Introduction:
The semiotics of circulation

BY: **Gastón Cingolani** and **Sebastián Moreno Barreneche**

We are delighted to present this special issue of *Punctum* on the semiotics of circulation, which was conceived in Thessaloniki, in September 2022, during the 15th World Congress of Semiotics. We thank **Gregory Paschalidis** for the opportunity he kindly gave us to work on this issue as guest editors and, in doing so, for fostering necessary intellectual exchanges between different academic circles in a journal that has become one of the most relevant in semiotics.

Sociocultural semiotics is the discipline that studies social discursivity by analyzing its empirical manifestation in specific texts, practices, interactions, and other objects of study. These serve as entry points for understanding its productive forces, which lie at a deeper level. Therefore, paying attention to how discourses and their empirical manifestations circulate in space and time is an essential task for any project of sociocultural semiotic research.

This approach to the social life of discourses is well-known in the Spanish-speaking academic world, for Argentinean semiotician **Eliseo Verón** put it forward at the end of the twentieth century. However, it is still not widely recognized in other academic circles, where the focus of interest is still the text. To overcome the structural account of semiosis, Verón embraced the work of Charles S. Peirce to ground the social semiotic approach he outlines in *La semiosis social* (1988). Verón's social semiotics studies texts as signifying conglomerates but rejects the principle of immanence embraced by structural semiotics. Instead, he suggests studying discourses in relation to the circumstances and conditions of production and consumption.

Verón proposes to use the analytical categories of the grammar of production and the grammar of recognition to study how texts are produced and read in different social and historical contexts. Between these two moments, circulation is in action.

The concept of circulation is central to Verón's sociosemiotic approach, whose central premise is that meaning emerges in the gap that always exists between production and recognition. Therefore, the semiotics of circulation involves leaving aside the synchronic and immanentist approach and focusing on the *diachronic dimension*, that is, on the life of discourses over time and across different media. Moreover, in a global world like the one we live in, the semiotics of circulation encourages us to traverse different geographies with the purpose of understanding the diverse transformations and manifestations of a specific social discourse – e.g., feminism or environmentalism – in contexts different from that of their origin.

Verón first expressed his interest in circulation in the 1970s. His interest in sense and meaning-making was grounded on a specific aim: understanding the basic mechanisms of the social realm. Verón did not begin his analyses studying sign systems (linguistic or of any other nature). Instead, he constructed a unit of analysis that integrated social exchanges of meaning as well. This approach included two joint projects. On the one hand, a conceptualization of the notion of discourse not as a textual unit but as something emergent, as a fragment of exchange relations. For Verón, discourse is not merely a carrier of meaning but rather a "point of passage," a portion of a network of meaningful relationships. Each discourse is grounded on a set of productive conditions: the conditions for its production and those of its possible readings and effects.

The second project involved elaborating the notion of circulation from a theoretical point of view. Adopting the scheme provided by the economic description of the productive circuit – for example, by Marx in his *Grundrisse* as "production-circulation-consumption" – Verón introduced two modifications. On the one hand, he refers to consumption as "recognition" (which is also a *productive* instance). On the other hand, he does not approach circulation as an actual instance but as an abstract concept. Therefore, circulation is not a 'moment' in the communicative process but, strictly speaking, a difference, a theoretical yet empirically observable gap between the moments of production and recognition.

According to Verón's account, this idea is crucial to understanding the social dynamics of meaning. Circulation not only expresses how meaning is reproduced – above all, it expresses how meaning *changes* and *expands*. This analytical category was highly innovative at its creation because it displaced the axis of semiotic

scholarship from its focus on the text as the central unit of analysis and on sign systems or structures. Therefore, the concept of circulation meant another step in the renewal already introduced by a "semiology of second generation" interested in intertextual phenomena. If sense and meaning are based on a relationship between texts, that type of semiology deals with the genesis of the texts but not with their subsequent derivations and effects.

Despite Verón's approach to circulation (our theoretical anchorage), other conceptualizations of this phenomenon might also be relevant for semiotic scholarship. In this special issue of *Punctum*, we present a selection of articles that elaborate theoretically or investigate through specific case studies the semiotics of circulation, and, in general, aspire to develop a non-immanentist problematics of semiosis by raising issues such as: How do texts and discourses circulate between the moment of production and that of their recognition? How do they travel from one time or space to another? What happens with sense, meaning, and signification in those travels? How do discourses circulate between traditional and digital social media? What happens with circulation in the gap of meaning existing in interactions in the presence of individuals? How do semiotic methodologies work on different scales of circulation, for example, in mediatized and non-mediatized discourses? These were the questions we proposed in the call for papers, launched in the early months of 2023.

The special issue begins with an original English translation of one of Eliseo Verón's essays. "Audiences between production and reception: Problems for a theory of recognition" is a text written for a conference that Verón read in Arrabida, Portugal, in September 2001. Its original title was "Les publics entre production et réception: problèmes pour une théorie de la reconnaissance" and it was originally published in Spanish in 2019, in a translation by **Gastón Cingolani**. In the conference, drawing on an early version of the notion of circulation, Verón develops a set of issues on the mediascape changes that were happening in the transition between centuries: then, television was not only undergoing a transformation manifested in several symptoms but also mediatization and new trends in its modes of consumption and production were emerging.

