

Approaching semiospheres through lists of songs: The semiotics of musical playlists

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a cultural semiotic perspective to examine how musical playlists can serve to define and characterize semiospheres. It begins with a discussion of cultural semiotics and the analytical challenge of accessing a semiosphere through music. Then, it focuses on the role the lists play in defining, describing, and characterizing a semiosphere. Finally, it discusses how musical playlists – collections of songs grouped following a rule or criterion – can define and characterize a semiosphere. The analytical section studies three general types of semiospheres linked to (1) space, (2) time, and (3) collective identities.

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1. Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun *playlist* as “a list of songs or pieces of music to be played; spec. a list of the musical tracks to be broadcast by a radio station over a given period.”¹ According to this general definition, any list of songs created to be played would constitute a playlist, regardless of the relationship between the songs composing the list. If a DJ were to program a playlist for a radio show and decided to include tracks by Madonna, Beethoven, and Paco de Lucía, three musicians with not much in common, that list would constitute a playlist according to OFD’s definition. In fact, it would be hard to argue otherwise.

¹ Source: <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=playlist>

However, when we look at actual playlists carefully and particularly through the lenses of semiotics, the discipline that studies signification and sense-making, we quickly realize that playlists are usually not created randomly. Instead, they seem to be the output of a process of selection that implies segmenting the musical continuum – the continuum of all existing songs – and grouping songs following a rule or criterion. Therefore, playlists usually function as a means that humans – and currently, also machines – use to order, classify, and group pieces of music according to a specific value or criterion.

Within the boundaries of the ever-growing digital culture we currently live in, and in particular, since the launch and popularization of technologies like the iPod and Spotify in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, playlists became a standard and normalized element in the everyday lives of many individuals through the world. Now, on our smartphones, we can access a broad catalog of playlists created by us, others, or machines at hand's reach to choose from at any moment of our day. We can even choose them based on what we are doing, how we feel, or how the weather is at the moment. Before the creation and popularization of the iPod, Spotify, and other technologies that allow massive storage of music, we could create a playlist of around 20 songs and burn it on a physical CD. Thanks to these technological innovations no longer linked to physical space, playlists can be more extended, even unlimited. In this sense, technologies like the iPod and Spotify function as the support – now virtual and potentially endless – to thousands of playlists containing a vast number of songs. Before, this type of storage was something we could do using a CD case, where each CD worked as the physical support that held one single playlist, with the case fulfilling the function of the catalog.

Now, playlists are created both by humans and machines, including artificial intelligence. Both human and mechanic agents can create playlists randomly without following a rule. However, when examining the world, we discover that, in most cases, playlists are made following a rule or criterion. This rule can be grounded on the musical genre the songs belong to, like rock, pop, reggaeton, new age, etc.; the time in which the selected songs were released, like the 70s, the 80s, the 90s, a specific year, etc.; the language in which they are sung (English ballads, Latin American pop-rock, Spanish rumba, *chanson française*, etc.); and their national origin (Brazilian rock, Argentinean folklore, Brit pop, etc.), among other criteria that serve to segment social reality and, in doing it, as the ground for the creation of playlists. Moreover, playlists can combine some of these criteria: that is how we can think of a playlist with the title 'British rock ballads from the 1970s'.

However, in some playlists, the criterion used to group songs is not evident. Even when someone creates a playlist with songs that do not relate to each other fol-

lowing a visible or culturally codified rule like the ones listed above, we can group songs through a less visible or culturally codified criterion, like our personal taste. Moreover, the rule or criterion used to create a playlist does not necessarily have to be related to the musical domain. Nowadays, on Spotify, we can easily find playlists created according to the criteria associated with moods ('Warm Fuzzy Feeling,' 'Relax at night'), moments of the day ('Sunday Morning'), or activities ('Next to the river,' 'Sing in the car,' 'Tea for three').

Linked to technological development, the nature of musical playlists has changed throughout time. Thanks to platforms like Spotify, the easy access that individuals currently have to music allows the proliferation of practices of bricolage, that is, of putting together preexisting units to create new meanings. This is precisely what happens when someone makes a playlist. Hence, from a semiotic perspective, we can approach a playlist as the output of a process of textual production in which differential units (the songs) are grouped following a criterion or a combination of criteria, giving place to a new differential unit (the playlist). The workings of this process are of utmost interest for semiotics, the discipline that studies signification, sense- and meaning-making, particularly for its branches dealing with discourse and the dynamics of culture (Lorusso 2010).

