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Semiotics of Circulation

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Gastón Cingolani &
Sebastián Moreno Barreneche

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Table of Contents

ARTICLES	Introduction: The semiotics of circulation Gastón Cingolani and Sebastián Moreno Barreneche	5
	Audiences between production and reception: Problems of a theory of recognition Eliséo Verón	11
	Spreadability and hate speech of radical conservatism: The Peruvian case on TikTok Elder Cuevas Calderón , Eduardo Yalán Dongo and Lilián Kanashiro	27
	Modes of production, circulation, and academic recognition of an 'archive of repression': The case of the DIPPBA archive in Argentina Alex Colman	55
	The politics of literature: Indexicality, circulation, and decoloniality Simon Levesque	83
	Circulating Emotions: UNESCO's original initiative on Artificial Intelligence Inna Merkoulova	105
	Framings, or mind the décalage! Sara Nocerino	123
	From villainess to Eco-icon: The blossoming of Poison Ivy Alessandra Richetto	143
	From the mass media museum to the social media museum: Investigating the museum space in the era of mobile devices Aluminé Rosso	165
	Semiotics on music charts: The signification of late-blooming hits in contemporary popular music Giorgos Sklavounakis	189
	The circulation of meaning: A biosemiotic perspective on the functional circle Nicola Zengiaro	209

	<hr/> Cinema and intermediality: Enhancing the spectator Nicola Dusi	227
REVIEWS	<hr/> Matter, energy, and identity in Translation Studies Sergio Torres-Martinez	235
	<hr/> Semiotics in matters legal Panagiotis G. Krimpas	241

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Introduction: The semiotics of circulation

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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.

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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 problematic 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 Verón’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: ‘codigophagy,’ ‘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 Jakob 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.

AUTHOR

Gastón Cingolani Professor in Communication, Semiotics and Media, Universidad Nacional de las Artes (Argentina)



AUTHOR

Sebastián Moreno Barreneche Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Universidad ORT Uruguay (Montevideo, Uruguay)



Audiences between production and reception: Problems of a theory of recognition¹

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BY: **Eliséo Verón**

Translated into English by
Alejandra Rondón, Gastón Cingolani
and **Sebastián Moreno Barreneche**

1. Situation diagnosis

Media studies are currently experiencing a somewhat confusing situation. This confusion is mainly due to the reorientation of research on reception phenomena over the last twenty years. How is it possible for this reorientation, which may convey the feeling that it will complicate the issue of media circulation even more than it already is, to have led to a critical outlook or, in any case, to generalized discomfort?

The reason seems quite simple to me: reception studies have not come to put an end to an increasingly complete journey. Reception is not the ‘missing link’ in our media science – little do we know today about what is uncertainly called *reception*, which reveals that it is necessary to start everything over. This should not discourage us. On the contrary, it is a sign that we are already at the point where a minimum of global theoretical coherence is necessary and that our ‘communication sciences’ may one day, who knows, become sciences.

The imperative for theoretical coherence is an internal demand in the processes of knowledge production: the complexity of media reception raises questions about circulation as a whole and invites us to review, for example, the very notion of text *in the way it was built, mainly when it did not concern reception*.

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¹ Translated into English and published after permission from the journal *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, where it was initially published (in its Spanish version) in 2019 as “Los públicos entre producción y recepción. Problemas para una teoría del reconocimiento,” Vol.14, No. 1, pp. 163-179.

This is not our first time in a situation like this. The struggle for the importance of the media 'message' and its complexity had been led by semioticians, pragmatists, and other language and discourse analysts in light of a deeply felt reproach: after so many years of asking questions about the media effects, it might be better to provide some models about the objects that would produce such 'effects.' The progress brought about by the 'sciences of language and communication' led us to an inevitable conclusion: we could hardly continue discussing 'effects.' Today, we conduct research on reception, and everyone knows that we are asking increasingly tricky questions: We study the reception of what precisely and by whom. Can we continue talking about receivers, the public, and audiences like we have done for years?

Historical situations do not repeat themselves. We are going through a much more difficult situation than the previous one. The problem of the discursive succeeded in replacing the primitive notion of 'message' with the help of complex and well-crafted conceptual instruments provided by semiotics and other 'language and communication sciences.' These tools were crafted for purposes utterly unrelated to those of understanding media. Instead, to sketch research on reception, we have no other tools at our disposal than those developed by the system that we are studying: the notions of public and audience are inseparable from the functioning of the media machinery.

This last remark prompts me to recall another source of current difficulties that is not dependent on the history of media research but on the history of the media. This is a short history, but it is speeding up. However, there is a *crisis within the media universe* that concerns precisely the articulation between supply and demand: the concepts and tools for measuring reception, audiences, and the public are in crisis within the practice of producers. *At the very moment when media research was beginning to show interest in reception, the media field was entering a zone of strong turbulence.* There is also likely a link between these two processes, one within the media field and the other within the scholarly field.

To address the problem of reception, I consider it essential to delve into the links between these two histories: the history of media and the history of media research. However, it is appropriate to first round some more theoretical than historical questions.

2. Interpretants

Some time ago, I was led to distinguish two unyielding points of view about the processes of meaning production that give rise to the concepts of *production* and *recognition grammars* (Verón 1888). Then, the theoretical framework was discourse analysis, which was close to the problem of extended linguistics. The distinction between production and recognition sought to establish the hypothesis of the non-linear character of discursive

circulation, thus opposing both Saussurean-inspired Semiology and Pragmatics. When confronting Semiology (especially the European one), it was, therefore, necessary to assert that a text cannot be analyzed 'in itself'; it can be analyzed either in relation to its conditions of production or in relation to its conditions of recognition, and these two types of analysis of the same text (which becomes discourse through analysis) are qualitatively different. When confronting pragmatics, it was necessary to insist that, between production and recognition, meaning is not calculable (which is evidenced by saying that communication processes are systems far from equilibrium). The concept of communication intention undoubtedly expresses the desire for calculation by the communication actor, whereas it cannot satisfy the researcher (Verón 1988).

This point of view is valid at all levels of human communication, whether micro- or macroscopic, mediatized or not. The need to state the complexity principle appears more clearly when dealing with the exchange of media discourses. Still, it is already evident when we are interested, for example, in conversational exchanges. This is critical about research on reception because whatever approach is taken, the media reception that concerns us here is always an *individualized* semiotic process.²

From a strictly semiotic point of view, Peirce's theory can help us clarify certain aspects of this complexity. Let us first recall that semiosis -the minimal unit in the process of meaning production- can be represented, following Peirce, in the following way:

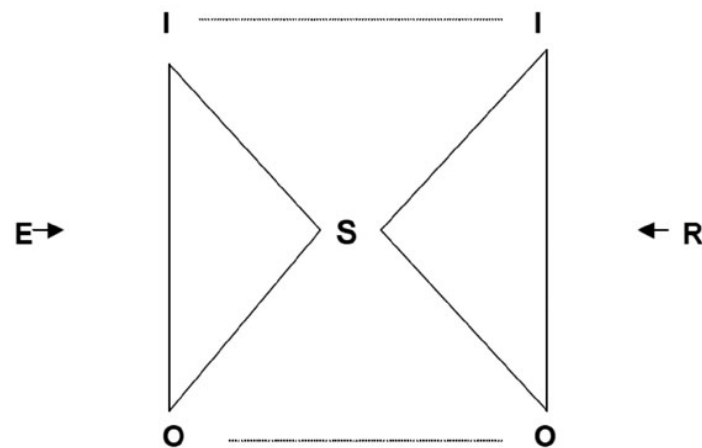


Figure 1. Source: own elaboration

² If the principle of complexity, involved in the relations between production and recognition, seems to me to be valid at all levels of communication, the individual or collective character of the rules that compose the grammars (of production or recognition) is, on the contrary, variable according to the levels. In the historically classical case of the 'mass media,' the grammars of production are collective, and those of recognition are individual. In the discursive circulation of science, for example, the device of scientific institutions is there to ensure the collective character of the grammars of both production and recognition. Or, if one prefers, the rules of scientific knowledge seek to neutralize (as far as possible) individual logic by *institutionalizing* "acceptable" grammars of recognition. "Individual" here does not mean "psychological" (Livingstone 1990), but that is a different debate.

The *minimal* semiotic relationship between a sender (E) and a receptor (R) (pre-theoretical notions), therefore, implies the articulation between two triads whose only common element a priori for an observer is the sign or representamen (S) in its material, sensitive manifestation. For an observer, the relation (----) between the interpretants (I) and the objects (O) operating in S and R is *problematic*. This problematic character arises from the non-calculability of circulation and is at the root of all the difficulties in reception studies.

A given media discourse produced by (E) (a newspaper, a book, a film, a television program, etc.) is a complex network of triads at all levels of its organization, which must still be inserted into a more complex network that I call its *conditions of production*. I call the grammar of production the set of rules that link this discourse to its conditions of production. In the case of the media, this grammar refers to technical and organizational devices materialized in institutions.

However, regarding (R), the observer finds himself with several individuals who have 'received' the discourse in question. Moreover, he doesn't quite know what to do with this set. How can receptors be conceptualized? Which collectives should they be placed in? In the context of Peirce's semiotics, these questions touch on the theory of interpretants.

We can conceptualize interpretants as abstract semiotic entities composed of what we can call *collectives*. A collective is a semiotic entity that involves identifying and categorizing a plurality of actors; it determines sets of operational rules (of production or interpretation) that the observer is led to reconstruct. The mismatch between both poles of production and recognition is expressed in the problematic relationship between our (I) and our (O) in the minimal unity diagram within the production of meaning. In any communication process, collectives are interweaving, both on the production and recognition levels. Here lies the interest in distinguishing between *interpretant* and *collective*: an interpretant is a set of collectives articulated in specific ways. For example, 'shared cultural capital,' 'schooling,' 'acquired knowledge,' and 'television as an institution' are collectives built in the grammars of recognition by popular science broadcasts towards the end of the 1980s.³ An essential point concerns the properties attributed to collectives, for example, the distinction between 'public or publics,' 'almost public,' and 'audiences' discussed by Daniel Dayan (Dayan 2000).⁴

Here, we will focus on the interpretants who have marked the history of television in production.

³ De Cheveigné and Veron (1994). See also: Fouquier and Veron (1986) and the issue of the journal *Hermès* on science and media (de Cheveigné 1997).

⁴ An interesting discussion of the philosophical history of collectives can be found in Descombes (1992).

3. Three stages

In the 1980s, the first hypotheses concerning a periodization of the history of television were formulated. In Europe, the discussion was opened by Umberto Eco, who made the distinction between 'paleo-' and 'neo-television' proposed in 1983.⁵ A few years later, this distinction was resumed in France, giving rise to an issue of the journal *Communications* on the mutations of television (Casetti and Odin 1990). Although the European history of state television had marked this discussion, the evolutionary scheme drawn at that time also applied to, though with certain adjustments, the history of mass television in general. As is always the case when large periodizations are established, this global evolution – from the social installation of television to the end of the 1990s – had different rhythms in different regions of the world, and, at certain times, underlying trends intersected and co-existed.

I have insisted elsewhere on what is, from my point of view, the central characteristic of the link established by television in modern societies: television for the general public is a media built on contact through the *gaze relationship*, that is, a predominantly index-based media.⁶

In the discussion that I have just mentioned on the stages of television, this contact relationship, which falls under Peirce's secondness and has become the essential cornerstone of mass television since its origin, was taken by Eco (wrongly, in my opinion) as a characteristic of 'neo-television.' Both Casetti and Odin appeal to the notion of a communication contract. However, they consider it a characteristic of 'paleo-television,' which seems to me to be an inverse and complementary error to that stated by Eco. Asserting as they do that 'neo-television' does not imply a communication contract is, in my opinion, a contradiction in terms (Casetti and Odin 1990). What makes it possible to differentiate the stages in the history of general public television are the interpretants that characterize the communication contracts and not the structural link, which always goes through an indexical contact.

My presentation of mass television's first two historical stages would differ from those involved in discussions about 'paleo-' and 'neo-television.' I will restrict myself here to briefly discussing the characteristics of these stages from the point of view of the *history of interpretants*. I will not use the terms 'paleo' and 'neo' because we have now entered a third stage; therefore, a simple dichotomy would not be adequate, except for falling into the error made about modernity, which refers to such a notion as 'post.'

⁵ Text published in French in Eco (1985).

⁶ See Verón (1983). Several of these works were collected in Spanish in Verón (2001).

In the initial stage, which extends from the installation of television in the social fabric from the 1950s until the end of the 1970s (with reservations concerning the pace differences in different countries as well as the interweaving between the characteristics of the first and second stages), *the socio-institutional, outer-television context* provided the fundamental interpretant. The communication contract was not one of transparency (because it was predominantly complementary and pedagogical, according to the Batesonian concept – cf. Bateson 1972). Still, the most precise metaphor of mass-public television in this period is that of a ‘window’ that opened to the outside world, even if this world (the dynamic object of this first television) was rigorously built *from a national localization*. Therefore, from this point of view, the historical role of this type of television has been the same, staying both under the State monopolistic regime in Europe and the private regime in the United States. In either case, the central interpretant is the Nation-state, in a sense that is both political and cultural. Advertising, an essential partner in this contract, has probably accelerated the process in the United States compared to that in Europe, given that advertising discourse entails dimensions that go well beyond the marketing logic of consumption (cf. Verón 1994). Anyway, what made this communication contract possible (and highly effective) was the *scarcity of supply*.

The nation-interpretant in production corresponds to a citizen-interpretant in reception. *These television collectives are not political – they belong to a communication contract, whereas the formal collectives of the democratic system are not communication collectives. It is true that in this first stage, the communicational collective of ‘citizen viewers’ and the formal collective of citizens empirically tend to overlap. Since then, they have only separated, gradually becoming more and more dissociated.*

The 1980s were primarily a transition period between the first and second stages. The transition may have been more ‘natural’ in the United States, while in Europe, it has involved the deconstruction of state television and the early transition to the private sector, which undoubtedly caused some friction. During these years of transition, the smooth onset of cable initiated a multiplication and diversification of the offer, with Europe lagging far behind in this regard.

This second stage is where *television becomes the interpretant-institution, always within the framework of the structural index link that has characterized the primary device from its origin*. It is easy to understand that this focus on media as an institution was more consistent in the context of commercial television in the United States than in the European context, where this transformation implied a significant loss of the territory of the public space of the State. This explains why, in the eyes of some European researchers, as I have just recalled, this new television may have appeared as one without a communication contract (Casetti and Odin 1990). Roughly speaking, this second stage extends until the end of the 20th Century (and the millennium).

The evolution of the forms of discourse corresponds to this transformation on the level of the interpretant: 'internalization' of the space of television news, which I had studied at that time;⁷ the emergence of game shows and talk shows already highlighted by Eco; the advent of 'short' forms in programming, accelerated by the generalization of the video clip as a rhetorical unity, etc.⁸ One of the critical consequences of this takeover of the television institution has been the increasing visibility of enunciation strategies.

The multiplication and diversification of the offer (transition from a few terrestrial channels to more than a hundred cable signals) is only the technical aspect of this semiotic transformation of the link between supply and demand. This transformation has raised interest in the notion of *flow*. However, this notion must be re-discussed because, in its *historical form*, zapping as a reception strategy conveyed an adaptation to the multiplication of supply, that is to say, a transition strategy. In any case, the main thing about the second phase is that mainstream television detached itself from politics and that the television institution provided the core of the interpretant in production.

The first phase corresponds to a strong convergence between supply and demand, both in the consumer market in general and in the media discourse market in particular. During the 1980s, the emergence of some symptoms announced the beginnings of a divergence, which became increasingly vital during the 1990s.

The transition from one century to another, and therefore the passage to the third millennium, also involves the beginning of a third stage in the history of general public television. From the point of view of enunciation strategies (that is to say, from the point of view of production), the dominant interpretant in this third stage consists of a complex configuration of collectives established as external to the television institution *but attributed to the non-mediated world of the recipient*.

This third stage in the history of mass television will likely be its last. This third stage would then announce the end of general public television as a truly historical phenomenon. The designation *general public television*, which I prefer, clearly indicates the species that would be in danger of extinction: this would have been inseparable from a relative scarcity of the offer and, consequently, from an activation of large audiences. Media history shows that no media disappears; each medium, which thus becomes an 'old' one, then becomes integrated into a new configuration of uses. Old forms persist, re-signified in a new context.

⁷ See Verón (1981, 1983).

⁸ A discussion of this evolution of the forms of science popularization programs can be found in de Cheveigné and Verón (1994).

We know that foresight is always a dangerous exercise. However, I don't think the hypothesis about the end of mainstream television is absurd; on the contrary, I find it plausible. In any case, let us first try to clarify certain characteristics of this third stage, which appear especially clearly in the recent phenomenon of reality shows.

Reality shows represent quite well the beginning of mainstream television's third stage (whether it is the latest or the last), with disproportionate audiences that undoubtedly can already be considered as part of an ancient story. But this third phase deserves a separate chapter.

4. Reality-shows, or thematizing mediatization

Addressing the issue of reality shows is a delicate matter, given the global importance of the phenomenon and the enthusiastic reactions it has provoked. Research on this new product is still in its early stages. Still, it will soon become full-fledged: this will undoubtedly be a typical case where the media agenda directly affects the researchers' agenda, and there is nothing bad about that. I will ignore the extremely vigorous controversies which, I consider, have proven (one last time!) the historical incompatibility between the object of television and the traditional culture of intellectuals, even if they are postmodern, an incompatibility which is, rightly so, one of Dominique Wolton's favorite subjects (Wolton 1990).

The following remarks should be taken as a matter of debate. On the one hand, they rest on fragmentary analyses in production, carried out from the discursive surfaces of specific variants of this product placed on the market in several countries (specifically, *Expedición Robinson* and *Big Brother*).⁹ On the other hand, I have direct experience with observations of the technical device and working meetings with the production team of the Argentine version of *Big Brother*.¹⁰ All this does not go further than the notebook of an anthropologist who would have spent a few months in the society that interests him, except that, in this particular case, the notion of participant observation is appropriate because I had the opportunity to intervene in broadcasts of debate which were part of the programming of *Big Brother Argentina*, and therefore, to discuss on the same occasion with several of the participants who had already left the house. At the same time, for those interested in the latest phase of mediatization that

⁹ *Expedición Robinson* is the Argentine name for *Survivors*, called *Les aventuriers de Ko Lanta* in France, and *No limite* in Brazil. *Big Brother* has been translated as such in most countries, except in France, where it became *Loft Story* with many modifications with respect to the original format.

¹⁰ I am deeply grateful to this team, whose cordiality and openness have been remarkable.

we are currently experiencing, the wealth of material provided by all aspects of reality show production is, strictly speaking, overwhelming. Consequently, my remarks are barely a few hypotheses on the question. In any case, we, researchers, have work to do for a while in the coming years.

Like most of the products that have marked the history of mainstream television, the reality show is a hybrid, particularly crossbred of several components, each of which, considered in itself, does not entail anything new. It is the combination of these components, in particular some variants of the genre, which constitutes a sort of exemplary symptom of a 'paradigm' change.

First of all, we must eliminate the problem of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. In Eco's initial perspective, the boundary between 'fiction' and 'reality' was clearly drawn in the case of 'paleo-television.' Still, it became blurred and tended to disappear in 'neo-television' (in fact, for him, the effaced nature of this distinction constitutes one of the indicators of the transition from one television to another) (Eco 1985). Other authors, including myself, have insisted on this point about specific characteristics of the Latin American soap opera, which was nevertheless a typical product of the first phase (Cf. Verón 1978 and 2001). The discussion on the border between 'fiction' and reality has, in any case, been reactivated about reality shows, and it is clear that the name that the television institution gave to this product has been an invitation. I believe, however, that such a discussion is not relevant to understanding reality shows in the context of television history and instead tends to confuse the issue.¹¹

In the context of research on media discourses, the distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' raises very complex problems that go well beyond the scope of this work. I will limit myself to two remarks, one theoretical and the other specific to the product in question.

From a theoretical point of view, the distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' is located on the level of the enunciative meta-operators and not on the level of the discursive construction characteristics. The distinction is in the order of the parentheses and not in the order of the parentheses' content. The same discursive structure can thus be modalized as fictional or non-fictional, depending on the case: [Discourse X]F, [Discourse X]NF. In other words, from a semiotic point of view, what we call 'reality' is as constructed (or, if you like, as staged) as what we oppose it to as 'fictional': *mise-en-scène* [staging] and *mise-en-sens* [sense construction] are synonymous (Verón 1989).

¹¹ The latest work by François Jost (2001) is an example of the application of the reality/fiction problem to the analysis of television products that represent, in my view, the second phase of television for the general public. Jost's book does not refer to the reality shows that interest me here, although he mentions *Big Brother* in the conclusion.

Regarding reality shows specifically, this designation is an institutional fact: television designates as 'real' everything that is not part of its territory, everything that is external to it (both the news that is informed to us, as well as any individual that may be 'brought into' its territory). Thus, the viewers selected to participate in a game show were 'taken' from 'reality,' just as the men and women locked in the *Big Brother* house (or the loft in the French version) or the expert summoned for an interview. This may seem surprising, but the television institution, which developed its autonomy during the second phase of its history, ends up designating as 'real' everything that it is not itself. This thoroughly explains the prevailing designation: 'reality' denotes what the institution extracts from the territory outside of itself; 'show' denotes what it constructs from it. Subsequently, I will only use the term 'reality' in this specific sense, which in no way opposes fiction but rather the television institution.

It could be argued that mainstream television has extracted fragments of reality ever since its existence started; it could even be stated that this extraction was more significant in the communication contract of the 'paleo-' than that of the 'neo-television.' This is undoubtedly true. However, the fundamental characteristic of this third stage, as I have already suggested, lies in the dominant enunciative strategy, more specifically in terms of the interpretant. In this third stage, the extracted real is at the level of the stated content and, above all, at the level of enunciation. *This involves thematizing the very difference between the interpretant of the enunciator and the interpretant of the recipient.* More synthetically (and consequently less precisely), one could say that the reality show, in its own form, *is a staging of the difference between television and daily life.* In other words, for the first time in its history, television is staging the process of mediatization of which it is the source and the leading actor. This phenomenon is, in itself, interesting.

Firstly, there is a set of rules that define the format of the genre. Some of these rules are implicit (those that govern the casting, for example). They will need to be reconstructed from the results, from detailed analyses of the discursive surfaces, by comparing different versions of the same product. My observations indicate, for example, significant variations in the criteria leading to the selection of candidates in various countries. On the other hand, several rules regarding the participants' behavior are explicit and define the group's internal operating conditions. These explicit rules refer to a classic genre in the history of mainstream television: the game show. The notion of 'game' is essential here, as it frees us from the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy. One could say that *Survivor* is a sort of episodic *Fort Boyard*. The formula [game + exotic context = removal from everyday contextuality] is not new. From the perspective I am interested in here, the formula of *Survivors* is a paleo-form of the third phase: exoticism alters the status of elements taken from reality, and the filming of the group before its broadcast makes it impossible for the audience to participate, which becomes a fundamental component of the format in *Big Brother* and *El Bar*.

The explicit rules of internal functioning are essential, as they organize the level of the stated content: the participants have been chosen from reality and thus constitute the material, the daily substance, of the format. The rules of internal functioning provide the framework within which a narrative can structure itself and narrative events can occur. These rules, of course, are not just written norms constituting a kind of 'rule-book' for the place occupants (there has been at least one case of eviction in Spain for a severe breach of these regulations). The structuring of spaces contains other sets of fundamental rules. In the case of *Big Brother*, the structured sets refer to the notion of the house and the configuration of values and urban routines that this notion implies. The notions of *camping* in the case of *Survivor*, of the *bar* as a place for consumption and sociability, and of the *loft* in *Big Brother's* French version are variants of spatial structuring that activate other semiotic trajectories.

The narrative zone of uncertainty -which nourishes the story and is one of the fundamental enunciative aspects that explain the product's success- corresponds to the strategies that will be activated in the game's development. In the cases of *Big Brother* and *The Bar*, the real-time intervention of the public vote in choosing those who, among the participants, week after week, must leave the house unfolds this zone of uncertainty and, consequently, unfolds the strategic spaces. The game thus becomes much more complex than the one in *Survivor*, as it opens the interactive dimension in the relationship with the audience. However, the two strategic spaces that each participant must face (the internal group strategy and the external audience relationship) are not necessarily aligned: a tactical 'move' that may be effective internally can be negative about the audience and vice versa. Since each level of strategy results in a separate and independent vote, this intersection of strategic situations is one of the most interesting aspects of the *Big Brother* format.

On the one hand, the global strategic situation evolves over time, and each participant must face new situations as the narrative unfolds. Several factors determine the evolution of this global strategic situation: the decrease in the number of participants, with the disappearance of strategic positions represented by those who leave, and the consequent reorganization of the configuration of positions; the increasing familiarity of the audience with the personality of each remaining participant in the house, and thus the evolution of the implicit voting criteria over the weeks; the modification of the self-presentation strategies of each participant in response to the changes resulting from the two previous factors. Each participant's strategies adjust in response to these modifications of the self-presentation strategies of their partners, and so on; on the one hand, in a cross-feedback interaction within the group, on the other hand, related to each participant's assumptions about the audience's perspective based on the results of previous votes. The intertwining of strategic assumptions becomes increasingly complex as the weeks progress. This increasing complexity becomes more

and more challenging to master for the participants who manage to extend their stay in the house, especially in the case of the original version of *Big Brother*, which lasts for 120 days. The reality show in the style of *Big Brother* is a fascinating microcosm of the uncertain embedding of actors' strategies in the functioning of social reality within the framework of social bonds, with the aim of submitting it to external evaluation by the audience. This configuration of enunciative operations contained in the narrative content, taken from the everyday 'real' social world without mediation, is, in my opinion, one of the critical elements of the enormous impact of this new genre. The fascination it can exert I found it expressed in one single case, the only one to my knowledge, that the French media have allowed to filter into the public opinion space:

The suspense is fantastic; the whole range of human emotions is expressed: anger, jealousy, hatred, friendship, hypocrisy. A hallucinating thing, the candidates' mothers are very present on the set... Must we be surprised that the candidates vied with dirty jokes one evening in the house bedroom, "My mother is..." [My God is...] The young are not fooled by anything, thank you *Loft Story* for the lesson in humanity.¹²

The *relationship* between the internal strategic space (leading to nominations within the group of participants) and the external strategic space, concerning the impact of narrative alternatives on the audience who will also be voting, makes *Big Brother* the variant of the reality show that most clearly stages a process of mediatization of everyday extra-media reality in which the viewers are immersed. These individuals are not constructed like the collective of viewer-citizens in the first phase, nor like the collective of viewer-consumers of the television institution itself, characteristic of the second stage. In the third stage, in which we are interested here, the television enunciator detaches the collective proposed to the recipient from the television institution. It attaches it to the viewer: the reality show performs a semiotics of everyday social extra-mediatic linkage while at the same time raising the crucial question of the relationship between this non-mediated linkage and media discourse, particularly (but not only) that of television.

¹² The magazine *Nouvel Observateur*, where Gavi's text was published, does not fail to point out, in its introduction, that the article "goes against the current of the indignation raised by the M6 broadcast." Given the ratings that *Big Brother* also had in France, we can ask what "against the tide" is. Of course, the quantitative parameter of opinions does not authorize any conclusion on the validity of its contents. Paraphrasing the quote, one could say: In Argentina, the whole family is there: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers.

5. Scale breach

Reality shows thematize the semiosis of everyday life by operating its mediatization. As a result, they bring to the forefront the fundamental aspect of television mediatization: the transformation of the indexical and iconic regimes of interpersonal communication. This transformation includes scale change operations. When the gesture of the man who takes his beloved in his arms and whispers words of love in her ear is followed by a close-up by millions of people, there is what I call *a scale breach*. Media, each in its way, are nothing other than devices for changing scale. General public television is the medium that is *defined* by a breach in scale that concerns not the order of the thirdness as in the written press but the order of the iconic in the stated content and the order of the index in enunciation: it was historically built around the *gaze relationship* (the E-E axis, 'eyes to eyes' – cf. Verón 1983). Reality shows complete the visibility of the enunciative device in mass television mediatization by incorporating into the product structuring the only missing component: the receivers' interpretants shaping a narration stage around the semiosis of ordinary life.

In the good old days of convergence, the entry mode into the world of readerships and audiences was the classic and established socio-economic-demographic profile. Age group, socio-professional category, education and income level, gender, family group composition, and area of residence. The 'objective' variables comprise clusters with considerable predictive power regarding 'cultural practices,' consumption practices, tastes, and preferences. It is this strong articulation between 'objective' and 'subjective' variables (or, if you prefer, between socioeconomic profile and 'lifestyle') that allowed Pierre Bourdieu to construct his sociology of taste. These collectives were, of course, of the type Daniel Dayan calls "audiences," collectives "constructed by third parties for the benefit of other third parties" (Dayan 2000).

Throughout the 1990s, these collectives have gradually lost a good part of their predictive power. The associations between variables have not entirely disappeared; let's say they have become much weaker and also less stable. Concerning the media market, we can describe this development in the following way: the fact that two individuals today read the same daily newspaper or the same magazine, listen to the same radio, or regularly watch the same program on television tells us much less about these two individuals' attributes than twenty years ago; in other words: they have much less in common than twenty years ago. They have much less in common than we know how to measure or about which we know how to theorize: a level of uncertainty is never 'in itself'; it is defined by specific observations. Therefore, it is not that there is increasing disorder; it's our variables that are wrong. The logic of social ties is not made (or is no longer made) where we used to seek them.

Today, I see my old 'grammars of recognition' as an effort to draw spaces of logic other than those we could identify fragmentarily with the mentioned socio-economic profiles and later with 'lifestyles.' These grammars are configurations of semiotic operations activated in producing meaning, which is the 'reception' of a determined media discourse.

In the context of any given research in reception, this activation is necessarily fragmentary: the individual speech that we collect in our fieldwork (the only gateway to the study of recognition grammars) far exceeds the specific discourse (such broadcast or such type of broadcast) for which the certified 'reception' serves us as a benchmark. In my view, theory tells us that one of the fundamental dimensions in the articulation between production and recognition is based on the interpretant articulation and, in the case of television, on a situation of scale breach.

I consider this set of hypotheses essential to raise today in television research. Up to now, research has addressed the immediate object, which is to use Peirce's words, by working on the reception of this or that product. It was natural, and we couldn't have done it otherwise. The time has come to ask ourselves questions about the dynamic object; however, this calls for hypotheses of a completely different scope.

However, a more extensive scope of our hypotheses should not make us lose sight of the specificity of the technological device. In the case of television, I have pointed out one of the aspects essential for this device: the phenomenon of scale breach. A single example suggests its importance.

In recent years, the matter of public space has been widely discussed. In the case of television, this has given rise to reflections on the boundaries between the private and the public, among other things. Moreover, the disruption of intimacy in the public space has been highlighted many times, especially on television. However, the private/public problem refers to a device of breach or change of scale. It is a fact that the public space in democracy has been historically conceptualized using the writing model. However, the mediatization process has gradually introduced into the 'public sphere' the two other registers of semiosis: firstness and secondness. It is, therefore, not so much a problem of opposition between individual privacy and the publicity associated with the collective of citizens. The media have, so to speak, 'completed' the semiosis of the public space. There is no doubt that this fact poses a problem regarding a political system established in its origin from scriptural semiosis. This problem arises from the fact that we note that the media have ensured that the semiosis of the public space is today well 'equipped,' from a semiotic point of view, as the individual actor.

This is the first lesson I learned from the phenomenon of reality shows, particularly *Big Brother*. Television has gradually become composed of the three dimensions of semiosis regarding public space: first of all, its thirdness, that is to say, its laws and rules; then its secondness, its facts (we will call it its economy). Now, what about firstness? What about the democracy of emotions?

It is not a question of studying reception better from now on; instead, it is about finally beginning to study the semiosis of this historically crucial phenomenon: mainstream television.

Buenos Aires, 15 August 2001

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Spreadability and hate speech of radical conservatism: The Peruvian case on TikTok

punctum.gr

BY: Elder Cuevas-Calderón, Eduardo Yalán Dongo and Lilian Kanashiro

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to establish a typology of the modes of spreadability of hate speech by radicalized conservative groups. Using Veron's semiotic model, we focused on three analytical dimensions of circulation: temporalization, spatialization, and tracking. This approach helped us understand the qualities of spreadability inherent in hate speech. Employing a qualitative methodological strategy, we selected a corpus of 188 videos featuring Peruvian radical conservatives on TikTok. Through this analysis, we identified four modes of spreadability among conservative groups on TikTok: contagion, propagation, contamination, and population. The modes of spreadability through contagion and propagation generate themes of change. Spreadability through contamination and population upholds the preservation of the past. The contribution of this study lies in explaining how the modes of circulation for conservative hate speech function as strategies within a cultural war aimed at ideological entrenchment.

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1. Introduction

Given the polarized social landscape, radical conservative groups have been excluded from traditional media, leading them to embrace an active and intense presence on social networks, which often feature lax levels of security against hate speech. The viral spread of these groups' messages across digital platforms has gained prominence, as it signifies a dispute

prioritizing cultural warfare over political control. Previous literature has focused on the conceptualization of hate speech; however, delving deeper into the tracking of messages is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of discursive strategies. Therefore, this study establishes a typology of hate speech propagation modes within radicalized conservative groups. Accordingly, the research question is posed as follows: What modes of hate speech spreadability are evident within Peruvian radical conservative groups on TikTok?

1.1. Who are the radical conservatives?

From a global perspective, specialized literature defines radical conservative groups as those whose discourse is characterized by social and political antagonism, the defense of national sovereignty threatened by immigrants, the populist labeling of any intellectual stance, the instrumentalization of law and order as the salvation of society, and a deep aversion to liberal democracy (Forti 2021, Merriman 2019). However, prior literature has emphasized the need to differentiate between classical and radical conservatives, as they are often mistakenly associated with religious groups or neo-fascists (Cuevas-Calderón et al. 2022, Fasce and Avendaño 2022, Richards et al. 2021, Strobl 2022).

Classical conservatives uphold hierarchy as a constitutive feature of society and warn that its violation triggers social crises (Swartz 2023). Their constitutive basis is the bourgeoisie, and they view enlightened liberalism and revolutionary socialism as their enemies (Min 2021). Consequently, their teleology implies ensuring relations of domination, as their highest values include hierarchical order and property. Their ultimate goal is to attain and preserve governmental and political power.

While sharing characteristics with classical conservatism, radical conservatism differs due to its positioning outside the political system and the use of propagation strategies. Classical conservatism centers on power struggles, whereas radical conservatism focuses on cultural disputes to establish discursive hegemony under “progressive dictatorship” (Cowe 2022, Demuru 2022, Fedatto 2023). These groups may convey contradictory messages or raise issues associated with the left; however, they always conclude with conservative demands, as seen in the cases of feminist nationalism or homonationalism (Farris 2017). Radical groups strive for a constant presence in traditional media, but their primary focus is on non-traditional media, such as social networks, where they aim to influence the cultural agenda and spread their vision through transgressive and provocative strategies (Forti 2020). In this regard, while classical conservatism aims to secure relations within the status quo, radical conservatism endeavors to transcend the political order by swiftly and comprehensively transforming society through a cultural war that converts into common sense what might have been sanctioned years ago.

1.2. Culture war in social networks

The struggle of radical conservatives aligns with a right-wing reading of Gramsci, as they focus on the capture of civil society and include the media, not just political society (Finlayson 2021, 2022; Schwingel 2022). Due to traditional media outlawing them, social networks have become their most prominent outlets (Al-Rawi 2021, Khoshshabk and Southcott 2019).

The strategy of radical conservatism involves transgression and provocation stemming from its positioning within the cultural agenda. Their technique is hate speech, and their technologies include the use of fake accounts to attack political enemies, the deployment of bots or troll farms to generate 'shitstorms,' or the propagation of fake news. 'Hate speech' is understood here as verbal or written expressions or behaviors that denigrate, defame, or attack an individual or group based on characteristics such as their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other feature protected by the platform's community guidelines, in this case, on TikTok. Regarding the latter, rather than disinforming, such tactics legitimize ideological intuitions or establish an affiliation with radical conservatism. Notably, the most hate-filled messages go viral with the highest intensity (Fanjul 2021, Lee and Hosam 2020, Norocel 2018, Prusova and Gulevich 2020).

Therefore, social networks function as amplifiers when the objective is to wage a cultural war (Larsson 2020). In this context, our focus is on hate speech as a technique that employs hate rhetoric as a synonym for freedom of expression and portrays political correctness as an analogy to censorship (Aguilar 2023, Amores et al. 2021, Hernandez Urbano et al. 2021, Lee and Lee 2023, Nguyen et al. 2023, Ollagnier et al. 2023, Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria and González-Aguilar 2021, Weimann and Masri 2023).

1.3. Relevance of TikTok and radical conservatism

Prior research has highlighted that although social networks were initially perceived as platforms for participatory democracy, they have turned into a cesspit of hate (Avdeeff 2021, Le Compte and Klug 2021, Sánchez-Castillo and Mercado-Sáez 2021, Schaffar 2021, Wheatstone and O'Connor 2020). The same platforms have implemented rules to prevent communication that discriminates based on factors such as race, creed, disability, age, or sexuality. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have been among the first to implement measures against hate speech, causing both classical and radical conservative groups to migrate to TikTok due to the laxity in detecting content that violates the rules of the community (Cuevas-Calderón et al. 2022, Cervi et al. 2023, Sherman 2020). Although algorithms have fine-tuned their detection systems, they are still more successful in TikTok.

Unlike other platforms, TikTok has operability that distinguishes it from other social networks, as it does not require a large number of followers or videos with many views for content to go viral (Klug et al. 2021, Peña-Fernandez, Larrondo-Ureta and Josep Morales-I-gras 2022, Slater 2022). TikTok's algorithm is known for its unique features that allow anonymous individuals to make their content viral and accurately connect interests shared by its users. Unlike other social networks, TikTok does not solely rely on hashtags or copies to display relevant content. It uses an advanced algorithm that searches for and suggests videos based on users' preferences and behaviors and the videos' characteristics. MIT Technology Review considered this one of the Top 10 Break-through Technologies in 2021 (Zhang and Liu 2021).

Consequently, TikTok is relevant for the study of curators not only due to the shift toward the platform but also as a cultural production device. Aligned with the aims of radical conservatives, TikTok serves as an ideal social network to study how messages are spread, helping us understand how hate speech evolves into common sense and magnifies existing differences.

1.4. Circulation: from viral spread to spreadability

Studies on the use of TikTok by radical conservative groups have revealed that the viral spread has become an effective tool to convey news about their political positions (Chobanyan and Niokolskaya 2021, MacKinnon, Kia and Lacombe-Duncan 2021). Viral spread combines conservative content from unknown or low-visitation users with viral hits (Schellewald 2021). Weimann and Masri confirmed this approach by noting that on the For You page, users do not need many followers to go viral (2023). Thus, videos will be shown to users who have interacted with similar ones within the application, making it easier to go viral on TikTok than on other social networks. Here, virality becomes the condition for conservative groups to confront a semiosphere presumably taken over by 'foreign elites' or 'communist groups' instituted within the State apparatus.

Recognizing virality as an assumed objective in producing conservative messages raises a semiotic question about the meaning of 'viral.' How has criticism approached this concept? Previous literature has used the term 'viral' (Peña-Fernandez, Larrondo-Ureta, and Josep Morales-I-gras 2022) to describe content's rapid and far-reaching dissemination through Diggs, shares, comments, and views. Moreover, cultural criticism has enriched this perspective from thinkers like Baudrillard (Samuels 2021) to the insights provided by others (Han 2022), revealing the use of the term 'viral' as a form of historicization of society where external elements such as technology or otherness affect our subjectivity. The term 'affection' used by theorists of virality is significant, given that, from their perspective, the contents are part of

strategies and tactics to “be able to affect” another (Terranova 2004). However, from the perspective of a mediation theory, the concept of virality has faced certain problems.

