place himself as a conscious and dominant being - leads to a non-returning movement towards "otherness", thus giving way to creation as gift, as free act.

On the other hand, the artist who engraves on rock can recognize himself in his work and have the confirmation of his "presence" through it.

Man tries to explore his own abilities, as though he asked himself: "If things and beings exist around me, they must have been created somehow. How?". This question seems to be the translation of a condensed thought, of an impulse to which man answers trying to reproduce the process of creation.

This attempt is often suggested by shapes which man discovers looking around: a hollow can look like an eye, a protrusion like a horse's snout. This is the starting point for the artist, who refers to what he already knows, to what he finds as given material, as ready-made reality. Actually, the prehistorical artist does not find himself in front of a blank sheet, but he already has an environment at his disposal, with shapes suggesting him images. He draws figures out of the shapes of the cave, so his creation is the same as a discovery, not as a creation from the gutter.

When the world was thought to be an inseparable whole, rocks were given a sense different from what we can imagine by now. Animals that man engraved or painted were already living in the lap of rock. He had only to complete a ready-made reality. The natural shapes appearing in the rocks inspired man to create the so called "innate form" of a natural or human image

(Giedion 1965:22). Examples of images made out of protrusions and hollows of rocks are the bison of La Mouthe, the bison of El Castillo, the bisons of the vault of Altamira.

For man of the Palaeolithic, the "given reality" is made of the environment in which he lives and with which he feels blending, not of conceptual interpretative models. On one hand, the will to seize upon the image through the engraved or painted sign can be aimed at magic and ritual evocation, on the other at searching an interpretative scheme, suitable to understand the surrounding reality.

We could accept the hypothesis that those representations have functional magic purposes, because to prehistorical man the magic ritual could seem functional to the finding of food, as he thought that if he engraved an animal on the rock, after a while the real animal whose image he had represented would appear in front of him, during the hunting. Anyway, if we consider the ritual meaning not functional in itself - because it belongs to the "sacred", that is placed out of the working cycle necessary to material survival - pictures that are still visible are a "sign residue" of the first meaning (that is, the ritual meaning), and for this reason can be placed at a second level of significance, that is the aesthetic value of the Palaeo-Neolithic work, and helps in building a cognitive model for man in those ages.

2.

The necessity of a modelling representation excludes the possibility of understanding prehistorical art in a naturalistic sense, since as building a model means to remove accidental elements and to preserve essential features. To obtain this, the way to be followed is that of abstraction. The process of abstraction has been increasingly perfected, to reach what is usually called "schematism" (the most noticeable example of schematism are the pictures found on the rocky

shelters in Eastern Spain, fig. 1) and then, through subsequent steps, symbol and picture-writing.

Figure 1: Scenes of hunting, example of Eastern Spain schematism. Alacon (Teruel), El Cerro Felio. Mesolithic age.

Anyway, the question of the rising of symbol remains debated, given that in the earliest rock-pictures - for example in Altamira, Lascaux, El Castillo - graphic signs with no directly understandable meaning already appear (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Roof-shaped figures, with no directly understandable meaning found in the cave of Altamira.

In the caves of Lascaux and Altamira, bulls are surrounded by red abstract symbols. Their meaning is not clear, because it is impossible to refer to natural shapes as explanatory sources. But for initiates this renounce to the sensible form gives a stronger power to the representation, so raised to magic symbol (Giedion 1965:17-18, 24). That by now the meaning of these symbols is lost does not prevent us from considering them within a whole gradual process that has been developing in time, starting from natural shapes.

Abstraction is grounded on two basic concepts:

1) isolation of an element out of a complex, to point it out or to examine it closely (the Latin verb "abstrahere" means to bring away);

2) concentration of essentiality - greek philosophical concept, consisting in leaving the particular, the individual, out of consideration, to save general characters, distinctive of a whole class of objects (for example an animal species). This leads to "identification", that is "a process of abstraction concerning what is not relevant with

respect to the identificational function" (Ponzio et al. 1985:115).

The first concept can be included in a metonymical conception, the part instead of the whole, that appears also in sympathetic magic.