This article approaches musical playlists from a cultural semiotic perspective. Namely, it discusses playlists as a means to define and characterize semiospheres (Lotman 2005) analytically. The concept of 'semiosphere' will be used here broadly, as a relatively stable and articulated semiotic system composed of a semiotic core, some boundaries, and an outside space. We argue that semiospheres of different nature could be defined, modeled, described, and characterized through musical playlists. Therefore, lists of songs become a possible entry point for researchers to study specific cultural spaces – that is, semiospheres – through music. This hypothesis implies that there is something like a 90s pop semiosphere that can be accessed through lists of songs.

In the first section, the article introduces cultural semiotics as an analytical perspective and discusses how we can characterize a semiosphere through songs. The second section proposes a theoretical framework for the study of lists and collections based on the work of Umberto Eco (2009). The third and final section examines specific types of playlists to see how they link to semiospheres of diverse nature and how they can serve to define, model, and characterize semiospheres related to space, time, and collective identities. This is a theoretical article, and as such, it presents an argument that could prove useful for conducting empirical analyses of specific playlists.

2. Cultural semiotics and the characterization of semiospheres through music

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signification, both human and non-human. At first glance, the denomination “cultural semiotics” might seem redundant to refer to a specific research field within the social sciences since signification is intertwined with culture, as scholars began arguing in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), culture should be studied as a semiotic system, for it is “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz 1973: 452). If “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” those ‘webs’ constitute culture. Therefore, in his view, anthropology is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973: 5). Some years earlier, anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1966) claimed that culture equals communication, for it is characterized by the production and interpretation of meanings.

Within the semiotic field, Umberto Eco (1975) argued that culture is a complex semiotic system based on processes of signification and communication. According to Eco (1975: 27), “to look at the whole of culture *sub specie semiotica* is not to say that culture is only communication and signification but that it can be understood more thoroughly if it is seen from the semiotic point of view.” This is the case since “in culture, every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon” and, therefore, “the laws of signification are the laws of culture” (Eco 1975: 28). From this theoretical perspective, studying culture with a focus on meaning and signification implies doing semiotics, while doing semiotics implies studying culture with an emphasis on meaning and signification. In Eco’s (1975: 28) terms, “culture can be studied completely under a semiotic profile.”

This theoretical account underpins contemporary semiotic research. However, as semiotics developed as a relatively autonomous discipline within the social and human sciences during the second half of the twentieth century, researchers needed to use the adjective *cultural* to emphasize a specific approach to studying culture’s functioning and dynamics. Nowadays, speaking of *cultural* semiotics usually references the work of Jurij Lotman, who is probably the most prominent researcher using a semiotic perspective to approach how culture works. We will return to Lotman and one of his key concepts – the semiosphere – below.

Anna Maria Lorusso (2010: 5, my translation) defines cultural semiotics as a lens, that is, as “the particular optic that serves to focus on certain specific problems.” For Lorusso, the defining traits of this account of cultural phenomena are its generality, its “ability to create correlations between sets of values and sets of morphological-formal traits,” and a functional perspective. As Geertz proposed in the 1970s, for Lorusso, studying culture – including a particular culture in a specific period – implies studying

not only the output of that culture in the form of the particular texts it produces but also analyzing the relationships between these texts as elements that are related and that belong to a semiotic system. According to Lorusso,

The study of culture (including the semiotic study of culture) cannot disregard a general consideration of meaning; in short, it cannot limit itself to and be satisfied with the study of a textual micro-phenomenon, a single behaviour, or a particular spot. The semiotics of culture can only deal with these individual texts if it approaches them using a general perspective, that is, in terms of the series of relationships that these singular objects have with the other objects in the series to which they belong (a textual genre, for example) or with the other series in the system (other languages, other types of behaviour, other social systems) (Lorusso 2010: 7, my translation).

For Lorusso (2010: 13, my translation), cultural semiotics “must be able to define the correlation logics that bind texts and codes within a certain system together, the logics that make a certain text compatible with a certain culture and exclude other texts.” The main research question of this article reflects the logic that Lorusso identifies as the one that defines the cultural semiotic account: How do playlists – sets of songs grouped following a particular criterion or rule – serve to define and characterize a cultural system? What can we know by studying playlists about the cultural system that produces them? How do songs relate to each other within a playlist? Which other songs are acceptable in a playlist, and which are not? How does a playlist work as the expression of some broader cultural content located beyond the value of the single songs that compose it?

