

# INTRODUCTION

## Semiotics and Fieldwork: On Critical Ethnographies

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Since its inception over a century, ethnography has been considered the characteristic research method of socio-cultural anthropology and the ontological sine qua non of an anthropologist. For anthropology, ethnography is both the conduct of a qualitative research process, as well the outcome of this process in a text (book or article) that analyzes a(ny) socio-cultural phenomenon. There, the ethnographer presents the ethnographic data and attempts to uncover the underlying significances, which are always to be found in relation to wider socio-cultural contexts. To grasp ‘the native point of view’ anthropologists gather all accessed data that will enable a holistic understanding of the people and/or the phenomenon under study. For several decades now this type of research methodology has been adopted by various other disciplines that also employ qualitative research methods, the term ‘ethnography’ being equated with more or less any qualitative research project that provides a detailed description of everyday life and practice.<sup>1</sup> The encounter, however, between semiotics and ethnography did not constitute a common point of convergence between anthropology and semiotics for quite some time. Actually, initially it was more a cross-fertilization between anthropology and semiotics, in specific Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology and Geertz’s and Turner’s symbolic perceptions of culture.

Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology emerged under the influence of the Prague School of structural linguistics, but its models essentially relied on Saussurean linguistics (Harkin 2007). Lévi-Strauss approached the organization of cultural sign systems, e.g., totemism, myth, kinship rules, as ‘languages’ whose deep structures underlie surface phenomena. For Lévi-Strauss, binary oppositions were seen to constitute the basis of underlying ‘classificatory systems’ within cultures. On the other hand, in *Thick Description* Geertz gave the renowned definition of culture as essentially semiotic, namely, the webs of significance that ‘man ... himself has spun’ (1973: 5). The task, thus, of anthropological analysis became a search of meaning and an issue

of interpretation. Symbols as vehicles of 'culture' are to be studied for what they can reveal about culture, i.e. how symbols shape the ways that social actors see, feel, and think about the world (Ortner 1984: 129). This semiotic conception of culture as 'webs of significance' formed the paradigm of 'interpretive anthropology' that called for the thick description of human behavior within its social context. Turner (1967), on the other hand, also a proponent of symbolic *anthropology*, put emphasis on symbols, his theory eventually to be described as the symbolic approach. Turner's view of culture established an anthropology of meaning that approached symbols in a more semiotic fashion than Geertz (Portis-Winner 2009: 133). He was interested in the ways in which symbols operate within 'society' (Ortner 1984:130), that is symbols as 'operators in the social process', which, when put together in certain arrangements in certain contexts, incite social action and produce social transformations (Ortner 1984:131).

In semiotics, on the other hand, this cross-fertilization with anthropology was less apparent. Even though in 1916 Saussure defined semiotics as the 'study the life of signs within society,' his theoretical emphasis was on semiotic systems or structures, without really considering the role of the wider socio-cultural context in signification, as anthropology did. The holistic interpretation of anthropology that considered the social context as an indispensable factor for the interpretation of signs/symbols did not seem to be an anticipated point of convergence between semiotics and anthropology yet, even more so ethnography. Herzfeld, however, as early as 1983, discussed a convergence of semiotic perspectives in anthropological discourse and method, and in particular in an understanding of fieldwork as a pragmatic embodiment of theory, a shared perspective that he called semiotic ethnography (1983: 99).<sup>2</sup> This direction did not seem to establish a strong tendency, most likely because, as Vannini remarked (2007: 3), ethnographers, interpretivists, interactionists, and qualitative researchers dismissed structural semiotics as formal, abductive, idealist, speculative, amoral/functional, detached, and objective, in opposition to their informal, inductive, empirical, descriptive, moral, sympathetic, and even subjective/reflexive ethnography.

