

## The Art of Bosch - A Mirror to Death and Beyond

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**Abstract:** *Who really pays attention to poetry, philosophy, painting or other art form? We rather seek for what is immediately needed or quickly consumable, what doesn't bother nor disturb us. Emotions and cultural products are strongly linked. But the perception of art depends on how it impresses us. Art can confront us with a reality. In a civilization dominated by images, through the media, advertising and virtual worlds, art, like life and death, is rarely valued. We approached on this study, the way in which college students - of both sexes, from courses of management, history and psychology - interpreted the image/painting 'Paradise: Ascent of the Blessed', from Hieronymus Bosch, which alludes to death and beyond-death. We analyzed the thoughts, feelings, images and symbols that emerged from their answers, through open questions, after seeing the image/painting. Men revealed security, like they were watching for something they see as controllable and far away from them. Women expressed an active emotional involvement, as well as fear, belief in God and hope in finding a path through the darkness, revealing an intense feeling of proximity before death and immortality. Students of psychology, in particular, revealed a more emotional reaction to the image/death, than the future historians. The conceptions of the first ones are closer to the women's perspectives, while the others resemble those of men. This work invited us to reflect about ourselves, the power of images, death, and on what lies beyond death and life.*

**Keywords:** *image, death, life, immortality, representation*

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is not easy to pay attention to poetry, philosophy, painting or other art form. We rather seek, on the outside, for something we need in the immediate moment that is quickly consumable, preferring what doesn't bother nor disturb us.

Emotions and cultural products are strongly linked. But the perception of art depends on how it impresses us. Art can confront us with a reality, such as death and immortality, by questioning our opinions, feelings, ideologies and beliefs. In a civilization dominated by images, through the media, advertising and virtual worlds, the real art, like life and death, is rarely valued. The multiple sounds, images, stimuli and sensations that surround us, also demand our attention, energy and time.

This is the civilization of image (Huyghe, 1965, 1986), many times abusive, authoritarian, and aggressive, where publicity and the media try to impose their rules, suggesting necessities and habits on us, while replying to our need for information and actualization. This obsession by image has promoted the triumph of different types of art. But in the concept of art that we consider here, the image is viewed as a mean to awake the inner sensibility of each individual, and to expand the conscious, until he understands a reality that at the beginning seemed to be strange or distant, and look to the inner self, listening to his intimate motivations and ideas, as well as his sincere feelings.

So, the use of images, as of music for instance, is important in the education, emotional and mental development of each individual, stimulating the search for beauty, equilibrium and inner harmony (e.g. Costa, 1989; James, 1993).

In the present study, we verified how an image is perceived, based on the thoughts, feelings and symbolisms expressed by a population of college students. We chose a painting by Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) representing

"Paradise: Ascent of the Blessed".<sup>1</sup> This brings us to reflect on life, death and immortality, and may rouse beliefs, convictions and deep emotions. The image evokes a symbolic imagery, religious or esoteric, where after the end of earthly life, souls saved, helped by angels, throw off the last remains, and reborn in a different plane, rising almost without the support of its heavenly guides, following by a corridor (or tunnel) where an intense light emerges from the darkness and illuminates their path of ascension.

Reflecting about the image and consequently about death or what is beyond it, implies questioning many of our ideologies, beliefs, judgments, values, attitudes or behaviours, on the way we think, feel and act, alone or in groups in a society in crisis, in front of what relates to the death and life (e.g. Ariès, 1989; Bradbury, 1999; Kastenbaum, 2001; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Morin, 1988; Oliveira, 2008, 2011, Reaney, 1991).

This study is framed on the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961, 1984, 1988, 1989). Social representations can be seen as a way of understanding and communicating what we already know or we intend to discover, linking images and meanings, establishing a 'common sense' that makes sense (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations are generated and always modified by processes of anchoring and objectifying that permit to transform anything unknown into something familiar. Anchoring is comparing and associating an object, subject or situation to a suitable prototype.<sup>2</sup> To objectify is to give a sense of reality to ideas, symbols or images derived from memory to represent a certain object.<sup>3</sup>

We had two main objectives: Apprehend the representations of the image among college students, of both sexes, of Management, History and Social Psychology. Analyze the extent to which these representations differentiate the groups considered.