A song is a text of a musical nature, which can also be multimodal when composed of words (the lyrics). Answering the above questions implies transcending the musical dimension and even the traditional semiotic approach that studies a song as a text in a broad sense. To answer these questions, we must focus on the social value of songs and their connotations, particularly when they enter a relationship with other songs in a playlist. If *Despacito* (by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee), *Bailando* (by Enrique Iglesias) and *La gasolina* (by Daddy Yankee) can produce social meanings individually as musical texts (for example, when a DJ plays one of these tracks during a party), the relationship between them creates a second level of sense, one linked to the semiosphere that they express and, at the same time, characterize and construct, which is defined by specific traits revolving around the semantic unit of /Latin-Spanish party/.²

² This cultural unit gains its meaning relationally, that is, in opposition to other cultural units that are characterized by other traits. Combining different traits, we can construct different cultural units linked to music that work as the base for the creation of playlists.

In this sense, analyzing musical playlists from a cultural semiotic perspective implies looking at the *pragmatics* of songs, that is, how social actors (people, radios, companies, etc.) use them in specific contexts to produce particular effects of sense. These contexts can be, for example, a summer season, where songs are usually repeated over and over on the radio, in nightclubs, etc., since they are somehow included in what is culturally codified as the soundtrack of that specific summer. Consider the many existing CD compilations that discographic companies launch in joint ventures with radios before each summer, like the ones included in Figures 1 to 3.



Figure 1-3. Summer albums from 2022.³

Lorusso (2010: 13, my translation) claims that “cultures are complex systems of compatibilities and incompatibilities, sets of sets that, in so far as they collect and unite certain elements, they exclude and distance others.” The semiotics of playlists will allow us to see this systemic logic in action. If we leave aside subjective criteria like personal taste (following a logic of “I include this song in the playlist because I like it, independently of the traits it shares with other songs that are part of the playlist”), we can appreciate the fact that musical playlists are usually made following what we could call a *logic of compatibility*, even if those who make them are unaware of it.

We argued above that one of Lotman’s key concepts is that of the semiosphere. The author proposes this concept by drawing on the idea of a biosphere when dealing with the natural world (Lotman 1990; 2005). According to Lotman (2005: 207), a semiosphere is “a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space.” Conceiving the semiosphere in topological terms – that is, as a space – serves to visualize an inside and an outside of that sphere. For Lotman (2005: 207), “only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realized.” In other words, meaning and sense cannot exist outside a semiosphere. Moreover, any element that enters the semiosphere needs to undergo a process of translation.

³ Sources: (1) <https://www.fnac.be/a17020270/Camille-Lellouche-100-Hits-Summer-2022-CD-album>;
 (2) <https://www.fnac.be/a17146235/Soprano-Nrj-Hits-Ete-2022-CD-album>;
 (3) <https://www.radioitalia.it/news/radio-italia-summer-hits-2022-la-compilation-dell-estate-targata-solomusicaitaliana-551975>

If we think of musical playlists through the notion of the semiosphere, we can easily identify a pertinence criterion as the core of a playlist. The playlist of an album created for the summer of 2023 cannot include a song like Haddaway's *What is love*, for it was released in the 1990s, a temporal trait that is not pertinent to characterize the 2023 semiosphere. But it can include a new or remixed version of the 90s' hit, like *Baby Don't Hurt Me*, by David Guetta featuring Anne-Marie and Coi Leray.⁴ The semiotic core of the summer 2023 playlist includes the necessary trait of being a song released in 2023 or late 2022 (together with other criteria, like being mainstream music, etc.).

If we examine the Italian semiosphere, focusing on the music it has produced over the years, we will realize that anyone from Italy or exposed to Italian culture will probably know who Eros Ramazzotti, Laura Pausini, Andrea Bocelli, Nek, and Tiziano Ferro are. They will also know who prominent singers like Franco Battiato, Vasco Rossi, and Lucio Dalla are. However, the second group would probably be unknown to most people from Latin America, while they will most likely know the artists from the first group. This is because Eros and others released songs and albums in Spanish as a commercial strategy. This has granted them a position within the Spanish-speaking musical semiosphere as well. If someone had to create a playlist entitled "Pop-rock in Spanish from the 1990s," it would be thus acceptable to include songs like *Cosa más bella* (by Eros Ramazzotti), *La soledad* (by Laura Pausini), *Laura no está* (by Nek) and *Vivo por ella* (by Andrea Bocelli).

As argued above, songs are pertinent within a playlist depending on a particular criterion, which usually relates to the nature of the semiosphere under study. In this sense, pop songs like *Gangnam Style* (by South-Korean performer Psy) or *Dragostea din tei* (by the Romanian pop band O-Zone) would probably be unknown outside the South-Korean and Romanian semiospheres, respectively, had they not become global pop hits. This gave them pertinence in other semiospheres, like those linked to the cultural unit /Summer-party hits/ and the playlists that originated around it. As a result, if someone were tasked with creating a playlist with the best summer hits of the past 20 years, they would likely include these two songs.