In many caves there are engravings of sexual attributes (undoubtedly referring to fertility), and of animal heads (it is well known that the head has a peculiar meaning to prehistorical man, so much so that tombs have been found where skulls are buried apart from skeletons).

In this case, abstraction is conceived as decomposition in elements, as dissection. The Gestalt theory will oppose the concept of abstraction as isolation of details, maintaining that the whole is more than the sum of its elements.

The second concept can be put in relation to a modelling activity, interpreting reality and guiding perceptions (to the same concept can be referred Cézanne's idea of going back to the geometrical shape of each object).

According to Worringer, this is possible through the exclusion of spatial representation and through the approaching to the pure form, with the purpose of releasing the object from its relativity, to make it eternal.

So, that prehistorical images lack perspective rendering is due to the necessity of representing the essential features of the object - either visible or not from a given viewpoint - rather than to technical inability.

This is what Luquet calls "mental realism", belonging also to children. This "internal image" is made of a spontaneous mental selection among the manifold visual attributes of the object. We can suppose the existence of a "mental eye" that creates a sort of hierarchy in selecting the elements that are

to be presented to the phisic eye, choosing them among all the elements of which the object is made. Only the selected elements - considered absolutely necessary by the artist - are saved and presented in the picture. The finished work may contain aspects of the model, that are impossible to be seen, whereas other ones have been completely neglected, though perfectly visible (Worringer 1930:69). Here, by "hierarchy" Luquet does not mean perspective hierarchy, given by distance and viewpoint.

Line-perspective makes things appear just as they seem to be at a given moment and from a unique viewpoint, and not as they really are, whereas turned-perspective reproduces the essential aspects of the whole object (animal or human being), so that its typical features are revealed. An example of turned-perspective is the bison represented with its body in profile and its horns frontally (fig. 3).

Figure 3: Bison engraved in the rock: example of turned-perspective. La Grèze (Dordogne). Aurignacian-perigordian age.

This kind of rendering is not naturalistic, because it reveals the essential aspects of an object, simultaneously or by different viewpoints (Giedion 1965:19) (the concept of simultaneity will be re-engaged by Cubism).

Also the outline, typical of all the age from périgordian to magdalenian, is an abstract concept, since as actually the boundaries between the object and the surrounding space is given by the contrast against the background, not by an outline: this is another reason why prehistorical art is not figurative, but symbolical, because the outline is required to define the boundaries of the object, as to take possession of it.

When Worringer says "internal image", Sebeok would say

"modelling device". All animals have mental models or mental representations of the world. Also language is a modelling device, it is a mental representation of the world. But what is a model to Sebeok? It is an analogy, because it is linked to the object it represents by a relation of similarity.

The identification of similarity releases the process of association of ideas, that is the basis for the shift of meaning, that takes place when a value is given to beings and objects, different from their natural or material function: a shift from profanity to the "sacred" is emblematical of a shift of value (Ponzio 1991:44). If there is a magic and ritual meaning of prehistorical art, it means that this shift has happened.

The presence of symbols not referable to natural forms could confirm the hypothesis of an attempt at a graphic expression of those psychological tensions that urged man to project his own unconscious on the external reality, thus creating a space - the "sacred" - that became the receptory of such unconscious projections.

The description of how, through this way, prehistorical man tended to abstraction is closely linked to the idea that art starts from "cosmic anguish" (Giedion 1965:42).

The work of art as an expression of the artist's "inside" is a conception of modern artists such as Arp, Picasso and Braque: precisely, Braque exalts the "pure line" as a direct outlet of movement and of irrational expression.

The process of abstraction recognizable in art from Palaeolithic to full Neolithic age shows the tension towards the building of perceptive models and interpretative schemes suitable to give man the possibility to establish a relation between his "self" and reality, this relation raising from the combination of cognition and expression.

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Figure 1: Roof-shaped figures, with no directly understandable meaning found in the cave of Altamira.



Figure 2: Bison engraved in the rock: example of turned-perspective. La Grèze (Dordogne). Aurignacian-perigordian age.