The representations are shared differently and to varying degrees by the different groups, modelling their behaviours, to which they give a meaning (Moscovici, 1961). They are social representations because emerge in a specific social context, referring to values, ideologies, systems of social categorization and social relations, that contribute to its production (Vala, 1986).

Considering that social psychology should study the behaviours of individuals within groups, and between groups, and that the psychologists examine the concepts and reactions suggested by those behaviours, we may expect that the students of psychology - who study the individual as a psychosocial being - are those who give more relevance to emotions or feelings, on their representations. Recalling the role that society has historically attributed to women, and given a greater tendency by women to express feelings in the face of death (e.g., Oliveira, 2008), we expect that women, more than men, highlight an affective-emotional dimension.

## 2. Methodology

In this study participated first year's college students (N = 98), men and women, of history, management and social psychology, from ISCTE-IUL (Lisbon University Institute). Sex/gender and university course were the main (independent) variables. We developed a questionnaire with two different stimuli or open questions: This Image makes me think on...; This Image makes me feel... The participants responded individually and anonymously, by free association of words, with words or phrases (that, after, according to a criterion of the etymological root, we reduced to simple words, respecting their meanings).

Data were collected in classrooms, where each subject responded in writing, while the image (e.g., Bosing, 2010; WGA, 2011) was projected on a screen. Each individual expressed the ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions suggested by this image. The data obtained was processed through factorial correspondences analysis, and the resultant factors were interpreted as the main dimensions (or semantic universes) of the representations of the image, constituting the dependent variables.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Thoughts and Ideas about the Image

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<sup>1</sup> The image of the painting is available online (e.g. Reuterswärd, 1991; WGA, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. hell can be associated to fire.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. death, as an abstract idea, can be objectified by a coffin or a cross.

When we asked the participants for 'This Image makes me think on...', their most frequent answers were light, angels, heaven, life beyond death, religion and death (cf. Table 1).

**Table 1.** Classification of the thoughts, by frequency order of the words answered

Ideas, Thoughts or Symbols	Frequency
light	36
angels	33
heaven	30
life beyond death	27
religion	24
death	23
hell	21
paradise	17
god	16
tunnel	15
purgatory	14
salvation	13
hope	12
passage	12
peace	12
final judgement	10
freedom	10
welfare	9
darkness	8
way	8

These answers suggest us that the image is represented as a transition from life to the beyond-death, on the way to heaven, passing over hell, accompanied by angels. The light, the universal symbol of the sacred and divine, appears as a positive, steady, calm and reliever element. The invisible face of the transcendent and our imaginary ideological and religious clearly emerges here, in a society distinctly catholic. The salvation of the being and his ascension to another plane of existence, are implied.

Figures 1 and 2 show the results obtained in the subsequent factorial correspondences analysis (FCA). The three factors that emerged from this FCA represent different dimensions about what may happen after death.