The concept of the semiosphere serves to have a systemic account to approach culture as a signifying conglomerate. According to Lotman (2005: 208), "the semiotic universe may be regarded as the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other. In this case, all structures will look as if they are constructed out of individual bricks." Examining these bricks – the individual texts – can provide the semiotician with access to the semiotic core of the culture, that is, the productive mechanism and differential traits that create (or, in the case of musical playlists, that make pertinent) those texts.

⁴ Interestingly, when the first draft of this article was written – in April 2023, before the European summer –, Guetta's song had not been released yet. This can be read either as a curious coincidence or as an intuition guided by an understanding of how the musical industry works. As we can claim in December 2023, after the European summer is over, the music of the past summer season was full of songs that use samples from music hits originally released in the 1990s and 2000s.

The concept of semiosphere is abstract and serves, above all, to *model* cultural practices of textual production. Semioticians interested in cultural semiotics must segment the cultural continuum and define their object of study by focusing on one of its elements. According to Lorusso (2010: 9, my translation), “once a criterion has been chosen, it is a matter of constructing series of objects that are not necessarily constructed at the outset as homogeneous but which, once collected, produce a ‘culture-effect.’” This “culture-effect” is crucial to our approach, since it is the *illusion of unicity and homogeneity* that semioticians will try to explain, as is our case regarding the three types of semiospheres studied below. To draw on our example of summer playlists, we can think of summer 2010 through the songs that were included in the summer playlist, like *Memories* (by David Guetta & Kid Kudi), *Stereo Love* (Edward Maya & Vika Jigulina) and *Break your Heart* (by Taio Cruz). Once the semiotician has identified – or, more precisely, postulated – the semiosphere, the next step would be, according to Lorusso (2010: 9, my translation), “searching in culture the correspondences between textual forms and value paths, outlining typifications of forms and significant morphologies.” Considering our purposes here, how do the songs included in the 2010 summer playlist express – and simultaneously construct – the differential traits of that particular summer compared to past summer seasons?

Lorusso (2010: 7, my translation) claims that cultures are not exhaustive; that is, “they do not total up in a global sum, in an all-inclusive description. Cultures are dispersed [...], and students of culture must account for this dispersion, identifying its logic, rules, and spaces.” One method to account for the dispersion of a culture is through focusing on a specific type of cultural output, like music. Different dimensions could be considered when studying culture through music from a semiotic perspective. This article focuses on the dimension of creating playlists. When a musical performer launches a new album, they create a playlist. Radio charts are playlists. Selections of songs like the 100 best rock songs in English are also playlists. The music played on a radio show constitutes a playlist. The songs a DJ plays during a nightclub or a wedding form a playlist. Spotify playlists are clearly playlists.

Other types of musical playlists exist besides these, although they are less clearly defined than those listed above. When we consider all the songs launched in the year 1987, we deal with a vast list. However, it is a finite list. Nobody would include all the songs launched in 1987 in a Spotify playlist titled *The Sound of 1987*. Every year, the US magazine Billboard tries to choose the 100 best songs of the year. For the 1987 list, they included, among others, *Walk Like an Egyptian* (by The Bangles), *Alone* (by Heart), *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* (by Whitney Houston), *Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now* (by Starship), *Here I Go Again* (by Whitesnake), *Livin’ on a Prayer* (by Bon Jovi), *La Isla Bonita* (by Madonna) and *Bad* (by Michael Jackson). We know that the criteria that Billboard used to put this playlist together is triple, at least: first, the year of

publication of the songs included must be 1987; second, it contemplates songs sung in English; finally, these songs were successful in commercial terms.

Using at least three criteria to create our playlist explains how the songs came together. But they do not say anything about the “culture-effect” they produce. Readers versed in pop-rock music will recognize all the songs listed in the previous paragraph as typical of the 1980s music. The playlist generates a sense of unicity and homogeneity, a unit of meaning segmented culturally (Eco 1975) that we could name “music from the 1980s.” In this sense, some of the songs listed are clear tokens of the type of rock standard in the 1980s (Bon Jovi, Whitesnake, Heart) or of pop (The Bangles, Michael Jackson, Madonna). Therefore, we could postulate a semiosphere of the 1980s by considering these songs. By analyzing songs, we can identify traits that characterize the semiosphere of our interest. Semioticians will be tasked with characterizing that semiosphere by studying the songs grouped as expressions of that content. This expression is grounded on the relationship established between the songs that compose the playlist.