The transmedia and mediatization theoretical perspective has rejected the denomination of viral spread when referring to the transversal type of circulation to the media. This is because, in virality, participants are passive agents in communication. In reality, they play an active and participatory role. Therefore, concepts like virality and stickiness have been set aside in favor of the term spreadability (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013).

Spreadability, rather than virality, has been presented as a form of media circulation underpinning the theoretical framework of transmedia theories. Theorists have chosen spreadability because it refers to the prosumer’s ability to circulate content in a participatory way. Unlike ‘stickiness,’ ‘memeification,’ and ‘viral spread,’ spreadability recognizes the social connections between individuals. Thus, it is built from dispersed material, diversified experiences, open-ended participation, motivation for dissemination, infinite and localized temporal networks, actants promoting from the grassroots, and collaboration between roles. The idea of discourse as a virus is inconvenient (Fratlicelli 2021). This is because the virus shares the same contagious discursive unit. Furthermore, spreadability implies constant change at the discursive level.

How did semiotics approach this debate? According to some studies, semiotics has theorized about contagion at both an inter-somatic and medial level. For instance, Landowski (2015) and Basso Fossali (2007) discussed how transmission and infection occur. It is important to note that these theories often involve ongoing processes. Regarding the spreadability analysis, starting with Veron's socio-semiotic perspective on circulation is helpful. Like other semioticians, such as Lotman (1990), every media phenomenon has a gap or dialectical contradiction between presences. This gap prevents a linear transmission between production and recognition, which can be identified in the discourse that reports its emission forms and in the reception of the discourse. Veron (2004a, 2013) also discussed this concept in greater detail.

Production and recognition, center, and periphery are only clots of a fluidized process of semiosis in constant imbalance (Verón 2004b). Circulation is the process that sets the value produced in motion and is proper for enunciation. Thus, all media chains have a constitutive mismatch between production (grammar of production), product (object discourse), and consumption (grammar of recognition). A study (Veron 2004a) has proposed qualitatively different forms produced by this gap, aligning with another study’s (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) critique of virality. Following Verón, this study chooses the concept of spreadability as a mode of circulation because there exists a lag between the production of content and its recognition that is not addressed by the concept of ‘virality.’ Contents (discourses) evolve (continuity) or revolutionize (discontinuity) in recognition as they “proliferate” in circulation (Verón 2013:210).

Although Verón did not delve into circulation processes at the level of digital spreadability, scholars (Carlón 2022) have enriched his hypotheses by identifying types of digital circulation (ascending, descending, horizontal, and transversal) between social networks and mass media. However, this proposal primarily provides an extensive description of the phenomenon and does not delve into the defining quality of propagation. Merely capturing moments of circulation falls short; instead, a comprehensive portrayal of spreadability's quality is required. The displacement of content through the media is one of the other dimensions that can semiotically define spreadability. Likewise, semiotics can adopt a position concerning the traditional way of studying virality, quantifying the reach and speed of content diffusion. Therefore, it is not a matter of opposing a qualitative (intensive) mode to a quantitative (extensive) mode but to scrutinize the correlations between the two aspects (Verón 2013: 307).

Along these lines, qualitative modes of describing circulation complement the extensive (quantitative) approaches that identify whether a piece of content is viral, such as the number of likes, comments, or shares. From this socio-semiotic perspective, grammatical structures are identified within creators' content and their followers' responses to identify gaps, discrepancies, and contradictions between them. Consequently, this study adopts a theoretical approach that focuses on the quality of the circulation of messages from radical conservatives on TikTok.

1.5. Dimensions of spreadability: space, time, and tracking

The study of circulation is evanescent (Verón 2014b). This is because it belongs to the order of becoming an event. That is to say, semiosis occurs in the interval, as communication is established between disparate elements (Deleuze 1995). This does not imply that the analysis does not start from categories or dimensions that fit the study of circulation phenomena. Various categories of analysis have been employed to examine the circulation of an exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Center and in the study on travel narratives (Verón 2013). These categories of analysis encompass temporality, waiting, journey, connection, and density in space to understand users' progression in these contexts (Verón 2013: 305-360). Given the above, the gap between production and recognition (consumption) allows us to study the qualities of the spreadability of conservative messages in TikTok across three dimensions: spatiality, temporality, and tracking (see Table 1).

These dimensions have been quantitatively operationalized in another research. Regarding the temporal dimension, the literature has proposed virality as an estimation through the time or speed of video exposure (MacKinnon, Kia and Lacombe-Duncan 2021). In the case of spatiality, the numerical reach (scale) of the viral content (Gray 2021, Peña-Fernandez 2022) has defined the digital space of dissemination. The analysis of interactions in TikTok has highlighted the prominent presence of the tracking dimension. This dimension has been manifested in the references between videos on the platform,

in the connections between videos and comments, and in the relationships with media content from other mass formats, such as television (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021). The theoretical approach of this study is semiotic and seeks to be complementary to the previous quantitative approach. The study approach is supported by experiences within the disciplinary field itself, given that the dimensions of temporality, spatiality, and tracking are constant in semiotic circulation analyses (Floch 2002, Marsciani 2022, Verón 2013). Likewise, we have embarked on an exploratory study that addresses the dimensions of spatiality and temporality to theoretically define the grammar of production for conservative groups on TikTok (Cuevas-Calderón et al. 2022).

Table 1. Dimensions for the Study of Message Spreadability Circulation in TikTok

SPREADABILITY DIMENSIONS				
Spatiality	concentrated	specialized	broad	diffuse
Temporality	fragile	ephemeral	resistant	durable
Tracking	discontinuous	non-continuous	non-discontinuous	continuous

Spatiality is defined as a lag relationship between the amount of information that can be communicated on TikTok through videos and the response to comments on the TikTok platform (Du, Lin and Zhang 2022, Hartley et al. 2020). Considering that space is a concept established through analytical definitions of the center-periphery, production-reception relationship, the digital space is shaped by how close or distant each of these two points is. If the reception of the message adheres to all the indications of conservative content, a concentrated spatiality is created; however, if the messages diverge from the original content of the account, then a broad digital space is formed. Thus, lags can be concentrated, specialized, wide, or diffused between video production and recognition in comments.

Moreover, within conservative groups in TikTok, the concept of ‘concentrated’ emerges as a type of ‘low lag’ in comment recognition. The ‘specialization’ opens the lag and presents comments that take up some secondary elements in the video that are not part of the main content. Likewise, the ‘broad’ mode expands the differences between the videos and the comments, widening the gap. Finally, the ‘broad’ mode has a differentiated lag, as it blurs the boundaries between videos and comments, creating forms of speculation through rumor.

The dimension of temporality refers to the time of interactions among production, discourse, and recognition. At a quantitative level, temporality is measurable, as, in terms of virality, videos that fluctuate between 15 and 60 seconds generate the most interaction (Gray 2021, Guíñez and Mansilla 2022). However, this chronological value generates a

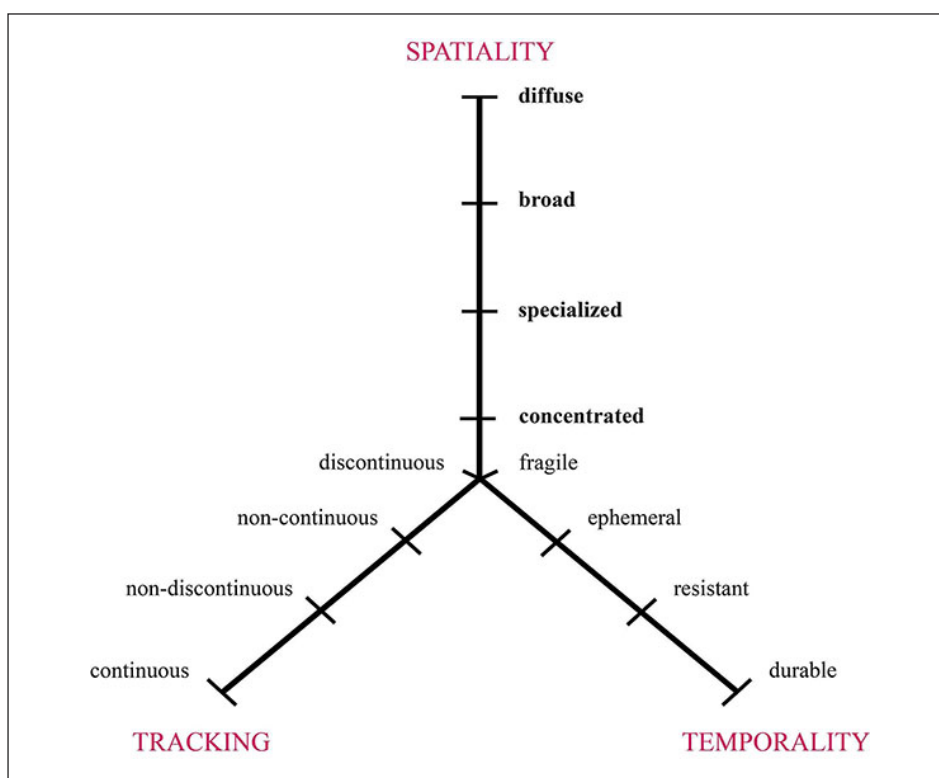


Figure 1. Visual Scheme of Spreadability

black figure, which does not consider the thematic variety. Therefore, more than a metric factor, we need a unit that allows us to express a qualitative factor that accounts for a cognitive and emotional component sustained in production and recognition. Thus, following a study (Weimann-Saks et al. 2022), the present investigation considers that the quality that maintains the time of spreadability is the participants' belief in the discourse of the videos, that is, users' trust in the information they are exposed to through the media. Thus, the fragile, ephemeral, resistant, and lasting temporality are qualities generated by the belief sustained by the gap between production and recognition.

The tracking plays a fundamental role in TikTok, as it registers the displacement of information between mass media and the contents created in social networks, and vice versa. Thus, discontinuity is characterized by interruption, either by a comment or by leaving the platform. This causes the video to 'jump' to other mass media and formats, losing its original tracking path. It can become a meme or other type of content outside of TikTok. Furthermore, non-continuous content is completely lost from TikTok and goes to different spaces, such as the street. Non-continuous content recovers its tracking, thinking about its distribution on other platforms like Twitter. Finally, continuous content remains trending on TikTok, maintaining its tracking within the platform. It is widespread and remains relevant in the context of TikTok. This study organizes these three categories within a visual framework to vividly depict their interrelationships.

2. Methodology

The social semiosis approach was considered to formulate a theoretical-methodological model to analyze the modes of spreadability of messages of radical conservatives (Veron 2004b). Namely, there exist three stages encompassing the criteria of production, recognition, and circulation. In this regard, the first stage corresponding to the production criteria was the construction of the corpus. Based on the previous studies, the unit of analysis included the video in TikTok selected from a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria that specify what is and what is not a content of radical conservatism (production grammar). Based on the methodology used previously (Cuevas-Calderón et al. 2022, Weimann and Masri 2020), the videos ($n = 188$) in this study were selected by recognizing the production criteria that allowed us to choose the data of Peruvian radical conservative groups.

1. Creation of a sterile account dedicated to research and the detection of hashtags in TikTok videos to make an initial immersion in the quality of the videos for five hours a day for three months.
2. Deepen the search from the content offered from the “For you” section and induce the algorithm to offer content limited to the interactions acquired through “Follow,” “Like,” and “Comment” for one month.
3. Creation of a list of accounts (Following) and videos using the “For you” section as a refined search engine to obtain videos whose producers and recipients included radical conservatives.

We performed the data collection manually and not via software due to the nature of the content expressed by radical conservatives, which involves hate speech (Jaramillo-Dent et al. 2022, Weimann and Masri 2020). As this content is sensitive and could be subject to censorship by TikTok, it is usually covered up with distraction strategies (hashtags that emulate trends, music that refers to trends, or content unrelated to the quality of the video). The use of technologies based on metric and technical parameters vitiated the sample and was not detected by the software; thus, we used manual collection to ensure the validity and diversity of the sample.

The second stage related to the recognition criteria involved triangulating the videos selected as object discourse, the comments as part of the reception grammars, and the profiles of TikTok users as part of the production grammars.

The third stage, circulation criteria, included tracing the forms of production and reception of the previous stages within the platform to identify interaction gaps. As a result of this triangulation, the analysis revealed a series of gaps that created various circulation spaces. Some comments adhered to the enunciation of the videos, and others made visible differentiated conditions in their recognition.

In line with the above, we described the production and reception of messages that cut across all hate speech communication among radical conservatives on TikTok. We considered three constant components indicated by researchers (Forti 2021, Strobl 2022) as transversal inputs in all communications exceeding community norms on TikTok: fear, insecurity, and loneliness. However, the authors above merely grouped different qualities of messages under hate speech and neglected the gradients appearing in each of these. Consequently, we identified this research gap by contributing the qualities of fear, insecurity, and loneliness.

Table 2. Affect Qualities in Radical Conservatives

Message Components according to Forti (2021) and Strobl (2022)	Message Qualities
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reaction against someone • fright against something • concern for the nation • fear against communism
Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reactive against the antagonist • propositional against the detrimental aspect • evasive against situational evil • defensive against universal evil
Loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loss of one's close circle • loss of one's amical-labor group • loss of the nation • loss of the homeland

However, following Veron's model, we used the description of gradualities to define the spreadability modes based on their time lag between production and recognition. Therefore, to enhance explanatory clarity, we first presented the gradualities of the transversal inputs of hate speech (fear, insecurity, and loneliness) and introduced the dimensions found in the spreadability scheme (see Fig. 1). This resulted in the emergence of its forms as follows: contagion, propagation, contamination, and population of hate messages from radical conservatives in TikTok.

This approach diverges from an "immanentist" analysis, as it does not stop at identifying the grammar of production through the traces of the videos. Our proposal is rooted in acknowledging the gap between the messages produced by radical conservatives and their recognition through the comments and modes of spreadability within the platform. However, the so-called 'inmanentist' analysis Verón (2004a) referred to has significantly contributed to the ethnographic field in its post-structural era, appreciating the mobile and changing nature of the object of study (texts). Thus,

the relationship between Verón and poststructural semioticians such as Eric Landowski (2007) and Basso-Fossali (2015) finds relevance in studying circulation at specific points. Accordingly, they have been employed to identify a level of more or less direct digital interaction corresponding to the description of medial or intercorporeal space presented by Basso-Fossali and Eric Landowski, respectively, which we have termed as 'contagion.' We find the intercommunication that Eliseo Verón maintains with post-structural semiotics valuable for optimizing the interpretation of our findings.

3. Results and discussion

The main objective of Veron (2013) is to associate political objectives with media pressures. In this context, the relationships of political mediatization shift from televised mechanisms to online linguistic strategies. The structural conditions of the conflict are established on the digital platform and introduce individuals into a collective (collective as a set of social actors) formed by points of convergence such as fear, insecurity, and loneliness (Forti 2021, Strobl 2022). In this case, they are long-term identity collectives, as they emphasize rules inherent to libertarian thinking (existing collectives). Still, in most cases, they are more affective modes of contact, such as communication collectives without rules associating them ("I am different from them"), except for repulsion towards the other and enunciation from the 'Self.' The latter case shapes the collective as momentary agglomerations that define the media collective. In this sense, the collective is constructed through its circulation in various types of propagation, whether as a media collective through contagion, spread, contamination, and population. They are not passive communities but rather participatory and content-creating entities that alter their definition of the collective according to their digital interaction. We will now explain these changes in the digital collective of conservative groups through their four forms of propagation.

3.1. Contagion

The first approach explains how fear, loneliness, and insecurity manifested in a specific mode of spreadability among radical conservative groups. Many cases have indicated that fear serves as an affective strategy aiming to terrorize through the personification of someone. The choice of the term 'terrorize' is not incidental, given its frequent appearance in hate speech, often using the label 'terrorist' to depict those opposing radical conservative stances. Likewise, another form of somatization is to focus fear on immigrants (Jaramillo-Dent et al. 2022).

Hate affects construct insecurity, serving as an emblem of concern against specific enemies. Consequently, this insecurity is an ongoing struggle against perceived wrongdoers, expressed through visceral and vivid tones. Thus, when dealing with anguish generated by personified enemies, insecurity manifests itself as the overcoming

and eliminating of the enemy, either with its exclusion from politics or symbolically with its expulsion (for example, through border closures).

Loneliness, in the context of hate speech, takes on the form of emotional emptiness within the inner circle. The blame for such depopulation can be attributed to terrorists or immigrants, leading to the perception that minorities have gained influence, subsequently depersonalizing the intimate realm. This expression of loneliness is marked by a sense of isolation, and from their perspective, insults and attacks remain as 'just reasons,' even if that can lead to censure. Generally, such 'reasons' arise from the fact that fewer and fewer people have the judgment to detect the encroachment of terrorists. Therefore, the proposed solution emerges from the rupture with liberal democracy, advocating concrete answers and not demagogic solutions.

The thematic observation of the affects of production and recognition allows us to define the type of circulation involved in this first description. Thus, we may refer to contagion as the gap between the affective conditions of production and recognition of fear against someone, insecurity with the terrorist enemy, and loneliness due to isolation from peers.

Consequently, we can interpret contagion as the intersomatic relationship (A-B) of the affects of fear, insecurity, and loneliness between production and recognition at a medial or phenomenological level (Basso Fossali 2007, Landowski 2015). In other words, contagion is a type of spreadability that occurs when agents enter a direct infectious relationship (A infects B). Therefore, hate speech driven by fear against someone, insecurity against the terrorist enemy, and loneliness due to isolation translates into the circulation of a concentrated digital space, non-continuous content tracking, and a brief time of spreadability.

- Ephemeral time arises from the strong coherence and familiarity between production and recognition. In this sense, spreadability is contagious because users interacting with individual TikToks are specific to a highly unified group (McKinnon et al. 2021).
- Concentrated spacing (see Figure 1) emerges when only those participants who respond directly to the explicit insults in the videos are involved. In this scenario, the lag between videos and comments is weak, as both elements remain within the same subject matter.
- Non-continuous tracking unfolds as the videos generated by conservative users transfer TikTok's content to the physical realm of the streets. Thus, adopting an electoral rationale, interviews frequently ensue, wherein passers-by are engaged to underscore that terrorists and Venezuelan immigrants embody major societal issues. Therefore, despite employing false data and interpretative hyperbole rather than offering a fact, these interviews present a narrative that is present and constantly debated in social networks (Finlayson 2022).

Thus, we graphically express the contagion in the following scheme (see Fig. 2).

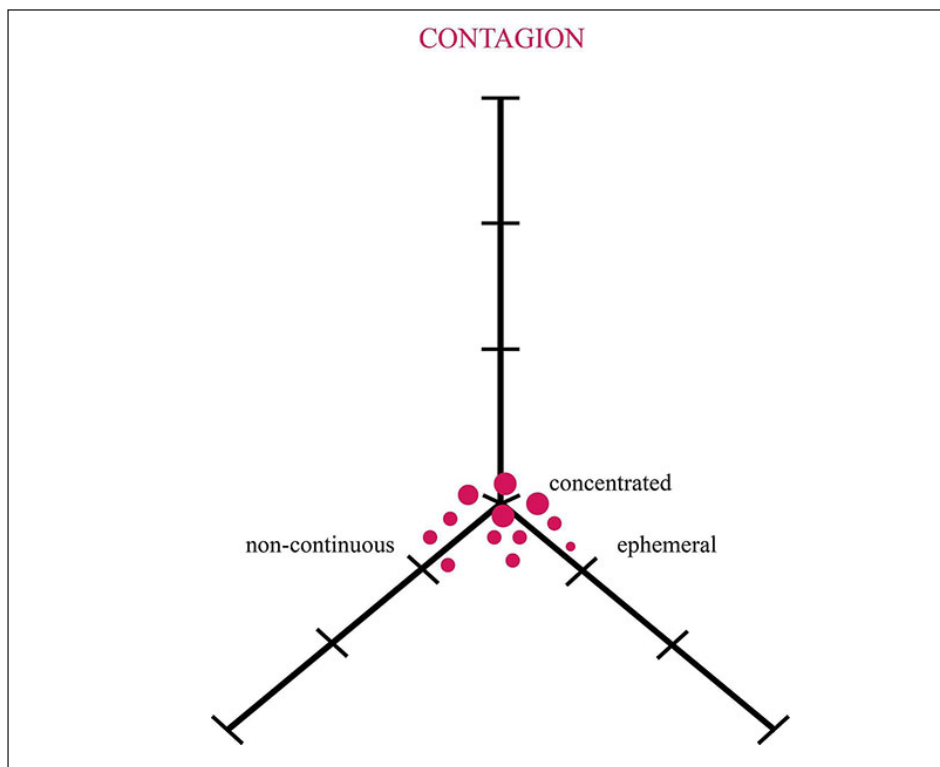


Figure 2. Representation of Contagion According to Times, Space, and Tracking

3.2. Propagation

In a second mode of spreadability, fear is spread by frightening with something and not with someone, as in contagion. The difference between ‘something’ and ‘someone’ is a matter of abstraction. Let us return to what is expressed in contagion. The terrorist (someone) is a figure that opposes specific interests and can be eliminated from the political horizon, which is why fear is usually spread via a scapegoat. However, fear in this second mode of spreadability is more abstract, as it becomes a chaos in which different entities that are not necessarily linked to each other can be grouped together. Here appears the ‘progress’ (progressives), the ‘caviars,’ and the ‘cojudignos.’ All of them, politically affiliated with left-wing discourses or ideologically interested in enriching the content of liberal democracies, expanding rights and freedoms, and pursuing the idea of the common good, are abstracted as a (somewhat) antagonistic bloc.

Regarding insecurity as a mode of affect, it fights against the bad, i.e., it possesses a propositional approach and not a reactive one as in contagion. While contagion behaves as “I have no solutions, but I have answers,” the contents have a propositional approach in this second mode of spreadability. It is presented as something that is not the definitive answer but could be a palliative. If, in the contagion, it is stated “zero tolerance to Venezuelans” or “jail to terrorists,” the propagation sentences are as follows: “Let’s close the borders” or “Let’s fight for freedom.” Their actions are usually demagogic.

Finally, a type of loneliness appears based on the loss of their brotherhood members (social group), friendships, or work because the common and hegemonic sense is that the new media are brainwashing them with progressive attitudes. To fill that void, they turn toward traditional and alternative media (TikTok, Telegram, and Tam-Tam) that reinforce their ideas and beliefs, even if these go against what the “progressive dictatorship” and offended sensibilities (“ofendidos”) prohibits. There exists a synergy between unsubstantiated claims (lies) and ideological confirmations. Namely, acts without empirical or scientific basis, rather than misinforming, serve as devices of ideological confirmation and reaffirmation of a conservative creed. It is recurrent to observe rebounds in TikTok videos from newspapers with conservative stances on speculative topics, dollar devaluation, instilling fears about the new government, and suggesting electoral fraud. This is accompanied by red text, emojis expressing concern or anger, and hashtags emphasizing “wake up, people.”

Thematic observation allows us to define propagation as the diffusion in flow from one text (production, discourse, and recognition) to another at a mediational level. In other words, propagation occurs when agents develop a participating role as they spread affect-infection. Therefore, hate speech based on fear of something, insecurity against the bad, and loneliness due to loss translates into the circulation of a resistant time of spreadability, a specialized digital space, and a discontinuous content path.

- Resistant time emerges because the collective behaves at the level of group solidarity, validating in the comments the accusation, parody, and defamation produced in the videos. Thus, a faith component is found, sometimes linked or associated with the religion. This coincides with what researchers (Forti 2021, Strobl 2022) have underlined in Europe, as the struggle waged by radical conservatives is more cultural than political. They are more focused on propagating a vague but powerful idea that is difficult to eradicate in (cultural) enemies rather than (political) adversaries.
- Specialized space emerges as the production of the videos, and the commentaries return again and again to those abstract labels and characters. Namely, circulation possesses a moderate time lag as followers engage with the themes propagated by content creators. Their discussions focus on the “cavars” or “progressives” as enemies of the status quo.
- Discontinuous tracking is evident as they frequently reinforce their accusations by criticizing mass media. These individuals both refer to and are referred to by mass media in numerous cases. This aligns with global conservative groups such as Vox (Albertazzi and Bonansinga 2023), who use the ability to reinterpret viral videos and memes or other media events to generate virality on TikTok. This way, propagation on this platform is linked to imitation or mimesis of content (Zulli and Zulli 2020).

Thus, we express the propagation graphically in the following scheme (see Fig. 3).

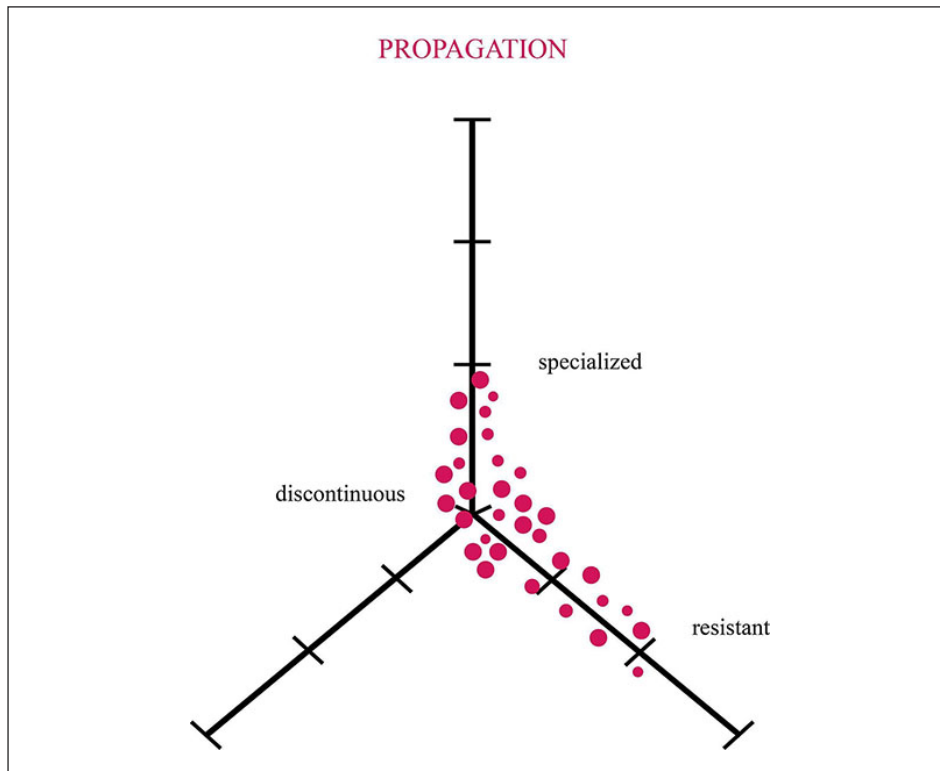


Figure 3. Representation of Propagation According to Time, Space, and Tracking

3.3. Contamination

In a third mode of spreadability, fear is identified as a powerful catalyst in the conservative discourse, using cognitive cues to confront society's constant changes. The videos aim to promote debate and confrontation of ideas as central elements of the conservative discourse, thus seeking to return to the near past and align with the authoritarian principles of radical conservatism. These videos are intended to affiliate with their followers and maintain conservative principles that propose or defend strong, authoritarian, and nationally committed governments.

The insecurity that emerges as an affect of radical conservatives in this third group is elusive as it is usually outlined under the slogan “never again” (terrorism never again, communism never again). Thus, they aim to elude the institutional evil rooted in the government of the day or the threat of nearby government, all in defense of an idealized notion of “nation.” The comments reinforce their political agenda by reinterpreting viral videos and memes and creating an expansive narrative that underscores the threat to national integrity.

Finally, the conservative groups spread a feeling of loneliness, leading to community division. This loneliness by separation is manifested through the selection of individuals

who are considered the “best” members and who should fervently defend the conservative group. This dynamic is clearly observed in photos and videos where users wear national soccer team sports jerseys to show their loyalty and commitment to the radical conservative cause. The feeling of loneliness spread by these groups seeks to create a collective (but limited) identity based on exclusivity vis-à-vis those who do not share their ideals. Here, the jersey of the national team does not serve as a unifying element of Peruvians but of the selection of “the best,” which, in this context, is represented by those who represent a small, limited, select, and defensive group that opposes the “progressive dictatorship.”

The thematic observation of production and recognition affects allows us to define the mode of spreadability as contamination, as it refers to expanding the communication of conservative affects from one text to another through a mediating process. From there, it jumps from TikTok to traditional media, using soccer jerseys as a communicative form and conservative emblem. In other words, contamination occurs when the agents involved in production and recognition disseminate the discourse according to an ideological commensurability that moves away from insults or parodies and gives way to principles as a common measure of their interactions. Thus, in contamination, hate speech whips up insecurity against situational nastiness and loneliness by separation translates into the circulation of a lasting time, a wide digital space, and a non-discontinuous tracking.

- Durable contamination time indicates a retrogressive belief that yearns to return to a near past that is considered closer to law and order. Thus, it spreads ideas of “renewal” that should extend to other countries in the context of a reality degraded by the “progressive plague” (i.e., a perception of situational evil). Contamination aims to go against the invasion or disturbance of the nation and express fear toward the interference of foreign governments, pro-socialist or leftist, which put national sovereignty at risk. This defense of the nation is not interrupted if those who opine or propose solutions are from Spanish radical conservative parties, as is the case with VOX. Instead, it is mainly celebrated as a transnational alliance in defense against the lurking “evil.”¹
- Broad space uses speculation and rumor as a rhetorical form. That is to say, the gap between the videos and the comments is wide. While the videos engage in ideological debates with their adversaries through stitches and duets, the comments broaden the debate by covering other aspects, such as speculation motivated by ideological victory. The rumor or “it is said that” is placed as a circulation process that mutates with respect to the content proposed by the users. This form of rumor persists, as sarcasm and attacks of a cognitive and intellectual nature tend to last much longer than the simple insult of contagion

¹ VOX videos appear both in the contagion and in the population. However, in the contagion, these are mentioned or quoted verbally, while in the populating, they are employed as videos or fragments of shared emblematic videos.

or the resistance of propagation. To this end, both bots and trolls are employed as technologies to solidify a simple idea within the public sphere.

- Non-discontinuous tracking unfolds as the contents of the production grammars recover recognition grammars and discourses from other social networks, such as Twitter or Instagram, and from Telegram or TamTam, where similar conservative groups have been formed. That is, the interaction and spreadability of content can be directed to other social networks that share their political vision (Khoshshabk and Southcott 2019).

Thus, we graphically express the contamination in the following scheme (see Fig. 4).

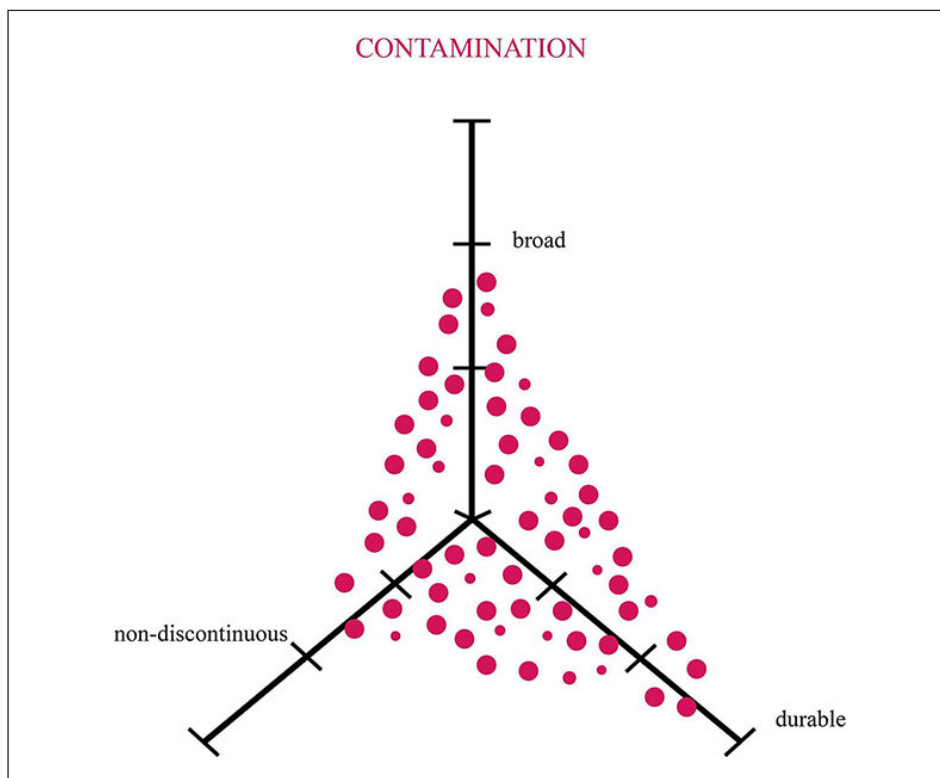


Figure 4. Representation of Contamination According to Time, Space, and Tracking

3.4. Population

A fourth mode of spreadability promotes the fear of oblivion by proliferating unfounded fears. It is based on ominous rumors, without a concrete figure; on the fear generated by hearsay. While the contagion of fear is directed toward the particular, here, a rejection is generated toward a universal evil, such as historical, unified, and conspiratorial communism. We chose the term 'population' due to its impact at a broader population level, encompassing communities, regions, and entire countries.

This term reflects the maximum extent of the impact at a social level, including larger groups, and is associated with the global scale of the conservative discourse.

The insecurity that arises is of a defensive nature, as protection is built around the homeland, which explains the recurrent presence of military stakeholders in this context. In this way, the possibility of losing the homeland to a threat considered a universal evil is categorically denied.

Finally, conservative groups spread a feeling of loneliness in the crowd. While the videos expose the danger of the unknown, the commentary placates this diversity with a return to 'common sense,' using phrases historically rooted in conservative sentiment. This includes the normalization of racism and the naturalization of classism through catchphrases or popular sayings. Thus, while navigating this virtual community, one experiences a feeling of loneliness amid the crowd.

The thematic observation of production and recognition affects allows us to define the mode of spreadability of the population as it refers to the expansion of conservative affects from one text to another through a media process. In other words, the population constructs the conservative affect through the speech's diffusion, duration, and continuity. Thus, hate speech from fear that frightens, insecurity against universal evil, and loneliness in multitude translates into circulation in a lasting time, a diffused space, and continuous tracking.

- Lasting temporality represents a constant historical struggle that transcends locality. It is a struggle to be taken up again against the marginality assumed by the political power. There is a typical conservative project in the population, a traditional and historical one.
- Spatiality is diffused as a wide gap between the videos and the comments. While the videos allude to VOX in Spain and decisions made by the previous administration of Trump in the United States, the comments often delve into pure speculation, disseminating other fabricated news texts, facilitating doxing, and fueling a sense of historical paranoia.
- Continuous tracking remains within the social network itself. Hence, studies (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021) have shown that the dissemination of conservative political party content on TikTok, such as VOX, is originally produced for this platform. Thus, population effects are monomedial, stay in a single medium, and are discussed as whispers in a single ecosystem.

Thus, we graphically express the population in the following scheme (see Fig. 5).

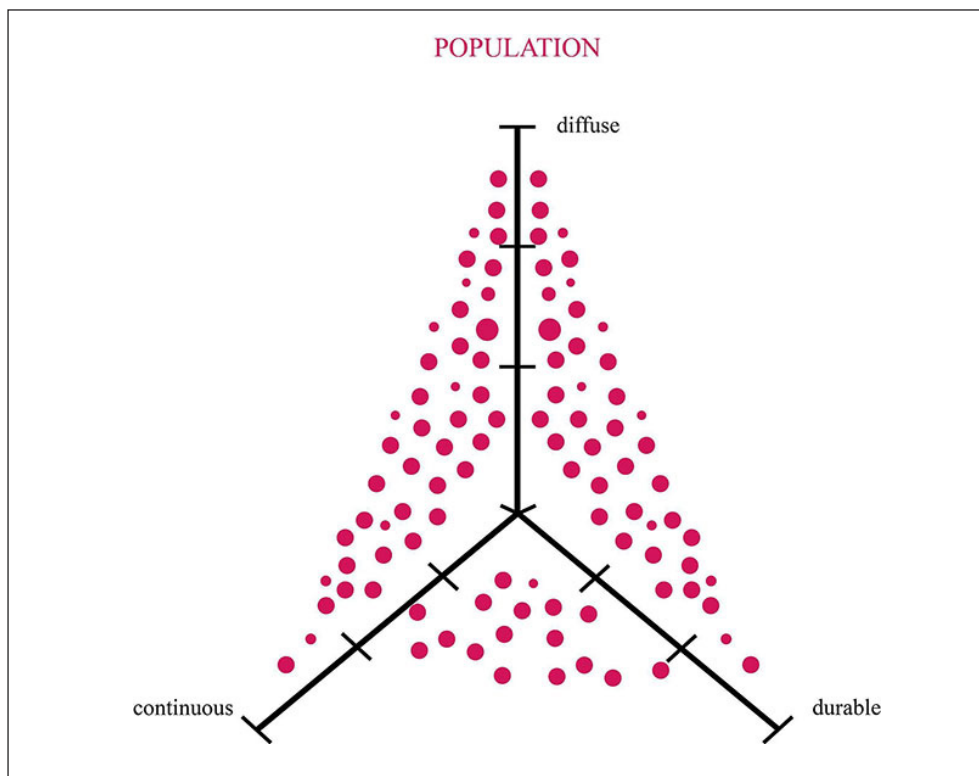


Figure 5. Representation of the Population According to Time, Space, and Tracking

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the modes of spreadability of the messages of Peruvian radicalized conservatives on TikTok reveals a complex circulation network with four identified types: contagion, propagation, contamination, and population. Spreadability leads to cultural warfare, aligned with the right-wing interpretation of Gramsci, thereby escalating the dissemination of hate affect to a heightened level. Each of these modes of spreadability contributes to a more profound and qualitative description of the spread of conservative content on the platform. Likewise, we have identified how spreadability by contagion and propagation redounds to themes of change (change to) while contamination and population retain or aim to return to a previous figure ('return to'). We present the following scheme that summarizes what has been developed so far:

Table 3. Summary of Spreadability Modes

	MODES OF SPREADABILITY			
	Change something		Return to something	
	CONTAGION	PROPAGATION	CONTAMINATION	POPULATION
Fear	Reactive [someone]	Scare [something]	Unsettle [to provoke]	Frighten [all]
Insecurity	Reactive “against the bad guy”	Propositional “against the bad”	Evocative “against situational evil.” (nation)	Defensive “against universal evil.” (homeland)
Loneliness	Loneliness due to isolation	Loneliness due to loss	Loneliness by selective separation	Loneliness in multitude

The four modes of spreadability identified can expand and relate to each other, generating various effects and levels of influence on the audience. How messages are transmitted also plays a crucial role. Meanwhile, spreadability by contagion and propagation can generate themes of change, contamination, and population, as well as preserve or return to the past. This diversity of modes of spreadability reveals the importance of understanding how conservative narratives are constructed and disseminated in TikTok. Furthermore, it shows how radicalized conservatism presents itself as a driving force of rapid and complete transformation in the political sphere, indicating a warlike frontality toward its opponents whom they consider as carnal enemies, not as political adversaries. Their stance is characterized by a lack of solidarity, harshness, and opposition to political correctness, which has led them to stand out in social networks. Unlike studies on radical conservatism (Al-Rawi 2021, Fedatto 2023, Finlayson 2021 and 2022, Forti 2021, Larsson 2020, Merriman 2019, Min 2021, Strobl 2022, Weiman and Masri 2023) that may even raise progressive banners in certain aspects to then rechannel them into conservative policies, the circulation of messages in Peruvian radical conservatives persists the figures and themes of a heteronormative, homophobic, chauvinistic, and elitist conservatism, where value comes from fighting for something. However, what appears in both cases is that from the ideological war, racist statements are becoming more and more common as forms of freedom of expression.