**Figure 1.** FCA of the words associated to 'This Image makes me think on...' (factors 1 and 2)

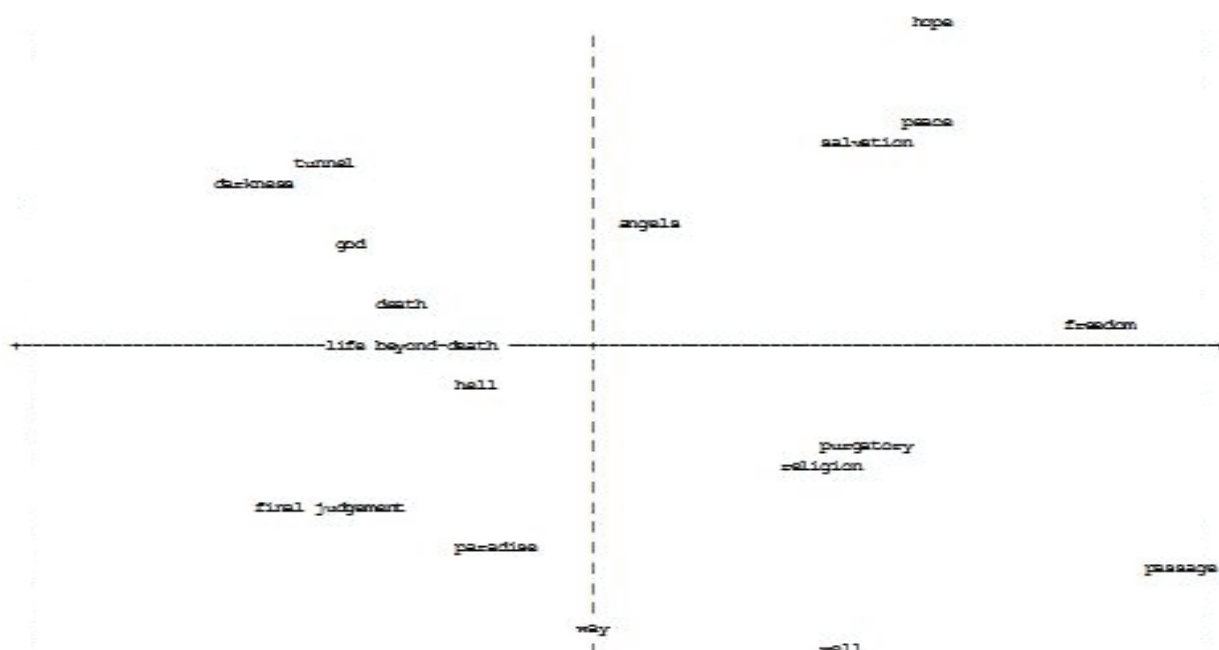
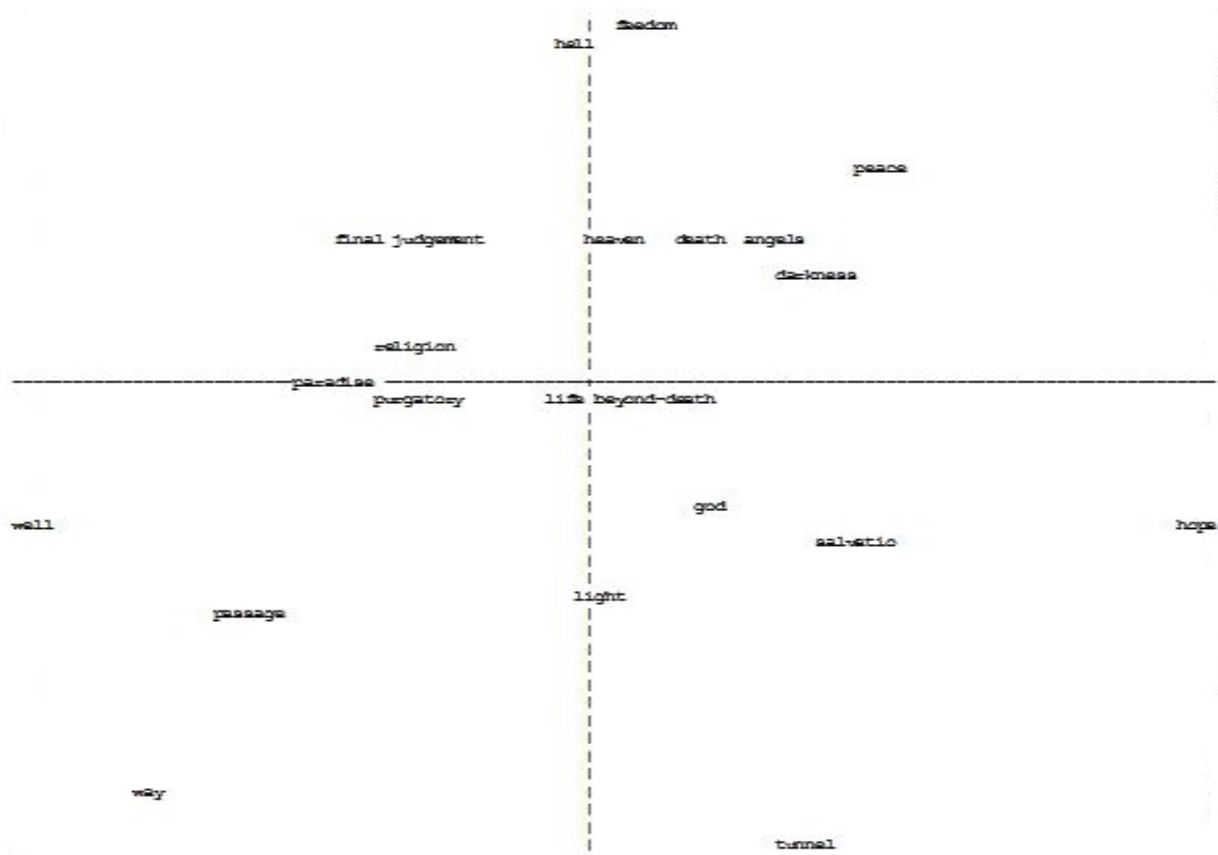