In the final section of this article, we will examine musical playlists and their significant relationship with semiospheres. Before proceeding to the analytical work, an introduction and discussion of the semiotics of lists and collections seems necessary since this will help us understand the nature of musical playlists as lists that are created following a rule or criterion and that, therefore, tend to be *open* playlists.

3. The semiotics of lists and collections

Just as when creating a playlist, semiotic research implies constructing corpora of analysis and creating an object of study based on the criterion of pertinence. Therefore, choosing an object of study is a relevant task since the results and conclusions of the research will depend on the items selected and included in the corpus. In his book *Introducing Social Semiotics*, Theo van Leeuwen (2005) describes the methods linguists should use to study semiosis beyond language use. The author proposes that they need to create *inventories*:

To make an inventory we first need a collection. Collections for social semiotic research projects could be put together in several ways. In the case of walking, we could make a collection of videotapes of people walking, whether secretly filmed for the purpose of the research, or taken from feature films and documentaries. [...] But it could also be a collection of *descriptions* of walking, for instance from historical sources such as the 1766 Army drill regulations from which Foucault quotes in his discussion of disciplining ‘docile bodies.’ (van Leeuwen 2005: 6)

Semioticians work with corpora, which take the form of collections of items. As with playlists, these items are grouped according to a specific rule or criterion.

Lists have also been an object of interest for Umberto Eco. In the book *Vertigine della lista* (2009), Eco presents some ideas and distinctions that serve to approach objects of study like playlists. To begin with, Eco distinguishes between *open* and *closed* lists. While open lists allow the inclusion of new units, closed ones do not allow such an inclusion. For example, the list of Spanish Medieval literary works is closed, while the list of football World Champions is open.

Eco (2009: 15) argues that if we know the boundaries of something, we will be able to discover its units and include them in a list. But if we do not, the list remains open, and it is hard to know which units compose it. Let us exemplify this idea with the list of the 1987 songs mentioned above. Billboard's 100 Best Songs of 1987 playlist is a closed list: 100 units can be part of it, and the units were already chosen and placed within the list. However, a Spotify playlist entitled '1987 songs' is an open list, for we can always include new units that comply with the temporal criterion. However, it is a finite list since the number of songs launched that year is limited. This is so because the year had a beginning and an end, and to be part of the second playlist, a song must have been published within those temporal boundaries. Therefore, 'open' and 'infinite' are not synonyms.

As discussed above, creating a playlist implies conducting a segmentation and a selection. Typically, only some songs launched in 1987 are included in the playlists created to remember 1987. Also, we find playlists where other criteria are in play, like national origin or language (the best French songs of 1987, the best German songs of 1987). Moreover, these lists are based on the commercial success of those songs. Here, Eco's idea of *specimen* or *example* (Eco 2009: 49) becomes enlightening. When we create a list, we tend to include songs that represent the system behind it in an *exemplary* manner. In this sense, Eco sees 'etcetera' as a relevant, productive mechanism. When we make a list, we provide a couple of exemplary cases and then leave the list open using this word so that the reader can think of other examples we do not want or cannot list. Imagine this conversation between two friends:

- A: Do you remember summer 2010? That season's music was great!
- B: Uh, I cannot remember any of the songs... what did we listen to that summer?
- A: *Memories* by David Guetta and Kid Kudi; *Stereo Love* by Edward Maya and Vika Jigulina; *Break your Heart* by Taio Cruz, etc.
- B: Oh yes! It was a great summer.

What pragmatic function does the *etcetera* fulfill in such a communicative context? Evidently, speaker A mentions some of the songs from that playlist that exemplify the summer 2010 semiosphere. Through the units listed by speaker A, speaker B must dwell in the semiosphere and think of other songs that are part of the playlist. Coldplay's 2005 album *X&Y* proposes a playlist of 13 songs. It is a closed playlist. However, when arguing that some of Coldplay's most well-known songs are in that album, we might create a list like this one: *The Hardest Part*, *Fix You*, *Speed of Sound*, etc. In this case, we are providing some exemplary units of the list to illustrate our argument.

Let us now think of a DJ that chooses songs to play, for example, during a wedding party. Once the party has finished, we could ask the DJ for a copy of their playlist. This is a closed list: the songs that are part of the playlist are those that the DJ played between the beginning and the end of the party. We cannot add more songs to the list. But if we had to explain to someone how the party went regarding the musical selection the DJ did, we would use the logic of examples and say he played songs like *Despacito*, *La Gasolina*, *Danza Kuduro*, etc. Moreover, when DJs want to produce a specific sense effect by playing a particular genre at a specific moment, they choose a few exemplary songs, like *Despacito*, *La Gasolina*, and *Danza Kuduro*. We could then think, using our encyclopedic knowledge and the commutation test, which other songs could have been played instead of these. These songs, together with the ones the DJ chose and played, belong to the cultural unit that we could describe as /reggaeton party music/.