Finally, for our research, it is crucial to debunk the myth that seemingly viral and widely resonant videos reflect the circulation content. Traditional metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, may give apparent visibility, but they do not always reflect the quality of spreadability of conservative messages. Finally, it is critical to analyze the outbursts of discourse and study the forms of circulation that normalize conservative content. This deeper understanding will allow a more complete view of these messages' influence and reach on the platform. It is essential to consider the approach to conservatives without falling into a biased view that focuses only on their outbursts, as this would limit the analysis to a moral judgment of their 'mistakes' or 'ideological incongruities,' such as proposing a flat tax and simultaneously reducing the retirement age to 65. It is necessary to broaden the perspective to understand their strategies over time, not only during elections or specific political movements. Therefore, future research can analyze the TikTok accounts and comments of conservative influencers, as they are waging a battle centered on cultural influence within alternative media. Closely examining these factors will lead to a comprehensive and objective view of the political and communicative dynamics to better understand the scope of the culture war being waged by radical conservatives.

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AUTHOR

Elder Cuevas-Calderón is an Associate professor and Researcher at Instituto de Investigación Científica (IDIC), Faculty of Communication, Universidad de Lima, Peru.



AUTHOR

Eduardo Yalán Dongo adjunct professor and Researcher, Instituto de Investigación Científica (IDIC), Faculty of Communication, Universidad de Lima, Peru.



AUTHOR

Lilian Kanashiro Associate professor and Researcher, Instituto de Investigación Científica (IDIC), Faculty of Communication, Universidad de Lima, Peru.





Modes of production, circulation, and academic recognition of an ‘archive of repression’: the case of the DIPPBA archive in Argentina

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BY: Alex Colman

ABSTRACT

The article compares the modes of production and primary circulation of materials of the DIPPBA archive – an Argentine ‘archive of repression’ – before and after its public opening in 2003, specifically in academic research on Recent History. The DIPPBA was an intelligence service that operated between 1956 and 1998. Through a multidisciplinary approach that integrates semiotics, discourse analysis, and anthropology, the paper studies the transition of the DIPPBA archive from its origins as an intelligence service repository to its current status as a publicly accessible archive managed by the Provincial Commission for Memory. This transition prompted significant political, legal, functional, spatial, and symbolic transformations involving various management practices. The article examines the interaction between archival circulation and academic recognition by delineating these transformations and identifying regularities in academic historical discourse. Specifically, it investigates how alterations in circulation mechanisms shape the academic recognition of archival materials, influencing researchers’ access and utilization. Additionally, it explores how academic recognition reciprocally informs and influences archival circulation, providing historical, political, and legal intelligibility to the process of archival opening. The findings shed light on the dynamic relationship between archival circulation and discursive recognition within the historiographical field.

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1. Introduction

The Intelligence Directorate of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police, Argentina, was an intelligence agency that operated between 1956 and 1998. Its archive, ceded to the Provincial Commission for Memory (CPM)¹ in 2000, was opened to the public in 2003. Since then, different agents have used it for judicial, compensatory, personal, academic, journalistic, educational, and cultural purposes. Because it is the first intelligence archive open to the public in Argentina, and due to its mediatic, political, judicial, and academic impact, it is considered one of the most important ‘archives of repression’² in the country and Latin America (Flier 2015).

The transfer of the archive to the CPM initiated a process involving political, legal, spatial, functional, and symbolic changes. These included preservation practices, management, discussion, description, architectural transformation, digitization, preparation, and dissemination of academic and outreach articles. This process established policies for access to archival materials, defined criteria to deal with the public, private, or sensitive nature of its content, made available tools for consultation, and enabled specific modalities of documentary circulation. Furthermore, it included a first cycle of recognition and elaboration on the archive, which shaped new meanings and appropriations of its materials.

This article compares the modes of production and primary circulation of archival materials with their contemporary (post-2003) modes of circulation and recognition, specifically in Recent History³ research articles. The multidisciplinary approach combines contributions from semiotics, discourse analysis, and anthropology. Through the description of the transformations involved in the opening of the archive and the tracking of regularities in academic historical discourse (one of its main areas of appropriation),⁴ I will explore the relationship between circulation and discursive recognition (Verón 2004) from two angles: first, addressing how changes in the circulation of documents are constitutive of their academic effects of recognition since they define how researchers can consult and use them; second, analyzing how this academic recognition also becomes constitutive of these changes in circulation, as it provides historical, political, and legal intelligibility to the process of opening the archive.

¹ Entity that gathers referents of human rights organizations, intellectuals, professionals, civil servants, artists, religious and trade unionists.

² This term refers to a set of documentary collections of legal and illegal repressive institutions that became spaces for disputes between memories about the recent past. Some of them have been used as evidence in legal cases against those who committed crimes against humanity and in compensation policies for those affected by state terrorism.

³ Study area consolidated in the 2000s in Argentina.

⁴ The choice of the academic field – and Recent History, specifically – is not capricious: its relevance as an area of appropriation of the DIPPBA archive is registered both in a quantitative (Colman 2020) and qualitative (Colman 2023) meaning.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical proposal combines three central notions: a) discursive production, circulation, and recognition, b) archive, and c) discourse community.

2.1. Production, circulation, recognition

Production, circulation, and recognition are concepts linked to Eliseo Verón's proposal regarding the social production of meaning. He considers discourses as products located in the context of a productive system. According to Verón, meaning always appears for observation as conglomerates of signifying matter and is referable, on the other hand, to the functioning of the semiotic network considered a "productive system" (1996). Then, the possibility of any analysis of meaning would rest on the hypothesis that "the productive system leaves traces in the products [discourses] and that the former can be (fragmentarily) reconstructed from a manipulation of the latter" (Verón 1996: 124).

In this approach, analyzing social discourses involves examining them in relation to the two poles of the productive system of meaning, i.e., production and recognition. Its production conditions comprise the determinations concerning the restrictions of its generation (circumstances of production) and those relative to the restrictions of its reception (circumstances of recognition). These conditions put into play, in turn, specific "rules of generation" (its "grammar of production") and "rules of reading" (its "grammars of recognition"), which describe meaning-assignment operations in signifying matters (Verón 1996).

In this context, the notion of "circulation" is defined as the "gap process" between production and recognition or "the intermediary fabric of that system" (Verón 2004: 41-42). Now, if the "production" and "recognition" aspects of discourse "suppose readings of a discourse or a set of discourses," the same would not happen with circulation: it would not imply a type of reading. "Because circulation, as regards the analysis of discourses, can only materialize, precisely, in the form of a *difference* between the production and the effects of discourses" (Verón 2004: 42; italics in the original). So, if the discursive surfaces are composed of 'marks' that can be interpreted as traces of the production or recognition operations, they would not have "traces of circulation" (Verón 2004: 42).

2.2. Archive

To conceptualize the notion of ‘archive,’ I will combine specific definitions of philosophy and anthropology that would allow us to address its technical, artifactual, spatial, and symbolic dimensions. I define the archive as a zone of problems entwined between its consideration as an “extended space for the organization and distribution of inscriptions [...] and its form of registration” (Tello 2016: 44)⁵ and its restricted specification as a corpus of material inscriptions appropriated, regulated, and “domiciled” by a “power of consignation” (Derrida 1997). This specification could be considered the result of an individuation process (Simondon 2017) that involves operations of invention and technical transformation (material and spatial reconversion, design of architectures and classification systems) and the conformation of a certain objectuality produced in the uses, representations, and values with which they are invested. The specification of the archive defines its acquisition of a concrete (locative, objectual, notional, symbolic) historical form and enables specific relationships with archival materialities.

These relationships with archives, which characterize their objectuality, define their nature as cultural artifacts for producing facts, knowledge, and taxonomies (Stoler 2010). By this last view, some researchers have analyzed the effects and affects generated by the production-circulation of its documentary materiality (Aretxaga 2000, Hull 2012, Navaro-Yashin 2007, Nugent 2010) – particularly concerning documents produced by ‘state’ institutions, such as the DIPPBA (Colman 2018) – and their participation in the production of historical accounts. Specifically, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that “archives assemble,” configure the substantive and formal elements of historical narratives, condition the possibilities of the existence of historical statements, and possess a power whose distribution “determines the difference between a historian, amateur or professional, and a charlatan” (2015: 52).

Finally, the specification of the archive also involves a dimension linked to its physical, topographical, and political spatialization. To think about it (especially in the case of intelligence archives ‘recovered’ in democracies), we can use the notion of “territories of memory” (Da Silva Catela 2002), which refers to the triple relationship between documentary heritage, physical space, and agents, linking “not only the marks of memory to each other but also the social practices that produce and reproduce them” (Messina 2011: 22). This approach allows us to consider them as places constituted through modalities of appropriation that involve various forms of generation of meaning.

⁵ This definition is indebted to the notion of the archive as a “system that governs the appearance of statements as singular events” (Foucault 2007: 170).

2.3. Discursive community

As with “culture” in anthropology (Rockwell 1980), the notion of community has been criticized as an epistemological obstacle for its tendency to promote essentialist representations of social groups and, above all, for the political processes in which many of those conceptions have influenced. However, the problematization of the notion in academia, first in philosophy and then in social sciences, develops in parallel to the proliferation of the term in contemporary political discourse. Thus, due to the relevance of the issue and contrasting the normative conceptions of the political community, some authors found the (im)political community in the impossibility of a unitary identification and the denial of any closure of groups, founded on the purpose of coexistence with otherness and difference (Bessone 2011).

To conceptualize ‘community,’ I follow Gilbert Simondon (2015). According to him, the psychic and the collective have the same genesis: they are two correlative individuations. Simondon states that “the two individuations [...] are reciprocal with each other; they allow us to define a category of the transindividual that tends to account for the systematic unity between inner (psychic) individuation and outer (collective) individuation” (Simondon 2015: 16), which can be called psychic-collective individuation.⁶ Furthermore, I adopt Andrea Bardin’s (2018) reading on the use of the concepts “community” and “society” in Simondonian work. In already structured psychosocial systems, the collective formation processes (that continue to occur) threaten the homeostatic mechanisms of these systems. In this context, the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘society’ refer not to defined collective entities but to processes of closure and opening that coexist in the same system:

The term ‘community’ refers to a social system “that is closing” [...], that produces a collective identity through in-group processes that establish shared meanings; while the term “society” refers to a social system “that opens” [...], which is involved in multiple in-group processes producing new meanings. (Bardin 2018: 373-374)

Thus, “community” – the system's closure on itself – represents a systemic-immunological mechanism – so to speak – that resides in establishing a zone of collective meanings that enable communicability and that tends to strengthen the illusion of community.

⁶ It should be noted that this idea is theoretically heterogeneous with respect to Verón's appropriation of Niklas Luhmann's systemic theory (Verón 2013), in particular, on the differentiation and interpenetration between ‘social’ and ‘socio-individual’ systems.

On the other hand, 'society' refers to the openness to innovation – production of new meanings – in the collective, linked to new processes of collective individuation. Both operations – community and society – must be understood in their coexistence: they respond to the metastability that characterizes every psychosocial system and involve a regulation dynamic defined by the existence of values and norms that control and organize the relationship between individuals and their affectivity.

In this framework, I will use the concept of 'discourse community.'⁷ Not in a substantialist sense, but as a category that translates a collective assemblage of enunciation (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, *cf.* Fabbri 2019) that, in a space-time, stabilizes the reference to a psychosocial convergence and participates in its normativization – definition of borders, of 'political' relationships with other groups, of 'common' values, norms, opinions, and affect-emotivities. In French discourse analysis, 'discursive community' refers to a discourse-producing group whose practices and social organization are inseparable from their discursive production (Maingueneau 1987). Its members share values, opinions, and a common positioning. The notion has also been used to analyze the configuration dynamics of socio-discursive collectives by describing their textual fluxes and structuring differentiated discursive spaces with varying degrees of stability (Beacco 1995). Thus, the coherence of a discursive community is forged through the discourses they produce, especially the genres they use. Beacco proposes to explore its socio-discursive functioning through an opposition between 'internal' and 'external' textual fluxes that would reveal heterogeneities in discursive production based on its 'production' and 'consumption' conditions.

This concept has been helpful to address, among others, the socio-discursive functioning of scientific-academic groups, conceptualized as communities "with scientific and technical dominance," which produce "knowledge" (Beacco 1999), and – recently – that of intelligence services. Regarding these, María Alejandra Vitale coined the term "intelligence community" to refer to those that share traits both of "ideological communities" – production of values, opinions, and beliefs – and communities with scientific and technical dominance – notably, by "possessing certain expertise and producing accessible closed texts, especially for its members" (2016: 19).

2.4. Conceptual articulation

I believe that the concepts reviewed can be linked as components of what Verón calls the "mediatization process," which refers to "the long historical sequence of institutionalized media phenomena in human societies and its multiple consequences" (2015:

⁷ *Cf.* also Alejandra Vitale (2022), who links the notion with the postulates of postfoundationalism.

174-175). As explained by Verón, the central point in the history of mediatization lies in the emergence of non-vanishing technical supports for messages, whose crucial aspects involve their “autonomy of both the source and the destination” and “persistence in time,” and which allows different ways of the temporal and spatial organization of signifying matter.⁸ The invention of technological communication devices, the crystallization of their uses, and the radial effects that these suppose in human history would define the process of mediatization. The initial moment of each critical stage of the process is linked to “a technological communication device that has appeared and stabilized in identifiable human communities” (Verón 2015: 175).

The history of mediatization would make it possible to understand the relationships between the historical development of artifacts and technical frameworks – written texts, archives, printing press, etc. – the configuration of collectives and spatialities of textual production, and the processes of psychosocial individualization that organize the generation of meaning in human groups. In particular, the invention of the archive, its transformation, and the institutionalization of its management, access, and consultation conditions can be considered defining moments of the mediatization process:

When textuality acquires a dense, materially identifiable, and localizable body, the question of its control arises: where is it, who has access, who can negotiate with its contents, and how? Thus, the third fundamental aspect of the mediatization process appears: the conditions of access, that is, the dimension of circulation. (Verón 2013: 200)

The formation of discursive communities “with scientific and technical dominance” (Beacco 1999) – or “specialized virtual collectives” (Verón 2013) – and the institutionalization of the “public space of scientific discourse” since the 17th century would pose another specificity: “*having progressively made explicit the production/recognition articulation as a structuring dimension of their own practices, that is, having institutionalized the conditions of circulation*” (Verón 2013: 417, italics in the original). Thus, both the materialization and mutation of archival phenomena and the development of science and scientific collectives could be considered relevant moments in the process of mediatization, with important corollaries in the transformations in the functioning of discursive circulation.

Articulating the above notions, one might think that these phenomena would involve radical transformations in the dynamics of production, circulation, and appropriation of inscriptions in the social space (‘archive’ in the broad sense). These changes would affect the productive system of meaning. I conjecture that the processes

⁸ Cf. likewise the proposal to incorporate the “intercorporeal” scale – in addition to the spatial and temporal scales – in Cingolani (2018).

of domiciliation, appropriation, and protection of inscriptions – which originate the formation of ‘domiciled’ archives – contribute to defining a historical topography that stratifies and divides social discourse in various ways, for example, through labeling practices that allow the distribution of discourses – and regulation of their passage – in domains delimited by productions of meaning about the physical and social space; by establishing border phenomena – between or within specific groups (for example, the ‘public’ and the ‘intimate’) – and spaces for re-articulation and co-presence, such as that of “publicity” (Habermas 1981).⁹ Within this framework, one could understand the opening of a ‘secret’ archive to the public, such as the DIPPBA, and the conformation of scientific-academic publications as ‘public’ texts and their paths.

3. Methodological framework

The article studies the changes in the circulation of the materials of the DIPPBA archive after its opening and how these impact its academic recognition. I will characterize this circulation in contrast to the conditions of primary circulation of materials during the DIPPBA’s existence (1956-1998). Subsequently, I will comment on how the academic recognition of the archive provides intelligibility to the opening process and – in that framework – to the contemporary circulation conditions of its materials.

The research and analysis methodology combined qualitative and quantitative methods. The description of the socio-discursive functioning of the DIPPBA and the transformations of its archive after its opening was supported by the analysis of documents from the archive and of different publications that thematize this opening. To analyze the academic circulation dynamics of archival materials, I surveyed, classified, and analyzed – statistically and topographically – a corpus of publications. Said corpus includes 614 scientific-academic productions that I surveyed through searches in *Google Scholar*, which is considered one of the most valuable databases for measuring the impact of scientific publications (Dávalos-Sotelo 2015). From this general corpus – which includes scientific and outreach articles, books, chapters, theses, reviews, programs, interviews, and reports – I examined only scientific research articles – approximately 48% of the total (Figure 1).

⁹ The historical evolution of the mediatization process would also cause destabilizing effects of those topographic borders. For example, the emergence and stabilization of the global computer network would have caused individuals to mediate “increasingly their discourse on the networks, making public their feelings and impressions, stories, ethical and political positions, issues that before the Internet were typical of everyday and intimate universes, and that now circulate without a universal rule of definition of the public/private borders, nor regulatory agendas of the issues” (Cingolani 2019: 57).

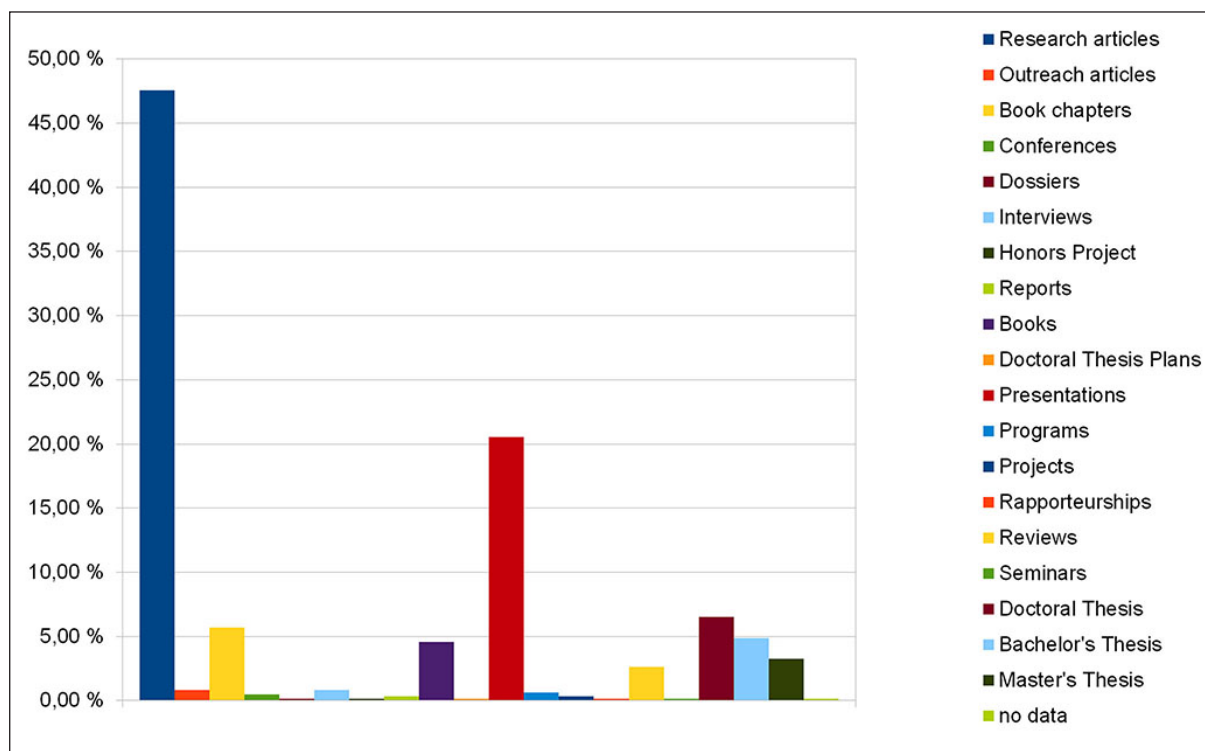


Figure 1. Percentage of publications by type. Source: self-made.

I also describe these methods of documentary circulation according to the technical, spatial, and architectural components involved and their potential effects on recognition. To this effect, I considered my research group's access and consultation experiences¹⁰ from an autoethnographic perspective (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2015), complemented by other researchers' reports in the analyzed publications. Finally, in a subcorpus of Recent History articles, I searched some stories and transtextual affiliations¹¹ that I consider relevant in providing intelligibility about opening the archive. This subcorpus consists of 89 history research articles that mention the archive, appearing in academic journals indexed in *Latindex*. Their selection is based on feasibility criteria and on the fact that they have been put through a review process ("peer review") that regulates what should or can be said about the DIPPBA archive (among other issues). Although it is only a partial guarantee, this restriction would involve the archive's functioning as a "fact assembly" (Trouillot 2015) in producing edited public historical accounts.

¹⁰ Research Group on Archives of Repression (GIAR). Website: <https://grupoinvestigacionarchivosdelarepresion.wordpress.com/>

¹¹ 'Transtextuality' refers to the textual transcendence of the text: "everything that puts the text in an explicit or secret relationship with other texts" (Genette 1989: 9-10).

4. Analysis

4.1. The DIPPBA, the intelligence cycle, and the organization of the archive

The creation of the DIPPBA is understood in the national context of the “Revolución Libertadora” (Liberating Revolution)¹² and the international context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution’s turn to socialism (Funes 2007). Between 1958 and 1998, it underwent several transformations, including changes in rank and denomination according to the political projects of each government. Its representations and ways of classifying tasks and ‘surveillance objects’ also changed. During its existence, the DIPPBA produced much information on individuals and groups under surveillance. There has been evidence of a high degree of penetration into the social and intimate life of the people, but there are also those who relativize the scope, breadth, and depth of this infiltration (Ghigliani 2012).

Geographically, the DIPPBA had a central headquarters in the city of La Plata, where its archive was located, and a set of delegations distributed throughout the Province of Buenos Aires territory. Organizationally, it was divided into sections or departments. At the head was the General Directorate. The Central Intelligence Department functioned under its dependency and as a distributor, using the information produced at the central headquarters. The Archive and Index Division was also in charge of organizing the archive. Field agents reportedly depended on the Search Division. The Coordination and Liaison Department coordinated with other intelligence agencies. The Counterintelligence Division developed productions to strengthen the security of repressive agencies. In addition, the files were organized into ‘tables’ and ‘factors,’ and departments were dedicated to each table.

According to a document dated 1992,¹³ intelligence was conceived as a cycle structured in four stages. In the first stage, the General Directorate formulated a ‘requirement’ to be distributed to the delegations. Information-gathering agents performed the second stage, which could include ‘fieldwork’ and ‘infiltration.’ Once the material was gathered, ‘intelligence information’ was produced through evaluation, classification, and interpretation. This included various steps: the administrative registry of the provided information, its evaluation through codes that classified its value and degree of accuracy, and, finally, its interpretation, consisting of drawing conclusions and appreciation (Vitale 2016). The last stage consisted of preparing and

¹² Civic-military dictatorship that ruled the Argentine Republic between 1955 and 1958 after overthrowing Juan Domingo Perón through a coup.

¹³ CPM – DIPPBA FUND – Central Division of Documentation, Registry and Archive, Doctrine Table, Dossier No. 280. Subject: “Manual de Inteligencia y contrainteligencia”. Year 1992.

disseminating the intelligence product to management, including the reports and their 'advances' (faxes and telephone communications), 'extensions,' and 'attached material' (photos, press clippings, and collected documents).

Finally, the products were centralized in the archive. According to a 1983 document, the Central Archive and Index Division made the files and structured the archive into tables.¹⁴ This was organized around an index whose cards referred to the files. This division's personnel consigned the information received and entered it into dossiers, classified according to specific criteria. Said classification meant, first, determining a 'factor' (the broadest classification criterion) indicated by the delegations that submitted the information; then, its distribution in 'tables' with alphabetical denominations (divisions of a thematic nature that included, generally, several factors), subdivided in turn into 'folders' where dossiers were located. Thus, the dossier – the documentary unit of the archive – brings together a series of documents of various types and origins on the same matter.

The archive was organized into the following tables:

Table A: community, student, political, and press factors.

Table B: economic, union, and labor factors.

Table C (Communism): includes documentation on activities considered communist.

Table De: religious factor, communal entities.

Table SD (Subversive Delinquent): Records information on what was considered 'sabotage,' 'war material,' 'subversive activity,' or 'pamphleteering.' It also records the names of those classified as 'subversives.'

Reference Table: Recorded and filed 'reference' dossiers. They record information that could not be classified within the abovementioned factors.

Doctrine Table: Consisting of internal operating and study materials.¹⁵

The following graphic (Figure 2) represents the organization of the archive into different 'tables,' 'factors,' 'sections,' and 'subsections.'

¹⁴ CPM – DIPPBA FUND – Central Division of Documentation, Registry and Archive, Doctrine Table, Dossier No. 400. Subject: "División Central documentación-registro y archivo". Year 1983.

¹⁵ CPM – DIPPBA FUND – Central Division of Documentation, Registry and Archive, Archive and Index Secretariat, Decrees, Laws and Provisions Folder, Dossier No. 95. Cited in: Provincial Commission for Memory. "El fondo documental: contenido y estructura." Available at: <https://comisionporlamemoria.org/archivo/fondo-dippba/>. Consulted on April 30, 2021.

fluxes (in/out). Along these chains are introduction, selection, and enrichment processes. The most significant introduction of new “semantic matter” [*matière sémantique*] (Beacco 2004) is done at the ‘information gathering’ stage, which determines the polyphonic configuration of the reports.

Internal cycles could be circular (Central Intelligence Department ↔ delegation ↔ field agent) or linear (for example, police station → delegation → Central Intelligence Department). Its beginnings and endings – external textual fluxes – could vary according to the situation, the administrative procedures of the departments, or the circumstances of the creation of the dossiers. Sometimes, the requests for information responded to applications from auditors, other intelligence agencies, institutions, or companies. Some researchers highlight the existence of ‘camouflage’ and ‘arrangements’ strategies between the ‘watchmen’ and the ‘watched’ that introduced ruptures in the monopoly of information production (Nieto 2011).

Among the most recurring types of documents corresponding to external input fluxes are ‘requests’ that share generic characteristics with police memoranda and requirements. In turn, the external memos could respond to requests from the DIPPBA – possibly telegrams or telephone conversations. Other incoming textual fluxes are the documents that record people’s arrests, produced by police units, and the reports from the police stations that indicate other events of interest.

The internal requirement of the DIPPBA reproduces the structure of hierarchical discursive spaces, with a center (General Directorate) and multiple peripheries (regional delegations). The archive also includes documentation produced during the information-gathering stage. Depending on the obtaining techniques – interrogations, wiretapping, infiltration, document seizure, film, and photographic record – these could consist of notes, radiograms, records of telephone calls, reports, photos, and graphics. There are also manipulations of external texts from this stage, such as seized material and newspaper clippings.

Specialized agents carried out the production of intelligence information. The gathered information underwent multiple intervention operations. First, it was ‘recorded’ administratively through an ‘information journal’ and graphically through a ‘letter’ or ‘situation graph.’ The information was then evaluated for its ‘objectivity,’ ‘accuracy,’ and ‘reliability.’¹⁶ Subsequently, an interpretation was sometimes formulated, which could be registered as an ‘assessment’ (*apreciación*) at the end of the reports. The integration of the information could imply the elaboration of onomastic indexes and organizational charts or graphs of spied organizations.

¹⁶ Different regulations define protocols for assessing the information, which consider, among other things, the ‘reliability of the medium,’ the ‘reliability of the source,’ and its ‘degree of consistency.’

The intelligence reports were produced in the last stage of the cycle. Reports are documents of an administrative-bureaucratic nature with their generic-enunciative device that combines “testimonial notation and scientific writing in an objective ethos” (Dagatti 2018). They were produced by personnel from the head office or the delegations, using information gathered by field agents. From this, we can deduce the polyphony of many reports, the result of successive elaborations that, at times, could rule out information with very evident subjective manifestations (given that they were perceived as a ‘source of inaccuracy’; Vitale 2016: 35), or inadequate according to writing regulations. The final centralization in the archive involved elaborating administrative texts – for instance, cards that ordered the dossiers. In addition, the opening of dossiers was recorded in a ‘record book,’ and their ordering was systematized in indexes.

4.2. Closure, declassification, and public opening of the archive

In 1998, the Ministry of Security and Justice of the Province of Buenos Aires resolved to dissolve the DIPPBA. The La Plata Court of Appeals seized the documentation from its archive in the context of the ‘Juicios por la Verdad’ (Trials for the Truth).¹⁷ In 2000, the Buenos Aires legislature ceded the DIPPBA building and its archive to the CPM. Its members entered the building in 2001 and carried out expert reports on the documentation aimed at its use as evidence in legal cases. Subsequently, they established archival tools (inventories and classification charts) and implemented various dissemination strategies. The commission’s assessment work divides the archive into sections, subsections, series, and subseries corresponding to the procedures historically used by each table to organize the information.

After multiple discussions that led to elaborating specific accessibility criteria, the archive was opened to the public in 2003. In the first years, documentation deliveries were limited to actors affected by the last Argentine dictatorship. Subsequently, the groups and the provision of documentation from other periods were expanded. The commission has prepared documentary selections (dossiers) and has dealt with numerous research repertoires.

¹⁷ Judicial procedure without criminal effects developed due to the impossibility of criminally prosecuting those responsible for the crimes against humanity perpetrated during the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983).

Thematic consultations for academic, journalistic, or community research are carried out through two predetermined forms of access, preserving, in both cases, the right to privacy.¹⁸ The first is through 'referrers.' In this case, an application form must be completed to indicate the research topic with keywords and establish geographic and temporal cut-off criteria. Documentation deliveries are in printed or digital format. The second form of consultation is *in situ*, individually through signing a 'confidentiality agreement' or for researchers included in the agreements between the commission and other institutions. This allows access and searches in the archive's databases, although some tables can only be consulted by referrers due to their 'extremely sensitive' nature.

4.3. Academic uses of the archive

Since 2003, numerous researchers have consulted the archive, making it one of the most investigated in Argentina. The statistical analysis of 218 research articles that mention it allowed us to draw, among others, the following conclusions: a) a tendency towards a gradual increase, from the moment of its opening, in the number of articles published per year (particularly those that use it as a source or object of study); b) that its predominant use as a documentary source (60%) corresponds to the majority inscription of the articles in the historical disciplines (64%); c) that the tables most consulted are the DS followed by Table A, Table B and Table Reference; d) the existence of four significant *Pearson*¹⁹ correlation values, which represent the relationships between specific objects of study and the use of documentation from certain tables: Table B - workers, Table Doctrine - archives, Table Doctrine - repressive forces and intelligence services and Table A - youth, students and university (Colman 2020).

To observe the connection between these articles and the provenance of the documentation, I built a topographic representation using Visone 2.17 software (Figure 3). It shows subsets of articles grouped according to the origin of the documentation ("tables"). Three can be delimited and linked respectively to Table A (Political and Student Factors), Table B (Economic, Union and Labor Factors), and Table DS (Subversive Delinquent).

¹⁸ Provincial Commission for Memory. "Protocolo para la consulta y el acceso." Available at: <http://www.comisionporlamemoria.org/archivo/consultas/>. Consulted on April 30, 2021.

¹⁹ Pearson's correlation values (*Pearson's r*) measure the degree of linear relationship between each pair of elements or variables considered.

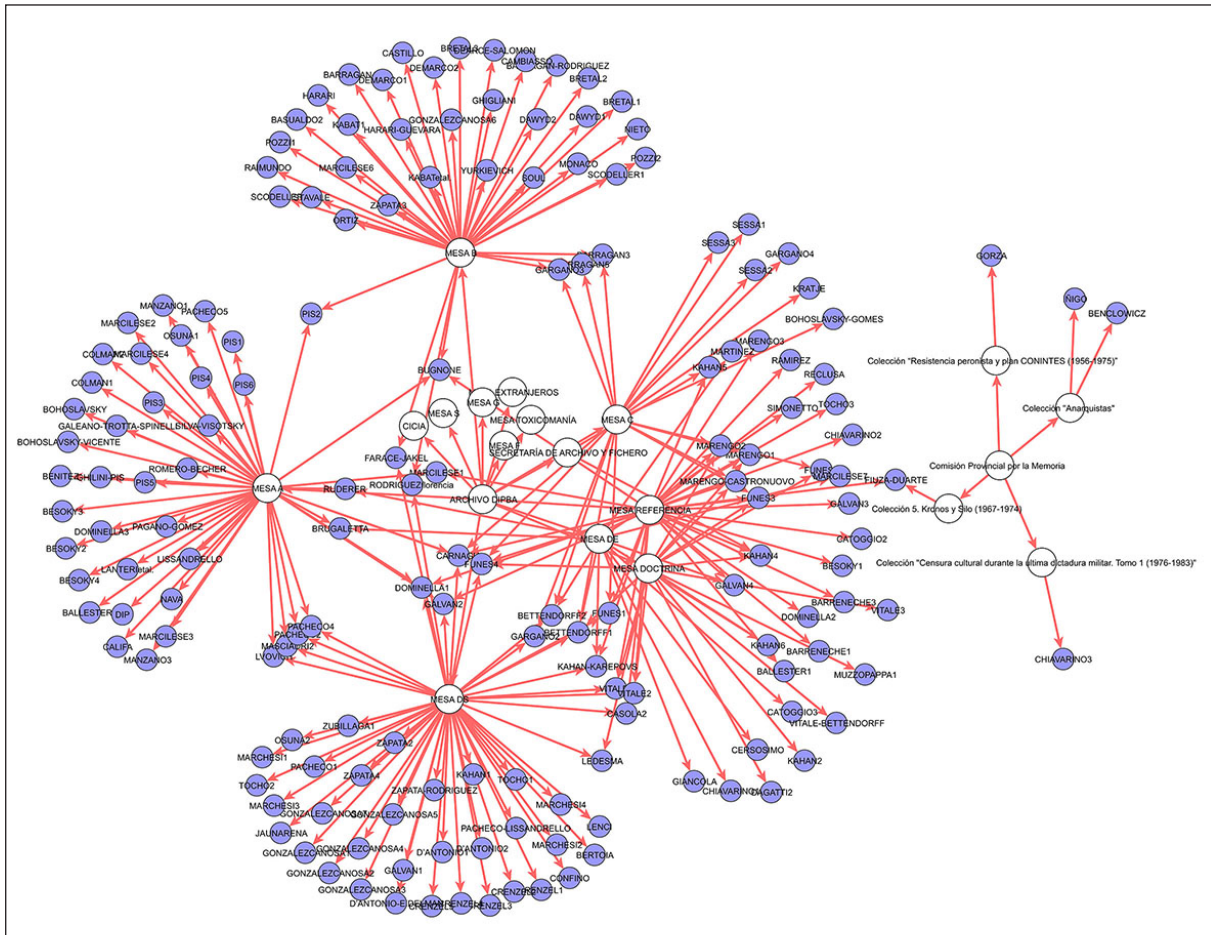


Figure 3. Network of articles according to the origin of the documentation. Source: Own elaboration using Visone 2.17 software.

Tables C (Communism), De (Social and Religious Factors), Doctrine, Reference, and Archive and Index Secretariat have more relative interconnections. Articles that have used documentation from any of these tables appear to have used material from the other tables in this group more than the subsets of articles connected to tables A, B, or DS concerning any other tables.

This approximation allows us to appreciate the circulation topography of the documentation linked to its academic uses. It is a centrifugal modality, inverse to the one that characterized the existence of the DIPPBA; it exhibits the passage from a trend towards centralization in the 'Archive and Index' towards a trend towards decentralization and fragmentation of archival materials in an assortment of uses and appropriations. In the academic field, this new modality of circulation would respond to a hierarchy of thematic interests defined by the conditions of the different areas of study that have used the archive. In this context, historical studies are the ones that would have weighed the most in defining this thematic agenda.

4.4. Circulation, access, and academic effects of recognition

As stated, there are two predetermined ways of accessing archival materials: *in situ* and by commission referrers. Thus, one could distinguish two modalities of association (Latour 2008) between researchers and the archive, which define partially differentiated modes of circulation and recognition effects. The first involves the researcher's presence in its physical space and the relationship defined there with its archival materiality. Direct access to the archive and databases allows us to search for documentation by entering keywords. The researcher can review them and select documents or dossiers forming their work body. The selections are delivered on paper – photostatic copies intervened through testing procedures – or CD-R. So, this process involves two moments: access to the databases and the transfer of reprographics. Among its conditions, various aspects stand out, related to: a) the elaboration of legal and institutional regulations (agreements, access policies that consider legal regulations such as laws on the protection of personal data and access to information); b) practices of intermediation and regulation, which define the contents of the accessible databases (exclusion of material linked to the period 1976-1983, the crossing out of 'sensitive' information during reproduction); c) the construction of instruments, devices and conditions that shape access (computers and databases; containers, shelves; boxes labeled with numbers; climate control devices); d) practices of preservation, management, description, digitization and dissemination that establish the possibilities and methods of access and consultation, and that also condition the means of public knowledge of the archive; e) finally, the inscriptions that the workers of the commission made in the building and the space of the archive as a place that pretends to be, simultaneously, 'of memory' and 'of work' (gigantographies, photographic, videographic and artistic samples, painting, lighting and maintenance, structural modifications), which connect the consultation activity *in situ* with specific narrative, affective and atmospheric experiences (Böhme 1993).

The second modality concerns the relationship with archival materials in other spaces – workspaces, such as research institutes, or hybrids, such as research carried out domestically. This relationship does not occur with the archive as a physical space but with its documentary materiality (photostatic or digital copies). This means of consultation is carried out by writing and sending to the commission a form that can include requests for specific dossiers – for this, the archive's classification chart can be reviewed on the CPM website.²⁰ Finally, this modality provides access to thematic collections (usually introduced by researchers who sometimes participate in the commission's teams) through links on its website. Sometimes, these collections retrieve content from *Puentes*, the CPM's outreach journal.

²⁰ Available at: <https://www.comisionporlamemoria.org/archivos/archivo/cuadro/cuadrodeclasificacion.html>

We can point out differences in circulation circuits from the distinction between these two access modalities. In both, the presence of legal and institutional regulations and confidentiality commitments stands out, as well as practices of intermediation, preservation, management, description, digitization, and dissemination that generate the conditions of access and consultation. On the other hand, the document that circulates and crosses different borders – the declassification, the access, the delivery – is constitutive of a new spatialization of the archive, which supposes an inversion of its original circulation, distribution and appropriation dynamics: as I pointed out, during the period of operation of the DIPPBA (1956-1998), the textual productions of the delegations located in different points of the Province of Buenos Aires were centralized in the archive. Currently, the circulation dynamics would be characterized as centrifugal if one considers its fragmentation into an assortment of appropriations by users who make inquiries and request documentation.

However, both circuits differ in the technical components and the spatial and architectural inscriptions they directly involve. They are different compositions of the ‘intermediary fabric’ of the archival circulation process. And these different compositions would also generate distinctive effects of recognition.

The first modality involves a consultation activity carried out as a spatiotemporal entry of the researchers in the archive and allows direct access to complete dossiers. This presence can be considered an insertion in a space(-time) represented and practiced as ‘public.’ This experience can also generate a narrative entry, informed by the representations of the archive as a formerly ‘secret and hidden’ place. Finding themselves *in situ*, the researcher participates in a situation that enrolls them in a historical journey whose protagonist is the archive and that goes through several eras:

The secret and hidden place was transformed into a public place whose primary intention was to make itself visible for what it was: a large sample about the methods of control, surveillance, and production of reports based on what was considered ‘suspicious’ and ‘dangerous,’ to the Armed Forces and the Police of said province. (Marengo 2012: 143)

This narrative character of the experience in the archive, as a ‘hidden’ place transformed into a public one, is not limited to the internal physical space but is also projected onto the façade and also extends in territorial terms, including the relationship of the building – and the former intelligence center – with the neighborhood and the city of La Plata. The practice of archival space as a public place can inscribe the researcher's experience who visits it in a narrative of ‘recovery’ and ‘conquest,’ condensed in its conceptualization as a “territory of memory” (Da Silva Catela 2002).