Figure 2. FCA of the words associated to 'This Image makes me think on...' (factors 2 and 3)



The first factor leads us to the thoughts inherent to the transition of the individual, opposing thoughts of fear or apprehension, to thoughts of hope. The second appears to reflect different expectations of what will come after death (thoughts of those who see death as an access road to the heavenly paradise, are opposed to the perception of those who simply expect to find some peace in this passage). The third seems to represent the fate of the individual after death (on the one hand with a vision of a heavenly destination and, on the other hand, with hell).

By comparing the representations of men and women, we found that men represent the image in a very concrete way, basically like outside observers, unlike women, who are more emotionally involved (cf. Table 2). For men, regardless of whatever happens after death, the individual is always saved. For their part, women reveal their religious beliefs, to sustain their hope, in individual salvation.

Table 2. Coordinates and Absolute Contributions (from the FCA), relative to the answers for the two stimuli, crossed with variable sex

This Image makes me think on...	This Image makes me think on...		This Image makes me feel...		
	Coordinate	Contribution	Coordinate	Contribution	
Women	-.12	28.0	Women	-.16	19.0
Men	.31	72.0	Men	.69	81.0
angels	.12	3.5	anguish	.25	2.5
welfare	.12	.9	well	-.16	1.3
way	-.35	7.1	calm	-.25	4.1
heaven	-.03	.2	confused	-.23	3.1
god	-.35	14.1	curiosity	.37	16.6
darkness	-.35	7.1	doubt	.15	1.1
hope	-.44	17.1	hope	.12	1.4
hell	-.09	1.4	happiness	-.06	.1
final judgement	.27	5.3	ignorant	.03	.0
freedom	-.18	2.4	interrogative	1.05	32.2

light	.12	3.8	lightweight	-.48	6.9
death	-.04	.3	freedom	-.12	.6
paradise	-.23	6.7	fear	-.48	22.0
passage	-.07	.4	peace	.28	4.7
peace	-.07	.4	thoughtful	-.23	3.1
purgatory	.17	3.1	sadness	-.12	.6
religion	.12	2.5			
salvation	.40	15.7			
tunnel	-.03	.1			
beyond death	.20	8.1			

A different FCA showed that the students of history are the ones that have revealed more as distant observers, also evidencing a religious dimension before the image. In fact, we all have been influenced by the roman catholic church, over hundreds of years, what, in itself, constitutes a subject of study to these students. The future psychologists show an emotional involvement, they think on an encounter with the immanent or within themselves (by the final judgment) and also with the transcendent, with God. The future managers look peacefully the image, finding in it reasons to understand death as a doorway to reach eternity.