Another relevant distinction that Eco proposes is between *practical* and *poetic* lists (Eco 2009: 113, my translation). Practical lists are referential, that is, "they refer to objects in the external world and have the purely practical purpose of naming and listing them (if these objects did not exist, the list would make no sense [...])." In the case of musical playlists, when Billboard charts the most successful songs of 1987, the list consists of songs that exist (that is, they circulate in the public sphere), and the hierarchy of the list is based on commercial success. Poetic lists are put together by some criterion that is unclear since it does not refer to anything concrete.

Since practical lists include objects that have an actual existence, they are finite. According to Eco (2009: 113, my translation), these lists "intend to list all the objects they refer to, and these objects, if they are physically present in some place, evidently exist in a definite number." In the case of playlists, although new songs appear daily, playlists are practical because they group already existing songs. Finally, Eco proposes that practical lists are not alterable "in the sense that it would be incorrect and senseless to add to a museum catalog a painting that was not kept there" (Eco 2009: 113, my translation). This final reflection does not seem to apply to playlists, for these are alterable, and we can delete and include new items.

Going back to our 1987 playlist, the songs that might integrate it are certainly not infinite since the number of songs published worldwide between 1 January and 31

December 1987 is finite. However, to make the playlist manageable, we must select some units of the whole repertoire. Although we could identify and include into a playlist all the songs published in 1987, cultural dynamics seems to prefer to select some examples to describe and characterize the 1987 musical semiosphere with songs like the ones presented above, that is, using the logic of the exemplary unit and adding an 'etcetera.'

4. Three non-musical criteria used to create playlists

Based on the theoretical discussion presented in the previous sections, this section examines three types of playlists. The focus will be set on identifying the *non-musical* criteria and rules that can be postulated as those underpinning the three different types of playlists studied here. We will begin our analysis with playlists grounded on a *spatial* criterion. Then, we will examine playlists created using a *temporal* rule, like in our example of the 1987 playlist. Finally, we will shift our attention to *collective identities*.

This selection does not imply that only these three types of rules are possible in creating playlists: as discussed above, the criteria are many and of different types, ranging from personal taste (a song is included in the playlist because the creator likes it, even if there is not an evident relationship with others songs included in the playlist), to objective properties of the songs or singers.

A. Playlist created taking space as the grouping criterion

Some playlists consist of songs that relate to each other thanks to a specific link with space. Take as an example a Spotify playlist called *Greek island music*. Such a playlist will most probably include Greek songs (or sung in Greek) and somehow express the social imaginaries linked to the cultural unit /island/, like quietness, relaxation, etc. In cases like this, there is a link between the units included in the playlist and a spatial dimension, like a nation (Greek) or a geographical space (island).

The analytical category of *geo-cultural identity* (Montoro and Moreno Barreneche 2021) can help better understand the nature of playlists created using a spatial rule. Geo-cultural identities are semiotic articulations – packages, we could say – composed of signs, texts, objects, practices and other signifying elements that construct the idea of a collective identity grounded on a geographical materiality. While some collective identities are based on traits like language, preferences, or tradition, others are based on a collective identification with a space. That space undergoes a process of semi-otization and becomes a unit in the dimension of the content that can be expressed through semiotic resources.

Suppose a Brazilian gastronomic entrepreneur wants to open an Italian restaurant in one of Brazil's cities. In that case, they will probably use a range of semiotic resources to construct the idea of Italianness within the restaurant. The decoration, the dishes available, and the language used in the menu and advertisement, among others, will most probably aim to express the cultural unit of Italianness while constructing it. Among the resources used, music can also be crucial in the semiotic effort to evoke the Italian semiosphere.

Geo-cultural identities can be different. We can make a first segmentation in terms of (1) national, (2) subnational, (3) supranational and (4) transnational identities. Examples of national identities are Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Argentinean. We can express these collective identities linked to a national space through music. In this meaning-making process, songs function as carriers of meaning (units in the dimension of the expression) that relate to a dimension of the content (the national identity in question).

Subnational identities are located *within* the national level and evidence some differential traits that allow considering them as collective identities within the overarching national identity. Examples are the Sicilian and Bavarian identities, which also can be expressed using songs and music in opposition to the music of other regions of Italy and Germany. As an example, Bavarian traditional *Blasmusik* (brass music) can be used to express the cultural unit linked to the Bavarian geo-cultural identity, which is one of a subnational type (that is, not recognized as a characteristic and differential trait of Germany as a geo-cultural identity of a national nature).