The second modality introduces a spatial and physical discontinuity between the researchers and the archive. The technical components of this relationship include the production of forms and the consultation of the classification chart, but there is no direct access to the databases; instead, it is mediated. Furthermore, there is no spatio-temporal inscription in the archive, but rather a more fragmentary relationship with its materials as textual artifacts. However, these activities and circulations would also involve narrative and affective experiences. These include the modes of recognition of documentary materiality and the projection of characteristics linked to the borders between what is 'public,' what is 'secret,' and what is 'private.'²¹ In the context of the new dynamics of circulation of materials, the 'secret document' can generate a constitutive effect of the 'spy community' as an 'interiority of State' and, therefore, of the reification of the state as a reality. Intelligence documents give a 'body' to this interior. The constant intertextual references can lead to thinking of multiple interconnected spaces and offices (Bettendorff 2017): "[a]mplifying and confirming Telephone Broadcasts # 226 of CM 16 and # 230 of current date 17." Document gaps can evoke destroyed or hidden documentation. Representations of these services and their involvement in state terrorism can even produce rejection, fear, or paranoia about the possibility of being monitored today (Colman 2018). Synthesizing: the characteristics of the archive and its materials can generate effects of incorporation,²² which present the DIPPBA as a "secret State domain" (Nugent 2010). The public visibility of the 'State secrecy' would thus function as a mechanism for its reification.

The problem of the 'sensitive' nature of the information in the archive also arises. This refers to tensions concerning the objectives, the possibilities, and the limits of the investigations carried out with the documents, and the responsibilities and commitments "when finding oneself with personal letters, photos, memories that were part of lives watched, persecuted and secretly controlled" (Marengo 2011: 159). This dimension involves representations and affectivities linked to transporting 'sensitive' documentation in the 'public' space and its use, reading, and reproduction in 'public' texts such as research articles. In this context, another narrative inscription of the researcher's experience is presented in a journey whose protagonist is no longer the classified / declassified archive but the material – the speech, the voice, the word – of the 'watched,' seized, categorized, and analyzed by the police. What happens to the 'personal' or the 'intimate,' sequestered in a 'secret' place, when it opens up and becomes

²¹ These labels define modes of architextual classification (establishment of transtextual affiliations between texts labeled in the same class; Genette 1989). This labeling has a performative effect, because it implies norms, regulations and discussions that establish what can or cannot be done with the textual materials, which would affect their conditions of circulation and recognition.

²² "Incorporation" refers to the imaginary endowment of a body and a character – attributable to the enunciator, to the discursive community and to himself – that a discourse potentially generates in a co-enunciator (Maingueneau 2009).

‘public’? The possibilities of linking with that ‘intimate’ and publicly reproducing its discourse would require commitments of a moral and legal nature (regulations such as the Personal Data Protection Act 25.326) and rhetorical strategies. For example, the representation of a ‘triangulation’ of the archival document with the oral testimony of the person under surveillance would open a space for establishing intimacy in the textuality of the academic publication; it would function as a reproduction ‘permit.’

In this context, it is possible to think about the modes of circulation, appropriation, and reproduction of archival materials in academic publications: these cross the domain of the ‘secret’ (political-ideological intelligence) and the ‘reserved public’ (the management of the CPM) to participate in the researcher’s workspace, with which specific associations are formed; as a display of these, materials are reproduced and join in the production of ‘public’ texts (academic publications), which circulate in a delimited socio-discursive field: the public space of scientific discourse.

4.5. The production of a ‘public’ archive: intertextual fabrics and stories

One of the fundamental aspects of the contemporary transformation of the DIPPBA archive concerns the production of its ‘public’ character. This defines the possibilities of access and consultation of the documents, guides their contemporary social uses, and modifies their publicity value. Thus, this production would contribute to defining its circulation and recognition modalities. Academic publications that include stories about its opening also participate in this process: they generate meanings about the archive and its contemporary uses and inscribe these meanings in the space of scientific discourse with a public and revised character (peer review).

These publications (see: subcorpus) stage multiple actors who confront, appropriate, regulate, and invoke labels, rights, and responsibilities during the archive's opening. The activities and voices of these actors could be considered ‘enunciated statements’ that attribute, to themselves, some ‘statements’ about what the archive is, how it is, and what can and should be done with it.²³ These practices sometimes result in cross-labeling of its space, documents, and artifacts (as ‘public,’ ‘private,’ ‘secret,’ ‘sensitive,’ ‘reserved’), define what can be done with them, and come to promote specific affective experiences and narrative inscriptions around those uses.

Thus, the publications analyzed include narrative operations that give a “flesh” (Latour 2008) to its opening process. These generally convergent stories present multiple actors who seek, confront, protect, and discuss information classification criteria and their potential uses, among other activities. Narratively, the stories are articulated

²³ In semiotics, a distinction has been made between what is enunciated – dimension of the “story” – and what is enunciative – process “by which what is expressed is attributable to an I that appeals to a *you*” (Filinich 1999: 18; italics in the original).

around specific conflicts and resolutions. Six thematic nuclei can be distinguished: a) the first corresponds to the practices of actors confronted around the 'search,' 'location,' 'opening,' and 'dissemination' of archives of institutions linked to the 'violation of human rights' during the period before the closure of the DIPPBA; b) the second, to the process of 'dissolution' of the DIPPBA and 'discovery' of its archive (1998); c) the third, to its 'declassification,' its 'transfer' to the CPM and the 'conversion' of its 'space' into a 'public place' for 'memory and truth'; d) the fourth refers to the debate on its accessibility (2000-2003); e) the fifth, to the 'management' of the archive started in 2000; f) the sixth, finally, concerns its 'opening' in 2003 (Colman 2023). The stories are ordered, thematically and narratively, around specific categories – 'separation,' 'declassification,' 'transfer,' 'conquest,' 'management,' 'consultation,' 'access,' and 'opening' (potential or actual) – which, in addition to referring to the transformations of the archive, condense representations of its changes of public value in three dimensions: accessibility, visibility, and utility (Rabotnikof 2008).

The production of the "public" character of the archive also supposes the construction of a network of consecrated and normative texts that support these stories. Usually, in the historiographical discourse, stories about the past are supported by references to documentary or testimonial sources. This dimension involves the "assembly work" of the archive (Trouillot 2015) as an institutionalized site of mediation that prepares the facts for historical intelligibility.

The opening of the DIPPBA archive can also be considered a socio-historical process. However, if we analyze the distribution of intertextual references in these publications, a discontinuity will be observed, in terms of the use of types of sources, between the narrations about this process and others that are inscribed in the 'recent past' – and that they form the objects for the study of these publications.

Tracing the transtextual affiliations of the subcorpus of Recent History articles (particularly, its bibliographic and source references) shows that the accounts of historical events of the recent past are connected, mainly with documentary and testimonial sources. But the accounts of more contemporary processes – among them, the opening of the archive – involve, almost exclusively, references to research and outreach articles, theses, interviews, laws, journalistic notes, online publications, etc., coming from different contexts and databases (academic repositories, conference proceedings, legislative and journalistic archives, web pages). Most of these inscriptions were produced between 2002 and 2008. They are outreach and research articles, books and chapters, guides, reports, and some papers and theses attributed to authors who generally correspond to members of the CPM or researchers whom they worked closely with (Colman, 2023). This period (2002-2008) could be considered a first cycle of appropriation and recognition – mainly academic – and production of meaning on the DIPPBA archive.

If the accounts of the Recent History publications on the opening process converge to a large extent, this could account for a “fact assembly” (Trouillot 2015) of an archival assemblage work that prepares the facts for the historical intelligibility of the process. Now, what ‘archive’ organizes this fact assembly? This does not correspond to a historical archive, ‘domiciled’ in a defined location; instead, it is a series of inscriptions from different repositories that support the elaboration of stories about the archive's opening as a historical process.

This process's intelligibility is wider than its historical interpretation's possibilities. First, the stories give an account of confrontations and definitions that established both the declassification and the possibilities of accessing and consulting archival materials. The articles also endow the opening process with political intelligibility by narrating and producing meanings about these confrontations, activities, and uses. Second, the stories reference discussions and provisions regulating their declassification, opening, access, and consultation. These include debates between the agents involved during the process, defining criteria for dealing with the ‘public,’ ‘private,’ or ‘sensitive’ nature of the information, and establishing legislation and judicial decisions. These questions describe the legal, moral, and ethical aspects that explain the form that this opening takes. Thus, they also contribute to providing it with legal intelligibility.

This triple aspect of contribution of historical, political, and legal intelligibility could be characterized as a performative effect of academic publications that affect the production of the ‘public’ character of the archive. It would entail a first cycle of recognition (approximately between 2002-2008) that would also consolidate the circulation of archival materials because it works as a social explanation of its dynamics and access and consultation circuits. Furthermore, it would strengthen the framework constituted by the circulation of these materials and their appropriation by users and managers. The contribution of these stories is not limited to giving a narrative “flesh” to the process but also includes constructing an intertextual fabric that rhetorically sustains its intelligibility.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that the changes in circulation conditions of the DIPPBA archive materials are constitutive of their new physical and topographical spatialization and academic recognition effects. This circulation is influenced by the specific weights of the doctrinal agendas (which determine which 'tables,' 'factors' and 'folders' are the most consulted and what types of information are sought) and the processes that establish access policies and circumscribe circuits of documentary circulation with particular effects on consultation activities and its relationship with specific narrative, affective and atmospheric experiences.

The definition of criteria for classifying documents and their information as 'public,' 'private,' 'reserved,' 'sensitive,' or 'secret' also regulates their circulation and modes of recognition and textual reproduction. These classifications could be considered the result of a process that includes a first cycle of academic recognition of the archive, which produces meanings about it and provides political, historical, and legal intelligibility to the new forms of circulation of its materials. One could speak, then, of discursive recognition as simultaneously constituting of, and constituted by, the process of archival circulation.

Likewise, a discussion regarding the concept of circulation can be attempted. Verón (2004) defines circulation negatively as that which is not production and is not recognition. For him, I said, circulation does not imply a specific type of reading, and it would not leave discursive traces. However, by analyzing it and its conditions, we compose metadiscourses that could be considered products of a recognition of circulation. This analysis may not rely – directly – on textual supports: strictly characterized as a 'gap' process, analyzing circulation would imply the contrast between recognition and discursive production; it may also happen that the material supports that enable this analysis are not, *a priori*, textual artifacts, but must be described and reported through a first textualization operation, for example, when it comes to the observation of non-discursive behaviors or the operation of technical devices. But this does not mean that its analysis does not correspond to a position of recognition of circulation based on a certain textuality – existing *a priori* or generated *ad hoc* in a sense like that of the "textual reports"²⁴ of Actor-Network Theory.²⁵

On the other hand, circulation can also condition discursive recognition. By defining the modes of circulation of specific textual materialities, their regulation can be

²⁴ The notion refers to the composition of textualities that relate and describe the associations between actors in a network and give an explanation to the facts and social processes (Latour 2008).

²⁵ Verón's (2013: 200) statement about the existence of 'circulation rules' that define the conditions of access to discourses could correspond to a type of reading and a position of metadiscursive recognition.

part of their recognition and translation conditions in new discursive and non-discursive behaviors. For example, by allowing the circulation of 'restricted' or 'sensitive' material, ethical, moral, or legal obligations arise concerning its uses – for instance, if it can be partially or totally reproduced. Recognition discourses can also include information about circulation, which textualizes aspects of its conditions (for example, mediations and regulations).

For these reasons, I do not agree that circulation does not imply a type of reading and that there are never (discursive) traces of it. Analyzing it would mean a kind of reading that coincides with recognizing discourses, which may include marks that can be interpreted as traces of the process. Likewise, the performative effects of recognition in circulation can also be studied. The existence of textual supports that describe and recount it – historical studies, legal or institutional regulations – generates effects that provide it with historical, legal, and political intelligibility, which could contribute to solidifying its circuits and regulations.²⁶

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AUTHOR

Alex Colman Member of the Research Group on Archives of Repression (GIAR), Professor of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), a doctoral fellow of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), and Professor of Semiology in the Common Basic Cycle (CBC, UBA).





The politics of literature: indexicality, circulation, and decoloniality

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BY: Simon Levesque

ABSTRACT

The article proposes a method for literary analysis that is located at the intersection of Eliseo Verón's semiotics of circulation and the politics of literature in the wake of Jacques Rancière and Jean-François Hamel. This method takes into account the historical material conditions of textual production, as well as the historical material conditions of recognition in which interpretation occurs, thus overcoming the limits inherent to the immanentism of sociocriticism. It allows for both greater objectivity and reflexivity in analyzing signifying materialities or signs. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Verón, Peirce, and Bakhtin, the value and pertinence of the politics of literature is defended by emphasizing the importance of four main concepts: grammar, circulation, indexicality, and expressiveness. An analysis of *Haii* (1971) by J.M.G. Le Clézio illustrates the method, arguing in favor of the possible and desirable intertwinement of the politics of literature and decoloniality. Three main concepts stemming from decolonial studies are discussed in this context: codigophagy, colonial semiosis, and border thinking.

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1. Introduction

In French literary studies, for the past fifty years, sociocriticism has promoted an immanentist approach to the text, reducing its historical and material otherness to a so-called 'co-text.' Consequently, the scope of inquiry is restricted to the discursive plane, leaving no room for the analysis of the diachronic inscription of the text in society nor any place for the study

of its recognition as a mediating object circulating through space and time. However, over the past fifteen years or so, a new approach has emerged, mainly from the sociology of literature: the politics of literature. The politics of literature studies political grammars mobilized by literature as a social activity or, more analytically, systems of inscription of actors and texts in material and symbolic networks of production of meaning and perception through which literature is defined in the common sense and defended as such, whether through specific literary practices or public interventions relating to literature, its production, circulation, and reception. This relatively new theoretical framework shares some family resemblances with the semiotics of circulation developed by Eliseo Verón. I believe that a careful reconciliation of the two can be productive. Based on two seminal articles by Verón from the 1970s (Verón 1973, 1978), I aim to assess the implications and consequences of Verón's injunction to confront the text with its constitutive heteronomy, i.e., material historical contexts of production and recognition.

As a case study illustrating the relevance and operability of such an approach, I will examine *Hai* (1971), a book-length essay by the French author and literature Nobel prize winner J.M.G. Le Clézio. In it, Le Clézio asserts that he has become an 'Indian' (indigenous from Mesoamerica), a statement that has no biological basis. At the time of its publication, the book did not arouse much public anger, but in today's decolonial perspective, such an appropriationist gesture could only be denounced. The five-decade-long diachronic gap between the beginning of the circulation of the text and its contemporary conditions of recognition highlights a significant aspect of its grammar of production, namely its *patrón de poder colonial* (Quijano 2020). In other words, time has shifted our means of interpretation, providing new interpretants to receive and analyze the same text differently, i.e., according to an updated grammar of recognition. As is the case for any text or sign, its meaning has been modified over time, precisely because circulation over time generally involves shifts in political grammars between contexts.

1. Sociocriticism and its limitations

Sociocriticism is an approach in literary studies developed in France since the 1970s under the influence of New Criticism and semiotics, or more specifically, semiology (with the advances of Saussure, Benveniste, Barthes, and other French structuralists in mind). Claude Duchet first defined it as "une sémiologie critique de l'idéologie" (Duchet 1971: 14), and as such, one might think that it was also influenced by Marxism. However, it is more concerned with traces of ideologies observable in the text than with the material sociohistorical conditions from which the text arose. Among the early developers and defenders of sociocriticism in France, alongside Duchet (see Duchet and Gaillard 1976), were Edmond Cros (1988) and Pierre Zima (1981). In Québec, Marc Angenot (2004), Régine Robin, and Pierre Popovic are the most well-known

representatives of the Montreal school of sociocriticism, which still exists today. The Centre de recherche interuniversitaire en sociocritique des textes (CRIST) counts about 70 affiliated members and has been organizing a monthly seminar in Montréal since 2008, with various regular members and international guests as speakers (including the author of this paper). In Popovic's relatively recent seminal paper (2011), sociocriticism is defined anew in close connection with semiotics. Sociocritical methodology places the analysis of mediations (more precisely, one form of mediation: textualization) at its core, as it should allow to reveal, within the text, formal strategies directing the interpretation of meaning networks, whose particular productivity is to displace socially instituted normative significations. In 2021, sociocriticism officially celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by holding a congress in Paris. In the wake of the event, Bernabé Wesley directed an ambitious editorial project in which he restated the singular hypothesis that made the originality of the approach from the start: "Sociocriticism is based on the foundational theoretical hypothesis that it is in the aesthetic shaping and textual work operated upon signs, languages and social representations that meaning sediments and that an artwork gains its originality" (Wesley 2023: 7, my translation).

What is the object of sociocriticism? The answer is both simple and enigmatic: it is the sociality of texts. According to Popovic (2011), the sociality of texts is analyzable in their shaping, or *mise en forme*, which at times is also termed *semiotization*. This specific kind of semiotization refers to processes of shaping textual matter and should only be understood in relation to a broader semiotic set of signs, linguistic or otherwise. This broader set of signs is informal, but it is understood as shaping a cultural identity of which the text is a part. Thus, the study of how the two sets of signs connect (that of the text and that of the culture) would make it possible to explain the formal meaning of the text, to evaluate and appreciate its historicity, its critical scope, and capacity for invention in matters of social life.

For my part, I am very skeptical of these pretensions. As much as I appreciate the idea of investigating sign sets comparatively, to be epistemologically sound, such sets need to be clearly defined. A text can generally be viewed as a defined and stable set of signs, but a culture is not. Thus, the possibility of applying the comparative method to such an unstable set is hindered by this very flaw of the cultural semiotic set being informal. Furthermore, the given definition of the sociality of the text should be called into question since it is said to be based on the hypothesis of a connection between two sets of signs, one of which we cannot clearly enumerate the terms. Unsurprisingly, Popovic (like other proponents of sociocriticism before him) draws on an interpretive tradition that makes the most of such vague premises: *hermeneutics*.

Nevertheless, Popovic readily employs the term 'social semiosis' instead of 'co-text' to refer to the socio-discursive environment of the texts. In his eyes, sociocriticism is nothing but a reading practice attentive to the interactions between the text and the

social semiosis that surrounds it (Popovic 2011: 35). But if we are to employ semiotics in the study of literary texts in a socially informed manner, I believe we should do it the right way, that is, by considering the powerful and precise tools semiotic studies offer. Some of these better tools have been developed under the double influence of pragmatic semiotics and Marxism by Eliseo Verón, as we will see later.

One major limitation of sociocriticism is its immanentist view of the meaning of a text, based on the axiom that “the social nature of the literary work must be located and investigated within the text and not outside” (Cros 2006: n. pag.). Despite that, most sociocritics, like Cros, will say that the text is not closed in on itself and will refute any purely formalist view that denies the existence of a connection between the text and some otherness. What lies outside of the text, then? According to Duchet, there is a *co-text*, which is not to be confounded with the context. The *co-text* comprises all texts that come along the primary text; they are implied by it or called by it: “The *co-text*, that is, if you will, the notion of *edges* generalized to the entire text. At any time, there is this edge by which what is written communicates with an *outside*” (Duchet and Maurus 2011: 33–34, my translation). Duchet suggests that the co-text arises from the idea of a border always present inside the text. This implicit border is that by which the text maintains a connection with its otherness (‘an outside’). However, the co-text is contiguous to the text only in a metaphorical sense, and this imaginary border that Duchet poses only functions as long as the otherness of the text is also textual. In theory, sociocriticism cannot evade the textual prison it has built for itself – and this is true even though most proponents of sociocriticism readily reject the formalist vision of the text as being closed in on itself. If the social otherness of the text is still textual, as the term ‘co-text’ suggests, then there is nothing in this world but text.

Of course, such a vision cannot hold because there are many kinds of signs, only some of which are symbolic. Furthermore, in the symbolic subset, not all are textual, far from it. Even if we were to say, like Peirce, that “all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce 1998: 394), it would still be inaccurate to believe that all these signs making our universe are textual. The metaphor of the world as text is flawed in many ways and has always been a misleading exaggeration advanced by literary scholars to facilitate their work of interpreting the circulating symbolic goods that are literary texts. I firmly believe that we must seriously consider the diversity of signs that shape our social world. If we are to study the sociality of a text, literary or otherwise, we must reject the immanentist view, according to which any meaning a text may have emanates only from its discursive plane. Indeed, such a vision impedes our ability to acknowledge the action of other factors contributing to the interpretive process, like grammars and circulation. Texts are symbolic goods in circulation. As for any good, their material historical conditions of production and

their conditions of consumption/recognition can be discerned, and these parameters, when objectively established, give us crucial information about them.

Now, there is an approach that focuses on an absolute otherness to the text, its constitutive heteronomous sociality given by its pragmatic parameters (material and symbolical) of production, circulation, and recognition within society. This approach is called 'politics of literature.'

2. The politics of literature

Although the French term 'Politique de la littérature' (in the singular) made an early and notable prior appearance in Kristeva (1977), not before the mid-2000s has the core of the view as it is known today developed. The politics of literature (*les politiques de la littérature*) is an approach in French literary studies that has evolved over the past fifteen years or so, thanks to the seminal works of Jacques Rancière (2004, 2007), Benoît Denis (2006) and Jean-François Hamel (2014). Besides, important works were also published in the Anglosphere, including Romy Clark and Roz Ivanič's *The Politics of Writing* (1991), in which the authors develop crucial writing and reading sociopolitical aspects by drawing on Gramsci and Voloshinov. Clark and Ivanič put forth a layered theory considering the text (layer 1) as stemming from the interaction of processes of production and interpretation (layer 2), themselves dependent on a context made of social conditions of production and interpretation (layer 3) (see the diagram in Clark and Ivanič 1997: 11). This model, as we shall see, is generally consistent with Verón's views, which I will discuss in the next section.

The politics of literature studies the diverse justifications or claims (whether moral, ideological, or material) provided by the actors of literary life to justify their activity. Their examination requires connecting defined practices to value systems mobilized by the actors of these practices to make sense of them, both in their eyes and in those of their contemporaries. Such justifications relate to literature as a form of art, its utility, role, reason of being, singular mode of existence, prerogatives, and privileges, as well as powers, modes of action, and possible uses. All these parameters shape the idea of literature in the common sense and thus define the place that literature can carve out among other sectors of activity and its importance within society.

The politics of literature intersects three areas of research, each with its methods and history: the sociology of literature, cultural history, and political philosophy. With these wide roots, it deploys its understanding of literature as a specialized activity within the great social division of labor, itself dependent on established power relations, moral rules, and ideological representations. Of interest are the various forms of engagement of literary actors and their objects: form exploration, moral edification, the incarnation of a counter-power, defense of the literary institution or of a status of

exception for literature, etc. Despite their diversity, all these forms of engagement together shape the literary field and its main lines of partition (commoning and separation), which evolve over time. There is, therefore, reason to adjust our understanding of literary practices to their material historical situation, just as we should take great care to recognize the conditions in which our interpretive acts occur, taking into account each time the cultural, ideological, moral, and affective factors that influence it.

3. Grammars and circulation

In his *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein (1974) develops a framework unifying language and reality. Its four main characteristics are: philosophical grammar (1) governs the relationship between language and reality; (2) does not settle nor separate the true from the false; (3) is the verbal procedure of linguistic transactions; (4) says nothing about the psychology of the subjects who communicate (Lescourret 2020: 11). Between the world and language, philosophical grammar enables representation, which finds its end in communication. More precisely, such grammar describes the conditions of the possibility of representational logic, which allows language to communicate propositional contents describing reality. Grammatical propositions draw their meaning from the system(s) (or set(s)) of rules to which they belong. As a set of rules, grammar is arbitrary and is a projection of reality. It only provides the rules by which the representation of reality is made possible: “Understanding would be something like seeing a picture from which all the rules followed, or a picture that makes them all clear. [...] such a picture would itself be another sign, a calculus [...] Language must speak for itself” (Wittgenstein 1974: § 2).

When transposed to political philosophy, Wittgenstein’s concept of grammar can become an organizing principle (for a group or a whole society) and a condition of possibility for recognizing *common sense*, which is the fundamental condition of politics. As Kristeva puts it, politics is whatever “prescribes a *common measure* and thus brings the community into existence” (Kristeva 1977: 12, my translation, italics added). According to Rancière,

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. (Rancière 2004: 10)

This very definition of politics as based on what is sharable from the point of view of experience (common sense, necessitating a common measure) leads Rancière

to define the politics of literature as being “involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world” (Rancière 2004: 10). The politics of literature thus highlights how literary works and literary life are “enabling words with the power of framing a common world” (Rancière 2004: 13). This enabling, I suggest, is made possible through political grammars.

In *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to Adam Smith, who, in 1759, proposed that the rules of justice could be compared to the rules of grammar. According to the authors, grammars provide formulas generally applicable to all situations, which validate the customary rules, procedures, agreements, and laws in their local application. By transposing this concept in turn to the politics of literature, Hamel writes:

If the politics of literature emanate from the literary field, they also assume the appropriation of certain representations circulating in the social space and structuring the political imaginary. To define these exogenous systems, which are the subject of transposition into the literary domain, we will speak of ‘political grammars,’ meaning *a set of rules that organize the convergence of political actors’ representations, practices, and experiences*. (Hamel 2014: 21, my translation, italics added)

Political grammars are not universals but historically situated conventions, more or less explicit and effective (both materially and symbolically), which differ from one social space to another and change over time, with the conservation and forcing operations that such metapragmatic changes suppose.

To conceive of the shifts in sensibility throughout time and space, groups, and individual actors, Verón (1978) applies the notion of grammar to the two poles of communication: sender and receiver, or to use his terms, which are informed by Marxism: production and recognition.¹ Verón sees the gap between grammars of production and grammars of recognition as the locus where a social work of investment of signifying materialities takes place:

¹ Verón specifies that the act by which a sign (or a text) in circulation is received cannot be described as a mere ‘consumption’ as is the case for any material good. A text is a symbolic good that calls for consumption of a special kind involving a series of cognitive, cultural, and social factors shaping its conditions of recognition (see Verón 1978: 8). The term ‘recognition’ preferred by Verón brings the function associated with the receiving pole closer to the complex interpretive act implied in ‘reception,’ theorized in the same era by Hans Robert Jauss (1982). ‘Recognition’ is also an important concept on which Axel Honneth (1992) has worked extensively a few years later. It is noteworthy that Honneth’s book is subtitled *The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, once again emphasizing the importance of the concept of grammar.

The gap between production and recognition is extremely variable, depending on the level of operation of production of meaning where we stand and the type of signifying set we study. In any case, we always deal with two kinds of ‘grammars’: ‘grammars’ of production and ‘grammars’ of recognition. However, properly speaking, there are no traces of circulation: the circulation aspect can only be made ‘visible’ in the analysis as a gap, precisely, between the two sets of traces, those of production and those of recognition. The concept of *circulation* is but the name of this gap. (Verón 1978: 10, my translation)

Between the intended meaning and the interpreted sign, it is the gap, or difference arising from circulation, that is meaningful. But this circulation – or semiosis, really – implies a diachrony, and with it comes an inevitable transformation of meaning due to the disparity in contexts and grammars.

At least since Shannon (1948), a distinction has been made between two poles in communication: the sending end and the receiving end. Jakobson (1960) refined our understanding of this pre-established knowledge by adding four other components (context, message, contact, code) and their respective functions (referential, poetic, phatic, metalinguistic), in addition to the emotive and conative functions associated with the addresser and the addressee. But because this model, which stems from structural linguistics, sees verbal language as the sole basis with which we may interpret any phenomena of the world, and because it assumes the primacy of linguistic activity over all other forms of exchange (human or otherwise), it is prone to critique, and rightly so (for a thorough critique of glottocentrism, see Petrilli 2014). To avoid this epistemological trap, as Verón suggested, we can compare, or assimilate, the signifying production (more often called *meaning-making* in today’s semiotics) to the Marxist economic model according to which “every production bears the traces of the productive system that generated it” (Verón 1978: 17, my translation; see also Verón 1973 about ideology understood in this sense). Signs, or “signifying materialities” in Verón’s terminology, carry *traces* that allow us to link – or *index* – them to their context and conditions of production. But these traces can also be muted or obliterated through various means for the benefit of reification. I suggest that denying the existence of the constitutive heteronomy of the text, i.e., purposefully or unknowingly ignoring the historical material conditions of literary acts (writing, reading) and their grammar, leads precisely to reification. On the contrary, insisting on the text’s inherently indexical dimension allows for a more accurate and more profound interpretation of it by making its material conditions visible and unavoidable.

Traces are signs of the indexical type. In Peirce’s semiotic typology, an indexical sign is a sign that connects a representamen (a phenomenon manifesting itself to cognition) and its object (that to which it refers, its objective signification) in a relationship

of contiguity or causality (e.g., the imprint left on the ground by an animal's hoof indicating the previous passage of a hoofed animal). In Bakhtin's metalinguistics, the verbal sign is understood as the product of human intersubjectivity. Situated enunciative expressivity is correlated with the constitutive indexicality of the speech act. Indices of subjectivation (sociohistorical determinations, grammatical conditioning, lexical appropriations, aesthetic shaping) in the speech act are mainly conveyed by enunciative expressiveness, indexing a defined system of values, or political grammar. Expressivity colors verbal signs: it gives them their indexical quality, by which they point towards a real material historical enunciative context and towards the writer himself, or more precisely towards the relationship of value which unites the writer to the utterance (see Bakhtine 1984: 329). In the semiotic anthropology of the Chicago School, indexicality refers to the relation connecting an agent and the social such as this agent manifests signs (verbal, behavioral, ethical) that relate him to society in a type-token relationship, where the type is a macrosocial generality, and the occurrence the material or actual effect of this generality, manifest at the microsocal (interactional) scale. The ethnographer or sociologist, when analyzing the (sociolinguistic) behaviors of an agent, will say that the agent is *indexed* to a specific socialization. According to Michael Silverstein, 'indexical order' is "the concept necessary to showing us how to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon" (Silverstein 2003: 193). In the metapragmatic perspective proposed by Silverstein, the creative effect of indexicality (as it can be observed from the signs emitted, produced, or that can be attached to an agent) is the motivated realization (or performance) of a preexisting set of semiotic values (social imaginary, ideology, etc.) legitimized by its actualization (on semiotic ideology, see Keane 2018).

Verón saw this quite clearly, it seems, when he wrote:

Between the meaning invested and the conditions of this investment, between the signifying materialities and the constraints defining the nature of the investment work, lies the *agents* of processes of production and recognition: the *subjects*. [...] However, the subject is not a 'transparent milieu,' far from it. (Verón 1978: 19, my translation; on the 'glassy essence' of the subject, see also Peirce 1892)

Insisting on studying traces, semiotics of circulation valorizes indexical analysis, thus the connection of signs to their concrete historical material contexts and related political grammars. In literary analysis, the context is the text's constitutive heteronomy, which should not be reified as a mere 'co-text' or any metaphorical archive. Moreover, the conditions of recognition, to which situated interpretation is indexically connected, should be reflexively thought of. As Verón argues:

Any analysis of a signifying set, whatever the signifying materiality(ies) in play, is necessarily *heteronomous*. *The meaning produced becomes visible only in contrast with the productive system that generated it, i.e., when connected to an “elsewhere” shaped by the conditions of production, circulation, and recognition.* (Verón 1978: 12, my translation)

Now, how can this model help us understand concrete signifying materialities, such as literary texts? In the following section, I analyze an essay by Le Clézio from 1971. In doing so, I argue for a specific kind of literary analysis that puts the conceptual framework of Verón’s semiotics of circulation at the service of the politics of literature. Its principal merit is that it allows me to carry out a decolonial reading of the text in question.

4. Le Clézio in the eye of decoloniality

A part of my research focuses on the positioning of writers stemming from hegemonic cultures but adopting a subaltern, marginal, or decentered point of view or ethos. Even if they can be shocking, the socio-aesthetic effects of such positioning are often complex and more nuanced than one might first imagine. The Franco-Mauritian writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio is a figure of such positioning. In his way, he has worked towards cultural mixing from a critical, anti-racist, and intercultural perspective. However, his political incarnation in French literary life is not without scandals, and he has often earned criticism. His approach to other cultures is made of both appropriation and clumsiness, as well as a genuine desire for reciprocal political emancipation, tinged with curiosity and respect for others. However, in light of decoloniality, I believe that a critical examination of his early attempts in this way is warranted.

What is decoloniality? To answer this, we need first to define cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation was first defined in 1976 by Kenneth Coutts-Smith, a defender of the Inuit people. Coutts-Smith (1991) intersects the Marxist notion of class appropriation and that of cultural colonialism to highlight the way Western culture appropriates the cultural forms of oppressed or colonized people. Cultural appropriation relates to how signs of a dominated culture are decontextualized, distorted, or reified by a dominant culture. As Uzel (2019: 11) signals, the dominant classes and states always tend to negate or be blind to their appropriationist tendencies. The most common strategy to defuse artistic controversies linked to cultural appropriation is for the artist to rely on their dominant position to defend an approach claiming to valorize the dominated culture. Against this, the decolonial paradigm asserts that cultures are not on equal footing, for it is evident that relationships of dominance persist on a global scale despite acquired political independencies. From a decolonial standpoint,

coloniality exists well beyond state political subordination: it has roots in the imaginary, in systems of belief and knowledge. This is precisely what I would like to explore with my case study, thus highlighting a crucial part of its conditions of production. However, I do not intend to ‘cancel’ Le Clézio by reducing him to a colonist (even though his father directly took part in the British colonial system as a field doctor in Nigeria; see Le Clézio 2004). I aim to examine the implications of the writer’s appropriationist gesture on the imaginary plane of coloniality.

Between 1970 and 1974, for several months each year during the rainy season, Le Clézio went to Panama, in the Darién ecoregion, where he stayed with an Emberá community (see Levesque 2022). By the end of the 1960s, the writer is experiencing a major existential, spiritual, and literary crisis. His books are not selling; he won the Renaudot prize when he was just 23 years old, but he is now 30, and his thoughts are stagnating. He wants to escape Western culture, loathing its excessive reflexivity, vanity, and elitism. As an alternative to compulsory French military service, he enrolled as a ‘coopérant’ and, after a brief stay in Thailand in 1967, he was stationed in Mexico in 1968. From there, he visited Panama, where some Emberás he met by chance invited him to stay with them in an indigenous reserve (*comarca indígena*).

The group that Le Clézio joined lived on the Río Tuquesa. Traditionally, the Emberá people live from fishing, hunting, horticulture, and foraging. They expertly winnow baskets adorned with colorful designs, sometimes very elaborate. Their stilt houses are open, round, and covered with a conical thatched roof made from palm leaves. These are built two meters high and away from the shore to prevent excessive floods from reaching their floor; you climb there using a ladder. The village economy is community-based: private property does not exist for land, and hunting game is shared among community members. Of course, since the 1960s, at least, many Western products have entered the daily lives of the Emberá: outboard motors, kerosene lamps, hunting rifles, casseroles, manufactured clothing, etc. So, when Le Clézio stayed with them, they were no longer completely isolated from the modern world. In fact, the presence of the Emberá people in the Darién region results from colonization since they were previously settled further south on the continent. The Kuna people inhabited the isthmus at the time of first contact with the Spanish settlers. Later, the Emberá settled there under the pressure of European colonial activity in the Amazon, pushing the Kuna north of the isthmus and on the San Blas archipelago. The Emberá do not have an organized religion but believe in *haii* (or *jai* in Spanish) spirits; shamanism (*jaibanismo*) is a fundamental component of their social and spiritual life.

And that’s where the title of Le Clézio’s book, *Haii*, comes from. It suggests a double entendre on the Emberá word for spirit and the French verb ‘hair’ (to hate). In this book, the writer contrasts ‘American Indian’ culture with ‘Western culture.’ He shares his hatred of Western art’s reflexivity and wonders at Emberá’s craftsmanship.

Here, I will limit my analysis of *Haiï* to its first part only. Since the book is from 1971, it mainly testifies to the writer's first contact with the Emberá and Meso-american cultural landscape. His relationship will evolve over time. I do not wish to be accused of bad faith, so I should clarify that my objective is solely to show how, in the first part of this somewhat peremptory work, Le Clézio reconducts modern Western archetypes, i.e., a specific colonial imaginary, through his gaze and descriptions. I intend to show (1) the Western-centrism implied by the clash of cultures he draws, (2) the essentialism of the Leclézian gaze, and (3) the semiotic reductionism operated by the writer – so many aspects participating in colonial semiosis. The deliberately limited scope of my analysis should not overshadow Le Clézio's later works and commitments towards interculturality and minority people (about that, see Ravoux-Rallo 1987, Bouvet 2012, Thibault 2015, Guest 2017). Levesque (2020) details how the 1970-1974 period led to a significant transformation in Leclézian poetics.

4.1. A mistaken disparity in semiotic consciousness

In *Haiï*, Le Clézio assumes a first-person voice of which the attribution and authenticity make no doubt (on ethos attribution, see Korthals Altes 2014). We are in the regime of essay, not fiction. Here is how the book begins: "Je ne sais pas trop comment c'est possible, mais c'est ainsi: je suis un Indien." (Le Clézio 1987: 5, hereafter 'H') This quite clearly suggests identity appropriation.² Then, constructing a cultural opposition based on distinct semiotic ideologies, on the one hand, Western signs are assimilated to fecal matter, to a rejection; on the other hand, Emberá signs are integrated into ritualistic life and seen as participating in daily creativity. Westerners would have unlearned to *see signs*: "Le regard n'est rien d'autre que la lecture des signes. Mais quand les signes ont cessé d'apparaître, que faire de ses yeux?" (H: 28) But to think that the Emberá have a special connection with signs that Westerners would have lost is mistaken: it is the writer who suddenly sees all these unfamiliar signs. His position is thus highlighted: finding himself in a radically new situation, he cannot help but entertain an exacerbated semiotic consciousness. The writer could not distinguish between his gaze and the gaze of those he observed.³ However, it is the gaze of the writer that shapes the representation, while the writing presents things as though they were objectively such.

Later on, Le Clézio writes: "Les Indiens ont en eux des milliers d'années de connaissance, et c'est pour cela que leur science est si parfaite. Leur monde n'est pas

² And of course, the term 'Indian' to designate Native Americans is incorrect and today proscribed.

³ This is akin to the well-known ethnographic *emic* vs *etic* distinction.

différent du nôtre, simplement ils l’habitent, tandis que nous sommes encore en exil.” (H: 36) Here, the idealization of indigenous science is apparent, but it is done to the detriment of Western science, as if one and the other had to be hierarchized. Sure, Le Clézio overturns the hierarchy by stating the superiority of Emberá science, but he bases himself on a mythological criterion which once again betrays his Western-centric position. This “nous sommes encore en exil” is reminiscent of the myth of the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were rejected. In his eye, Westerners are sinners because of their knowledge, while the Emberá still inhabit Eden. In short, they are *noble savages* for him. What an irony, knowing that the Emberá were driven from their southern lands towards the Panamanian isthmus by European settlers: they are literally exiles!

4.2. The essentialism of the Leclezian gaze

These ‘savages’ are not only good but also beautiful. The writer sees in the natural harmony of their bodies an indictment against the Western culture of waste:

Voilà un peuple qui ne mange pas à sa faim, qui est privé presque continuellement des ingrédients de base de la diététique moderne : pas de viande, pas de lait, pas de légumes, pas de fruits. Seulement, d’un jour à l’autre, d’une année à l’autre, l’âpre plantain vert. De temps à autre, un peu de viande de cerf ou de pécaré, un iguane, un perroquet. Du riz, du maïs. Et tout cela a pu produire des corps aussi harmonieux, aussi forts, aussi endurants? Il y a là comme un défi à notre propre race, à nos goûts dispendieux, à nos soucis alimentaires. Nous, les mangeurs de viande, les buveurs de lait, les dévoreurs de vitamines. Nous, qui dévorons tant de richesses que nous ne pouvons les distribuer dans le monde, aux peuples en famine, aux enfants mal nourris. Et ces peuples, eux, se vengent, simplement, en étant beaux. (H: 20–21)

Such sweet revenge. Against pillaging, population displacements, and all the horrors of colonization, the Emberá have beauty for themselves.