### 3.2. Emotions and Sentiments about the Image

The most significant words (curiosity, hope and fear) lead us to think that the subjects have some fear about something that is strange to them, but they hope that this image may reflect something really good (cf. Table 3). Excepting curiosity, thoughtful, doubt and interrogative, that reveal an attitude considered as neutral before the image, all other words convey positive emotions (marked with +) or negative emotions (-) (cf. Table 3).

**Table 3.** Classification of the emotions/Sentiments, by frequency order of the words answered

Emotions		Frequency
curiosity		21
hope	(+)	17
fear	(-)	16
calm	(+)	11
thoughtful		10
confused	(-)	10
peace	(+)	10
doubt		8
welfare	(+)	8
anguish	(-)	7
sadness	(-)	7
freedom	(+)	7
happiness	(+)	6
interrogative		5
ignorant	(-)	5
lightweight	(+)	5

On the first factor, we may observe two ways of reacting to the idea of death, on one hand, where the individuals feel like observers of a reality from the outside and, secondly, where the subjects show feelings linked to a great emotional involvement, imagining the meanings of the painting. The second can distinguish different attitudes before the unknown - between a tranquil attitude, carefree, and a sad or apprehensive attitude. The third factor points out two ways to represent an abstract image - with a peaceful reaction and a difficulty to understand what is observed, or with an interrogative attitude (cf. Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. FCA of the words associated to 'This Image makes me feel...' (factors 1 and 2)