It was many years later that a more holistic social semiotics developed, which focused on semiotic practices and explored how linguistic and communicative codes are formed by social processes, being themselves part of those social processes too. A few decades ago social semiotics repudiated the old structuralist emphasis on the relations between parts within a system and emplaced signs in specific social and cultural contexts. Characteristically, Lotman's 'semiotics of culture' approached culture as a 'semiotic mechanism for the output and storage of information' (Lotman 1977). Later his notion of the 'semiosphere' (Lotman 1984) saw sign processes to operate in the set of all interconnected *Umwelten* (that is, factors that can influence people's behavior), as a modeling system with permeable boundary structures that facilitates the mapping of the contexts of culture (Portis-Winner 2009: 130-131fn.1)

At the same time, Kress's Social Semiotics diverged from 'traditional', Saussurean semiotics by its emphasis on meaning-*making* vs. meaning-*use*. For him, systems of signs do not just exist

and are put in use, but there is a ceaseless *social (re)making* of a set of cultural resources. Thus, a semiotic action involves the choice of a *signifier* from paradigms, to be then made into a sign according to the interest of the maker in a particular social environment. As a remade signifier, the new sign becomes available for the *making* of more signs. Social semiosis, in other words, is both the *choice* of existing signifier-resources and the anew *making* of signs from them (Kress 2011: 242, italics in the original).

This switch in emphasis in social semiotics incorporated the theoretical and thus methodological changes that had occurred earlier in social theory in general and in anthropology in specific: the emphasis on the role of agency and action in the production and reproduction of social structures (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1976; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984), as well as critical ethnography's sensitivity to issues of agency, power, knowledge, reflexivity, and representation (Appadurai 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983; Marcus and Fischer 1986). In such a context, a *socio-semiotic ethnography* was advocated to combine the Peircean and pragmatist social semiotic tradition, classical and contemporary critical theory and post-structural socio-linguistics, contemporary cultural studies, an advancement that would carry great potential across the academic spectrum (Vannini 2007: 1-2).

This shared emphasis by social semiotics on social action, context, and use has been brought forth by Kress (2011: 243), who argued that the cultural resources for representation are constantly remade in line with the interest of the sign-makers' needs and requirements, and the prevailing structures of power in their life-worlds. This makes every sign particular to the social characteristics of this social environment, to the life-world of the sign-maker and that culture. In this respect, social semiotics is a theory of meaning that looks for *meaning*, *meaning-making*, the *agency* of *meaning-makers* and the constant (re-)constitution of *identity* in sign- and meaning- making, as well as the (social) constraints faced in *making* meaning. The focus on the relation between *social semiosis* and *knowledge* in terms of how and by whom 'knowledge' is produced and shaped and constituted distinctly in different modes, which resources are available in any one society for the *making* of meaning, how, therefore, 'knowledge' appears differently in different modes (Kress 2011: 242, italics in the original).

An important identifying trait of social semiotics came to be the attribution both of power to meaning and of meaning to power, taking into consideration the ever unstable conditions of hegemony and the consequent 'multi-actuality' or heteroglossia of signs (Vannini 2007: 6). Considering culture, society, and politics as intrinsic to semiosis, socio-semiotic ethnographers need to acknowledge the power dynamics that are intrinsic to their research practices from the very beginning to the very end. Reflexivity should, therefore, be ensured by socio-semiotic ethnographers in their heteroglot *paroles*, the process of explicit dialectic self-awareness, and the polyvocality, which informs the very shape and validity of socio-semiotic ethnography (Vannini 2007: 10).

At this juncture social semiotics saw 'language' as just one among the resources for making

meaning and started also paying attention to non-linguistic modes of communication as 'resources' for making meaning, as new 'grammars'. Multimodality, i.e., the communication practices through a range of textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual semiotic modes, addresses the modes used to compose messages. 'Multimodality' is thus defined as a field of work, a domain for enquiry, a description of the space and the resources that enter into *meaning*, taking for granted that the available resources in one social group and its cultures at a particular moment constitute one coherent domain, an integral field of nevertheless distinct resources for *making* meaning (Kress 2011: 242). In that direction, however, Pink (2011: 266) argued that Kress's notion of 'sight, hearing, smell, taste and feel' as 'each being attuned in a quite specific way to the natural environment, proving us with highly differentiated information,' should be reconsidered. For her, Kress's argument that the multimodality of our semiotic world is guaranteed, because 'none of the senses ever operates in isolation from the others' (2000: 184 in Pink 2011: 266), should be revised, because people actually tend to communicate linguistically about their embodied and sensory perception in terms of sensory categories.