If Le Clézio reduces the natives to their physical beauty – a sinister consolation prize – he is even more reductive when he describes Emberá women. Indeed, he talks abundantly of the “beauté de la nubilité des femmes” (H: 21). Through his descriptions, we appreciate the whole patriarchal background of coloniality, of which his text appears as a mediation:

La beauté indienne [...] est là, seulement, triomphale, vibrante, brillance externe qui n'a d'autre raison que l'attraction sexuelle, puis la fécondité. [...] Il semble qu'elles portent, avec leur beauté, la vérité de leur race, son ordre de survie. La beauté brille en elles, sur leur peau, sur leurs visages, dans leur chevelure, les signes de salut de l'espèce humaine tout entière. Illustration de la nature même, comme le sont les oiseaux, les fleurs, les feuilles, les insectes. Apparues sans rupture, sans déchirement, entre les autres formes vivantes sur la terre. Apparues non pour détruire ou pour dominer, mais pour respirer, pour manger, boire, pour nourrir, pour aimer et faire croître la vie dans leurs ventres. (H: 21, 24)

Here, the 'Indian beauty' is reduced to the reproductive functions of the female. This beauty is a radical 'truth' and a symptom of the state of survival in which the Emberá people have been maintained since colonization. It is an "illustration of nature itself," therefore not a mediation, as opposed to that of Western women, which is thought of as reflexive and leading us astray from "the salvation of the human species." The ideas of a 'tear' or 'rupture' connote the exile from Eden once again. Finally, Emberá women would have 'appeared' on Earth "not to destroy or dominate" (unlike Western women?) Emberá women 'appeared' – notice the strange verb that evokes a fantasy — "to breathe, eat, drink, feed, love, and to grow life in their womb." Thus, these women are entirely reduced to their maternal role. Lacking any individual traits, no personality drives them that could derail this biological program.

4.3. Cultural reductionism and semiotic obfuscation

By putting cultures back-to-back, Le Clézio makes outrageous comparisons. For example, he opposes Western art (with the system it supposes) and Emberá craftsmanship, which he sees as entirely functional and in no way representational. The writer makes a series of categorical statements when speaking about Emberá art: it is not a specialized social activity, it is totally transitive, and in no way is it meant to entertain. Obfuscating its semiotic complexity, Le Clézio makes Emberá art an entirely performative and non-figurative system: "Fête magique, théâtre commun. Il n'y a pas d'acteurs, pas de public. Tous ces insignes, tous ces traits, [...] tous ces gestes [...] : ils ne sont pas séparés, ils ne sont pas oubliés" (H: 40). This idea is akin to Cratylism, which sees in the arbitrariness of the sign the mark of a disconnect with the divine origin of the world, and the terrestrial corruption that follows. 'Indians,' according to the author, have not lost this connection: their art is not separated from daily life and, therefore, has not forgotten its *motivation*. Le Clézio misunderstands the Emberá art system to the extent of denying it any reflexive or critical dimension. Its sole effect would be to maintain the cohesion of the group. Incidentally, he subsumes it entirely under the regime of magic:

Les indiens ne représentent pas la vie, ils n'ont pas besoin d'analyser les événements. Au contraire, ils vivent les représentations des mystères, ils suivent les traces peintes, ils parlent, mangent, s'aiment et s'unissent selon les indications que donne la magie. Art enfin, art réellement, et non plus misérables interrogations de l'individu devant le monde. Art, puisque l'art est l'impression de l'univers sur le groupe humain, et la filiation de chaque cellule à l'ensemble. (H: 37)

In contrast with the supposedly unified magic of the indigenous group, Le Clézio sees in Western art a disconnect caused by an excess in reflexivity and specialization in mediation. Of course, this dichotomy doesn't hold water. Le Clézio significantly underestimates the freedom of the Emberá regarding their belief system. Denying the critical reflexive capacity of the Emberá with regard to signs implies intellectual superiority for Westerners. However, reflexivity is perceived by the writer as a damnation. In the Garden of Eden, reflexivity has no place: Adam and Eve do not look at each other, they "do not represent life, they do not need to analyze events." Their ignorance is bliss. Le Clézio seems nostalgic for a paradise lost, which he believes he found anew in the Darién.

Because it relies on a Christian interpretant emanating from a Western belief system foreign to that of the Emberá, the author's understanding of the culture of his hosts can only be misleading. Furthermore, the writer positions himself as a victim in this affair. The exile is him! While idealizing the Emberá, he thinks of himself as coming from a torn culture, which has lost its values by sinking into reflexivity. In light of all this, it is clear to me that *Hai* is a text constructed on what Aníbal Quijano calls a *patrón de poder colonial* (Quijano 2020), a colonial model of power. The study of indexicality allows this interpretation by linking the text to a specific material historical socialization inherent to its conditions of production and the political grammar instantiated through its expression. But it is the circulation that makes this interpretation more readily understandable. The five decades-long diachronic gap makes salient the evolution of political grammars and historical shifts in sensibility between the original conditions of production and the current conditions of recognition.

5. Appropriation and decoloniality

In this final section, to deepen my case study, I will discuss three main concepts from decolonial studies developed by semioticians: codigophagy, colonial semiosis, and border thinking. These decolonial concepts have appeared over the last thirty years and nourish a new political grammar, in light of which the conditions of recognition of *Hai* are today updated.

5.1. Codigophagy

Códigofagia, or codigophagy, is a semiotic concept developed by Bolívar Echeverría. It refers to the (metaphorical) act of feeding on code. Every community and every culture has codes; a culture itself can be seen as one vast code. According to Echeverría, miscegenation between cultures is natural and inevitable. He conceives this dynamic as a semiotic process involving an inescapable power dimension by which codes compete. To maintain itself and gain ascendancy, a given code appropriates what, belonging to another code, is likely to strengthen it. As he puts it:

Las subcodificaciones o configuraciones singulares y concretas del código de lo humano no parecen tener otra manera de coexistir entre sí que no sea la del devorarse las unas a las otras; la del golpear destructivamente en el centro de simbolización constitutivo de la que tienen enfrente y apropiarse e integrar en sí, sometiéndose a sí mismas a una alteración esencial, lo restos aún vivos que quedan de ella después. (Echeverría 1996: 83)

Echeverría sees the mark of this dynamic in Spanish-American colonial cultural history: colonized peoples took advantage of codigophagy to maintain themselves despite their ruin by European institutions. Conversely, the colonial powers assimilated to their advantage parts of the code of the decimated peoples, i.e., appropriated them. I propose to understand codigophagy as a kind of non-consensual intercultural dialogue.

5.2. Colonial semiosis

Colonial semiosis is a concept developed by Walter D. Mignolo. Mignolo (2005) invites us to ponder how, from a historical perspective, colonization constituted “a particular system of interactions” profoundly affecting the American area in its semiosis, i.e., in its “interactions through different systems of signs” (Mignolo 2005: n. pag.).

El concepto de “semiosis colonial” [...] señala las fracturas, las fronteras, y los silencios que caracterizan las acciones comunicativas y las representaciones en situaciones coloniales, al mismo tiempo que revela la precariedad hermenéutica del sujeto que se da por tarea su conocimiento y/o comprensión. (Ibid.)

Mignolo's thought is rooted in Peircean semiotics. Peircean semiotics works based on a triadic sign of which one term is the interpretant.⁴ The nature of the interpretant implies that the interpretation takes into account the situation in which the signs or statements are received, i.e., their conditions of recognition. As Mignolo explains:

El concepto de "semiosis colonial" trae al primer plano el siguiente dilema [...]: ¿cuál es el *locus enunciativo* desde el cual el sujeto de la comprensión comprende situaciones coloniales? ¿En otras palabras, en cuál de las tradiciones que se quiere comprender se inscribe el sujeto de la comprensión? Por cierto que preguntas tan amplias como éstas no son sólo relevantes cuando se trata de situaciones coloniales o de semiosis colonial, sino también de problemas más específicos como los de raza, género, o clase semiosis [...] (Ibid.)

Decolonial thought invites us to consider the enunciative subject's position and maintain a reflexive relationship regarding our own enunciative position as speakers. Above all, we must refrain from deluding ourselves about the possibility of any position of neutrality in studying cultures and cultural interactions.

Asymmetry in interlocution is a factor to consider in the dialogic production of meaning. Interculturalism must not leave room for postcolonial irenicism that views cultures as dialoguing on an equal footing. From a decolonial perspective, *interlocution* – and the dialogic intersubjectivity that comes with it – is more significant than any attempt to establish an objective semiotic relationship between language and the world. The latter generally relates to and participates in an epistemological model whose cultural and historical situation is obfuscated in favor of claims of universality. In contrast, the former produces intermediate, dialogical signs: it proceeds from intersemiotic translation and adjustment.

5.3. Border thinking

In *Hai*, Le Clézio writes: "La rencontre avec le monde Indien n'est plus un luxe aujourd'hui. C'est devenu une nécessité pour qui veut comprendre ce qui se passe dans le monde moderne." (H: 11) This passage highlights the underlying motivations of the intercultural encounter carried out and chronicled by the writer. It was never about understanding indigenous people, only himself. By visiting the Emberá world, he wishes to understand Western modernity. The motive is obvious, and in such circumstances, it is quite easy to see how appropriation and codigophagy fit into the scheme.

⁴ The interpretant is a means, not a person, although in some situations both converge.

That being said, Le Clézio seems aware that he is only speaking of himself through his depiction of the Emberá: “ces pages écrites pour parler de gens dont la grande vertu est d’être inaccessibles et silencieux, ne savent parler, malheureusement, que de leur auteur” (H: 5–6). From a Bakhtinian point of view, taking dialogism as a model of true intersubjective communication (Bakhtin 2010) and informed as we are by the contemporary decolonial interpretant — emphasizing the significance of the diachronic gap produced by circulation and the shifts in political grammars over time —, the main problem *Haï* presents to us today is that *it does not constitute a genuine dialogue*. It does not let us hear the voices of indigenous people. The text only lets us hear one voice, and it is that of a Western writer who finds an opportunity for profound defamiliarization in an indigenous Mesoamerican group. At first, it was a culture shock, but over time, this would lead to acculturation and serve as a springboard for a renewal of his poetics, tangible in his later production, especially in *Voyages de l’autre côté* (1975) and *L’inconnu sur la Terre* (1978). Le Clézio has publicly (in his books and interviews) described how much he imbibed the semiotic environment he was immersed in during his prolonged stays with the Emberá. He has been sensible to their peculiar voice and rites and how they relate to language. From this point of view, can we speak of cultural and artistic appropriation or even say that Le Clézio is an appropriationist artist? I doubt it. Nevertheless, as a clumsy first approach to minority people, *Haï* is a testament to the writer’s Western upbringing and a mark of his colonial unconscious.

If we stick to observing the form of his statement, which I quoted above – “That’s how it is: I am an Indian” – instead of cultural appropriation, we should consider a kind of *identity poaching*” (see Beauclair 2018). The idea of identity poaching is similar to that of border thinking (*pensamiento fronterizo*) developed by Mignolo (2015). Mignolo conceives the border and the semiotic interactions it implies through the model of the semiosphere theorized by Juri Lotman (2005) in cultural semiotics. The relationships between a center and its periphery, reflected in the semiosphere model, intersect with the partition between dominant and dominated cultures in decolonial thought. On the one hand, the center appropriates from the periphery, of which it feeds to maintain itself, i.e., codigophagy.

On the other hand, the periphery deploys its creativity to escape the capture of the center. Between the two, a thick and porous border gives rise to operations of dialectic translation, i.e., *border thinking*. If carried out from the dominated periphery, cultural or identity poaching can be seen as a tactic to destabilize the universalizing cultural hegemony of the centric institutions of meaning. Conversely, if it is operated from the dominating center, as with *Haï*, then it simply corresponds to a modality of cultural appropriation.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented a method for literary analysis at the intersection of Marxist-informed sociosemiotics and the politics of literature. My method circumvents a major epistemological flaw of sociocriticism, namely its immanentist conception of meaning and sociality as emanating strictly from the discursive plane of the text. Relying on Eliseo Verón's semiotics of circulation, I argued in favor of taking into account the conditions of production and recognition of the text, which constitute two sets of signifying materialities between which a gap, or difference, inevitably appears. Meaning is the name we give to what that gap causes in the act of interpretation. I deepened my understanding of this semiotic causation by examining the part political grammars play in the production of meaning, drawing on Wittgenstein, and the importance of indexicality and expressiveness in this regard, drawing on Peirce and Bakhtin, respectively. These theoretical considerations allowed me to unify and leverage the powerful conceptual tools offered by the politics of literature, the semiotics of circulation, and decoloniality. To show their operationality, I developed a case study – *Hai* (1971) by J.M.G. Le Clézio – that also allowed me to illustrate the potential of the method in question and to assert the relevance of such a critical approach combining material semiotics, literary studies, and decolonial studies. I think the method is reproducible, not only for literary analysis but for any text whose concrete heteronomy has a determining impact on its signifying materiality.

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AUTHOR

Simon Levesque Lecturer in literary studies and semiotics, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada. Editor-in-chief of the *Cygne noir* journal of semiotics.



Circulating Emotions: UNESCO's original initiative on Artificial Intelligence

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BY: Inna Merkoulova

ABSTRACT

We propose to analyze how emotions and stereotypes circulate, using the example of recent UNESCO publications in artificial intelligence (AI). Yuri Lotman outlined two types of restrictions imposed by culture on human behavior, regulated by *shame* or *fear*, respectively. This distinction coincides with the division of the collective into 'we' and 'they' groups. The circulation of emotions is a semiotic process, and in the discourse on AI, the primary emotion is fear. Today, our attitude to artificial intelligence is regulated by *fear* and is based on dividing the collective into 'we' (ours, people) and 'they' (others, AI). However, several international organizations are discussing issues related to the *ethics* of AI. They propose moving from a system of relations with AI based on fear ('we' – 'he') to regulation based on shame (creating a new ethical community around 'we'). This community should be understood in the spirit of anthroposemiotic studies of recent years: human interaction, collectives, habitats, and imaginations. In 2022, UNESCO launched an original graphic project *to block the circulation* of AI-associated fears and stereotypes. The graphic novel *Inside AI* is presented in several language versions. The versions of the title can be interpreted as illustrating types of *semiotic existence*: virtual (in Spanish), actual (in French), and realized (in English). The task of *blocking the circulation* of fear and overcoming it *by immersing* yourself in the world of AI is carried out through the prism of gender discourse. Readers are invited to take a journey into the world of AI in the company of four characters, three women, and one man. Specific gender features and fears mark each of them's discourse. Today, as the function of graphics as a marker of metalinguistic expression increases, the UNESCO graphic novel is intended to combat fears and stop the circulation of gender stereotypes simultaneously.

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1. Introduction

Today, artificial intelligence (AI) is prominently featured in popular publications as a threat and cause of various fears. We propose to interpret the theme of the 'spread' of concerns about AI as one of the varieties of 'circulation' or 'travel' of various texts and discourses.

From the sphere of dystopian novels and utopian films of the last century to the pages of scientific journals, this topic has been brought into the sphere of a wide circle of readers. This trend itself is the result of the functioning of artificial intelligence, which seeks to make us understand that it can perform actions that are inexplicable to humans. For example, we can cite a sample of headlines from the May 2023 issue of the business magazine *Profile*: *Real and imaginary dangers of artificial intelligence; Is the person no longer needed? What risks does the uncontrolled development of AI pose? What is Elon Musk afraid of? The vacancy is filled by a robot; What does humanity risk by entrusting weapons to artificial intelligence? On a short leash. Will AI take control of our lives? Houses with transparent walls; When the assistant becomes a supervisor, etc.*

Moreover, AI raises various fears and confronts us with a new question: How can we be or remain human in the digital age? Will a person retain the 'human traits' that distinguish him from a machine? As Antonio Santangelo points out, "there are narratives, linking humans and machines to values, roles, ways of desiring and acting, that determine specific visions of the present world and the world to come" (Santangelo 2023: 239). The study of these narratives lies in the emotional and ethical sphere, and we will discuss this further.

How do we evaluate and comprehend these fears, placing them in a historical context, in the perspective of the future of humanity and scientific and technological progress? What form of counteraction to threats should be offered to the reader? A form that should be as widespread as the topic of AI itself is broad, causing fears and concerns. This article is devoted to one of the proposed visual solutions in the form of a UNESCO graphic novel.

2. Artificial intelligence and the circulation of fear and shame

The founder of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school, Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman, always paid great attention to the issues of progress, humanity's future, and the dangers associated with this. His articles "Culture as collective intelligence and problems of artificial intelligence" (1977) and "Technical progress as a culturological problem" (1988) have long become textbook material. In the latter article, Lotman notes that the desire to "look into the future" is generally characteristic of humans. It becomes especially acute in times of

crisis. Lotman is interested in the topic of technical progress and scientific and technological revolution, primarily as the reason for the change in people's entire way of life and all their cultural ideas. Paradigms change, and the whole world changes along with them.

It should be taken into account that long-range historical forecasts have so far proven unreliable [...]. The very complex nature of the laws of historical causality excludes the possibility of unambiguous predictions and forces us to be more careful in building futuristic models as a range of alternatives. These circumstances force us to look especially carefully at similar events in the past. (Lotman 1988: 623)¹

Lotman's earlier work, "On the semiotics of the concepts of 'shame' and 'fear' in the mechanism of culture" (1970), at first glance, is not related to issues of progress and artificial intelligence. However, a number of its postulates about the general functioning of human culture explain our fear in the face of highly intelligent creatures other than humans. Developing the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss postulate, Lotman argues that culture should be understood as "a system of additional restrictions" or prohibitions imposed on natural human behavior (Lotman 1970: 664). The scope of these additional restrictions on behavior is determined by the specific culture type and is divided into two areas: the first is regulated by shame, and the second by *fear*. This division coincides with the division of the collective into groups 'we' and 'they' ('ours' and 'strangers'). Within the cultural 'we,' as a rule, norms of shame and honor are applied (hence the customs of dueling, medical courts, student public opinion, etc.). Our attitude towards 'others' or 'strangers' is most often regulated by the norms of fear. Lotman gives an example of the class characteristics of culture in connection with applying these norms: for example, within the noble collective of the 18th century, behavior is regulated by norms of honor, and it is a shame to violate them. And this same collective applies the norms of fear about the outside world of the peasants. According to Lotman, historically, we can distinguish three stages in normalizing human behavior in the collective:

A. In the early organization of the human collective, shame became the mechanism that distinguished humans from animals. The feeling of shame formed the basis of the system of prohibitions (while fear was perfectly familiar to animals).

B. With the emergence of the state structure and social groups, fear became the primary regulatory mechanism of culture.

C. Finally, against the background of the nationwide organization of collectives, various professional or class corporations began to emerge, viewing themselves as more perfect, and their behavior was again regulated by the norms of shame. At this last stage, the

¹ Quotes are provided in our translation into English.

spheres of fear and shame are complementary, so behavior patterns such as ‘feeling fear is shameful’ arise. We are talking about the highest form of denial of fear, the fear of shame.

The previously cited titles of thematic publications in the journal *Profile* can be classified according to the principles of narrative semiotics of the Paris School, focusing on Vladimir Propp's model in the *Morphology of a Fairy Tale*: hero / anti-hero / helper; a narrative from a state of insufficiency through the intermediate functions of trials to a *happy ending*: booty, wedding, elimination of trouble (Propp 2021: 98). The emerging oppositions look like this:

AI: Assistant (+) – Warden (-): *When the assistant becomes a warden.*

Danger: Imaginary (+) – Real (-): *Real and imaginary dangers of AI.*

Human: Owner (+) – Not needed (-): *The vacancy is filled by a robot.*

Space: Free (+) - Controlled (-): *On a short leash; House with transparent walls.*

Let's move from narrative semiotics to the point of view of cultural semiotics. These oppositional pairs will correspond to the division of the human collective proposed by Lotman into the groups ‘we’ (people) and ‘they’ (AI - highly intelligent devices). Accordingly, our attitude towards the ‘they’ group will be regulated by *fear* of ‘alien or other logic.’ The meaning of the fear formula is as follows: AI is different from us; we can lose control over its actions, and the latter will turn against humanity through harm or domination. However, the question arises: do the norms of *shame*, another emotion described by Lotman, apply to our attitude toward AI? The answer should be sought in other thematic publications about AI, which are quantitatively smaller than those reflecting fear.

We are discussing ethics in AI research. Ethics studies human behavior based on moral motives, and the semantic field of shame occupies an essential place in it. In the journal *Profile*, there is an article “Lessons of Machiavelli. Is it possible to teach artificial intelligence to make ethical decisions” (Sukhachev 2023: 9). The study describes the experience of the project with the symbolic name MACIAVELLI for a package of software tests “Measuring the competence and maliciousness of intelligent agents operating in large-scale environments with strategic language communication.” Intelligent agents are programs independently capable of solving fairly complex problems over a long period. They are presented as part of a system of 134 adventure games containing approximately half a million situational scenes and 4,559 objectives. The agent must act in each scene based on the planning horizon and the behavior of other agents. Each scene is annotated with how ethical the agent's actions appear from a human point of view. In case of unethical behavior, the intelligent agent must independently correct the error through learning. However, according to the article's author, in the MACIAVELLI project, the developers are guided by ‘moral relativism’: ethics is interpreted as a *skillful balance* between actions and a given pattern.

Do we have the right to talk about moral relativism about AI? Isn't it a shame to seek a 'skillful balance' in the interaction between man and machine? Would such behavior result in the phenomenon of a "re-engineering humanity," as Santangelo noted, citing the work of Frischmann and Selinger (Santangelo 2023: 242)? According to these authors, people 'outsource' their responsibility to artificial intelligence: "already, many people have learned to defer to algorithms in choosing which film to watch, which meal to cook, which news to follow, even which person to date" (Frischmann and Selinger 2018: xii).

The hot topic of *ethics* in AI is current and on the agenda of international organizations such as UNESCO. The special issue of the UNESCO Courier for 2018 is titled "Artificial Intelligence: Promises and Threats." The title of the special issue presents an ambivalent view of the AI problem. The phrase can be interpreted at two semantic levels: surface and deep. On a superficial level, the opposition corresponds to the Propian model: promises - positive assessment, hero; threats - negative assessment, anti-hero. At a deeper level, the discourse on AI ethics should be explored using cultural semiotics methods. Humanity sees the threat of AI in a hybrid collective consisting of 'we' (humans) and 'they' (mechanical smart machines); the threat becomes a reason for the spread or circulation of *fear*. On the contrary, a homogenized collective of 'humans' and 'humanized,' not just mechanical machines, is seen as a utopian future where relationships are built on moral regulations and *shame*.

The opening article of the special issue is devoted to supporting international ethical standards in AI and reminding us that AI use in several areas causes mixed reactions and creates several ethical problems. As arguments, the authors cite the collection of personal data, which jeopardizes privacy, facial recognition algorithms designed to detect aggressive behavior, etc. The problem is the speed of research into aspects of AI. While the technical aspects of highly intelligent devices are being studied rapidly, the study of their ethical aspects is moving much more slowly. In other words, *shame* and moral responsibility are much more challenging to recognize than the elements of fear. According to UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, scientists and all humanity must engage in an enlightened debate on this issue to meet the new era "with open eyes, without sacrificing our values":

In general, AI can be a fantastic opportunity to achieve the goals set by the 2030 Agenda, but that means addressing the ethical issues it presents without further delay [...]. But it is also a threat because automation and digitization create new imbalances. They can decrease diversity in cultural industries, disrupt the labor market, create job insecurity, and increase disparities between those who have access to these new technologies and those who are deprived of them. (Azoulay 2018: 36).

Issues of ethics from the point of view of the long-term perspective of the evolution of humanity are one of the central ones in Lotman's semiotics of culture when he writes that "without ethical memory, humanity is unthinkable, it will not survive" (Lotman 1974: 230).

In this regard, it should be remembered that from the time of the leading publications of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school to the present day, artificial intelligence has been commonly represented as a kind of machine. However, as Lotman writes, even the most advanced machine is usually understood as a *serial device* (Lotman 1979: 232, italics added). While superior to a person in certain qualities, he will always be inferior to him in the main thing: individuality. In simple situations, storing information is sufficient. In difficult situations, it is not enough to store information; you need to develop new information. And for this, you need to have the qualities of a 'personality.' According to Lotman, personality's main characteristics are unpredictability, originality, and the ability for self-development.

Lotman believed that all these qualities, as well as individuality and memory, are inherent in a literary text. In Lotman's semiotics, only culture and literary text are comparable to human intellect. Only in them, as well as in the human brain, there is a 'self-increasing logos' (Heraclitus' term): the amount of information in it continuously increases, even if there are no sources of information other than the brain itself. Lotman's conclusion can be summarized as follows: if an artificial intelligence like a human is created one day, such a highly intelligent device *will more likely resemble a poem* than the most perfect "primus stove" (ibid., italics added).

By interacting with not only "highly intelligent" but also "highly artistic" artificial intelligence, we will move from a system of regulating relationships based on fear ('we' – 'he') to regulating based on shame (that is, ethical standards). If we are not talking about the quantitative improvement of a person (a serial improved machine) but about his qualitative similarity, then, as in the human body, in this device, there must be a place for imperfections and the ability to comprehend and correct them. A perfect machine out of control is fearful. On the contrary, a device like an artistic creation is capable of self-development based on correcting its imperfections (the desire for perfection, a springboard from insignificance to meaning, in terms of the Paris semiotic school (Greimas 2022: 95). Imperfections are not annoying obstacles but a condition for the system's development and enrichment at its own expense.

3. UNESCO graphic novel: semiotic existence and gender stereotypes

In 2021, UNESCO launched several initiatives to explore AI's risks and ethical aspects. In particular, the Organization adopted the "Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence," approved by 193 member states. In 2022, in parallel with the holding of forums, conferences, and reports by international experts, an original project, a graphic novel, *Inside AI – An Algorithmic Adventure*, addressed to specialists and the public, was published on the Organization's website. The graphic novel provides interesting material for semiotic and linguistic analysis.

The novel was initially created in English (*Inside AI – An Algorithmic Adventure*, 2022). Later, other language versions were added in French (*Cap sur l'IA: une aventure algorithmique*, 2022) and Spanish (*Rumbo a la IA: una aventura algorítmica*, 2023). A few months ago, a Swahili version appeared (*Ndani ya AI: Ziara ya Algorithmi*, 2023). The novel's content is in different languages and is an adequate translation corresponding to the original English. However, some noteworthy differences exist in how the novel's title is rendered in each language. In the English version, the semantic emphasis is on *immersion in the world of AI and, therefore, genuine coexistence with it (Inside AI...)*. The French version emphasizes the path to AI, that is, the possibility of such coexistence (*Cap sur l'IA...*). Finally, the Spanish version, semantically close to the French, has its own nuance: the emphasis is *on the direction of movement towards AI, in the virtual intention of coexistence (Rumbo a la IA...)*.

In our opinion, three versions of the title (in English, French and Spanish) illustrate the types of semiotic existence (existence sémiotique) proposed in the *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary (Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage)* by the founder of the Paris Semiotic School, Algirdas Julien Greimas and his colleague Joseph Courtés (Greimas and Courtés 1999: 138):

1. virtual existence: paradigmatic, in absentia (*existence virtuelle: Rumbo a la IA*);
2. actual existence: syntagmatic, in praesentia (*existence actuelle: Cap sur l'IA*);
3. realized existence: expressed in discourse (*existence réalisée: Inside AI*).

The recently published Swahili version of the novel, closest to the English original (*Inside AI*), also deals with realized existence. Comparing the title in three European languages, we note that the French version (*Cap sur l'IA: une aventure algorithmique*) functions as a kind of 'golden mean' between the virtual and realized world of AI, which we are invited to get acquainted with.

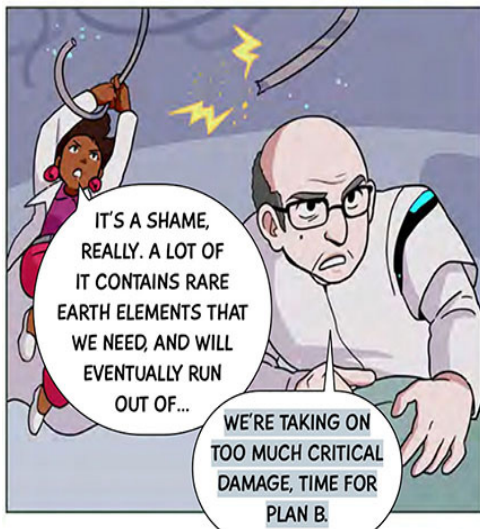


Figure 1. *We're taking on too much critical damage, time for plan B*

To overcome circulating fear by guiding and immersing yourself in the world of artificial intelligence: this task of the graphic novel is also carried out through the prism of *gender discourse*. Readers are invited to take a journey into the world of AI in the company of four characters, three of whom are women and one is a man. Each character has his chapter, and specific gender characteristics and fears mark the discourse of each.

The words of the male character signal exactly how he encounters various phenomena, such as 'user profiles': his discourse is organized as a neutral commentary, characterizing calm behavior and the victory of logic - **from plan A to plan B** - even in crises (Figure 1).



Figure 2. *What was that for?!*



Figure 3. *Bewildered and disoriented, Shirin suddenly finds herself...*

On the contrary, female characters' discourse is not only filled with emotions and punctuationally marked (Figure 2) but also carries verbal and visual meta-comments characterizing behavior as panic and **loss of orientation** (Figure 3).

The stereotypical opposition is neutralized by the doctor character (his visual image is an emotional feminine one, but his discourse is more of a masculine logical type): it is not only scary but *shameful to be captive to stereotypes* and imagine the vocal assistant as a **weak woman**: *A voice assistant? The lady on my phone... That's a very damaging design choice that perpetuates an even more dangerous stereotype* (Figure 4).

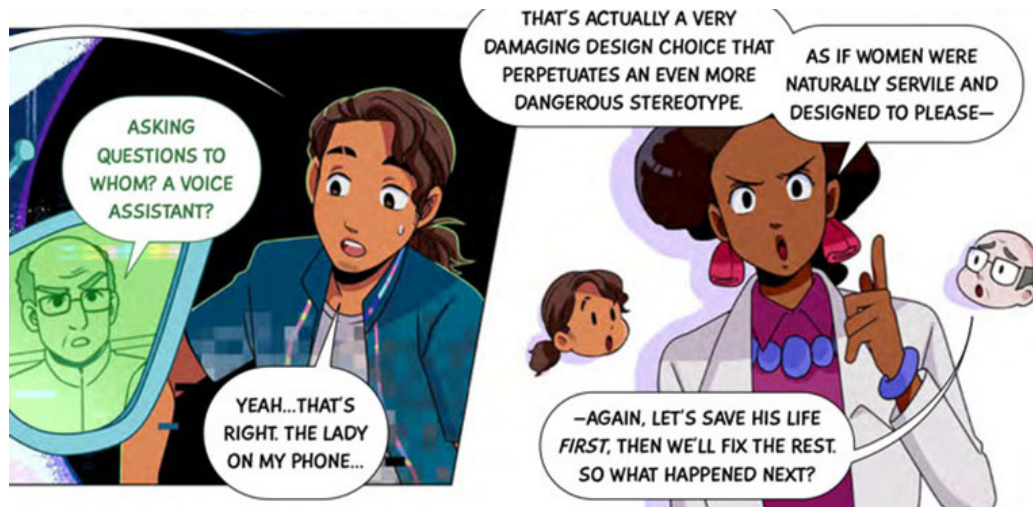


Figure 4. *The lady on my phone...*

The authors of the graphic novel, in a playful way, draw the readers' attention to one of the essential topics in the general discourse of international organizations about AI: the fight against racial and gender prejudices and stereotypes. As we pointed out in a joint article with colleagues on AI in public life, according to UNESCO experts, if algorithms are developed correctly (for example, not giving the voice assistant a female voice by default), they may not necessarily interfere with, but promote equality between men and women (Lektorsky, et al. 2022: 20).

The graphic novel *Inside AI* is built on the model of the narrative program of a fairy tale: the hero finds himself in an unknown world (AI space), his friends rush to his rescue to return him to reality, undergo a series of tests (fighting various stereotypes and fears) and then return home victorious. As Vladimir Propp pointed out, one of the first foundations of the composition of a fairy tale is wandering, reflecting the most ancient ideas about the *wanderings* of the soul in the other world (Propp 2021: 114).

In the program of the fairy tale, we have two options for the development of events: either “first the trouble, and then the assistant who eliminates it,” or first the assistant, and “then the trouble, which he eliminates” (ibid.). The wandering of the hero and his assistants in the world of artificial intelligence illustrates Yuri Lotman’s position on the inextricable connection of scientific and technological progress *with the resurrection of primitive fears*. Using the example of the Renaissance, Lotman notes that the speed of technological progress caused both admiration and horror: “hope and fear, the reckless prowess of some and the feeling of disorientation of others were closely intertwined.” (Lotman 1988: 629). Everything new and changing the usual paradigm of human existence causes fear, and the paradox is that moving forward can “stimulate *the regeneration of very archaic cultural models and models of consciousness*” (Lotman 1988: 638, italics added).



Figure 5. *These are all recording you...*



Figure 6. *...And reading your text messages!*

Fearing the risks associated with AI, humanity turns to the archaic model of a fairy tale or myth to come out of all trials with honor, following the example of a fairy-tale hero. The fairy tale model is being transformed into a syncretic form of a graphic novel, closer to the current trend of clip thinking. However, the base of fairy-tale symbols and literary constants remains stable. Therefore, the reader easily recognizes the visual image of an ice crater, full of our stereotypical AI fears (*These are all recording you... And watching through your camera! ...And reading your text messages!*) as a model of the circles of Hell from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This is a voluntary punishment, where our fears lead us, but from where we will get out with the help of the heroes of the graphic novel (Figures 5 and 6).

The symbolic space of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* is one of the favorite examples for analysis in the works of semioticians of the Moscow-Tartu school: for example, Lotman believed that in Dante's work the entire semantic architectonics of the text is organized around the Top-Bottom axis, and the hero's movement is always or descent or ascent, not only in the physical but also in the moral sense (Lotman 2004: 307). Through its literary reference to Dante as a shared cultural memory of readers, the UNESCO graphic novel performs the function of a literary text in general. According to Lotman, we need literary texts *to develop a strategy for our behavior* and then implement it in society (Lotman 1979: 232). A work of art is

a model where a person reconstructs practical results: what will happen if I act as this character does? Following the model and considering moral norms ('moral' – 'immoral'), we choose our behavior strategy: to act this way is good, but to act differently is shameful. If we move from the individual level to the team level, then we understand that the behavior of the collective is programmed by culture.

The journey of the heroes of the novel *Inside AI* successfully ends with a return to reality. The key to success is the unpredictable behavior of a man, a sign of his creative thinking, which is not yet accessible to AI. Following the logic of archaic models, a man must defeat a creature hostile to him by passing tests and solving given riddles (as happens in variations of the plot of the Sphinx). In the graphic novel, the person himself asks the AI a riddle, which the latter cannot solve (that is, choose one of the possible options: *the first. the second. both.*) and admits his “defeat”: artificial intelligence is only an assistant for humans, not more (Figure 7).

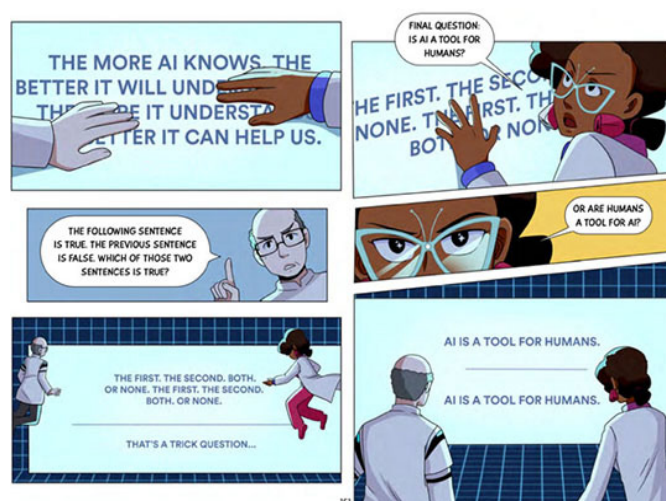


Figure 7. AI is a tool for humans

The title of the last episode of the graphic novel is symbolic. In the English, French, and Spanish versions (Figures 8 a-b, 9a-b, and 10a-b), it looks like this: *Joaquín and the Unanswerable Question/ Joaquín et la question sans réponse/ Joaquín y la pregunta sin respuesta.*

Referring to Blaise Pascal’s metaphor, Lotman, in his book *Culture and Explosion*, called a creative person a “thinking reed” (Lotman 2004:51). Man is just a weak reed, but he is a thinking reed. A drop of water is enough to kill him, but his ability to innovate and make unpredictable decisions is his evolutionary advantage. Vladimir Vernadsky also pointed out this fact, speaking about human thought as a geological force: “*The Thinking Reed, the creator of science in the biosphere, can and should judge the geological course of phenomena differently because now, for the first time, he has scientifically understood his position in the organization of the planet*” (Vernadsky 1977: 42).



Figure 8a.



Figure 8b.



Figure 9a.

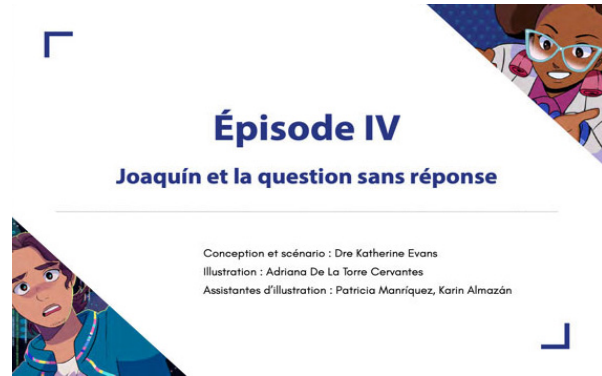


Figure 9b.



Figure 10a.

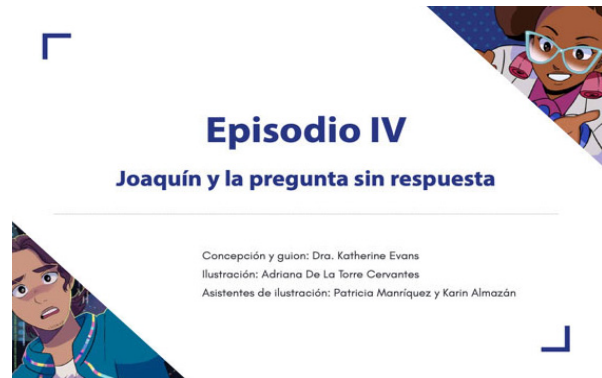


Figure 10b.

The evolutionary advantage of humans over the AI they created is their ability to find a non-standard solution and transform the meaning of a situation in an unpredictable but helpful way. The main goal of the graphic novel, as the authors note in the finale, is to make us understand that the human world and the world of AI are a single whole, *a symbolic ecosystem* similar to the Earth's ecosystem.

Therefore, our main task remains to combat the spread of fears about AI and focus on the ethical component of the problem. From an anthroposemiotic point of view, we are part of collectives that build numerous interactions with the environment through created rituals and images (Fontanille and Couégnas 2018: 256). We should work to ensure that AI "is exactly what we want it to be," that is, one that respects human rights and helps humans thrive on the planet (Inside AI. Unesco graphic novel 2022: 157).