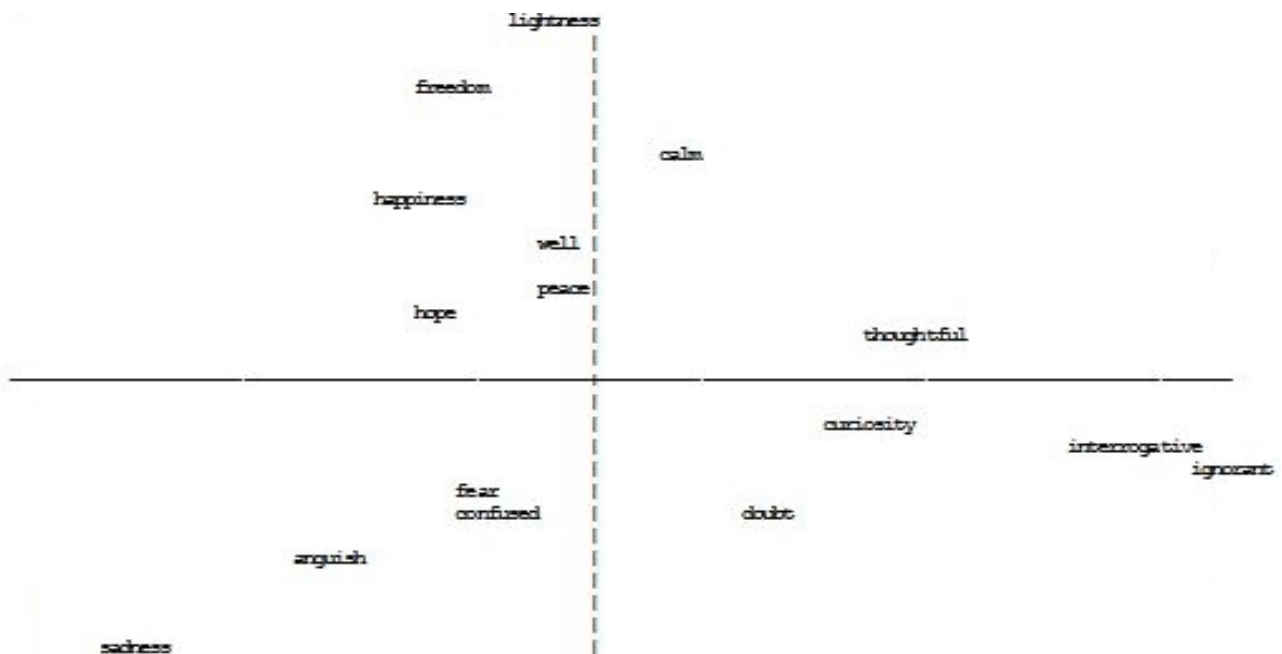
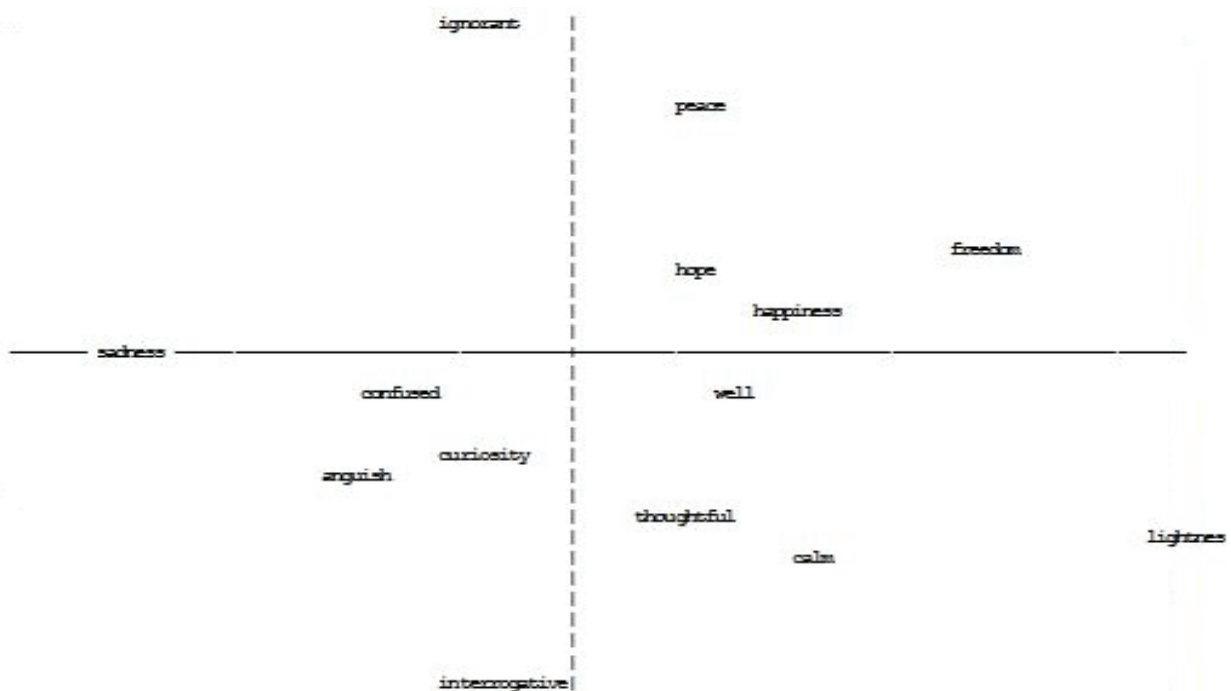


Figure 4. FCA of the words associated to 'This Image makes me feel...' (factors 2 and 3)



Women, more than men, denote a more personal view of the image and show a sadness that seems to come from fear of the unknown, or from not understand the meaning of death, while men appear to be observers, questioning all with curiosity (cf. Table 2).

From another FCA we confirmed that students of history are the ones that examine the image by its outer side (and not so much by the personal internalization that it can induce), in a more cognitive dimension. On the other hand, the future psychologists clearly denote their questions, thoughts and doubts, as if the image made them think about themselves, the human being, and destiny. The future managers emphasize quietness and sadness, believing that whatever the difficulty by which the individual passes after death, there will be a salvation and a destination.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

First of all, we must note that were found significant differences in the way women and men represent the image of the painting, as well as distinct perceptions between the three courses.

