

The Meaning of Collections between Media and Practices: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the foundations of a semiotics of collecting, from Wunderkammers or cabinets of curiosities to modern digital phenomena such as NFTs. It examines the extent to which the practice of collecting shares similarities with the semiotic research methodology of creating meaningful analytical corpora. It discusses the market and symbolic aspects of collections, addressing their transformative value and the transition from objects that gain value through collecting to those produced as collectibles in the first place. The role of online platforms in the presentation and valuation of collections is emphasized, particularly in the context of online entertainment and user-generated content; the compulsive nature of modern media consumption makes it comparable to a form of collecting. Collecting must be understood as a theoretical category and epistemological horizon essential to the organization and understanding of objects and concepts in various disciplines.

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In his erudite and enjoyable essay entitled *The Infinity of Lists* (2009), Umberto Eco associates the practice of itemization with the dizzying semiotic modality of accumulation and categorization. The list, the catalog, the register, and the inventory are indeed quasi-synonyms, all united by their belonging to a specific semantic area: they refer to a set of things whose being together is governed by some kind of pertinence and relevance. If you think about it, this is, *de facto*, the same

principle that guides the semiotic researcher in the act of detaching the text to be studied from the phenomenological world, of constructing the corpus of analysis which, to be meaningful, must show an isotopic consistency, at least – as Charles Sanders Peirce would have put it – in some respects.

There is an elective affinity between the semiotician's procedure in building their field of action and the subject who draws up lists or, even more generically, collects and sorts. But more is needed, given that sets are capable not only of signifying as semiotic objects but also of profoundly resemantizing the elements that compose them. This is precisely the guiding principle of the collection: a beer cap is, by itself, an object whose significance is rapidly exhausted and strictly limited to its primary function (preventing liquid from escaping from a bottle). However, that same cap takes on another – and higher – value when associated with others, in a syntagm defined by the collector that does not foresee any paradigm. The collection is, therefore, a whole, which, by semiotic statute, precisely defines its boundaries and value, what it contains, and what it excludes.

Collecting is a practice codified in Antiquity, as demonstrated by the Medieval and Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, an exercise in orderly and scrupulous accumulation that ennoble the contained object and the container context. From here stems the iconography of the 'chamber of wonders' meant as a spectacle for the eyes, not only on account of the objects it contains but also of *how* they are contained, with reverberations also in the *still life* – which aestheticizes the chaotic set (the famous 'order in disorder') of things that become environment – recently described by media scholar Henry Jenkins in his *Comics and Stuff* (2020): the 'stuff' becomes the vehicle of a real autobiography through fragments of the world. Collecting is not simply gathering since the term takes on specific semantic values related to identity communities, forms of life, and market sectors. This happens with regard to the physical, offline world, as much as to the digital, online one; a notable recent example is the craze for NFTs, both within and outside the realm of contemporary art. Collection practices also lead us to reconsider an assumption shared by semiotics: the collecting market is a market dominated by tokens rather than by types (albeit the latter are essential for the expert to establish the authenticity of the former). Today, the Pokémon card market, perhaps the ultimate example of a Kitsch product for children in the eyes of a non-collector, is, for initiates, a sort of parallel philately. A card like 'Charizard first edition' (whose rarity is defined by a combination of factors) takes on the symbolic value of a Gronchi Rosa, the cult stamp for collectors, with all the consequences thereof (the creation of markets, speculative bubbles, and falsifications).

The market – both at an economic and symbolic level – of collections is now so fashionable that it represents an area of great importance. Earlier collections were based on the semantic remodeling of an object whose value transmuted, astonishingly, from the condition of a simple object to that of a treasure. Today, it is increasingly common that collectibles are already born as such. Whereas previously, things such as bottle caps, stamps, comics, or butterflies were conceived as devices that were ‘recovered’ in the act of collecting them, today, industries produce items that can be collected ‘in the matrix.’ In addition, collections are active semiotic constructs, practiced by enthusiasts but also passive ones, and enjoyed by growing audiences, especially in online entertainment genres. YouTube is filled with thousands of videos where collectors show off their treasures, while many videos are formally constructed according to the semiotic principle of the ‘vertigo of lists.’ In online neo-neotelevision, the ‘top’ (ten, twenty, etc.) and the ‘best of’ embody the revival of formats relevant since the traditional media. This is a kind of ‘new life’ for the semiotic form of the canon. The aestheticization of the whole becomes a show capable of vigorously re-conferring value to the most disparate objects, which, framed within the semiotic horizon of the collection, acquire a kind of specific harmony. The sense of the whole is capable, *à la* Aby Warburg, of illuminating the sense of the single component.