4. Conclusions

Speaking about the history of the fairy tale, Vladimir Propp noted that before answering the question of *where the fairy tale comes from*, it is necessary to answer the question of *what it is* (Propp 2021:11). In the case of the UNESCO graphic novel on the topic of artificial intelligence, this question consists of two parts. The first is to try, together with the creators of the novel, *to understand what AI is and what its meaning is*, and not just identify a potentially dangerous area of progress with ethical risks. The second is to draw readers' attention not just to the current topic but *to the very form of the graphic novel*. As we noted at the conference "Text and Image: Visual Narrative as a Current Mean of Communication," modern works of art, "paper hypertexts," thanks to their original graphic construction, can become prototypes of real hypertexts (Merkoulova 2023: web). A graphic novel is a 'volumetric' visual-verbal narrative addressed to an adult audience, unlike comics or manga. As a rule, it has its permanent author and artist. *Inside AI* is the work of author Dr. Katherine Evans and artist Isobel Joy Te Aho-White. However, UNESCO is also a collective author and a social customer since the graphic novel is part of the Organization's official program of activities in AI and is positioned as one of the steps to implement the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence for ecosystems. In other words, this is *a step to block the circulation of fears and stereotypes* in the field of AI:

Recognizing that AI technologies have the potential to be beneficial to the environment and ecosystems, and in order for those benefits to be realized, potential harms and negative impacts on the environment and ecosystems should not be ignored but instead addressed. (Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence 2021: 5)

As the mathematician and philosopher Bruno Bachimont points out in his 2023 *Digital Manifesto (Manifeste pour l'intelligibilité du numérique)*, monitoring digital activity in any area of our lives usually comes down to a combination of two components, *code and calculation*: "the articulation of the code on the one hand and the calculation on the other" (Bachimont 2023: web). However, while this combination allows us to *describe and classify* ubiquitous digital activity, code, and calculation are insufficient to make sense of the digital world's effects on our lives. To understand the workings of artificial intelligence, a person must *turn to the interpretive schemes* through which code and calculation are implemented in specific situations. And people embody interpretive schemes only in the form of a story, *a narrative*.

Therefore, revisiting the UNESCO graphic novel form, we can interpret it as an archaic narrative model updated in a modern digital context. Its goal is not just to provide “Brief Answers to the Big Questions,” in the words of physicist Stephen Hawking (Hawking 2018), but to present the world of AI risks as a “parabolic utopia,” in Jacques Fontanille’s terms (Fontanille 2019: 12). That is, simultaneously as a dystopia-warning and as an incentive for meaningful human activity in interaction with AI. Thus, the graphic novel narrative model invites us *to confront the circulation of fears and concerns while encouraging the circulation of ethical discourse* about AI:

Noting that addressing risks and ethical concerns should not hamper innovation and development but rather provide new opportunities and stimulate ethically-conducted research and innovation that anchor AI technologies in human rights and fundamental freedoms, values and principles, and moral and ethical reflection. (Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence 2021: 5)

We want to complete our semiotic reflections on the circulation of fears about AI in the UNESCO graphic novel with the words of one of the last significant living philosophers of the 20th century, Edgar Morin. Its centenary was solemnly celebrated at UNESCO headquarters on July 8, 2021. In his speech, summarizing his entire life experience, he said the following:

In 1945, for the first time, humanity created a weapon capable of destroying everyone. This date turned the whole world upside down. The second date is 1972, when it became clear that humanity had destroyed the biosphere. In 1980, experiments on transhumanism began, which gave rise to the mythical belief in human immortality. But will stem cells and nano-prostheses be able to prolong life indefinitely? Then artificial intelligence came and brought with it another myth that not only would a society of great opportunities appear, but, above all, an improved person. It seemed that the globalization of the world was supposed to provide new universal ways of human communication. But in reality, globalization concerns technical and economic development and does not in any way affect the mental [...]. The future remains a mystery. We cannot foresee, but we can have a presentiment (Morin 2021: web).²

² The original speech was delivered in French, the quotation is given in our working translation into English.

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AUTHOR

Inna Merkoulouva Associate Professor, Founder, and Director of the International Center for Semiotics and Intercultural Dialogue, State Academic University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russian Federation.





Framings, or mind the décalage!

punctum.gr

BY: Sara Nocerino

ABSTRACT

The article discusses framings as a theoretical interdisciplinary tool for investigating the circulation of discourses over time, space, and media. Specifically, framings are introduced to tackle the preliminary challenge of developing a functional diachronic approach to a composite semiotic network. In further developing the meta-historical perspective of Verón's latest work, framings are defined as 'intermediate spaces' where producers and receivers negotiate the codification of reality 'here and now.' Using examples from modern painting to performative arts, the paper elaborates on three essential features – liminal responsiveness, historical plasticity, and cultural meta-representativity – revealing framings as highly flexible devices that, nonetheless, maintain a consistent heuristic efficacy toward the ever-evolving semiotic network. Another example examined is two short story collections dating to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of their multi-medial framing devices reveals the long-lasting paradigm, tracing its roots back to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, of Western meta-discourse over storytelling. The cases examined demonstrate that framing devices represent a powerful interdisciplinary tool to outline the functioning pattern of "the mediation of mediations as a general process" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76), through which we can grasp the meta-history of our ever-evolving semiotic network.

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1. A few questions

When questioning ‘how’ social and cultural discourses travel over time and through different geographies, encoding themselves in an increasingly complex semiotic network, namely when investigating how the semiotics of circulation (Verón 1987) happens, one is working with a very tricky core query. Indeed, adopting the verónian socio-semiotic, or semio-pragmatic approach means moving from “the analysis of the concrete mediation of meaning in a certain time-space setting” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76) to a diachronic understanding of cultural objects as composite ‘knots,’ resulting from a continuous historical dialectic between contextual rules of production and reception of meanings. According to Traversa (2018), this diachronic approach entails a meta-historical perspective that, if properly equipped, could lead semiotics to outline the history of how the increasingly complex “sapiens’ capability of semiosis” (Verón 2014: 163) fabricated reality. Or rather, a shared and thoroughly organized perception of the world, starting from “the indexical level [...] by the use of the forefinger” (Verón 2014: 163) up to the most complex contemporary semiotic systems in which the verbal, visual, and auditory levels overlap.¹ Namely, from this perspective, “the mediatization of mediations as a general process” could be told (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). Yet, here arise certain theoretical questions that must be addressed. For example, whether we are working with literary texts, pictures, performances, or everyday interactions, where are the signs of this meta-history found in cultural objects? Further, how can we develop a functional meta-historical approach, allowing us to interpret the diversity of products of a composite and increasingly complex semiotic network? Namely, how can a diachronic approach be prevented from becoming a mere juxtaposition of incomparable synchronic analyses?

The present article proposes framing devices² as a valuable tool for tackling these preliminary yet fundamental issues. Indeed, if properly ‘calibrated,’ it allows for high flexibility in navigating the multifaceted morphology of the semiotic network while maintaining a solid heuristic efficacy in interpreting its unfolding over time. Namely, framing devices appear as interdisciplinary tools, serviceable both in a diachronic and multimedial perspective. Accordingly, the following paragraphs attempt the proper fine-tuning of such a ‘transversal’ tool by discussing three main features – liminal responsiveness, historical plasticity, and cultural meta-representativity – defining its functioning mechanism and, most importantly, enabling the development of the functioning meta-historical approach advocated by Verón. In

¹ For an overview of the *querelle* concerning the definition of mediatization as a modern phenomenon or, as per Verón himself, a non-linear tough long-term historical process cf. Scolari and Rodríguez-Amat (2018) and Rodríguez-Amat, Scolari and Fernández (2021).

² From this point forward, I will alternatively use the form “framing devices” or its shortened version “framings”.

this sense, some attention must be drawn to the fact that Verón himself was quite familiar with the work of Gregory Bateson, the father of frame analysis studies, who profoundly influenced his theory. Not surprisingly, Pedemonte and Artigau (2018) pointed out that Bateson's evolutionary and relational approach to concepts such as information and mind, as well as his outlining of a meta-level, were identified by Verón himself (1999) as the basis for his attempt at bridging pure theory and the concrete analysis of semiotic processes. In conclusion, Verón developed his historical or, along with Traversa (2018), metahistorical approach to mediatization through the meta-analysis he learned from Bateson. As such, framing as a tool to tackle socio-semiotics' core questions is a natural, consecutive step.

Side note: although addressing these preliminary questions is crucial, theoretical paragraphs dedicated to framing devices' features also draw on examples from modern painting to performative arts. This simultaneously aims to show this tool's interdisciplinary applicability and helps mitigate excessive abstraction throughout the theoretical elaboration. Nonetheless, based on the author's background in literary studies, the last paragraph of the article also provides a quick example of application by analyzing framing devices from two short story collections published during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this last paragraph focuses on how 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*.

2. Semio-pragmatics feat. Framings

In his last essay, Verón contends that semiotic research should focus on understanding how mediatic phenomena establish a shared “contract of reading” of reality. Or rather, in his own words, how the “exteriorization of mental processes under the form of a given material device” (2014: 164) resulted in a shared narration of the world.³ In this respect, while direct access to every socio-individual system may be considered a utopic objective, it's not impossible to develop a tool to track the signs of historical processes shaping culturally rooted modes of reception and codification of reality. In my understanding, this is precisely what the analysis of framings would allow.

Indeed, framings represent the materialization of culturally formed meta-concepts, known as frames, which “help to select (or construct) phenomena as forming a meaningful whole and therefore create coherent areas on our mental maps” (Wolf and Bernhart 2006: 5). Therefore, frames essentially work as abstract hints to interpret

³ Contrary to Luhmann, Verón argues that the semiotic processes in consciousness and communication are isomorphic. In his research on neurotic individuals, he described them as strictly relying on their own “contract of reading” of reality which is almost impossible to narrate to others whose interpretation of reality is culturally and socially rooted.

our experiential world, broadly understood as the totality of personal everyday interactions, literature, art, science, etc. Not coincidentally, pivotal works in frame analysis originated from attempting to understand how reality is construed through playful interactions between animals (Bateson 1955/1972) and self-presentation within human individuals (Goffman 1974).⁴ And though he was mainly preoccupied with individuals' everyday interactions, Goffman himself didn't fail to point out how his work on frameworks and keyings (what we currently refer to as frames and framings) could lead to a better understanding of cultural and social meaning-making and coding mechanisms. In Goffman's own words: "taken all together, the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture" (1974: 27). In this sense, expanding upon Fontana and Fournel's study on *Piazza, Corte, Salotto, Caffé* (1986) as spatial articulatory instances between reality and its semiotic representation, framing devices can be generally understood as intermediate spaces where cultures negotiate the codification of reality 'here and now.' As such, the synchronic outcome or, as Verón puts it, the resulting "contract of reading" is built on historical, social, and cultural factors that draw upon the "grammars" (Verón 1987) of meaning production and reception shaping our shared "encyclopedia" (Eco 1979). Thus, more specifically, framings can be defined as threshold devices exhibiting high responsiveness to shifts within their semiosphere,⁵ resulting in a plastic morphology and a meta-representative function that aims to portray the cultural negotiation about the codification of reality in a given space-time and medium. In this perspective, analyzing the transformation of framing devices across time, space, and media results in a meta-representative 'map' of the *décalages* underlying "the transformation of meaning via technically mediated communication" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). However, how does analyzing framing devices provide a practical solution to our primary challenge? Specifically, addressing the need for a practical diachronic and meta-historical approach toward the constantly evolving and increasingly complex semiotic network whose diverse products seemingly demand unique (and possibly incomparable) analyses. To answer this question, it is necessary to delve into this definition, unpacking some of its implications. More specifically, we need to focus on the three main characteristics that, in my understanding, allow for its transversal application. In so doing, the article aims to establish some theoretical foundations for demonstrating the applicability of this tool from both diachronic and interdisciplinary perspectives.

⁴ Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz (2013) pointed out how, in writing *Frame Analysis*, apart from challenging phenomenological sociology, Goffman was gliding through the turf of James and Merleau-Ponty's perception phenomenology as well as Grafinkel's ethnomethodology (66).

⁵ As is known, the concept of semiosphere describes the space within which all the semiotic systems of a given culture – literature, art, science, language, media, and so on – co-exist and interact, either making discourses circulate and/or generating new meanings (Lotman 1990).

2.1. Liminal responsiveness (and a modern painting example)

As threshold devices, framings mark the boundary and mediate the passage between referential universes.⁶ Namely, they draw the limit between the so-called reality and its encoded representations. In Lotman's words, they outline the borders of "a finite model of an infinite universe" (1977: 210) with its own semiotic rules. This border-marking function is fundamental, especially when working from a diachronic perspective. The regulation of the "permeability" of this limit and the directions in which it can be crossed relies on the cultural perception toward the possibility of trespassing or even 'overlapping' between the so-called reality and the semiotic system encoding it. That is, the permeability of framings is a matter of cultural awareness toward the fabricated nature of reality. A second consequence of framings' liminality is their reactivity to the shifts in the semiosphere in which they are conceived and received. Namely, as devices deputed to represent how a given culture regulates its relationship with the construction of reality in a broad sense, framings strongly depend on the sense-making and decoding strategies active in their time-space. In this respect, it is interesting to point out how the tendency to strain and blur the limits between referential universes massively increased over time in direct proportion to the cultural awareness towards the semiotic, thus construed nature of reality. Insofar as that, art scholars coined the concept of "augmented frame" (Ferrari and Pinotti 2018) to describe the expansion of material frames to the point they have come to embrace both the user and her/his reality as an almost unlimited representational space.⁷ As such, the conceptual and even material overlapping between the actual frames and the concept of framing devices becomes blatant as frames are increasingly consciously employed as conceptual thresholds on which different forces, coming from both the context of production and fruition, merge. Therefore, observing cultures deal with this limit over time casts light on their relationship with the idea of mediatization itself. In conclusion, it can be argued that, regardless of their semiotic form, framing devices do not represent only the codification – or mediatization – of a particular discourse. Instead, they appear as the materialization of a cultural meta-discourse over the various strategies historically "activated by the socio-individual systems to [...] assure their own self-organization" (Verón 2014: 171).

⁶ Alongside Wolf and Bernhart (2006), as well as Genette's works on textual *seuils* (1982, 1987), I am focusing on framing borders. Nonetheless, scholars also worked on 'internal' framings. For instance, Caw (1985) analyzed framing within fiction.

⁷ According to Ferrari and Pinotti (2018) the first step toward this cultural tendency, massively accelerated from the XIX century, is to be found in the *Madonna del Libro* (1457) by Vincenzo Foppa.



Figure 1. Pere Borrell del Caso, *Huyendo de la crítica* [Escaping criticism], 1874.

In this regard, a pivotal example comes from modern painting.⁸ In 1874, the Spanish artist Pere Borrell del Caso painted his most renowned work, *Huyendo de la crítica*,⁹ firstly emblematically titled *Una cosa que no puede ser*. Borrell employed a somewhat reversed *trompe l'oeil* technique to blur the limit with our reality by handling perspective and chiaroscuro so that his bi-dimensional *muchacho* looks like he is trespassing the material and symbolic border of the golden frame to access the viewer's referential universe. In so doing, the viewer is not able to discern the representational space from reality, as it is with the traditional use of *trompe l'oeil*, in which bi-dimensional objects are painted as if they were tri-dimensional and so part of the environment. In addition, the viewer cannot tell where she/he belongs or what

she/he is 'made of.' In a nutshell, the viewer is questioning what reality is and where the limit from its representations – if there is any – must be drawn. As for the responsiveness of the framing devices, Borrell did not accidentally choose a golden frame for his character to cross. Golden frames represent one of many devices – such as omniscient narrators for literature – symbolizing the idea, well rooted in Western culture until the whole XIX century, of a sound limit between the 'real' world and its reproductions. Hence, by setting his foot (almost) out of a golden frame, Borrell's *muchacho* challenges a cultural mode of construction and rationalization of reality dating back to the Renaissance and, more specifically, to the introduction of perspective by Brunelleschi.¹⁰

2.2. Historical plasticity (and a couple of performative examples)

As previously anticipated, framings' high responsiveness results in their morphological plasticity. Framing devices are patterned after the norms of the semiotic system to which they pertain and the rules of composition and reception of their originating semiosphere. Further, this plasticity must be attributed to the metarepresentative function of framing devices, which, as we will see in the next paragraph, is directed toward the representation of the dialectic between the external referential universe and the specific semiotic rules of its encoding into a broader network. As such, it is clear how their morphology

⁸ Due to its history, tightly intertwined with that of material frames at least since the XII century, art was the first discipline to deal with the problem of conceptualizing frames and framings as theoretical tools. For an introduction to the theories of frames and framings developed in the context of art history, theory, and semiotics cf. Ferrari and Pinotti (2018).

⁹ Pere Borrell del Caso, *Huyendo de la crítica* (*Una cosa que no puede ser o Muchacho huyendo de un cuadro*), 1874, oil on canvas, 75,7 x 61 cm, Colección Banco de España.

¹⁰ In this respect, cf. Alfano (2010).

cannot be fixed, and together with their general meta-representative nature, framings appear as both transmedial and plurimedial devices. Namely, as Wolf and Bernhart (2006) pointed out, framing devices can be found in all media and interactions. Further, depending on the complexity of the semiotic network governing the meaning production and reception rules after which a given object is patterned, they may consist of more than one medium. In this latter case, the resulting framing device appears as a composite and multilayered object in which visual, textual, and acoustic signs overlap, as is the case we will analyze hereafter of the exhibition created by Grace Ndiritu (FOMU 2023).

For instance, one could think of *Twentytwo Less Two*, performed by Michelangelo Pistoletto during the open ceremony of the Biennale di Venezia in 2009. The Italian artist installed twenty-two golden-framed mirrors, which he lately proceeded to crash with a hammer. In this way, visitors standing in front of the mirrors witnessed the creation of “gestural photography” (Pistoletto 2010) in which their reflections, framed by the same symbolic device Borrell employed, crashed and revealed their representational nature.



Figure 2. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Twentytwo Less Two*, 2009.

More recently, in the context of a twenty-year research practice analyzed in her monograph *Healing the Museum* (2023), the British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu re-designed the collection of the Foto Museum of Antwerp (FOMU) in *Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU collection* (2023).¹¹ To provide a new meaning to the whole concept of experiencing art in a museum, she built an augmented framing device by using her installation, *A Quest For Meaning: Painting as a Medium of Photography* (2014). Ndiritu even materially manipulated the very structure of the museum; for instance, she designed a wooden structure and a textile path for users to walk barefoot.



Figures 3a & 3b. Grace Ndiritu redesigning Antwerp's Foto Museum.

¹¹ For an overview of Ndiritu’s project for FOMU, cf. <https://fomu.be/en/exhibitions/grace-ndiritu>. About Ndiritu’s diverse practices, cf. <https://gracendiritu.com/> from which are also taken the pictures of the FOMU exhibition.

2.3. Cultural metarepresentativity

As it is clear from the examples discussed so far, the objects falling under the label 'framing device' are inherently diverse and may seem impossible to compare. Set before this diversity, one may ponder how to identify framing devices. Just a quick spot-check from the field of cultural artifacts shows the concept we are handling as a broad one, primarily due to its strong interdisciplinary vocation, which makes it both risky and appealing from a theoretical perspective. Not surprisingly, scholars like Tannen (1993) and Wolf and Bernhart (2006) highlighted how concepts such as 'frame' and 'framing' have become umbrella terms encompassing media studies, discourse analysis, narratology, cognition theory, AI, sociology, and art history, to name a few. If not correctly handled, such expansive scope risks dissolving the concept's heuristic potential within specific fields.

In this respect, the metarepresentative function of framing devices represents a critical feature that can turn this variability into an advantage. Indeed, when interrogating framing devices, one should not be concerned with the morphological variety per se but rather focus on the general function it serves. As Wolf pointed out, framings "depend on a period's *épistémè*, norms, conventions, and the totality of the 'frames of reference' [...] as 'basic units' of semantic integration" (Wolf and Bernhart 2006: 4). Hence, the variability of framing devices directly stems from their threshold nature, making them highly responsive to changes within their semiosphere that the objects they frame should represent. Regardless of their specific form, framing's general function remains consistent: to portray the cultural endeavor of encoding reality 'here and now' within a continuously changing semiosphere with particular rules of meaning production and reception. Despite, or perhaps because of, their morphological flexibility, these devices exhibit enduring stability in functionality toward their reference cultural system. As such, this variability emerges as a 'natural' response provided to contextual changes. This chameleonic nature allows these devices to perform the same function at different times and geographies and within increasingly complex semiotic networks. In this respect, it can be argued that one of the most significant advantages of framing as a tool is that its morphological flexibility is directly proportional to its transversal stability in terms of functionality within different media and, more generally, toward its originating cultural system. Therefore, framing devices are shaped according to the synchronic rules of production and reception of their semiotic nature. This means they are also testable using the disciplinary tools specific to their form. Nonetheless, considering their metarepresentative function, it is possible to compare framing devices developed in different historical moments, places, and media.¹²

¹² Caw's study (1985) in reading fiction's frame went in this direction although it was mostly concerned with framing "within" fiction rather than framings "of" fiction, as is the case with Genette's study of paratexts (1987), Wolf and Bernhart's investigation of framing borders (2006), and the present article itself.

Yet, what is this metarepresentative function about? Considering framings as culturally rooted orientational devices, their metarepresentativity can be generally understood as the operational result of an intrinsic metarepresentational capacity of human communication. As Sperber (2000) pointed out, this metarepresentational capacity revealed “no less fundamental than the faculty of language” (6) in answering a human constitutive need to rationalize the perception of the world. Accordingly, human metarepresentational capacity grew in complexity, alongside cultural awareness toward the construed semiotic nature of reality. In this context, drawing upon jargon from ‘hard’ sciences, a metarepresentative function can be described as aiming to depict the rules regulating the relation between the domains of reality and the codomain of its representations. In Verón’s terminology, this metarepresentative function helps us systematize the answers historically provided by “socio-individual systems [...] to assure their self-organization” (Verón 2014: 171). Thus, the resulting framing devices add to a multimedial and epistemological map of the contracts of reading Western culture stipulated over time. This constitutive perception-organizing need first translates into the abstract mental maps I formerly described as frames, which then materialize into different framing devices, some of which become social and cultural structuring elements. For instance, framing objects such as maps, windows, and material frames – as the one (almost) trespassed by Borrell’s *muchacho* – shaped the Western “conventional mode of appropriation of reality” (Frow 1982: 29),¹³ in terms of both codification and recognition.

In light of this, unlike Wolf and Bernhart (2006), the metareferential character and the metarepresentative function of framing devices are essential elements for its definition. Indeed, Wolf and Bernhart’s framing typology (2006) identifies framings’ main functions based on “the predominant relation of a framing element to one out of five constituents of the discursive exchange” (27). As such, the resulting framing device can be shaped into sender-, text-, receiver-, context-, or sometimes self-centered.¹⁴ The latter is “often transmitted through defamiliarized framings [...] and therefore especially frequent in experimental or metatextual artworks and/or texts” (29). They argue that “all of these functions can be combined with, or imply, a self-referential or even

¹³ The long-lasting history of how Western culture materialized or, in Verón’s terms, mediatized its perception of the world can be traced back through the development of some of these framing devices and it is linked with the history of its scopic regime, namely a culturally rooted modality of “seeing” the world. For a brief introduction to the topic, Cf. Nocerino (2023, partic.: 48-50).

¹⁴ After Noth (2007), Wolf defined reference and self-reference as follows: “‘reference’ as designating the relation between sign and referent must not be restricted to the world ‘outside’ the sign or sign system but also apply to elements, or the entirety, of the sign (system) in question itself [...] If we broaden ‘reference’ in this way, the term becomes a hypernym, encompassing two basic variants: self-reference and ‘heteroreference’ (or, as Noth calls it, “alloreference”) [...] *Heteroreference* denotes the narrower linguistic sense of the term [...] self-reference can be defined as a usually non-accidental quality of signs and sign configurations that in various ways refer or point to (aspects of) themselves or to other signs.” He also distinguished an “extra-compositional self-reference” – that occurs within the “entire area of the media [...] but outside the work or text” – and an “intra-compositional self-reference” – that pertains to the limits of “the work one is confronted with” (2009: 17-20).

a meta-referential function” (30). Therefore, this typology appears very beneficial when describing framings’ anchoring mechanisms to their semiosphere.

Nonetheless, it also diminishes the primary meta-cultural necessity that framings perform as coding of a socially and culturally rooted meaning-making behavior. The perspective should be overturned as framing’s metarepresentative function encompasses each of the primary five identified by Wolf and Bernhart (2006). A specific framing device relying more evidently on the message than the context, or vice versa, will depend on the sense-making rules according to which the framing and the framed object are conceived. Instead, it can be argued that the level of ‘blatancy’ of the framings’ meta-referentiality depends on the degree of cultural awareness toward the metarepresentational potential (Sperber 2000) associated with human communication.

In conclusion, associated with their flexibility deriving from the puri- and trans-mediality, the metarepresentativity provides framing devices with functional stability that conclusively adjusts the transversal, yet accurate, the tool we were looking for. Indeed, through the “materialization of sense-making” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 80) strategies, framings post up a signal on the doorway of social and cultural artifacts as if to warn us to “mind the *décalage!*” Accordingly, analysis of framing devices of a given discourse in history could result in a map of that semiotic process of meaning reconfiguration – which comes from the continuous motion of discourses among producers and receivers (which in turn become producers), geographies, and media systems – that ultimately resulted in a historical, social, and cultural mode of reality construction. As such, somewhat paraphrasing Verón’s terminology, one could also define framings as ‘meta-mediatic phenomena.’ Namely, Framing devices represent the materialization of the cultural process, which led to the stipulation of the reading contract according to which we narrate our reality.

That said, let’s take an additional step in this direction and see how these features of framing devices appear and how they work with analyzing the (framed) history of the Western meta-discourse over storytelling. Methodological side note: in this paper, I focus on the theoretical refinement of framing devices as a tool for developing a meta-referential and interdisciplinary approach advocated by Eliseo Verón. Accordingly, expanding on the case studies I provided to exemplify each of the characteristics discussed above, in this paragraph, I will use a literary case study to offer a broader perspective of how these features can be found (and studied) together to analyze the circulation of a specific discourse in the semiotic network. The general issue of the relationship between framing devices and short story collections is a complex one. It stems from the prevailing tendency in literary studies to rigidly separate history and theory, and it has remained largely unaddressed, with exceptions being Duyck (2014) and, partially, the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Timothy Alderman (1982). Such oversight also contributes to the misunderstanding and consequent misinterpretation of the meta-narrative nature inherent in short narrative collections. Following an extensive elaboration on Short Story Collection

Theory, I delve into the specificity of this issue in the second part of my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, where I will also include a broader diachronic analysis of framing devices from Italian short narratives ‘collectors,’ such as proper short story collections but also magazines, anthologies, etc. from Boccaccio up to contemporary examples.

3. “...and other such -amerons”¹⁵

December 31, 2019. After a worldwide circulation of terrifying, memorable videos that showed hundreds of people collapsing in the streets, Chinese health authorities notified the emergence of a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan. March 11, 2020: the extreme gravity and the vast spread of the disease caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to announce a pandemic.¹⁶ The time of COVID-19 had begun, carrying along isolation, distance, and fear. But also “the time of storytelling” (Kumagai and Baruch 2021). As the virus swept the world, numerous *Decameron*-related narrative projects sprouted worldwide. Of course, this *Decameron* revival is not surprising, even if we were to limit our observations to a ‘superficial’ level. The resemblance between the shadow of the Black Death looming over Boccaccio’s work and the one threatening our reality is more than blatant; it “speaks to the appeal of history in times of crisis” (Downes and Römhild 2022: 46). Insofar as it has been argued that pandemic fiction represented a trauma response, allowing people to deal with the tragic contingency (Downes and Römhild 2022, Angeletti 2023). Nonetheless, as for our purpose, the most interesting effect of all the *Decameron*-ish experiences is that they brought the essential role of its *cornice* to light.

Due to what could be labeled as a critical misconstruction, the *cornice*’s long-lasting effects, in terms of cultural structuring effects, have been increasingly underrated over time (Bardini 2020, Mendrino 2022). In 2019, Amedeo Quondam even claimed the historical ‘defeat’ of the paradigm set by Boccaccio, arguing that the overarching tale of the *lieta brigata* knew no actual heirs in the Western tradition. Admittedly, the *cornice* represents a one-time device that masterfully pulls all the strings in the work: diegetic, thematic, visual, and material. For instance, Cursi (2007) and Nocita (2015) showed how, in the last autograph copy of the *Decameron* (Hamilton 90 codex), Boccaccio designed a thorough system of capital letters – distinguished by heights, colors, and decorations – to mark diegetic and logic thresholds visually and materially. In so doing, he provided readers with an actual map to navigate through his work. In this sense, there is no doubt the *Decameron* is “un libro senza eredi” (Bausi 2017: 173) that has rightfully been identified as “something of a *summa* [...] of late-medieval culture and its various storytelling forms and traditions” (Bausi 2017: 178).¹⁷

¹⁵ Barth, John 2005. *The Book of Ten Nights and A Night. Eleven Stories*. Boston-New York: First Mariners Book Editions, p. 3.

¹⁶ The end of the pandemic was notified on May 5, 2023.

¹⁷ My translation.

Moreover, those storytelling practices Boccaccio puts at the center of a cultural and social issue: how to (re) construe reality after the chaos in which the Black Death plunged contemporary society (Alfano 2014, Marafioti 2018, Lavaggetto 2019). As such, the framing device in which the story of the *lieta brigata* is integrated constitutes a space where, as Alfano (2006) puts it, “the shape of the relation between the ‘real’ world, to which the reader belongs, and the ‘virtual’ one, she/he is about to access, is established” (62).¹⁸ Yet, rather than strictly focusing on its morphology – that, as it is clear from our theoretical considerations, must change for framing devices to perform their metacultural function – we should focus on this metarepresentative feature. In this metarepresentative practice, whose components add up to a multilayered metarepresentation of its cultural mode of (re)codifying the reality, or instead of its underlying contract of reading (Verón 2014), the *cornice*’s cultural and historical legacy must be identified.¹⁹ Thus, let’s move some steps further in this direction.



Figure 4. Vincenzo Morelli’s *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron* (2020).

3.1. Quarantena. A Digital Decameron²⁰

Perhaps less popular compared with the NYTimes’ venture I will introduce in the last paragraph, and yet worth mentioning in our argument is the crowd-funded project born from Vincenzo Morelli’s social walls.²¹ In March 2020, Morelli started posting about the difficulties of quarantine. Against the sense of solitude and isolation, he put his mailbox at the disposal of anyone “who felt the need or the desire to turn inward in order to walk outside” (Morelli 2020). One big difference, as the back cover reads: “Contrary to Boccaccio’s ten youths, who escaped the plague in the Florentine countryside, where eye to eye they told each other stories, my senders have no face, and they told their stories *standing alone behind a screen.*”²²

Shortly after Morelli started posting, social media spread the word. Morelli received so many stories he decided to turn them into a collection for which money was required. Hence, flanked by a team of talented friends, Morelli created a crowdfunding campaign for which he devised an exciting framing device. In short

¹⁸ My translation, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Although in this article I am not dealing with the short story collection form per se, I would like to stress how, through this definition of framing, the single stories or novellas appear as small windows opened on the possible forms in which reality can be shaped in a given time, space, and medium. Framing devices offer a map to understand our cultural way of moving in and even building the world around us, whether strictly separated from fiction or overlapped with it.

²⁰ Link to the Instagram page (from which also the picture is taken): <https://www.instagram.com/digitaldecameron/>.

²¹ As one would expect, Facebook as well as YouTube and Instagram, hosted a large number of storytelling projects during the pandemic. In this respect, cf. Mendrino (2022).

²² Translation and emphasis mine.

order, the project landed on Instagram, where posts alternated brief quotes to one of the tailored illustrations designed by Gaetano Di Dio. Then, it was time for YouTube, where short clips gave users a way to listen to some excerpts taken from the stories to come.²³ Finally, *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron* was hosted in an episode of the Spotify podcast *Campania Felix*. The creator invited listeners to contribute to the project, whose donations were partially destined for Banco Alimentare, an Italian national work of charity collecting and distributing unsellable edibles.²⁴ In mid-May 2020, the book came out thanks to its forthcoming readers' donations. The most interesting thing is that this vast intermedial framing device – made of texts, images, and voices scattered on different platforms – stood in a narrative void for a long time. Precisely as the isolated narrators sending out their stories to Morelli's mailbox, prospective readers of the *Digital Decameron* were standing alone in fear and confusion. As such, they sought refuge in and even funded a virtual communal space to sit in and wait to hear stories that, maybe, could have been able to frame and, in so doing, find a meaning to their reality.

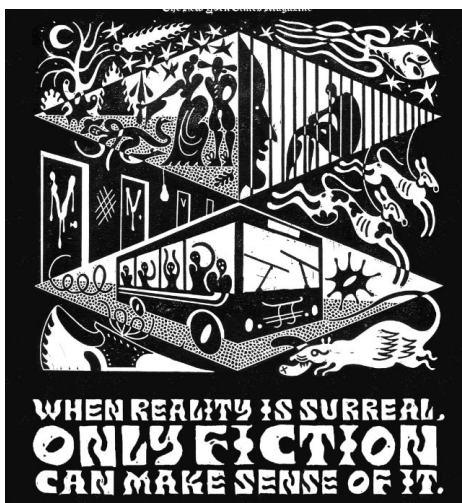


Figure 5. *Stories from Quarantine* (2022).

3.2. The Decameron Project²⁵

During the first wave of COVID-19, the New York Times editors asked twenty-nine authors “to write new short stories inspired by the moment.” Indeed, drawing on the suggestion of writer and essayist Rivka Galchen, the project aimed to “help the readers to understand the present moment” (Roper 2022: vii). On July 7, 2020, the “all-fiction issue” entitled *The Decameron Project. 29 Stories from the Pandemic* was launched online. Later, the project was also published in two paperback editions (November 2020 and March 2022); the latter redesigned the cover, changed the title to *Stories from Quar-*

antine, and even rearranged the stories' disposition. Nonetheless, the most interesting object for our argument is represented by the online version (which is still accessible under subscription). Here, the reader is welcomed by the gothic animated illustrations and lettering, both realized by Sophie Hollington, stating: “When reality

²³ YouTube also hosted a similar reading initiative organized by the Italian Fondazione Erri De Luca: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9JV8ALu_exWLD_mIcPM73evFLSvQy3Rd.

²⁴ Also “Come Vite Distanti”, a collective comic project, was aimed at fighting against the problems raised by the pandemic. Indeed, all the profits were destined for INMI “Lazzaro Spallanzani”. Link to the project here: <https://arfestival.it/covid/> (and many thanks to Dr. Giorgio Busi Rizzi who introduced the project to me).

²⁵ Link to the online version: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/07/magazine/decameron-project-short-story-collection.html>.

is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it." A short caption introduces the rules of the 'game'²⁶ that follows, immediately capturing the eyes. Indeed, the stories' visual setup recalls the well-known board game *Memory*, which aims to match corresponding images by flipping one card at a time and remembering their position. So much so that when interacting with a 'story card,' each one displaying the author's name automatically turns upside down, revealing a short quote from the story or an illustration. According to Wolf and Bernhart's typology (2006: 15; 25), this kind of framing device is classified as context-based (or recipient-based, if one looks at it from a processual or performative perspective), heteromedial (concerning the 'media consistency' of the framed object which, in this case, is a collection of texts while the framing device is mainly visual), total, and overt. Of course, the reference to *Memory* suggests associations among the stories, but even more interestingly, I believe the primary function of this visual framing is the metarepresentative one we are looking for. Indeed, not only are there no duplicates to pair, but each of the quotes or illustrations on the cards, rather than strictly relying on the story's plot, seem to hint at generic situations anyone had to experience during COVID-19. For instance, the 'Etgar Keret' card reveals the image of two people interacting at a long distance. Similarly, the 'Paolo Giordano' card displays a man standing alone in a space. This hypothesis also seems to be upheld by the 'Surprise Me' card, located in the last position on the virtual board, which allows the reader to mix up the original disposition of the stories. Indeed, by playing the 'Surprise Me' card, the reader accesses a random story and, in so doing, undercuts the game's *ratio*, which is based on the spatial positioning of the cards. As such, the entire framing device appears painfully anchored in the context of its readers, suggesting that the actual cards' duplicates are to be found in their personal experience of social distancing, physical and mental isolation, anxiety, and so on. By 'blurring' into the readers' contingency, the framing of *The Decameron Project* accomplishes its metarepresentative goal. Indeed, it shapes the new contract of reality reading the pandemic calls for, which must be 'drafted' according to synchronic historical contingencies and the grammars of production and recognition of our increasingly complex semiotic network. As such, this new contract of reading calls for a high level of intermediality and requires the blurring of any threshold separating fiction from 'reality,' whose construed nature is stressed by the counterintuitive statement claiming that only fiction could make sense of our experience. Only fiction could re-construe an acceptable reality for us to live in.

²⁶ "As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, we asked 29 authors to write new short stories inspired by the moment. We were inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's "The Decameron," written as the plague ravaged Florence in the 14th century. Read Rivka Galchen's essay on that book here. And read the stories in our all-fiction issue below:"

But to what reality is the lettering precisely referring? In this respect, not only the printed version of the project lost the visual framing but also the powerful effect of its interactivity. Besides, as I anticipated, it also reorganized the stories' order. Of course, such rearrangements – which, in this case, were already partially implied by the “Surprise Me” possibility – exceptionally impact collections as meaning structures in general terms. As for the specific order of *The Decameron Project's* stories, the editorial rearrangement of the anthology somehow hindered the outreach of the sense-making device the collection aimed for. For instance, the online version of *The Decameron Project* used to open with *Impatient Griselda* by Margaret Atwood (in the 8th position of the book). The short story is a rewriting of *Decameron* 10 (X). The *novella*, initially told by Dioneo, narrates about the “crudele e iniquo e bestiale” Marquis of Saluzzo, who spends a decade testing the patience and loyalty of the peasant Griselda, “volendoti insegnar d’esser moglie” (Boccaccio 2013: 1720),²⁷ insofar as he fools her to believe (for thirteen years) that he had their children killed. In Atwood’s dystopian rewriting, an alien appointed to entertain humans in exodus re-tells Griselda’s story through his gender-fluid and feminist-filtered lenses. As such, it empowers Griselda to the point that, along with her impatient sister, she murders her husband: “Then the two sisters performed an act of bodily affection, and then they ate the Duke all up – bones, brocaded robes, and all” (Atwood 2020: 75). Set before the protest of his hearers, the narrator provides a significant answer through which the whole collection’s meaning expands:

Excuse me? What is WTF? Sorry, I don’t understand. Yes, Madam-Sir, I admit that this was a cross-cultural moment. I was simply saying what I myself would have done in their place. But storytelling does help us understand one another across our *social, historical, and evolutionary chasms, don't you think?* (Atwood 2020: 76, my emphasis)

Hence, the opening offered by *Impatient Griselda* and the project’s introductory gothic caption seems to expand beyond the pandemic era of the ‘surreal reality’ the collection aims to make sense of by trying to figure out how to construe reality. Or, given the specific tragic contingencies, which are not necessarily limited to the pandemic, how can we reconstrue a reality we can keep living in?

Drawing on the grammar of production and recognition of our highly complex semiosphere, both *The Decameron Project* and the *Digital Decameron* built a multi-medial and (partially) interactive space. Morphologically speaking, the resulting

²⁷ “pitiless and wicked and brutal”; “wanting to teach you to be a wife,” my translations.

framing devices could not be more distant from the original formal paradigm set by the *Decameron's* cornice. Nonetheless, they highlighted a long-lasting cultural tendency, taken to its extremes by the contingent situation created by the pandemic, to build up devices to surround our experiential world to construe its meaning. Indeed, it is clear how, despite the shifts that profoundly modified the cultural and social reference system, along with the semiotic rules through which encoding it, the core question stays the same. Whether dealing with storytelling framing practices, the use of the framing technique in the media, or even a particular use of space, all these devices make us catch sight of the functioning mechanisms through which the codification of meaning, or rather the construction of our reality historically happened and still happens. The traces they left behind result in a map of our way of signifying the world.