The representations of the students of history are opposed to those of the students of management and psychology - the students of psychology, and to a lesser degree, the future managers, show a greater affective-emotional involvement in the way they feel and think about the image, than the other students. Hence, we admit that individuals who are studying the human being as psychosocial being, in a certain context, reveal, more than others, dimensions of affection and emotions, when they reflect upon an image connected to life, death - and in a possible destination for us all.

Women tend to emphasize, more than men, an affective-emotional dimension of the image, as we also expected. Women also express, more clearly, the belief in God and hope in finding their way through the darkness. They admit that the image illustrates their own death, and although this causes them fear, they review themselves in the situation represented. Men assume a more observant, distant and thoughtful attitude.

Although women (70% of total population) are in majority in all courses, it is mainly in psychology that we find dimensions that correspond to a more typically feminine stereotype.

So, even if there are more women than men in a population, is not enough for the representations of an object or a reality become more feminized (Amâncio, 1994). This must happen in a particular context, in this case, to be a woman and also a student of psychology. The gender seems to be most significant than the sex. Thus, we note that there is a closeness or similarity between the representations of women and the students of psychology (and management), as well as between the representations of men and the students of history.

The answers to the two stimuli were grouped in three categories: ideas, thought or symbols; emotions or sentiments; and the words most frequent in both cases (cf. Table 4). Participants had greater facility responding to ideas or thoughts, than to emotions or feelings, which highlights the difficulty to express emotions, even with an anonymous and confidential questionnaire.

**Table 4.** Classification of the most frequent words, by alphabetical order

A. Ideas, Thoughts or Symbols	B. Emotions or Feelings	A + B
angels	calm	freedom
darkness	confused	hope
death	curiosity	peace
final judgement	anguish	welfare
god	doubt	
hell	fear	
life beyond death	happiness	
light	ignorant	
paradise	interrogative	
passage	lightness	
purgatory	sadness	
religion	thoughtful	
salvation		
heaven		
tunnel		
way		

The most common thoughts that we found (e.g., light, angels, heaven and life beyond death) lead us to the idea of ending, at a physical level, and to what may happen after death. These are related to dimensions associated to the transcendent, divine, religion and sacred, that appeal to our ideological imaginary, filled with beliefs, symbols and images, above all influenced by a predominant roman catholic church.

This work also reveals curiosity and fear of the participants before an image they interpret as something strange, but at the same time, something that inspire hope, with the idea that what they see may represent something positive and good in their lives - considering the day when they will be confronted with death.

Social representations of the observed image (as well as death and the afterlife) may anchor in several areas of knowledge, religion, ideology, culture or sacred. These are forms of knowledge, created and shared between the elements of each group of belonging, and in the relationships that social groups establish between themselves. The

processes of objectification, through which the perceptions of the image are transformed into symbols or abstract notions, are associated with different concrete images, such as hell, way, passage or tunnel.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, despite the limitations, allowed us to reflect about ourselves, the power of the image, of death, and what lies beyond death and life. Because the real image of life, where we can dominate our needs, pursue a way and meet a sense, is sometimes proposed by a glorified piece of art (Páez & Adrián, 1993). Who looks at it carefully, penetrates on its meanings and may even extract from it the lost trust. In a real work of art, we may recognize a human factor, acquired and inevitable, closely connected to our origins and our destiny (Huyghe, 1965).

The observation and reflection from the image of a (wonderful and at the same time mysterious) painting, invite us to understand it, to feel it and touch it, in its external aspects, but also in sharing the designs of its author and with what he wished to represent.

Maybe we can reveal a little more of ourselves, as if we looked on a mirror that reflects aspects of our being - something that we thought we had mysteriously captive. Thus, we may refine our perception and consciousness, with one small step, in the evolutionary path. Gradually, we learn to listen and develop our inner sensibility. Eventually, we may even dare to peer the great beyond.

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