While the importance of the context, of the surrounding ambiance, and of multimodality in the interpretation of the signs/symbols expanded the social semiotic perspective, there seems to still exist a preoccupation with texts. McDonald (2013: 320) commented that, while analysts within the Social Semiotic tradition criticize the privileging of language within multimodal studies and semiotics, they still favor language as the model for other semiotic modalities, being essentially considered as different kinds of 'languages,' rather than as modalities in their own right. For her, the disengagement of social semiotic approaches from linguistic models requires first the comprehension of the nature of semiosis; how modalities combine in 'performance,' the links between the iconic and/or indexical and/or symbolic referential processes involved in expression and interpretation in each modality (McDonald 2013: 331-332).

Notwithstanding the critiques and the different views expressed above, it seems that the holistic perspective of anthropology, which takes the social context as requisite for the explication of signs/symbols, has become a well-established point of convergence between semiotics and ethnography. Indicatively, Kress defined both 'ethnography' and 'social semiotics' as qualitative research 'approaches' in the social sciences that should be explored whether and how they can or should collocate to their common benefit (2011: 239). Considering that this encounter would encourage rapprochements and interdisciplinarity across a wide range of fields, Kress argued (2011: 241) for the cooperation between Social Semiotics and ethnography, because to him the invocation of 'the social' by the Social Semiotic analysis of (social) semiosis (the *making* of meaning in social environments) is not equally detailed as in *ethnography*.

Pink (2011: 273), on the other hand, considers only a 'classic' ethnography to be theoretically and methodologically coherent for the multimodality paradigm, because multimedia scholars are still drawn by the semiotic principles of 'classic' 'Geertzian' ethnography. As a result, she argued, the 'classic' conceptualizations of culture, meaning, and experience that

multimodality scholarship advocates, bypass the recent critical literature around ethnographic methodology. While their approach to ethnography recognizes the need for researcher reflexivity and seeks to understand the relational constitution of meaning, yet, its ethnographic approach is mainly observational of culture-as-readable-text. Even more, its emphasis on the *differences* between different senses, different modes, and different media assumes a world that is separated into sets of discrete, but relational to each other, components (Pink 2011: 270).

Meanwhile, Kress (2011: 241) considered that the encounter between semiotics and ethnography raises a core issue: whether general aim would be a merging of frameworks and methods, or the potential temporary complementarity of distinctly different approaches around a specific task. While this is more of a concern for social semiotics than for anthropological ethnography,<sup>3</sup> Kress argued for old good anthropological ethnography to provide 'the social' in the analysis of social semiosis. For a multimodal social semiotic analysis to visit the homes of customers, do some kind of survey, conduct interviews, gather other material, is to employ methods that are much more in the domain of ethnography and made for such tasks. Being clear that interviews and 'participation' are not tools of Social Semiotics, he perceived complementarity to be the use of each approach for what each will do best, and suggested to bring the two kinds of 'findings' together and see what that would show<sup>4</sup> (Kress 2011: 245).

Regardless of whether the encounter between ethnography and semiotics will eventually be one of complementarity or merging, and which one will prove to do what better, the emergence of new sites of representation shows the fruitful interplay of semiotics and ethnography in the critical analysis and interpretation of context-bound social action and symbolic interaction, particularly when they are engaging with sites and microcosms that are non-discernible by other means of research for non-reductive understandings of the contemporary. The following examples of semiotic ethnographies exemplify some fruitful directions that this interaction of social semiotics with ethnography has recently taken: how the semiotic employment of the body in systems such as music expands understandings of language and expresses very different kinds of meanings (McDonald 2013); how at moments of friction, the never fixed and stable indexical meanings are temporally reshuffled and the symbolic systems of new political systems engender reclassifications that employ the ability of old signifiers to signify something new or new signifiers to signify something old (Brink-Danan 2010); how an ethnography of a semiotics of commodity contemplates over a theory of semiosis to explain both the semiotics of commodities and the commoditization of semiosis, and a definition of meaning that brings together political economy with the techniques of linguistic anthropology (Kockelman 2006); how an ethnographic analysis of Bible Advocacy shows that the sense of ambience, i.e., a sensual semiotics, may improve an understanding of, or transcend the structural public-private distinction (Engelke 2012); how an analysis of 'multimodal' transcripts from a social semiotic framework accounts for transcripts as *artefacts*, as empirical material through which transcription can be reconstructed as a social, meaning-making practice (Bezemera and Mavers 2011);

how the semiotic function of the hashtag in social media, as intended significance of an utterance, may indicate a meaning that is possibly otherwise not apparent (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