This special issue's original selection of articles begins with "Spreadability and hate speech of radical conservatism: The Peruvian case on TikTok," a paper written by **Elder Cuevas-Calderón**, **Eduardo Yalán Dongo**, and **Lilian Kanashiro**. This paper focuses on how hate speech spreads and works on TikTok, one of the most popular digital media platforms. The authors propose some dimensions to approach spreadability based on Veron's concept of circulation: time, space, and trajectory. One of the most exciting aspects of the research presented in this paper is the (open)

question about the strategy of radical conservatism, which involves transgression and provocation, together with how TikTok is especially useful to spread their messages, including hate speech, political attacks to their enemies, the deployment of bots or trolls to generate "shitstorms," or the propagation of fake news. The paper proposes four modes of spreadability: contagion, propagation, contamination, and population, as the result of a qualitative analysis of 188 videos and their reactions to the platform.

In "Modes of production, circulation, and academic recognition of an 'archive of repression': the case of the DIPPBA archive in Argentina," **Alex Colman** uses a multidisciplinary approach combining inputs from semiotics, discourse analysis and anthropology to study the DIPPBA (Intelligence Directorate of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police), an archive of repression dating from Argentina's military dictatorship that was opened to the public in 2003, and the first intelligence archive opened to the public. Drawing on Verón's sociosemiotics, Colman explores the relationship between circulation and discursive recognition from two angles: on the one hand, he addresses how changes in the circulation of documents are constitutive of their effects of recognition on academia; on the other hand, he analyzes how this academic recognition becomes constitutive of these changes in circulation, for it provides historical, political, and legal intelligibility to the process of opening the archive.

To analyze some aspects of **Jean-Marie Le Clézio**'s work, in "The politics of literature: indexicality, circulation, and decoloniality," Simon Levesque offers a critical review of the theoretical and methodological principles of sociocriticism, which he considers inadequate to understand literary production due to the immanentist nature of the discourse analysis it proposes. The article reviews the contributions of authors like Rancière, Bakhtin, Silverstein, and Verón to value the notion of circulation and the indexical relationship that connects any discourse with its conditions of production and recognition. Levesque defends this perspective as the most favorable framework to analyze literary output from a decolonial perspective, discussing three fundamental notions stemming from decoloniality semiotics: 'codigophapgy,' 'colonial semiosis,' and 'border thinking.'

Inna Merkoulova's article, "Circulating Emotions: The UNESCO Graphic Novel on Artificial Intelligence," explores fear triggered by technological innovations. The presentation of Artificial Intelligence in society is accompanied by what organizations promote, not only in technical terms but also – and above all – in the form of emotions and passions. Merkoulova studies UNESCO's graphic novel *Inside AI* and its different language versions with the aim of understanding the circulation – in terms of fear, as opposed to shame following Lotman's work – of this technological innovation.

In "Framings, or Mind the Décalage!" **Sara Nocerino** advocates for framing devices as an interdisciplinary tool to analyze the circulation of discourses over time, space, and media. Based on three essential features – liminal responsiveness, historical plasticity, and cultural meta-representativity – she defines framings as intermediate spaces that display the cultural negotiation about the codification of reality 'here and now' by drawing upon synchronic grammars of production and recognition. Her theoretical considerations are applied to two collections of short stories: *Quarantena* and *The Decameron Project*. The analysis of their multimedial framing devices reveals a long-lasting paradigm for Western meta-discourse over storytelling, tracing its roots back to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Nocerino concludes that framing devices represent a useful interdisciplinary tool to face the historical reality of a composite and ever-evolving semiotic network and, in so doing, properly develop the meta-historical approach advocated by Verón.

The paper "From villainess to Eco-icon: the blossoming of Poison Ivy" by **Alessandra Richetto** focuses on the fictional character of Poison Ivy, created by DC Comics, to study how the axiology of this character shifted over time from a villain – she was initially constructed as an evil femme fatale in Batman's comics – to one with a motivation that can be approached as euphoric, as evidenced in her solo series. Comparing two texts (one from 1966 and one from 2022), Richetto looks at the isotopies present in these texts and the values related to the character's moral alignment, for these allow us to study the changes evidenced in the axiology attributed to her.

In "From the Mass Media Museum to the Social Media Museum: Investigating the Museum Space in the Era of Mobile Devices," **Aluminé Rosso** employs Verón's concept of circulation to study the museum experience, which includes the building, the artworks, the exhibition materials, the visitor's body, and different technologies that participate in the configuration of visiting contracts and visiting agreements. The author focuses on all the forms of sense produced by emergent devices, mainly social media platforms. After presenting a short history of the museum in "four acts" (the Massive Museum Sensibility, the Triumph of the Blockbuster, from Digital Cameras to Smartphones, and from the Selfie in the museum to the Explosion of the QR Code), the article aims to shed light on the contemporary museum experience by analyzing both physical and digital visiting practices developed in the Centre Pompidou (Paris) and the Museo Reina Sofia (Madrid).

Georgios Sklavounakis's paper, "Semiotics on music charts: The signification of late-blooming hits in contemporary popular music," deals with the realm of music and studies a selection of songs that reached their peak of success years after their first commercial release. For that purpose, Sklavounakis uses American charts like Billboard's Hot 100 and studies the context surrounding the songs' release and

commercial peak. In doing this, the author dwells on the phenomenon of musical re-emergence and approaches it using Verón's distinction between the grammar of production and recognition.

Finally, this special issue presents an article that stems not from sociocultural semiotics but from biosemiotics. In "The circulation of meaning: a biosemiotic perspective on the functional circle," **Nicola Zengiaro** takes a deep dive into Jakon von Uexküll's work and the umwelt, which is composed of the interwoven relationship between the operational and perceptual marks of organisms. Here, the notion of a "functional circle," a general pattern that underlines the relationship between any animal and the world, gains relevance. According to this perspective, it is here where the circulation of meaning occurs, a phenomenon whose proper study requires dealing with cognitive semiotics of a corporeal type. This biosemiotic account of circulation, divergent from the other papers composing the special issue, shows how the concept of circulation can be used in different semiotic accounts.

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