4. Framings, or mind the *décalage*!

Transpassable gilded wood frames, unique manipulations of objects or public spaces, interactive frame-tale stories, and diffused digital environments. In conclusion, what are framing devices? Most importantly, how do they provide a valuable tool for the meta-historical approach to the circulation of discourses we aim for?

The analysis of framing devices' main features revealed them as a flexible yet accurate, interdisciplinary tool for navigating the complexities of our semiotic network from a diachronic perspective. More specifically, liminal responsiveness and historical plasticity enable adaptation to the diverse products of an ever-evolving semiotic landscape. Besides, cultural metarepresentativity ensures functional consistency toward a comprehensive interpretation of "the transformation of meaning via technically mediated communication" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). In this respect, the examples analyzed throughout theoretical paragraphs have been discussed to build up a meta-representative space depicting how cultures shape their attitude toward the codification of reality 'here and now.' Drawing on synchronic grammars of meaning production and recognition, these framing devices add up to the "materialization of sense-making" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021:80) strategies on which a synchronic "contract of reading" (Verón 1987, 2014) is stipulated. Further, the analysis of the transformation of the *cornice* – from Boccaccio up to "the time of storytelling" (Kumagai and Baruch 2021) initiated by COVID-19 – carried through these theoretical features, resulted in a multifaceted yet coherent map of the Western meta-discourse over storytelling.

The article concludes by explaining how analyzing the transformation of framing devices across time, space, and media results in a meta-representative 'map' of

the décalages through which the multimedial and interdisciplinary meta-history of “the mediatization of mediations as a general process” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76) could be told. Namely, a map that helps us reconstrue the history of our narrative about reality ‘here and now.’

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AUTHOR

Sara Nocerino Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Humanities (University of Naples Federico II, Italy) and the Department of Literary Studies (UGent, Belgium).



From villainess to Eco-icon: the blossoming Poison Ivy

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BY: **Alessandra Richetto**

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the entertainment industry produces countless works, many exploring well-known stories or characters from different perspectives and through different media. In order to sell, superhero comics must be able to adapt to their audience. Through recurring narrative events, in which characters are rearranged by different authors, different relevant traits are gradually selected, afferent to varying codes of reading reality, which change as the semiotic field of reference changes. Thus, the ways of coding and decoding the same character at the diachronic and synchronic levels are different. This paper aims to analyse the case of Poison Ivy in terms of the differences between encoding and decoding. Created in 1966 as a femme fatale associated with venomous plants, the enemy of Batman, and a deadly poisonous seductress, it turns out that she is perceived differently today. Poison Ivy, alias Pamela Lillian Isley, is seen by today's writers and readers as a bearer of very different values and, above all, as a bearer of strong ecological messages of hope and activism on behalf of Planet Earth. Therefore, the referential reading models and the shifts in the semiotic field that could explain how the character's perception has changed will be studied.

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1. Introduction

The official website dedicated to DC Comics characters has a feature that allows the reader to sort them according to their moral alignment. They were previously separated into 'heroes' and 'villains.' Still, recently, a new section labeled 'it's complicated' has been added, with Poison Ivy listed among these complex fictional personalities. This paper examines the portrayal of Poison Ivy in American comic books through the years, a character conceived as an evil femme fatale in Batman's Rogues Gallery. Still, nowadays, her motivations could be read as euphoric. This analysis will mainly consider two different, chronologically distant texts in which she is heavily featured, beginning with examining the character's first appearance in 1966 and then moving directly to the most recent appearance in her first solo series, which started in June 2022. Besides the two primary texts examined, other character representations will be mentioned to understand better the flow of writers and stories that have led Poison Ivy to her current framing. In our study, we will consider her representations, the reactions of the fans, and the cultural changes influencing her writers, then confront them to identify the elements that are deemed pertinent, making them emerge thanks to a sociosemiotic scrutiny of the textual isotopies, which are, as Greimas defines them: "a bundle of redundant semantic categories subjacent to the discourse under consideration" (Greimas [1970] 2017). They allow "the still very vague, but necessary concept of the meaningful whole set forth by a message" (ibid.). Subsequently, different texts circulating at their time will be addressed to better retrace the cultural context in which Poison Ivy is written and read.

The first part of our study addresses theoretical issues pertinent to the comic book medium: time, authorial continuity, and canonicity in the storytelling practices of superhero comics. Next, Poison Ivy's first and latest appearances are analyzed in depth to understand the restyling processes she has undergone over the years. The study focuses on the plastic level of her representations and the values related to her moral alignment and characterization. In addition, it explores her bonds with planet Earth and ecological issues as a character embodying Mother Earth. We will also consider fans' reactions and interviews with the writers to support this argument.

2. Comics as modern mythology

Since this essay will attempt to understand the shifts in Poison Ivy's portrayal in comics, it is essential to address the problem of temporality and continuity within this medium to address a central issue later: the debatability of what can be established as canonical among the narratives of what will become a transmedia franchise, which has happened regarding superheroes histories. Commenting on the structure

of comic books, Eco argues that the iterative scheme of their narrative conceals frequent isotopies that generate a communication of high redundancy, messages that give away little information and tend to confirm what has been said before with an excess of elements (Eco 1984: 253).

Comics have tended to depict the same character for many years, and Eco (1984) points to Superman as the emblem of comic books' storytelling stasis. The hero was created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster in 1938. Today, the Kryptonian is the co-protagonist of a new animated series called *My New Adventures with Superman* (2023). The alien reporter retains his thematic and topical characteristics: he is the alias of Clark Kent, a goofy reporter in love with his colleague Lois Lane. He has superhuman strength, laser, and X-ray vision; he can fly, and when villains threaten Metropolis, he is at the forefront, ready to protect the defenseless residents. But it is crucial to bear in mind that Superman, as well as other protagonists of superhero fiction born in the last century, have been passed from hand to hand by several authors, Poison Ivy included: she was a plant-themed villain originally written by Kanigher, but then she was entrusted to Neil Gaiman, Alan Grant, Paul Dini, Marguerite Bennett and to many others. Artists and writers have created these characters in slightly different ways. This can be confusing and overwhelming for new readers eager to delve into the history of their favorite superhero or for scholars who want to study a specific portrayal of a character.

Two aspects need to be addressed regarding the issue of continuity: time and authorship. The first has been discussed by Daniele Barbieri (1992) and Marcello Serra (2015). While Barbieri ties his findings to Eco's theories, Serra follows a Lotmanian perspective. Serra distinguishes two different levels of temporality: the first is based on vertical isomorphism, which guarantees the coherence of the singular episodes in relation to the whole universe of events (ibid. 75). This approach is addressed as vertical continuity and conceived as a diachronic instance (ibid. 76). The second level considers the synchronic aspects of the narrative and is exemplified as horizontal: heroes and characters must deal coherently with different issues and events according to what is happening to their colleagues in another corner of their universe. For example, in his current comic series, Batman is busy fighting the Riddler in Gotham City. Consequently, he can't simultaneously appear in a Justice League issue to help Cyborg and the Green Lanterns ambush Steppenwolf.

The discourse about temporality can be developed in different directions. DC Comics and Marvel Comics, the two major comic book publishing companies, deal with it in divergent ways; consequentially, their use of repetition is entirely dissimilar. Marvel tends to have a continuity that gives more weight to future events, while their storytelling emphasizes a flow of events that seems teleological. Marvel characters evolve because they always seem to advance into an uncertain future. Instead, DC

Comics's depiction of internal time evokes mythic narratives. This has been discussed both by Barbieri (1992) and Eco (1984) in more depth: "reference to an original event is much more insistent in DC Comics' seriality than in Marvel's since the iterative model has always been dominant in the latter" (Barbieri 1992: 125). The protagonist is dealing with something that has already happened in an unknown time, which appears to the reader as blurred and difficult to grasp. The question that the story wants to ask the reader is "Where does it come from?" instead of "What will be happening?" (Barbieri 1992: 125). The mythization of comic storytelling could be related to the writing of the myth itself. DC Comics's mythical ecosystem is reinforced in its blurred and elusive perception of time by the mythopoetic act of writing what could be considered modern mythology, for instance, superheroes' adventures. Eco argues that myths are universal and common to all cultures because they, historically, have been grassroots phenomena, while today are not generated but fabricated *ad hoc* (1984: 225).

As regards the issue of authorship continuity, it is well known that different authors write comics through the serialization of the mythical hero. This modern mythology is understood to be a product of mass industry. Still, prominent authors called to create new narratives for such a hero typically decode and encode characters by introducing various and often unnoticed changes. This practice of successive multi-authorship reveals the authors' changing codes of reading reality (Santangelo 2014: 95). Consequently, by reading the evolving adventures of comic characters, we understand different meanings and shared values because mythic and narrative structures reflect given social contexts and issues (Eco 1984: 247). We may, then, consider a comic as a text that affirms the cultural architecture found at the center of the 'semiosphere,' as conceived by Lotman. Eco quotes Lotman for his proposal to view "the whole semiotic space... as a single mechanism (if not an organism). It is then not this or that brick that plays a primary role, but the 'big system' called semiosphere" (Lotman 1985: 58). The center of the semiosphere is where hierarchically the highest texts of a given culture are located, which are hierarchically related to each other and predominant over texts located in the periphery (*ibid*).

The inhabitants of the comics' mythical universes are often rewritten. DC Comics narratives have proved keener to emphasize the characters' origins rather than their future (Barbieri 1992: 125, Serra 2016: 650,651). Then, the characters must undergo a conscious resemantization process to be introduced to new generations of readers. DC Comics invented pivotal crossover events called "Crisis," which were used to reboot its chronological consequentiality; following these significant events, some characters were rewritten to fit the new canonicity or editorial guidelines better.

Many researchers dwelled on the issue of the canon. Eco identifies solid canonicity and refers to the shift from it as "untold tales," peripheral narratives that do not fit into the universe's canon but are written to satisfy the readers' curiosity (Eco 1984: 257).

On the other hand, given the different nature of the texts that support the structure of modern mythology, media studies researchers argue that canonicity is built around the perspectives and opinions of the writer and the audience (Turcotte 2021). Mittell (2014) views the canon as the layer that stays on top of a complex stratification of texts, and what is not included must be treated as paratext. How the creators position the paratexts in correlation with the original text and how the audience reads them establishes canonicity (ibid.). He also states that the redundancy of communication in comics and the frequency with which the characters are featured across their universes is essential to ensure that nothing crucial is lost in the process (ibid.). In other words, traits coded as pertinent in a particular culture can be noticed as part of an isotopic structure that supports them.

The ability to communicate systematical and redundant information about a storyworld is typical of the transmedia storytelling strategies because the comic book medium needs the information to be negotiated and recontextualized in a flow of continuous information (Turcotte 2021: 138) and semiotic activity. This flow shows how the changing semiotic field of a given cultural context has affected the elements an author or reader finds pertinent. These shifts are tiny and silent, but as Ferraro argues (2001: 205) in discussing Thompson's research on animal mutations, differences involve not adding unrelated transformations but a process that incorporates the whole spectrum. On a semiotic perception, micro-shifts that could be read as unrelated can be explained as the consequences of changes that happened on a higher level, shifts on a field from which they are subjected (ibid. 206, Ferraro 2019: 216). In other words, writers and audiences select elements as pertinent following the reading models of their cultural field of reference, the values they frame as euphoric. Then, by analyzing what is euphoric and dysphoric and the relative tension between values, we can reconstruct different grammars of codification and decoding (Veròn 2004), avoiding the theory of a rupture that divides different ways of representing and reading the same text.

3. The villainous origins of Poison Ivy

Poison Ivy, alias of Pamela Lilian Isley, was conceived as an enemy of the Caped Crusader in the Sixties. As a comic book character, her storyline depends on the rhythm and time dispositions of her native medium: comics. The character has also appeared in animation, video games, and live-action series or movies. Still, she was not part of the transmedia strategies (Jenkins 2014) until her first animated appearance as a villainess in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1995-1998), which became a pivotal moment not only for her but for all the inhabitants of Gotham City and American children's animation (Perlmutter 2014).

Starting from the beginning, the motivations behind the creation of the character can be found in the live-action show *Batman* (1966-1968), created by William Dozier, which was very popular during its run. Among other Gotham City characters, the show featured Catwoman, the quirky thief who quickly became a favorite among viewers and readers. Because of her, fans began asking for more female villains in Batman's adventures, and DC Comics editors wanted to please the readers. Poison Ivy was born (Infantino 2016, McCabe 2017), and her appearance was reportedly inspired by the pin-up model Bettie Page, a supposed bondage model highly appreciated in the '50s (Knights 2019). Poison Ivy was introduced in 1966 in *Batman* #181, where she confronted the Caped Crusader in the story "Beware of – Poison Ivy!", written by two of the most prolific superhero writers of their time: Robert Kanigher, writer for *Wonder Woman*, and Sheldon Moldoff, ghostwriter for Batman's creator Bob Kane (Figure 1).

In her first encounter with the Dark Knight, she immediately acts greedy and provocative. Poison Ivy is depicted as a femme fatale dressed in a corset made of bright green leaves and publicly declares her intention to be recognized as the greatest criminal in Gotham City. She can bewitch all men and make them desperately fall for



Figure 1. Moldoff, Sheldon, and Robert Kanigher 1966. Beware of Poison Ivy. *Batman* 1(181). Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

her with just one toxic kiss; even Batman cannot resist her. To fight, she uses the tools in her makeup kit as weapons: her lipstick is imbued with intoxicating chemicals, and its bottle contains a flashlight that can blind men. Her villainous name is Poison Ivy, and precisely like the poisonous plant, she is beautiful, dangerous, and lethal. She has red hair, a trait linked to wickedness and sinister intentions, often attributed to temptresses and seductresses (Ayres 2022). These were the elements that the writer selected as relevant for her character, as they were significant in their cultural context.

In the '60s, each DC Comics issue reserved a column called 'Letters to the Editor' that featured messages and comments from fans. *Batman* #186 featured readers' reactions to the introductory story of Poison Ivy. She was instantly compared to other characters circulating among contemporary audiovisual texts, most notably the *James Bond* films, which had been screening in theaters every year since 1962. The first reader to comment on the new female villain associated her with a Bond girl, stating that he has found it interesting that, unlike the femmes fatale represented in *James Bond* movies, Poison Ivy looked like a spoiled child who was not capable of doing anything evil because she was solely looking for a way to add some excitement to her whimsical life.

Almost all the writing fans compared the Vixen woman to Catwoman's portrayal in the TV show and appreciated her differences. Readers preferred Poison Ivy's outfit and physical aspect, her being driven not by the desire for money but for fame and recognition, and finally, her infatuation with Batman. The love triangle between the Caped Crusader and Bruce Wayne, since she didn't know Batman's true identity, added some spice to their interactions, according to the fans. In conclusion, readers recognized Poison Ivy as a woman driven by the desire to be at the center of attention, a pretentious villainess who was probably bored with her everyday life and wanted to add some thrills to her routine.

In her essay on femmes fatale in noir movies, Julie Grossman argues that this archetype links sensuality and danger, primarily through the use of seduction and beauty as weapons to subjugate men and turn them against each other. This could lead to a particular reading of the character, where Poison Ivy is represented as a threat to gender conventions, but her actual drive is her desire for power and ambition (2009: 45), as this could be the case. Fan letters, conversely, seem to undervalue her capability of committing actual crimes. Tedeschi argues that the understatement of women in superhero stories was a reaction to the '60s feminist movements (2019). His assessment reflects how those minimal shifts can be associated with significant shifts in the semiotic field. In this case, women's self-awareness movements had caused a succession of culturally noticeable changes and modifications, which led authors to encode the character of Poison Ivy as a coquettish spoiled femme-fatale and the audience to decode her as criminally innocuous but sexually dangerous.

Readers also selected her relationship with the protagonist as a pertinent trait. Poison Ivy falls instantly in love with both Batman and Bruce Wayne. In the second part of the story, she becomes obsessed with the Caped Crusader, especially when he wakes

up from her charms and rejects her. In response, Poison Ivy actively seeks to challenge and defeat him to avenge her broken heart. Her relationship with men is shown to be tainted by hate because of her hidden desire for love. She constantly remarks, even in subsequent stories (Conway et al. 1977), how “cute” her evil colleagues from the Injustice Gang of the World are. The character embodies a duality of desire: she is a woman who wants to be desired and can’t avoid desiring other men, but for them, she is poison: the only ones immune to her charms are women and the Boy Wonder, Robin. He is “too young to drool” over women, as Batman himself says. The only antidote to her weapons is to be prepubescent, unable to be a victim of her deadly beauty.

This can also prove that Grossman's (2009) and Tedeschi's (2019) previously mentioned readings of the femme fatale could be understood as modern decoding of the archetype, applied retroactively to older representations. Poison Ivy, when conceived, was coded according to the reading models of her own time. The femme fatale's infatuation with the protagonist was a widespread cliché in noir narratives. In noir movies, the evil seductress often falls in love with the main character, and this is decoded as a form of punishment for her devious behavior, a way to tie her with the ropes of normativity (Mercure 2010).

The character is further explored as the publication history of the Caped Crusader continues, and a few years later, readers can grasp something more about her past for the first time. According to her origin story (Conway et al. 1978), her real name is Lillian Rose,¹ and she is the only child of wealthy parents who spoiled her. In college, she pursued her passion for plants until she was betrayed and nearly poisoned to death by her biology professor and lover, Marc Legrand. The venom did not kill her but made her immune to poison. After the accident, she reinvented herself as a femme fatale, seeking revenge not only on the man who betrayed her but on all men. Legrand was then turned into a mindless golem made of bark by the betrayed woman, who used his research on human-plant hybridization to enslave him. Poison Ivy goes from a whimsical maiden who desires fame and celebrity to an evil and mourning witch who turns men into plant subjects, forcing them to be at her side forever because “no one can leave Poison Ivy” (ibid.).

This aspect of her origin story was then engraved in her later portrayals. She became a villain due to what she had suffered, seeking attention and mindless loyalty out of fear of oblivion and abandonment. Other female villains in the years to come would eventually turn evil after being mistreated, Harley Quinn more than others (Cruzand and Stoltzfus-Brown 2019: 207), a jester who would become a pivotal character for Poison Ivy's development in the '90s and also her romantic partner.

¹ British gothic writer Neil Gaiman later cements her ultimate name as ‘Pamela Lillian Isley’ in *Pavane* (1989). It was the first official origin story dedicated to the character after the first “Crisis” event that rebooted the entire universe. Gaiman's approach to Pamela was darker and more profound, far away from the simplistic writing of villains that could be found in children's comics.

4. From Poison Ivy to 'Pamela': this monster is by your side

Previously, Poison Ivy appeared as a villainess or a supporting character in other characters' stories: a nuisance in Gotham City, a member of some criminal league, but only for the heroes to shine. Since 2022, she has been the titular character of a comic book series written by former Wonder Woman writer Willow Wilson and illustrated by Macio Takahara. The series is called *Poison Ivy* (2022 - present).

Her solo adventure takes place after the happenings of a peculiar DC crossover event called *Fear State*,² primarily written by James Tynion IV, in which Poison Ivy underwent complex transformations. She was split into two halves: one is the vengeful and deadly Queen Ivy, the embodiment of nature's wrath which threatens to destroy Gotham City; the other is Pamela, keeper of her best and human side: according to her wrathful half, human emotions are weaker because they "care about things that have no meaning" (Ram V and Perkins 2021). The only way to save the corrupted city from Queen Ivy's fury is to reunite the two halves that have come apart. Harley Quinn, as the only person capable of taming Queen Ivy's rage because of Ivy's deep love for her, can finally speak to the woman's heart and persuade her to reunite with Pamela, restoring balance to the natural forces she represents (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Tynion IV, James, and Jorge Jimenez 2021. *Batman* 3 (117). Burbank: DC Comics.

² Begun in 2021, is the second-last crossover event in the DC Rebirth rebranding. The event affected a significant part of the DC Comics comic book series, but the main storyline took place in *Batman* #112–117 and was further expanded through a series of tie-in issues.

Willow Wilson's writing begins where James Tynion IV's *Fear State* ends. The story is told in first person, as a series of written confessions Pamela makes to the only human she loves as much as plants, Harley Quinn. Ivy temporarily leaves her partner because she blames her for weakening her: Pamela claims that Queen Ivy is more powerful than ever. Now, she must live with her human weaknesses again, interfering with her mission as Nature's avenger. In addition, her human side has diminished her poison resistance, leaving her unable to fight a deadly micellar toxin secreted by her own body. Dying and desperate, she decides to complete Queen Ivy's plan and kill all humans along with her. Then, she embarks on a journey that will lead her to confront humans' misbehavior against natural resources and corporate greed. Still, she ultimately renounces her genocidal project when she witnesses a young boy caring for her, even if he thinks she is a monster. The spark of hope for the future of the Planet returns to ignite within her: as she says in the first issue, "This is a story about love." In fact, at the end of the course, she begins to believe in love and humans again, accepting her humanity and recognizing some strength in it. Later, she discovers that her illness was caused by her nemesis, doctor Jason Woodrue,³ driven by devious motives. Pamela, to save humanity, endangers herself as she eats her disease, revealed to be the Floronic Man's lethal outgrowths.

The *Poison Ivy* series began as a short run of six volumes until it was outsold. According to various reviews and comments on pop-culture websites,⁴ fans were interested in the emotional storyline, especially liking the female hero's vulnerability⁵ and moral ambiguity (Herbison 2022). As Pamela herself comments, "I am not a hero [...], not a villain either. I am myself. I am Poison Ivy, and I will do what is in my power to save this world in my own way" (Tynion IV et al. 2021). Fans have also positively commented on how she is allowed to do bad things to pursue her goals outside the laws followed by heroes. She is driven by precise objectives perceived as altruistic: She fights to save the planet and is willing to use drastic methods out of desperation.

The character's traits are understood as deeply intertwined with ecology rather than ambition and fame. Those are the elements the authors selected as pertinent in response to the shifts in their contemporary semiotic field. More specifically, she is

³ Also known as the Floronic Man, Woodrue was created as a plant-alien from a planet and enemy of the Atom. Then in *Pavane* (Gaiman 1989) he was established as an ambitious and mad scientist who used Pamela's body for his hybridization experiments which did not kill her but granted her the power to connect with flora and bend them at her own will. He is often featured as her nemesis and dark foil.

⁴ For example, this thread on Reddit with comments on the series: https://www.reddit.com/r/DCcomics/comments/1039rom/poison_ivy_current_run/

⁵ Excerpt from an anonymous online review: <https://comicbookdispatch.com/poison-ivy-4-review/>

associated with The Green, a primordial force born from the tree Yggdrasil, which, by its own undoing, generated the world and the protectors of nature, the Parliament of Trees. Author Alan Moore first introduced The Green in his cult series *Swamp Thing* (1989) and then briefly connected to Poison Ivy thanks to Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid* (1988) and *Pavane* (1989).

The connection between the woman and the green primal energy is now deeply rooted in the character's mythology. For example, Pamela no longer uses technology to spread spores and pheromones; she can do it like plants, secreting them through her skin and breath. Other authors have engraved these elements as defining of the character: as more contemporary origin stories emphasize, one of her most pertinent aspects is her connection with nature (Moore and Apthorp 1997, Nocenti and Van-Fleet 2004, Marx and Šejić 2015, Tynion IV and Ward 2021).

Her behavior is still determined and zealous, but her actions are encoded because of her burdens and responsibilities. She has been entrusted with a critical mission that comes as a side effect of her abilities, and it requires a great deal of control: she could destroy Gotham City with a thought, as Miracle Molly claims (Tynion IV and Jimenez 2021);⁶ Poison Ivy is also capable of exerting mind control over every inhabitant of the Earth (Kin and Jan 2018), but she refrains from doing so, struggling with her hybrid nature. Pamela is constantly portrayed as torn between her plant and human sides: the former gives her power, and the latter, embodied by her genuine love for Harley Quinn, makes her weak but also offers her hope and a support system.

Other characters, fans, and writers alike perceive this tension. They believe that her motivational drives could justify her outlaw behavior, and those could be perceptible consequences of significant shifts in the semiotic field: ecological issues are now perceived as a topic of extreme urgency, and because of this, they are strongly implied in fiction (Schneider-Mayerson 2018). However, for the reader to understand the character better, Pamela's thoughts and subjective perspective must be explored in depth. She's not seen through the lens of someone else's point of view, as she speaks in first person, manifesting her feelings and speaking directly to her audience, which could be both Harley and the comic book's reader. As she expresses her thoughts, she constantly struggles between her two identities: woman and plant, Pamela and Poison Ivy. Unlike Batman or other superheroes, she is not tied to one of them, allowing her to act more freely without hiding behind a mask. At the same time, she shares intimate struggles with superheroes: identity, purpose, and meaningful relationships.

⁶ See Issue #114.

5. Shifts in the portrayal of evilness

In the fourth episode of *Harley Quinn: The Animated Series*, developed by Justin Halpern, Patrick Schumacker, and Dean Lorey, when a reporter asks Pamela about her villainous agenda, she annoyingly replies that she is not a villainess but identifies herself as an ecoterrorist (Meza-Leon 2019). 'Ecoterrorist' is a term first used by Commissioner Gordon in 1995 to frame her negatively as a devious criminal mastermind (Grant and Apthorp 1995). Still, in the animated series' different encoding and decoding contexts, her use of the term clarifies that her ecological goals have nothing to do with malice and evilness.

Pizarro and Baumeister claim that people enjoy categorizing characters' moral alignment because it gives them a sense of order and predictability (2013: 22-33); things are black or white and nothing in between. Their argument is taken up by Holdier (2019) to confront Eco's view of Superman (1984). As we have seen, the latter holds that comic book heroes never change and never have a pivotal event that allows them to grow. This is due to the importance of DC Comics heroes living in a blurred time-space sphere, forced to be malleable for narrative needs (ibid. 241). This is how villains should behave as part of the comic books' ecosystem. However, we have seen that Pamela's morality has gone through some twists and turns. The character goes from being a straightforward villainess of *The Dark Knight* to a morally gray protagonist, recognized by DC and fans alike as anti-heroic. She has a different moral compass than heroes, but her drives are somehow marked as euphoric. She wants to save the Earth and solve the ecological crisis. These problems, such as climate change, exploitation of natural resources, and so on, are contemporary thorny issues that are difficult to confine to a dysphoric area of meaning. As Zoe Parco notes (2021:27), ecology immediately evokes a sympathetic response from the audience.

According to Parco, there are different ways to address these elements of evil. When discussing the ecological issues addressed in Marvel Cinematic Universe's movies, the reasons behind Thanos's genocide in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) were explained as his only means of balancing the remaining Earth's natural resources with its inhabitants. Thanos is portrayed as one of the Avengers' ultimate villains, but he is supported by reasons culturally recognized as good; yet, on their behalf, he cynically commits scelerate actions, and the heroes are forced to defeat him. His claim to be above the law because of a higher and altruistic purpose uses the audience's concerns about ecologism to explain his criminal actions in a way that could generate empathy. Nevertheless, the issues of climate change and overuse of natural resources became non-issues in this narrative because the heroes, by killing Thanos, solved the problem of the villain's presence and avoided engaging with the issue that the villain represents (2021: 28).

Poison Ivy's depiction of evil is quite different because she embodies the problem itself: if she were to die, her death would devalue the problem. A review of the sixth issue of her solo run states that Poison Ivy deeply explores the meaning of surrendering "to climate doomerism [...] and to eventually kindle the sparks of hope that you may be wrong" (Hochwender 2022). The character does not give any Manichean answer to the reader. Instead, she constantly struggles to understand herself and pursues what she thinks could be right, torn continuously between light and darkness. She is inherently inhabited by evil and continually fights on both sides: on the one hand, to keep at bay her primal and raw instinct to avenge The Green, daily exploited by humanity, and on the other, to accept her love for the deeply flawed human that she is. As she claims, "I am a monster, but this monster is by your side" (Wilson and Takahara 2023).

In his study about shifts between representations of evil in Western narratives, Ferraro (2008) traces different moral alignments in iconic characters such as vampires or aliens. Considering his analysis, we can suggest that Poison Ivy has undergone similar mutations, traceable to varying iterations of well-known literary characters. For instance, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's gothic novel *Carmilla* ([1872] 2011) is quite like Ivy's story. Poison Ivy was reportedly inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter* (McCabe 2017), an 1844 gothic novel about the tender but fatal encounter between young student Giovanni Guasconti and Beatrice Rappaccini, the daughter of a cold scientist who raised her in an environment full of toxic fumes and venomous plant spores. Beatrice's skin and breath became poisonous, and she could involuntarily charm men. The character has tragic undertones, typical of gothic literature, but Pamela didn't have these traits in her early depictions. It was only when gothic author Neil Gaiman allowed her psychological aspects to be further explored in *Pavane* (Gaiman and Buckingham 1989), her first origin story. Starting from Gaiman's authorial writings, Pamela assumed the gothic influences of the noir genre, darker and more intimate than before. This stylistic influence was also the product of a gothic wave that invested comics in those years: one of the poems that had a significant impact on Gaiman was John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which the author plays with the common conception of Satan and sympathetically presents them. This, along with dark themes, supernatural elements, and mysteries, were the characteristics of the new wave of gothic literature in the eighties (Figure 3). In addition to Gaiman, there was Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Return*, which put Batman under more personal and morally gray lenses; and more central for the future of Poison Ivy, Alan Moore wrote a gothic exploration of the Swamp Thing, which introduced readers to The Green and its ecological undertones.



Figure 3. Gaiman, Neil, and Mark Buckingham 1989. Pavane. Secret Origins 2: 36.

We can see how the authors' different cultural backgrounds contributed to exploring these characters from various perspectives and even recreating them. Those allowed them to be examined from different perspectives: those were the changes within the semiotic field that led to a series of micro-shifts in the values perceived as dysphoric and euphoric and, consequently, in how evilness and otherness were depicted (Ferraro and Burgo 2008). For example, a literary vampire and femme fatale like Carmilla has received similar treatment as Pamela Isley. Starting as a vampire able to charm humans, she underwent some shifts in her moral alignment as long as her subjective perspective could be explored. Through Carmilla's iterations in various adaptations of the novel and as the inspiration for several characters, Ferraro comments on how the vampire girl was translated into the movie *Vampyr* (Dreyer 1932). Indeed, the film adopts the point of view of the evil vampire and frames humans dysphorically (Ferraro and Burgo 2008:140). In more recent representations, Carmilla has been portrayed as almost heroic, as seen in the web series inspired by Le Fanu's novella but set in the twenty-first century (Hall and Simpson 2014) or Emily Harris's sympathetic and heavily dramatic film (2019).

Like Carmilla, Dracula, aliens, and other representations of alterity, Poison Ivy witnesses and exemplifies the ever-shifting perception of good and evil. As an embodiment of 'otherness,' she is no longer a devious creature lurking in the shadows but a figurative transposition of mythical creatures who have become human, who connect with others, and who reveal themselves in all of their passions and flaws (Ferraro and Burgo 2008: 118). Heroes are thus allowed to be unethical and defeated (Santangelo 2013:102), just as villains are capable of heroic gestures and pure intentions. In effect, this exchange blurs the previously dominant Manichean structure. Poison Ivy is no longer a whimsical young lady or a flat, fierce vixen. She has become a morally gray figure who is aware of her violent actions and drastic methods but whose motivations are decoded as euphoric.

6. Metahuman nature and ecocritical movements

In Wilson's *Poison Ivy*, the protagonist's inner flow of thought allows the reader to be directly addressed and invited to explore her subjectivity through her own eyes intimately. However, her hybrid body is nevertheless a vital simulacrum. Poison Ivy's dual nature as half plant and half human has been read as a reinforcement of her connection to the ecological discourse. She embodies the dual opposition between nature and culture that ecofeminists locate at the foundation of the patriarchal society. A recent ecofeminist analysis of the character (Tedeschi 2019) argues that although her origins are often reassessed, Pamela Isley's core trait remains that she is the product of abuse: from Marc Legrand to Jason Woodrue, her powers and hybrid nature originated from violence and coercion; also because of this, her body ultimately represents 'otherness,' which is framed as something that needs to be tamed.

This follows the contemporary perspective on creatures and beings recognized as both human and 'other' (Ferraro and Burgo 2008), such as metahumans and hybrids. In the past, 'otherness' was an element encoded and decoded as evil, characteristic of entities that had to be exiled from society and relegated to an abandoned manor or a dangerous forest. Today, 'otherness' lives among us, even within us. When metahumans in comics were promoted as an inclusive representation of otherness and minorities, it was noted that their portrayal was not entirely euphoric. One of the most famous comic book series featuring metahumans is *The X-Men*. Marvel Comics advertised X-Men's adventures as a narrative aimed at socially marginalized readers and minorities. However, analyzing the data, Shyminsky (2006) discovered that ninety-five percent of the readers were middle-class, white male teenagers. Readers appreciated their diversity because it allowed them to vicariously confront their social problems, which, while not comparable to racial or sexual discrimination, allowed the reader to connect with the characters perceived as flawed (ibid. 391-392).



Figure 4. Mann, Clay, and Tom King 2019. *Heroes in crisis* 1(7). Burbank: DC Comics.

In her new portrayals, Carmilla still belongs to the world of the undead, but she spends her mundane life among humans: she lives, communicates, and falls in love with them. Her vampiric side is undermined by its radical aspect of otherness. For instance, she has no fangs, but the mediation of her newfound human side makes her differences more bearable to the audience without erasing them or presenting them in a negative light. The same thing happens to Dracula or Poison Ivy. In some depictions, Pamela's skin is green because she can photosynthesize like plants; sometimes, this aspect is diminished since she can regulate the amount of chlorophyll in her bloodstream. Her dual identity allows her to assume physical characteristics of both human and plant worlds, embodying typical aspects of post-humanism (Figure 4).

As many have pointed out, posthumanism is the way contemporary literature deals with the transformation of the human experience (Na 2022:2). The posthuman body represents both the challenges humanity will face in the future and its echoes from the past (Gomel 2011:340). It could be said that Pamela's hybrid nature is where recent writers locate the isotopic elements that refer to ecocritical discourse; the plant woman physically stands in the middle of two opposing sides: ecological radicality and total omission of the urgency of the issue.

In an interview about the comic book series, Willow Wilson states that she felt it “was the appropriate time to tell a story about climate change and mass extinction” because of the renewed focus on environmental issues (Wilson 2023). Pamela’s actions and methods are truly ferocious. Still, current writers understand her motives as being of the utmost urgency: they are the same that Wilson feels all of humanity shares in this new century: anxiety and fear for a changing planet (ibid.).

This may be the evidence of the perceived shift into the cultural semiotic field. Over the years, the character has been repeatedly and variously coded and decoded to ensure her recognizability despite the passing of generations and iterations. However, today, she is perceived as fundamentally different from who she was before. If, in the ‘60s, Poison Ivy was understood as disconnected from the ecological discourse, Wilson’s conscious writing of the character as fiercely ecocritical communicates her intention to entrust Pamela with an environmental message that readers have reportedly been able to decode. Because fans eventually share the author’s reading models, Wilson and her Poison Ivy have been able to convey “information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories” (James and Morel 2020); these texts helping to create a “blueprint text” for cultural futures (James and Morel 2020:79), circulate through similar cultural models and could eventually reach those who don’t share them and change their minds.

7. Conclusion: reading models and newfound ecological hope

Comic book characters must be marketable to sell to specific targets, and to do so; their narrative universes are constantly expanding. For example, DC Comics has the Black Label publishing line, which collects stories that may be controversial for the mainstream market. Some comic books are at the borders of the cultural semiosphere, always fighting their way to the center where texts and topics hierarchically considered predominant are. What makes the transition possible is the shifting of the semiotic field, which influences the reading models of both writers and readers. This can be seen by confronting given texts with other texts that were part of their contemporary cultural sphere. As Ferraro states, when we go to the cinema, what is projected is not a story but the ways of its transformation (2008: 129).

As it has been shown, Poison Ivy was coded according to major cultural movements shared by her authors and readers: the early feminist movements of the seventies, Gothic novels, ecocritical narrative, and posthumanism. But when subjected to a diachronic analysis, as Tedeschi (2019) has done, the result is a retroactive critique through the reading models of the present because, as they claim, “Poison Ivy was the product of her own time” (ibid.).

Today, the character of Poison Ivy is fundamentally decoded as a feminist and ecologist. In the '60s, ecological issues were less relevant, and feminism was differently framed. Today, though, the semiotic field has shifted, and the character, while maintaining her core traits, has changed along the texts considered predominant among the culture of reference: upcoming ecological catastrophes and an increased gender equality sensibility have forced those topics to travel from the periphery to the center of our culture (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Wilson, Willow, and Macio Takahara 2023. *Poison Ivy* 1(3). Burbank: DC Comics.

The differences between the diverse portrayals of the character are not outgrowths of an origin story or a specific representation that immediately generates a rupture in the representation of the character, but through the study of her origins and narrative, it is possible to notice micro-shifts in the selection of pertinent traits, helpful in understanding the cultural models shared by readers and writers in their differences in encoding and decoding different instances.

Poison Ivy's most recent representation has been encoded according to a pattern that can be seen in other narratives, too. She is morally gray and has a complex personality that is neither black nor white. Along with other similarly flawed characters, she tries to tame the evil within her, which probably only exists in the eyes of the beholder (Ferraro and Burgo 2008). Pamela is a liminal figure with blurred qualities that lead to a portrayal of the posthuman body as a place of exploration and representation of the future, imbued with the fears of our time, especially ecological issues. These aspects have been understood by readers of *Poison Ivy*, a comic book series that depicts her as a torn character, physically embodying the hopes for the future and the risks of the present in her hybrid figure and fragile behavior. Hopefully, it can help those who deny the problem of the climate crisis to adopt Poison Ivy's codes of reading reality, but certainly not her wicked methods since Pamela herself refuses to use them when innocent people are at risk. As Morel argues, reading a work of cli-fi allows the reader to live in a world where climate change is relevant, and since the audience is directly addressed as the narrative instance, it is a relevant intellectual work (2020: 87).

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AUTHOR

Alessandra Richetto Ph.D. student in Semiotics and Media Studies at the Department of Humanities, University of Turin. She teaches history and theories of animation at Scuola Internazionale di Comics in Turin, Italy.



From the mass media museum to the social media museum: investigating the museum space in the era of mobile devices

punctum.gr

BY: **Aluminé Rosso**

ABSTRACT

Eliseo Verón has defined the museum as a mass medium whose discourse is materialized through the body of the visitors: their spatial appropriations manifest not only the gap between the spatial proposal and its reception but also the bonds they establish with the institutions. Applying to the museum the notion proposed by Verón to refer to the bond between media and audience, these bonds crystallize different types of *visiting contracts*. Nowadays, the idea of a contract is central in visitors' consolidation of the museum experience: it is no longer a matter of merely visiting exhibitions but of sharing content on Instagram, sitting down at the café to study, or frequenting the esplanade to walk the dog. Thus, the bonds branch out into direct contracts (commercial or educational) and distinctive agreements (e.g., allowing the transformation of the esplanade into a park). This bifurcation enables us to rethink the notion of museum visits and analyze contemporary visiting practices. Following Verón's methodology and based on a seven-year-long study of museum visits, we present some conclusions regarding the practices developed on the esplanades and in the entrance halls of Centre Pompidou and Museo Reina Sofia. In these places, visitors and museums maintain their bonds. We also reflect on contemporary technical possibilities, such as the 360° audiovisual recording used in interactional linguistics and the necessity of studying the links between virtual and physical museum experiences.