Supranational geo-cultural identities encompass national identities. Examples of this type of geo-cultural identity are the African and Latin American collective identities. Through music, we can express the cultural units linked to an African and a Latin-American semiosphere and provide access to them. In this sense, some songs work as exemplary African or Latin American, independently of their countries of origin or even if they were indeed created in Africa or Latin America. Whenever we find a Latino party in a German city, the DJ will play songs that express the Latin American semiosphere, even if some songs are from Spanish artists (like Enrique Iglesias' reggaeton songs from the 2010s).

Finally, a fourth type of geo-cultural identity is of a transnational nature, like the Alpine and the Mediterranean identities. These identities include segments of national identities but do not encompass them entirely, as supranational identities do. Suppose our Brazilian gastronomic entrepreneur plans to open a Mediterranean and an Alpine restaurant in Rio de Janeiro. A playlist aimed at expressing the Mediterranean semiosphere will include Spanish, French, Italian, and Greek songs, among others. In contrast, an Alpine playlist will consist of Austrian, German, and Swiss songs and eventually some French and Italian songs. In both cases, the cultural unit linked to a collective identity grounded on space can be expressed and accessed through specific songs, like *Quiero verte* (by Los Sobraos) and *Heast as net* (by Hubert von Goisern und die Alpinkatzen), respectively.

When considering space as the criterion used to create a musical playlist, these four analytical categories can help identify different strategies linked to space segmentation. Regarding national identities, we can create a playlist based on the artists' origin. An Italian playlist could include songs by Eros Ramazzotti, Franco Battiato, Fiorella Mannoia, Andrea Bocelli, Laura Pausini, Baby K, and other Italian singers. It could also have songs by the rock band Måneskin, although it could be tricky to include some songs they sing in English. What would not be part of our Italian playlist are songs by artists who are not Italian or do not sing in Italian. In this example, the notion of the semiosphere can be of use, in particular the idea of boundaries and a hierarchy: within the Italian semiosphere, some artists and songs are 'centrally Italian' (Lucio Battisti, Lucio Dalla, Franco Battiato, etc.), others whose Italianness is debatable (they are located in the margins of the semiosphere) and others who are excluded (let's say Joaquín Sabina or Daddy Yankee) as being undoubtedly outside the Italian semiosphere.

The same logic applies to subnational, supranational, and transnational identities. To create a playlist expressing a transnational identity like the Mediterranean, we will exclude ABBA songs because they do not belong to this semiosphere. But songs from many countries around the Mediterranean, including the Arab world, could be included. Nevertheless, it would be challenging to accept Spanish hard-rock songs in such a playlist since imaginaries of the Mediterranean reflect specific cultural contents linked to particular values (Violi and Lorusso 2011).

B. Playlists created by taking time as the grouping criterion

Next to space, time can also be used as a criterion to create a playlist. Above, we discussed the case of a playlist about the year 1987, as well as summer playlists. We usually make playlists of this type, taking a temporal rule into account. In this sense, songs included in a playlist entitled *Dancing Music from the 1980s* cannot include songs from the 2010s, like a playlist entitled *Summer Hits 2010* cannot have summer hits from a different summer (unless, of course, a new version of an old song is relaunched, for example in the form of a remix).

The temporal criterion to create playlists is salient in the dynamics of culture. This is especially visible in CD compilations like the one in Figure 4 or Spotify lists like in Figure 5.



Figure 4. CD compilation using a temporal criterion.⁵

⁵ Source : <https://www.amazon.com/100-Hits-HITS-80S-VARIOUS/dp/B0050U1Q58>

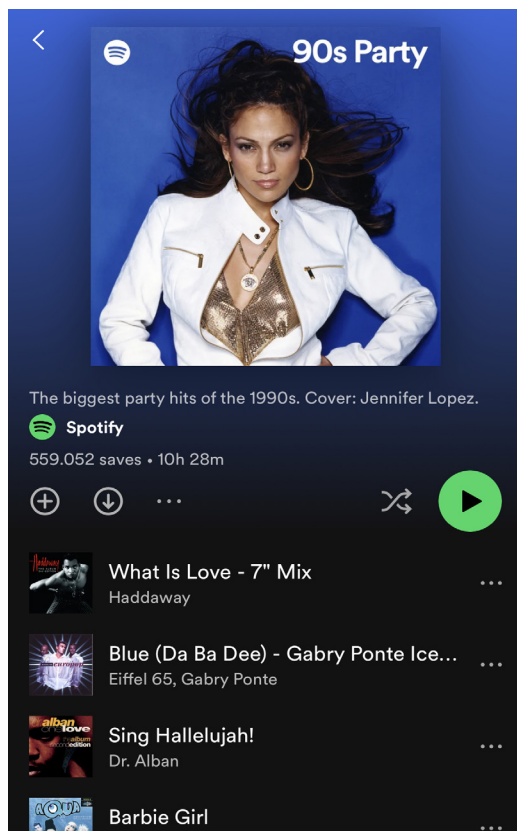


Figure 5. Spotify playlist using a temporal criterion.