On the one hand, the websites that host such content are, in turn, containers; on the other, the dynamics of accumulation are such as to substantiate some of the most common practices in the contemporary media world. Binge-watching is, to all intents and purposes, a compulsive accumulation of visions fed by a sort of ‘aesthetic disposophobia’ of which the streaming platforms are well aware and which they foster through their user interface design. Before the streaming era, at the dawn of the domestic Internet, many downloaded and stored, according to personal and shared forms of classification, as many materials as possible, being aware that they would have been much more than what one could hear, watch, or read. Nonetheless, the early Internet collector would find disturbing an mp3 discography with even one single file missing. Back in 1977, in his classic guide to *How to Write a Thesis* (Eng. trans. 2015), Umberto Eco warned against the risks of compulsive informational and cultural accumulation. Photocopying one or several books could lead to the illusion of possessing not just the object but its actual textual content as well.

Therefore, the collection takes shape as a theoretical category, a set of practices, a form of discourse, a format, and even an epistemological horizon. This last point is particularly interesting, given that a good part of human doctrines, both those with a humanistic vocation and the so-called *STEM* disciplines, must consider as a preliminary basis

for their analyses a set of objects organized in some way. Lists, corpora, ensembles, categories, classes, archives, canons, and counter-canons are just some of the terms – each clearly, with different nuances and meanings – that constitute a kind of a ‘set-theoretic reason.’

Thus, the collection critiques set-theoretic reasoning, persisting through the ages. The articles in this issue demonstrate how, as an organizational matrix of things (both objective and semiotic), a collection is a specific concretion of communal, identity-related, and sociosemiotic dynamics. In more extended terms, it can be understood as the competence underlying the construction of forms of life, even pathological ones. Through the collection, forms of entertainment are articulated (both active and passive; e.g., see textual genres such as ‘unboxing videos’), but also serious ways of managing and regulating the circulation of objects and bodies within societies and cultures. More fundamentally, through the collection, the idea of ‘thingness’ is defined; that is, the contours – to be precise, the enunciative thresholds – that make things what they are and simultaneously establish their semiotic value from this delimitation.

These are the theoretical foundations of the volume at hand, opened by **Sebastián Moreno Barreneche**’s article, which introduces the theme of music collections. He proposes a semiotics of musical playlists, objects that take on a collector’s dimension by organizing sets of songs according to various principles of relevance. According to Moreno’s approach, these playlists can exert a particular influence in shaping semiospheres. Using the tools of cultural semiotics, his contribution explores musical playlists and presents a taxonomy that identifies non-musical parameters, such as spatial, temporal, and identity-related criteria, in their creation and reception.

Margaux Cerutti focuses on a specific case study: that of the movie poster, observed diachronically considering its formal evolution and the gradients of significance it has gradually acquired. Through a comparative semiotic approach, which examines the production of original posters, alternative posters, and the contemporary case of Netflix posters, Cerutti emphasizes how the collection of visual objects of this kind, beyond the fetishism towards specific cinematographic paratexts, can be a manifestation of contemporary participatory culture.

Roberta Cicchirillo’s article focuses on the collection as a rhetorical device in the Italian language that manifests itself through lists. Starting from a semiotic bipartition

between *everything-here lists* and *etcetera lists*, she moves in two directions: on the one hand, through the analysis of some grocery lists Cicchirillo lays the groundwork for a kind of semiotics of everyday life *sub specie collectionis*; on the other hand, the investigation of how lists are used in Italian political communication highlights the strategic-rhetorical value of this specific linguistic figure in terms of effectiveness in public persuasion processes.