This journal issue aims at combining social semiotics with ethnographic fieldwork, mostly in the direction of a critical ethnography that goes beneath the obvious, that exposes obscure operations of power and control, and challenges regimes of knowledge and social practices that frame people's everyday choices in any possible way. In Vannini's words (2007: 121), socio-semiotic ethnography is a form of critical analytic ethnography that seeks to combine fieldwork and theory in order to understand and interpret social processes, a critical practice that emphasizes the praxiological relevance of critical emancipation and critical enlightenment. All the ethnographically based semiotic researches and the semiotically informed ethnographies of this issue share an openness to different fields, such as cultural studies and social semiotics (Vannini 2007). Sideri's textual and contextual analysis of a movie as context of multiple meanings and power relations meets with Zaimakis' analysis of street art practices as alternative modes that express dissatisfaction, protest and, often, readiness for social change, as well as Canakis' research of changes on the linguistic landscape brought forth by tourist and refugee flows. These thick descriptions of the particular cultural contexts and the global expectations of social agents challenge the limits both of ethnographic practices and of semiotic understandings in conditions of dynamic historical, economic, and political transformations. This is also the case of Tsékénis' paper on culinary semiotics and the political economy of witchcraft in Africa. Bouissac's ethno-semiotics of a circus live performance further shows participant observation as mainstream ethnographic modality to complement with the analysis of performances as multimodal texts. They all challenge the impact of the cultural meaning and reflexivity, when fieldwork experiences are facing overlapping socio-historical codes and significations, in colonial and modern, post-colonial and late modern environments.

We consider that this openness to, or synergy/penetrability amongst the fields of social semiotics, anthropology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, visual studies, media studies, political economy, etc., challenges predominant trends in understanding our complex globalized world(s). In this issue's critical texts, participant observation meets social semiotics to serve a new critical semiotic ethnography. This complementarity shapes a framework of cultural critique that assists ethnography in its reflexive undertaking and social semiotics' search for source signifiers that produce other signs of meanings within social practices.

This complementary interaction works as a dynamic game, flexible and precarious, that can be permanently transformed by social actors through everyday experiences and everyday triviality. All the studies in this issue pay attention to the importance protagonists give to banal everyday trivialities. Social agents produce dissent, critique, meaningful communication, recognition, by way of signs that are created through ordinary discourses, words, habitus, materials and representations. These trivial everyday components seem to work as source-signifiers in order to produce new signs, transmit and transform their cultural meanings. From this per-

spective, the present volume contributes to relevant previous discussions on the importance of everyday semiotics and hermeneutics (Yoka & Paschalidis 2015), where semiotics meets ethnography, art and cultural studies.

In this framework, the adherence of the present studies to everyday triviality serves and stresses the impact of complementarity between critical ethnography and social semiotics. In our globalized world(s) and multiply mediated realities, we realize more and more that ethnography cannot be limited to dry participant observation. Representations of every lived experience that produce cultural meanings need a detailed deconstruction by methods and approaches that locate and problematize the dispersal of power (i.e. cultural studies, feminist and minority studies). In this direction, socio-semiotics' focus on 'any representation of how people experience, use, practice, talk about, contest, critique, understand—and in general, interact—with polysemic meanings of semiotic resources' (Vannini 2007: 125) further advances endeavors for a more reflexive and critical ethnography.

## NOTES

1 Kress (2011:241) commented on the constantly expanding use of the term *ethnography* that, as in Social Semiotics, signs are specific at the moment of their making and are remade by interpretation, anyone's use of the word/signifier 'ethnography' makes a sign of it that is precise for her or him at that moment.

2 For an insightful application of semiotic principles in ethnographic analysis see Herzfeld 1981; 1986; 1987.

3 Pink, also, argued that, while multimodality scholars make approaches to ethnography, the interest in the multimodality approach among anthropologists is not equally great (2011: 273).

4 Kress assumed for the time being a relation of 'cooperation' and 'complementarity,' to consider later on, if the tasks persist, a merger (2011: 241).

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