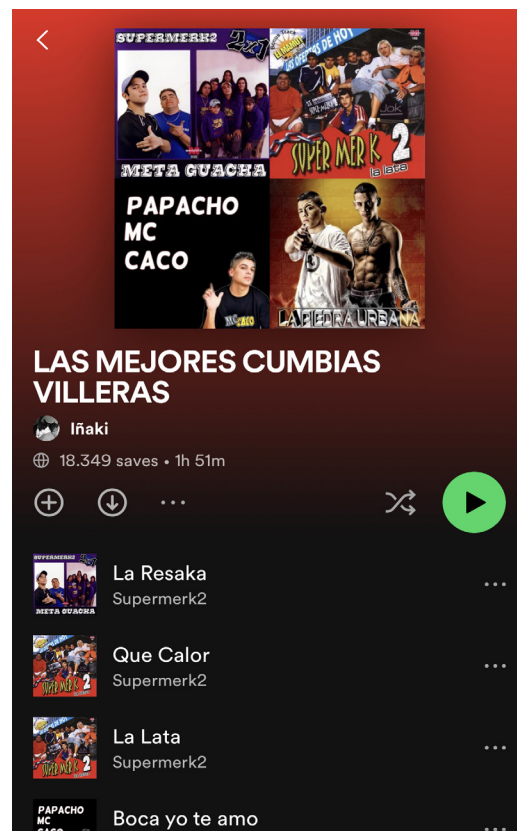


Figure 6. A *cumbia villera* playlist on Spotify.

C. Playlist created by taking collective identities as the grouping criterion

Space and time are transversal categories that can be combined with others to create musical playlists. For example, in a playlist entitled *Uruguayan Rock from the 2000s*, space, time, and genre are the criteria used to group the songs and establish a boundary to discriminate between the songs that could make it into the playlist and those that could not. There is a third non-musical criterion relevant to cultural semiotics, which links to the expression of a collective identity.

Music can be used for collective identification, that is, to express and construct a group identity, where the songs included in the playlist function as semiotic units that populate the cultural repertoire of that collective identity. For example, we can think of class identity in the South of Latin America, where specific social groups define their collective identities as marginal sectors of society listening to specific musical genres, like *cumbia* or urban trap. In the early 2000s, Argentina was the place of origin of *cumbia villera*, a genre whose musical composition and lyrics concern life in the slums, prisons, or the streets. Playlists that group songs from this genre still exist (Figure 6). Here, the grouping is done neither in terms of space or time but of something linked to a collective identity.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to approach musical playlists using a cultural semiotic perspective. As such, it is only a first attempt to think about how cultural semiotics could help define and characterize different semiospheres with the aid of songs grouped following a specific criterion. After discussing lists from a semiotic perspective based on the work of Umberto Eco, we focused on three types of non-musical criteria used to create playlists: space, time, and collective identities.

In our argument, the analytical category of the semiosphere was used to refer to the signifying systems underpinning a playlist. The assumption here is that a playlist is created using a rule and that that rule, following Anna Maria Lorusso's proposal regarding cultural semiotics' methodology, serves to map and access a semiosphere. If we study a playlist including 2010 summer hits, that list can provide us with access to a semiotic articulation linked to time – the year 2010 – but also space, for summer hits typically differ from one country to another. If we recognize the formal traits of the songs (musical arrangements and structure, lyrics, genre, etc.), we could have partial access to the production system underpinning those songs that are part of a playlist, a collection of songs that are somehow regarded as unitary.

This paper presents a theoretical argument and has an exploratory character. Using some examples, it aimed at showing how cultural semiotics, the semiotics of lists, and actual playlists can come together to approach musical playlists as a means to understand the functioning of culture with a focus on signification, sense- and meaning-making. Subsequent empirical work would consist of studying specific playlists and postulating the rule that groups them and how they relate to a particular cultural system. If we think, for example, of a playlist entitled *Uruguayan Rock from the 2000s*, then the analysis of the songs included in that playlist could tell us something about values, topics, genres, and other aspects that were relevant in Uruguay in the 2000s and that work as differential traits of the type of rock music produced in the country in that decade. This is undoubtedly an object of interest for cultural semioticians.

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