Jacques Fontanille postulates a theory of seriality as a semiotically inscribed feature in works that do not initially present themselves as ‘serial.’ By comparing the pictorial works of the Iranian artist Mehdi Sahabi and the French artist Georges Laurent, his analysis aims to identify in the visual text a volumetry of meaning that takes on serial connotations in its layered and multidimensional morphologies. These serial features are identifiable as syntagmatic processes unfolding in a serial space-time within each work. Fontanille opens a new perspective for pictorial analysis, supported by an epistemology of seriality as the matrix of a dynamic construct which, through semiotic methodology, can illuminate the visual text more profoundly and richly.

Daniel Jacobi’s article remains within the artistic realm, questioning the fate of museum collections in an era of overcrowded museum storage. The author highlights the potential loss of meaning when collections are removed from the exhibition context. After emphasizing the importance of museum inventory practice as a specific form of collection organization, Jacobi identifies contemporary procedures of digitization and dematerialization of artworks as potentially threatening if not cautiously approached. These procedures imply a reshaping of the collectivist dimension intrinsic to the physical exhibition, which risks undermining the potential of the artwork understood, in terms of Krystoff Pomian, as a “semiphore,” a singular semiotic unit whose semiotic value is destined to endure.

Rocco Pellino maps the literary field through a comparative analysis of Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) and Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884). He examines how these two novels use the inventory to construct the characters’ identities and as a trace of specific features of the authorial instance. Pellino identifies different semantic configurations of the inventory in these two contemporary novels, each expressing a particular value symmetry in terms of intimacy vs. extraneity and distillation vs. cluttering. His discussion of the two novels offers a broad reflection on late nineteenth-century ideologies and phobias related to accumulation, a degenerated form of collection and inventory.

Ioulia Pentazou's article addresses the connection between collecting practices and forms of archiving, with a specific focus on the digital context. Pentazou's thesis is that with the displacement of the collection into the digital environment, there is a transition from the subject-object relationship to the human-machine relationship. This relationship requires a specific conception of meaning, which takes on the characteristics of a dynamic process that transcends the very idea of content.

Francesco Piluso proposes a mythopoeia of the collection, understood as a practice essential to forming subjecthood. Focusing on two animation films, *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements 1989) and *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton 2008), and guided by Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, he establishes the relationship between object collections and subject formation, identifying the subjectivation dynamics associated with specific forms of collection arrangements. Further insight is dedicated to the film *Everything is Illuminated* (Liev Schreiber 2005, adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel), introducing a kind of eschatological vocation of the collection.

The relationship between object and subject is also the starting point of **Gabriella Rava's** contribution, which questions the consequences of this relationship in a crucial recent form of collecting: digital collecting. In the digital realm, the dematerialization of the collected object generates a resemantization of the scarcity/rarity principle underlying traditional collecting discourse. Nevertheless, according to Rava, new forms of collecting are possible in light of reevaluating the communal dimension of preservation for the immaterial good. Rava focuses on new forms of collecting, where the principle of possession is reconsidered, and the archival dimension is enhanced, opening up a future semantics of collecting that is still to be written and imagined.

The issue concludes with **Emiliano Vargas's** paper, which offers an additional perspective on musical playlists. Vargas approaches them as a sequel of the traditional idea of *repertoire* and explores their ability to influence contemporary cultural forms, altering socially shared tastes and ways of conceiving and perceiving music. Vargas sees the playlist as a genuine format that encodes cultures expressed through developing musical genres and productive and receptive practices.

The set of contributions summarized here ultimately constitutes a semiotically oriented cartography of the notion of collection, explored as a theme cutting across a complex series of expressive fields. It is consistently understood as a semiotic-interpretative category that does not merely indicate a set of objects (material or symbolic)

but highlights the dynamics of internal organization and peculiar forms of semantic configurations. In conclusion, we should emphasize a gratifying observation: this coherence is undoubtedly the result of extensive previous work on the collectivist horizon, bibliographically and methodologically shared by many contributions and a solid state-of-the-art to build further reflections. It is also a sign of a common sensitivity and a communion of visions regarding what has emerged as a still-relevant issue, especially considering its constant modification over time. In light of what has emerged, we hope this issue will be placed in the tradition of studies on the subject (a heterogeneous tradition, given the disparate variations on the theme that the collection and its almost synonyms inevitably entail) as a vital bibliographical resource. After all, even a bibliography is, in every respect, a collection.

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