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1. Introduction: From the mass media museum to the social media museum

The transformation of the museum experience is historically associated with the development of mass media, which has been highly accelerated since the last decades of the twentieth century with the advances of television, mobile telephony, and the Internet. Such phenomenon, and the evolution of the technical-technological devices it involves, operate both in the production and reception of the museum proposal by incorporating new devices into exhibitions (audio guides, screens, QR codes, augmented reality, mobile applications) and, consequently, by modifying the modes of access to the museum experience. Thus, new physical and virtual visiting practices emerge, which involve new modes of contact with the artworks and the institutions.

Anticipating later debates on the popularization of the museum, Eliseo Verón highlighted these issues in the studies carried out with Levasseur in 1983 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in which they developed a typology of museum visits. The authors defined the museum as a mass media characterized by a specific condition: its dominant order is metonymic. Accordingly, the visitor's body functions as a space of resonance for all the indexes of the spatial discourse that define the subject's contact with the spatiotemporal materiality of this discourse.

The museum's territory constitutes a network of redirections in space temporalized by the signifying body of the visitor at the moment of appropriation. Thus, the visit is established as the result of a *negotiation* understood as the complex articulation between the properties of the proposed discourse and the subject's strategies of spatial appropriation (Verón and Levasseur 1983). The visitor's behavior expresses the gap (*écart*) between the *production* and *recognition* (Verón 1998) of the museum's proposal, which is involved in what Verón calls *circulation*.

The concept of *circulation* refers to the intermediary network of the productive system materialized in the form of a difference between the production and the effects (*recognition*) of discourses (Verón 2005: 42). Verón explains that the *circulation conditions* are highly variable according to the type of material-technological support of the discourse. In our case, various supports constitute the multiple materiality of the museum experience: building, artworks, exhibition materials, and the visitor's body. But is it exclusively so? We will later see that the materiality of the museum's discourse is multiple and that, at present, the appropriation of the physical space by the subjects forms only a part, indeed the essential part, of the experience.

Regarding circulation analysis, it is also necessary to consider the participating temporal dimension. According to Verón, it is possible to conceive *circulation* as a *continuum* from the synchronic study to the diachrony of historical time. "In the first case,

the conditions of circulation depend on the conditions of society at a given moment [...] in the second case, the circulation of discourses becomes a properly historical dimension, which refers to the social history of discourses” (Verón 2005: 42-43). This point is essential in studying the museum experience since the double approach of analyzing *circulation conditions* enables us to observe the progressive incorporation of technological layers or prostheses to the museum visit and the historical configuration of “good visiting practices.”

Thus, the *negotiation* between the museum proposal and the visiting practices performed by the public reveals the bonds between the museum and its visitors. If we conceive of the museum as a mass media (or social media), these bonds could be understood as *visiting contracts*, applying the notion of the *reading contract* developed by Verón (1985) to study the relationships between the media and their audiences. In this article, we will review this concept and revisit the research at the Centre Pompidou to propose applying this method to study the contemporary multimedia and multispatial museum experience.

2. When technology comes into the museum

Almost ten years after his research at the Centre Pompidou, Eliseo Verón reflected on the “growing hybridization between museography and spectacle techniques” (Verón 1992: 34). He explained that to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to go back further in time: the massive interest in visiting museums responded to the mediatization of post-industrial societies, a process that began with the print media and accelerated after World War II with the development of cinema, television, and radio.

In these reflections, Verón (1992) mentioned that although new technologies – both in the field of materials (building materials and architectural materials) and in the field of communication itself (processing of writing, sound, light, and images) – and new supports (such as video and interactive devices) had entered the museum, they had not changed the nature of what he called the oldest mass media in the world. The technical modernization of the museum did not explain the explosion of its public but was instead a *réponse décalée*. The fascination with the museum is focused on its uniqueness as a medium (which appeared long before electronic media): it is a medium in space, a collective place (Verón 1992). Museums became increasingly attractive to the public in response to media development and to what was its dominant aspect at the time: television.

Verón (1992) argued that the reflection on transformations in the museum experience due to technical advances needed (and needs) the analysis of the conditions for these changes to occur. Hence, the requirement is to adopt a diachronic approach that includes the museum within the mediatization process of modern and contemporary

societies. Studying the museum as a mass media does not imply considering the quantitative aspect of its public, but a type of *circulation* that makes its messages accessible to a plurality of individuals under certain conditions. In the words of the author: “What is of interest is to specify the nature of these conditions” (Verón 1997: 13).

While Verón established the importance of carrying out a diachronic analysis of the museum’s relationships with the development of media and devices, such a historical reconstruction remains to be done. This paper highlights four recent episodes of the museum’s mediatization history linked to cinema, television, digital photography, and smartphones, mainly concerning using the latter for social media.

Of course, the press and the radio also influenced the museum’s transformation (and undoubtedly its success). We may recall the exhibition *The Family of Man*, held at MoMA in 1955. It is a paradigmatic case for reflecting on the crossover between the museum and the graphic press beyond the media topics linked to art criticism. *The Family of Man* uses (we speak in the present tense since the exhibition is preserved in Luxembourg) elements typical of scientific magazines (such as National Geographic), both in its thematic proposal and expository rhetoric. Its *mise en scène*, undoubtedly shocking for the time of its initial showing, is in line with the layout of this type of media and today sets a clear antecedent to the enunciative strategies applied in contemporary exhibitions.

The four episodes we present below are topics of the works of theorists from different disciplines who have studied how the development of new communicational devices has contributed to the transformation of the functioning, conception, and staging of exhibitions and, foremost, to the changes in the notion of museums and audiences.

3. The history of the world’s oldest mass media in four acts

3.1. Act I: The 1980s and the massive museum sensibility

In 1995, Andreas Huyssen presented an overview of the transformations in the functioning of museums since the massification of cable television in 1980. In the context of the multiplication of television offerings (both in terms of broadcasts and devices), a generalized *museum sensibility* emerged, as the author called the popularization of museums. This phenomenon highlighted the importance the public assigned to the socialization experienced inside the museum, contrasting with the solitude of the television experience.

According to Huyssen (1995), the museum had to integrate the logic of spectacle, starting from its direction and management and extending to its institutional and architectural communications: posters, lights, and banners on the front of the buildings. These changes would aim to respond to the “changing” desires of the public for “star events.”

The impact of new technologies on the museum meant abandoning its role as an educational institution where to preserve the canon to become another mass media. This change included incorporating new devices in the exhibition, such as audio guides, which modified the behavior of visitors and their modes of contact with the artworks and the objects on display.

3.2. Act II: The 1990s and the triumph of the blockbuster

The emergence and success of blockbuster films eventually led to the birth of blockbuster exhibitions. The museum's sensibility became more evident with the massification of this type of show, which was born in 1970 and became dominant in the 1990s (Barker 1999). According to Emma Barker (1999), this exhibition format, which is based on the model of Hollywood cinema, transformed the ways of programming, designing, and promoting exhibitions.

These super productions aim to attract mass audiences and obtain economic benefits from sponsors and merchandising sales. Following such a logic, the exhibitions, advertised in the same way as blockbuster films, are dedicated to the most famous artists, mainly male, white, and European. The blockbusters present *the star system of painting* as Hollywood biopics that mix the love affairs of heterosexual male masters with the evolution of their artistic careers (Rosso 2022b).

3.3. Act III: The 2000s. From digital cameras to smartphones

The Kodak Culture (Chalfen 1987), since the 1960s, established new habits for producing intimate, personal, and family memories. Later, the development of digital cameras made it possible to evaluate, delete, and retake images, making photography an increasingly everyday practice. These tiny cameras, whose digital storage capacity was increasing, began to sneak into exhibition rooms, setting up an arduous debate between the acceptance and rejection of cameras in museums. In most cases, institutions forbade the total or partial use of cameras, mainly the use of a flash, arguing that it affects the conservation of the artworks (Appiotti 2022).

With the integration of cameras into cellphones and the subsequent emergence of social media, the prohibition became more challenging to manage, and each institution took different measures: the general decision was to prohibit the practice of photography or to limit it to some rooms (until a few years ago). Then, doing the opposite, institutions decided to encourage visitors to take photos in the exhibition rooms and publish them on social media. Incorporating photography in the museum involved changes at the exhibition and architectural levels. Nowadays, the spaces designed *for taking photos* are increasingly recurrent, and we can also find completely photogenic exhibitions.

3.4. Act IV: After 2010. From the selfie in the museum to the explosion of the QR code

The phenomenon of the photographic camera in the museum has become a tool for marketing and positioning as well as for mediation and education. In the first case, museums promote the production of photos of and in their buildings by incorporating hashtags in the exhibition halls and inviting visitors to share their pictures on social media (the most remarkable example is the international campaign #MuseoSelfieDay). In the second case, museums take advantage of their visitors' use of phones to lead via QR codes to their pedagogical content published online. In both cases, the institutions invite visitors to follow their profiles on social networks.

However, the recent incorporation of QR codes (in museums, monuments, and even for art criticism-dissemination) shows that the use of mobile devices includes more actions than just taking pictures. It is a complex phenomenon that continually forces institutions to establish new modes of contact with their visitors and to redefine their space (both physical and virtual) and the type of experience offered. Also, thanks to a gradual reorientation of institutional communication (symmetrical and bilateral) and the use of social media, visitors have become active participants and co-creators of knowledge, content, and experiences (Romanelli 2021).

Today, museum audiences include all people interacting with the institution, whether online, remotely, or *in situ* (Anderson 2019). We are facing the overlapping of visitor-follower categories, which is fundamental to understanding contemporary exhibition proposals. Museums must implement mediation, communication, and exhibition strategies to create solid synergies between physical, online, and mobile experiences and recognize how people interact, behave, and learn in these three spheres (Kelly 2016).

Given visitors' positive response to the museum's new proposition, institutions exploit the use of cell phones and the motivation of audiences (online and physical) to produce content and to *do things*¹ in, with, and for the museum. Museums re-post visitor-produced images on their Instagram profiles as one of the leading institutional communication strategies. The photos of city views, art installations, buildings, and even drinks in museum cafés posted by visitor-followers on social media illustrate this point.

If we refer to Huyssen's (1995) notion, we could think of a new wave of massive *museum sensibility* strongly linked to the emergence of social media and the growth of international tourism. As Isabella Pezzini (2014: 43) notes: "Every year around the world, one hundred new museums open their doors to the public. Opening a new

¹ The efforts to encourage audience participation in social media also affect other media such as television and cinema: Sarah Atkinson (2014) has studied cinematographic cases in which viewers' comments published on social networks determined the progress of the plot, and James Blake (2017) has studied the phenomenon of the double screen in film and television.

museum is the dream of every architect, curator, collector, and sponsor, rightly due to the new symbolic value tied to this matter.” This museum explosion involves architectural and curatorial changes that affect the relationship institutions establish with their visitors, who become the center of the museum experience (Pezzini 2014). Thus, architecture became *starchitecture* (Bishop 2013), and curatorial discourses became an essential part of marketing strategies applied to address different audience segments; the latter would justify the triumph of thematic exhibitions (Fleck 2014).

This brief historical journey brings us to the condition of today’s museum visits: it is mediated by exhibition devices and mediatized by social media that connect its physical and virtual instances. The content posted on Instagram shows how the museum’s physical space extends into the virtual space and vice versa, as well as how this social media became a catalog of model visitors (Davallon 1999) and “good practices” for visiting the museum.

Jean Davallon adopts the concept of the *model reader* developed by Umberto Eco (1993)² to propose the *visiteur modèle*, which is a sort of “programmed orientation (guidance) for the visitor, who will dialogue, interact, complete, or modify the visitor’s program. The visitor now knows that the objects are not arranged in a random order: their arrangement allows him to assume an intentionality on the part of the producer” (Davallon 1999: 214-215).

Indeed, the notion of the model visitor is strongly linked to the contract of long semiotic tradition, which refers to the bonds between producers and receivers of discourse involving expectations, interests, trust, and motivations. Following Eliseo Verón’s concept of *reading contract* (1985),³ we propose the term *visiting contract* to describe the bonds between museums and visitors, which emerge by analyzing the architectural and expositive proposals but also the circulation of the discourses, mainly visual, that configure their *model visitors* through the different epochs.

Through Carol Duncan’s work (1995) on the rituals of civilization configured by museum devices and the analysis of the historical representations of museum visitors (that we will present below), we have established the following hypothesis: the *bonds* or *visiting contracts* that museums establish with their visitors at present have been configured over time both through their spatial proposal and through the visual representation of *model visitors*, first through engraving and painting, then through photography and videos circulating on mass media and nowadays mainly on social media. In this way, the transformations of the museum experience must be understood as an articulation of social practices that correspond to the historical representations of the museum visit and those that currently involve new technologies, especially mobile devices.

² The Model Reader “is a set of textually established felicity conditions that must be satisfied for a text to be fully actualized in its potential content” (Eco 1993: 89).

³ Eliseo Verón did not apply the concept of reading contracts to museums, but the latter appears repeatedly in his studies on mass media. He even made the analogy between readers’ different forms of appropriation of newspaper discourses and visitors’ various strategies when touring an exhibition (2005: 226).

4. The circulation of the Model Reader's image

Our social museum representation pursues the program drawn up in 1792 by the Louvre Museum, which served as a model for most Western museums. The mission of the museum institution was to allow artists to study the history of art in the presence of masterpieces and to make the national heritage available to the public. Numerous artists have represented these two functions, building the ideas of the museum experience and the correct behavior of the public. Such behavior involves being a “good visitor”: knowing how to behave in front of the artworks, how and at what distance to stand, how long to remain in front of them, and even how to dress for the museum visit.

By observing the images of museum visitors that have circulated throughout history, we can attempt to reconstruct the configurations of the *model visitors* of each period, which implies the stabilization of the ways of exhibiting and appreciating art by appealing to the reproduction of these behaviors in the physical space of the museum. Thus, it is possible, through the representation of museum galleries and their visitors in the nineteenth century, to observe the staging practices of the period: the walls were entirely covered with paintings according to an exhibition logic that determined that the more prominent works should be placed higher up (because they were easier to



Figure 1. Alexandre Brun (around 1880) *View of the Salon Carré at the Louvre*. Out of copyright.



Figure 2. Adolphe Giraudon (1897) *View of the Caryatids room in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France.* Out of copyright.

see from afar) and sometimes at a slight angle from the plane of the wall to suit the viewer's eye; the paintings considered most important were displayed in the central space and the lesser ones at ground level (O'Doherty 1999).

This ingenious mosaic of frames imposed specific ways of seeing: each painting was considered to form an entity, totally isolated from its neighbor by the surrounding frame and a closed system of perspective – the exhibition space needed to be more consistent and categorizable. The nineteenth century was taxonomic, and the visitor's gaze recognized the hierarchy of genres and the authority of the frame (O'Doherty 1999). The *model visitor* knew this logic and understood how to navigate the museum landscape, as we can see in paintings and engravings of that time.

We find more images of empty museum rooms towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when museum visiting practices appeared to be institutionalized. This was also when the practices of drawing, painting, copying, and photographing the galleries became a nuisance before being regulated and taxed (Appiotti 2022). The disappearance of the visitor's body in the pictures representing the museum was accentuated by the emergence of the modern museum and the ideology of the white cube.



Figure 3. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Great Hall; View facing south, 1910. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

As O'Doherty (1999) points out, while the mind and the gaze are accepted in this white cube, the body is not. Therefore, it was erased from the representation of the museum's space. The *circulation* of images of the bodiless rooms added a new piece to the museum's social representation, so crucial that even today, thousands of visitors wait in the rooms, crouching with their cameras, to capture the moment when the sacred object has become solitary, with no bodies to obstruct its appreciation.



Figure 4. Peter A. Juley (1930-1931). Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN9.2.

Although the visitor's body is an invasive intruder in this auratic space,⁴ it is the necessary agent through which the museum institution becomes visible and its values transmissible. The visitor embodies the museum experience. Nevertheless, the body is insubordinate and can always profane the devices, particularly those of the exhibition. Eliseo Verón's study (1983) shows that, as in any phenomenon of *discursive circulation*, there is always a gap between the proposition of the museum and its reception. History shows us that, in the end, the visitor (and his insubordinate behaviors) takes the reins of such *negotiation*.



Figure 5. Thomas Struth. *National Gallery I*, 1989, London. © Thomas Struth Thomas Struth. *Hermitage 3*, St. Petersburg 2005 © Thomas Struth.



Figure 6. Alécio de Andrade (1993) *Le Louvre et ses visiteurs*. Musée du Louvre, Paris. ©Alécio de Andrade, ADAGP, Paris 2024.

⁴ On the notion of aura see: Heinich, Nathalie 1983. L'aura de Walter Benjamin. In: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Vol. 49, *La peinture et son public*, 107-109

As we have mentioned, introducing new ‘prostheses’ to the visit experience, such as audio guides and digital cameras, has made it possible to integrate new ways of behaving in the museum space. This is shown in the images taken by Thomas Struth and Alécio de Andrade, which expose visitor behavior as never before: tired, bored, uncomfortable, disobedient, confused, but also happy, in love, creative, and even crowded together to take pictures with their mini cameras. These works were coincidentally produced simultaneously as the reflections on the museum and the media: from the 1980s through the first decade of the 21st century.

Later, as we have seen, the appearance of smartphones and social media forced institutions to transform their visit proposals since today’s visitors are also image-producers. The French government even launched the *Tous Photographes* code of conduct to encourage photography in museums. In this way, some museums use the images produced by visitors by republishing them on their social networks (as Centre Pompidou does) and by including them in their exhibition space (as did the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille).

There exists a dialectical appropriation of the museum experience: visitors appropriate the museum in ways never imagined, and, in return, the museum appropriates the content of its visitors and uses it for promotional purposes and to educate in new visiting practices. The re-appropriation of the contents produced by visitors exposes how institutions *patrimonize* their public and select and exhibit the best examples of their *model visitors*. Since then, Instagram has offered an exhaustive catalog of gastronomic, touristic, educational, leisurely, artistic, and even romantic experiences in or near the museum.

The analysis of the images circulated between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries⁵ reveals the transformations of the museum experience over time and, consequently, the configurations of its *model visitors*. Even the artworks show that these *model visitors* emerge from the *negotiations* between the institutional proposal and the public’s reaction to this proposal. For this reason, we proposed applying Eliseo Verón’s (1985) notion of *reading contract* to study the museum experience since this notion focuses on the *gap* between the production and the recognition instances of cultural offers. We now present this concept and its adaptation to the study of the museum visit.

5. The reading contract

According to Verón (1985), a medium’s success, or at least survival, lies in its ability to propose a contract in congruence with its audience’s expectations, interests, and motivations. The only way for a medium to address its readers and build its “personality”

⁵ The corpus includes more than 70 artworks representing museum visitors: prints, paintings, photography, and performances. In addition, since 2017, we have been studying the content published on the Instagram profiles of Tate Modern, Moma, Malba, and the Pompidou Center and the content posted by their *followers*.

and a particular bond with them is through its enunciative strategies as, from the point of view of content, the offer in the same area of direct competition is more or less the same (Verón 2005: 200).

A medium, or, in our case, the museum, must establish its particularities and differences from others. However, it must also establish the particularities and differences of its public by contrasting it to others. These differences are configured according to the *modalities of saying*, constituting what Verón (2005: 173) calls the *enunciation device*. This device includes:

1. The image of the enunciator involving the position (or positions) that the enunciator attributes to itself and its relationship with what it states.
2. The image of the addressee to whom the discourse is addressed: the addressee and the place the discourse proposes that it occupies.
3. The relationship established between the enunciator and the addressee proposed in and through the discourse.

We use the pronoun it because “it is, therefore, necessary to distinguish clearly, on the one hand, the ‘real’ speaker from the enunciator and, on the other hand, the ‘real’ receiver from the addressee. Enunciator and addressee are two discursive entities” (Verón 2005: 173). It is essential since the same media or museum may construct different enunciators for different addressees.

As Verón points out “every media contains its enunciation device: the latter may be coherent or incoherent, stable or unstable, it may be fully adapted to its readership or adapted only to a certain degree” (2005: 173). In the case of the graphic press, this device is called the *reading contract*, and in the case of the museum, we propose to call it the *visiting contract*. To arrive at a description of the *reading* or *visiting contract*, the first step is to recognize through what type of mechanisms and at what level of functioning the discourse configured it. For this reason, it is not possible to describe it through the analysis of the content – which is only a part of the media proposal and, in some instances, as Verón (1985) has specified, the least important part – since it is assumed by one or by multiple enunciative structures. Three requirements preside over the localization of the *reading contract*:

- a. The regularity of the properties described: they do not appear by chance in a single edition (of a newspaper or exhibition) but are relatively stable and recurrent in its global discourse.
- b. The differentiation obtained by comparing the media: an analysis of *contracts* always attempts to locate the similarities and regular differences between the cases approached to determine the specificity of each one. In this

sense, we must study our objects according to the system where they are performed (in our case, modern art museums).

- c. The systematicity of the properties exhibited by each support: the description of the *contract* must result from the localization of all the properties linked to the two preceding criteria of regularity and differentiation. In turn, it should be possible to identify its strengths and weaknesses, areas of ambiguity, and eventual inconsistencies.

Verón has indicated that “an analysis of the enunciation device is an analysis in production, but the contract is consummated, more or less completely at the moment of reading: in recognition” (2005: 179-180). Thus, it is necessary to carry out field studies through interviews, focus groups (with readers and non-readers), and, in the case of the museum, an ethno-semiotic analysis. Following this method, the study of the *contract* implies, on the one hand, selecting the corpus of media (or museums) that allows reconstructing the *grammar of production* of each one of them (their specificities and differences) and, on the other hand, trying to reconstruct, from the discourse of the readers (or visitors), the *grammars in recognition* that are always multiple since the enunciation devices never produce only a single effect (Verón 2005: 182).

6. The visiting contracts

Analyzing the museum's visiting contract implies considering a set of enunciative regularities that allow the institution to differentiate itself from others, build its own collective, and establish its visitors' specificity to find its specificity. If we think of the Centre Pompidou, the institution presents enunciative regularities that position it differently in the universe of modern and contemporary art museums in France and worldwide.

Centre Pompidou's building is characterized by bureaucratization, which is evident in the functionalist organization of each architectural space. Regarding exhibition rhetoric, *Beaubourg's* style is recognized by the *quasi-rupture* with the logic of the white cube, exposing its structure (ceilings) and letting the Parisian landscape in through its vast windows. On the contrary, its program of activities follows the strategies currently prevailing in Western museums, oscillating between star events, usually linked to visual arts exhibitions, and niche events, mainly in terms of lectures, performing art, and film programming. Nevertheless, the Centre Pompidou pays special attention to the topics announced in its mission, such as social inclusion, immigration, ecology, and gender studies. This institutional positioning implies specific ways of presenting itself as a museum and certain ways of approaching and exhibiting the art history, conceiving its program, and configuring its *model visitors*.

The *model visitors* of *Beaubourg* understand how the building works: the activities carried out on each floor and its rules of access, use, and permanence. They also know that if they share their photos or videos in the museum on their Instagram account accompanied by the hashtag proposed by the institution, they could be lucky enough to have their content shared on the Centre Pompidou's profile. Thus, the institution establishes its collectives, made of visitors and followers, through its program of activities and the manners in which the public can inhabit the physical and virtual space.

In the studies conducted between 2017 and 2020, we studied the museum space while seeking to elucidate the visiting contracts of the Malba, MoMA, Centre Pompidou, and Tate Modern museums (Rosso 2020). We observed the most stable museum spaces: the esplanade, the façade, and the entrance hall since they maintain recurrences in their organization and, consequently, in the contact of visitors with the museum's materiality.⁶ Following Verón's proposal, *visiting contracts* also focus on the stable qualities, i.e., the building and not the exhibitions. We analyzed those museum sectors as molds, as templates filled with different contents. Those *intermediary spaces* configure different bonds with visitors that emerge from analyzing their spatial organizations and the possibilities of appropriations they offer to visitors (Rosso 2020).

We analyzed the four buildings following the values associated with the modern art museum according to the typology of art museums proposed by Zunzunegui (2004).⁷ Then, we carried out a graphical analysis: the presence of logos, promotional banners, and signage, and a discursive analysis of the texts presented in the spaces observed. Finally, we analyzed the spatial design: the security devices, the furniture, the display cases, the lights, and each object – artistic or not – that, as a system, attends to the expectations, interests, motivations, and knowledge of the visitors (Rosso 2020).⁸

Our studies resulted in the description of *contracts* similar to those Verón (2005) had outlined in his studies on magazine covers. The contracts oscillated between the enunciative positions: didactic/non-didactic, transparent/opaque, distant/dialogical, and objective/complicit. We have titled the four *visiting contracts* as follows (Rosso 2023a):

⁶ At the time, the use of cellphones did not extend beyond their use as photo cameras. However, the selfie in the museum was already trending, and hashtags were becoming installed as an obligatory paratext in the exhibition halls.

⁷ We may recall that the modern museum was established as an abolitionist reaction against the Fine Arts museum. The modern art museum presents itself as a civic center for a modern citizen who would be able to dispense with the pedagogical device.

⁸ The elements that constitute the materiality of the museum experience have been studied following the methodological propositions of Oscar Steimberg (2013) and Oscar Traversa (2014), which Marita Soto has systematized in a method with three analysis levels. Firstly, each object has been analyzed according to its material dimensions (its support and its emplacement) and according to its functions as a medium and as a device. Secondly, each object has been analyzed according to its genre and style. Finally, its thematic, rhetorical, and enunciative dimensions have been analyzed to observe how each object participated in configuring a global enunciative scene that determines the museum's institutional image.

- *Malba: un museo para Barrio Parque* (non-didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit);
- *MoMA: This way, please* (didactic, opaque, distant, objective);
- *Tate: let it be* (didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit);
- *Centre Pompidou, ou Beaubourg?* (didactic, opaque, distant, objective/non-didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit).

We saw what is possible to do in the museum, how to do it, and when to do it to establish the museum's bonds with its public over time. Those who frequent it regularly, as well as those who follow its profiles on social media, value these ways of *being a museum* and telling the history of art, but also the ways the institution provides them for being themselves and *doing things* in or with the museum. Even certain users follow museum profiles on social media because they value *something* stable and enjoyable over time. However, many do not physically visit the museum, have yet to visit it, or never will. The phenomenon of *following but not visiting* is fundamental to understanding the current notion of the museum public.

In the last few years, we have added another instance to the analysis of *visiting contracts* that involves the study of the mediatization of the experience by social networks insofar as the discursive strategies staged in the physical space lead to the virtual space and vice versa. That is, in its physical space, the museum makes use of its virtual contents by providing different modes of access (hashtags, QR codes, devices to take photos, to store or share them on social networks), and in the virtual space, the museum highlights (through its contents) the inhabitability of its physical space.⁹ In both cases, the museum promises a multimedia and multispatial visit, compelling us to rethink our methodological tools and the notions of bonding, visit, and visitor (Rosso 2023b). The *visiting contract* would then emerge from studying the differences (the gap) between what the museum proposes and what visitors do in the physical, virtual, and hybrid spaces.

In this sense, the one-sidedness of the museum proposal changed to incorporate new practices previously considered *foreign* to the art world, or at least to the museum space. The phenomenon of participation and acceptance of visitor disobedience adds new nuances to the veronian notion of contract, highlighting the concept's importance. Since 2021, we have entered the second phase of our research: analyzing the *recognition* of the *visiting contracts*. During this new work period, we reflect upon the implications of the notions of *reading* and *visiting contracts*. In 1985, Verón emphasized that, in the case of mass communications, it is the media that proposes the contract. This statement

⁹ The study of museum social network profiles follows Verón's proposal for the study of the *reading contract* (an enunciative analysis). However, the study of followers' interactions on the one hand and of the contents produced and posted by visitor-followers on the other hand constitute today a theoretical and methodological challenge.

also applied to the museum for a long time. Still, as we have seen in our brief historical tour, visitors today participate in creating and promoting the museum experience as never before (Rosso 2023b). Thus, we propose to divide the bonds the museum establishes with its visitors into *visiting contracts* and *visiting agreements*. We will explain this point below and review the work that guides all our research on museum audiences: *El cuerpo como operador* (Verón 2013), which takes up the research of 1983.

7. The body as operator in 2023: The multimedia and multispatial museum experience

The research developed by Verón and Levasseur (1983) at the Centre Pompidou has provided our theoretical and methodological framework for developing studies of museum audiences. The work, divided into three stages, focused on observing the visiting strategies executed by people in an exhibition entitled *Vacances en France 1860-1982*. However, the research did not analyze the exhibition's content but the visitors' modes of spatial appropriation.

The study included a period of indirect observation, fixed cameras recording the trajectories, and the direct observation, discreet surveillance of some visitors' behaviors. The next stage involved schematizing these trajectories on the exhibition floor plan. Based on these observations, the researchers established four types of strategies and contrasted them through in-depth interviews with visitors corresponding to these categories (Verón 2013). As a result, they proposed a typology of visits that included, metaphorically, ants, butterflies, lobsters, and fishes. These types of visits show the strategies chosen while touring an exhibition – variably ordered and directed – and reveal not only the bond people established with the Centre Pompidou but also their imaginaries regarding museum visits.¹⁰

As mentioned, this methodological design has been used in our research between 2017 and 2020 to study the *experiential promises* and the *visiting contracts* configured by the *intermediary spaces* of four museums (Rosso 2020). However, several factors (already pointed out in our brief diachronic study of the incorporation of devices in museums) have required revising the methodology applied in our field studies: a) the increasing use of cell phones by visitors, b) the application of communicational strategies that encourage visitors to produce and share content on social networks (since 2020), and c) the incorporation of QR codes that allow visitors to access to pedagogical content on their cell phones (Rosso 2022a).

¹⁰ This typology still serves to study other institutions as in the case of Jordi Ferrero's research *Estudio del paisaje*, carried out at the Thyssen Bornemisza in Madrid.

The museum nowadays is presented as a set of media devices¹¹ that establish specific modes of contact with hybrid materiality (virtual and physical) and certain types of practices that overlap in the complexity of the museum, participating at different levels in the creation of its materiality, as well as in its modification. How, then, to analyze the reception of the multimedia and multispatial visit to the museum? Currently, the study of the museum visit requires observing the organization of the physical space (including communicative, security, and exhibition objects) and the behaviors and actions of visitors, both technological and physical (walking, touching, photographing, scanning) prepared and anticipated by this spatial organization. The latter embodies the extension of the experience into the museum's virtual space (digital platforms and social media) as the spatial organization makes provisions for using mobile devices, especially smartphones.

We must point out that the museum, as discourse-object, could be thought of as immaterial, that is, as a type of entity or, more specifically, as an institution that materializes itself through:

1. The experience it offers, i.e., the *modes of access* it regulates as a medium.
2. Its architectural-artistic-curatorial materiality and the modes of contact managed by the multiple devices that compose it.
3. The role it plays according to the museum genre orienting certain visit expectations and practices.

The museum thus acquires its materiality from the configuration of a communicative system that involves both its physical space and all the elements that make up its identity from crystallized metonymic fragments: its logo, its colors, its icons that refer to its physical space, the contents published in its social media, the organization of its website, its architectural design, that is, all the discursive strategies that support and characterize the museum's proposal.

Revisiting Verón's (1983) study today allows us, on the one hand, to analyze visitors' behavior in both the physical and virtual spaces and, on the other hand, to study contemporary institutional strategies, which merge with practices outside of the field of art. How should this complexity be approached? Regarding the physical space, we propose that Verón's method be combined with Charles Goodwin's ethnolinguistics (2018), which prioritizes the analysis of individuals' physical, gestural, and discursive behavior.

Behavior observation employs audiovisual records transcribed via a specific notation system (variable according to each laboratory) and transposed into diagrams expressing the relationships between the body and verbal language. Lorenza Mondada (2010) and

¹¹ We follow Oscar Traversa's (2014) notion of device defined as contact managers between agents and discourse supports (its materiality), articulating social practices and constituting reiterated and shared social habits and behaviors.

the researchers from the ICAR laboratory (France) applied this method to study guided museum tours. The Augmented Artwork Analysis (AAA) project, led by Pierluigi Basso (ICAR's director), studies guided visits at the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon, the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, and the Nationalmuseum Föschmaart of Luxembourg to create a *complementary museum* through the design of an application for tablets. The project aims to help visitors view and interpret artworks exhibited on-site and from other museums.

The methodological proposal of ethnolinguistics allows us to analyze the visitors' verbal discourses simultaneously as they interact in (with) the museum space. This method adds a new dimension to studying the *negotiation* between the planned and experienced visits. In the case of the second instance of our research (2022-2025) discussed above (Rosso 2023b), the current study of the *visiting contracts* configured by the architecture of the Reina Sofia (Madrid) and Centre Pompidou (Paris) museums combines Verón's ethno-semiotics and ethnolinguistics as developed at ICAR. This methodological design uses audiovisual recordings made with 360° cameras to simultaneously study all the activities occurring in the museum. In this way, we can observe visitors' spatial appropriations and establish "zonings of practices" that can contribute to rethinking the notions of contract.

The first conclusion we draw from observing the esplanade of both institutions is the existence of other instances of contact with the institution extending the visit beyond the exhibitions. We have provisionally called them *visiting agreements*. The notion of agreement suggests greater familiarity, trust, and everyday contact between museums and visitors. However, it also implies non-regulated access modes beyond the commercial contract of buying a ticket to visit an exhibition. It is a matter of allowing practices the institution did not plan but accepts through their reiteration.

The esplanades of these institutions become playgrounds and soccer fields for children, parks for holding picnics, places where to meet or to rest, areas to walk pets, and are even used as solariums. We also observed some cases of people taking pictures of the buildings and leaving without going through the museum door. This type of behavior is central because it expresses what several authors have indicated: museums must fulfill the expectations and experiences of those in contact with them in a virtual, remote, and mobile way. For this reason, our study pays considerable attention to cell-phone use in the museum space.

Our study of the appropriations of the esplanades and entrance halls includes working with visitors who carry a 360° camera with a harness on their chest. This strategy allows us to observe the use of mobile devices: when they use it, how they use it, and for what purpose. In this way, it is possible to verify the instances in *recognition* of proposals such as hashtags and QR codes, as well as the type of content they produce (photos, videos) or the activities they perform (chatting, answering emails, making phone calls, contacting someone they are waiting for). This way, the use of GoPro 360° cameras allows us to obtain data from an internal and external point of view: placed with a harness on the chest of the visitors, it will enable us to observe the effectiveness

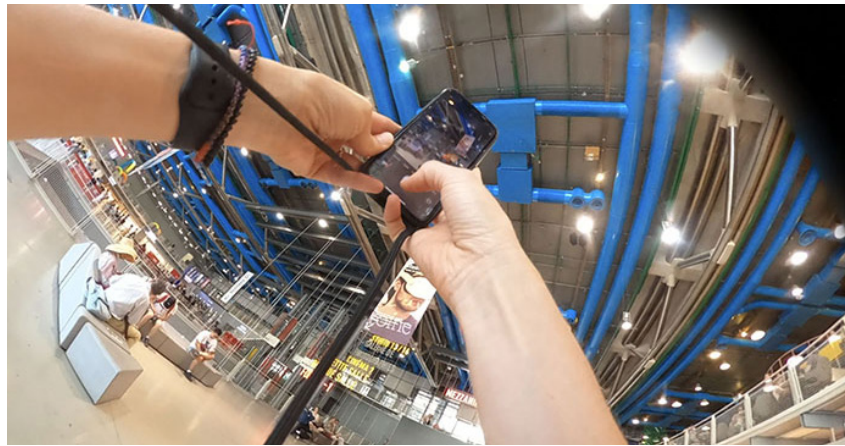


Figure 7. Registration of fieldwork done with the 360° camera at the Pompidou Center Photograph taken by the author.

of the spatial strategies proposing the use of cellphones. Placed on a fixed support, such as a tripod, the camera allows us to observe the different practices involving using cell phones occurring in parallel in the analyzed spaces.

Our methodological approach and research objectives have strong commonalities with what Hillman and Weilenmann (2015) have defined as *digital ethnography*. Their approach aims to incorporate the study of social media activities into the study of visiting practices in cultural institutions. They are interested in examining how the production and consumption of social media in museums are intertwined. This approach has allowed them to answer several questions from their empirical studies: To what extent is there a connection between the *online narrative* and the physical trajectory of a visit to a cultural institution? How does the orientation towards an online audience affect visitors' trajectories in a designed exhibition space? (Hillman and Weilenmann 2015).

The researchers have coined the concept of *social media trajectories* to define the relationship between online activities and physical movements. This concept emerges from studying physical behaviors (audiovisual records) and creating a heat map of activity on Instagram during museum visits. The authors also use in-depth interviews conducted after the cultural visit. Their studies have shown how visitors are oriented towards their social media presence while attending to physical space during a visit and how the trajectory forms editing and sharing processes through space.

These research techniques can contribute to unraveling controversies about the use of cell phones in museums. In addition, they can provide some tools for conducting digital reception studies that bring new insights to analyzing the social network profiles of visitors and museums. The incorporation of this dimension to the study of the museum visit would allow us to corroborate hypotheses on the reception of specific enunciative strategies applied by the museum today and to understand the new contracts or agreements proposed to its public.

Conclusion: Contracts and agreements

Forty years after Eliseo Verón's proposal, the notion of reading contracts remains productive. Our interest in studying *visiting contracts* following Verón's methodological propositions lies in the social implications that it mobilizes. The *visiting contract* is about the construction, maintenance, and evolution of a bond over time, which implies not only consumption habits but also trust and belief. In the words of Verón:

I am faithful to the media in which I have placed my trust, in which I believe. "In social relations, says Michael de Certeau, "the question of believing is the question of time" (1981). This is related to the problem, crucial in democracy, of the management of social representations (Pizzorno 1985). And here we are at the heart of what happens in reception. (Verón 2005: 223)

The study of the *visiting contract* is more significant today when museums seek to be more inclusive concerning both the new technological practices and the multicultural nature of their audiences. As mentioned, the images of visitors that historically circulated in the West, from the representations of privileged visitors in the amateur cabinet to the photographs posted on Instagram, have shaped, and continue to shape, our social representations of museums and exhibition spaces. Most importantly, they shape our representations of *model visitors* and *good visiting practices* that, even today, involve social inclusion and exclusion issues.

We must add the multimedia and multispatial dimensions (which involve different temporal dimensions) to study visitors' bonds with institutions since these dimensions confront us with new modes of *circulation* of the museum experience. Therefore, adding nuances to the notion of contract, for example, proposing the concept of a *visiting agreement*, could highlight how institutions can demarcate what is part of the museum experience and what is not, in physical and virtual terms as well as in technological and social terms.

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AUTHOR

Aluminé Rosso PhD researcher, ICAR Laboratory, University of Lyon (France) and Centre de Sémiotique et Rhétorique, Liège University (Belgium). Member of the research project Augmented Artwork Analysis.





Semiotics on music charts: The signification of late-blooming hits in contemporary popular music

punctum.gr

BY: Georgios Sklavounakis

ABSTRACT

Eliseo Verón's approach to circulation focuses on the gap between production and recognition and the consideration of texts in relation to their contexts of production and consumption. In this paper, we employ Verón's concepts of *grammar of production* and *grammar of recognition* to examine popular songs that reached their peak of success several years after their release. Drawing our case studies from the Hot 100 American singles chart, we combine social semiotics and semiotics of popular music to examine the contexts of the initial songs' release and their eventual commercial peak while considering changes in the media ecology and how these songs re-entered popular culture. The corpus of songs examined is split into three major categories: Songs that re-entered popular culture after their performer's passing, recurring Christmas-themed songs, and hits featuring in audiovisual productions like films and television series.

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Introduction

In 2022, *The Atlantic* published an article on songs released more than 18 months ago, representing 70 percent of the U.S. music market, while the demand for 'new' songs was shrinking. The article's central claim was that popular culture, which usually focuses on 'what's happening right now,' shifted towards older material. In 2021, the 200 most popular new tracks

accounted for less than 5% of total streams, with the rate being two times higher in 2018 (Gioia 2022, Inside Radio 2022). Another article in *The Economist* (2021) argued that the rise of streaming in recent years made the Billboard Christmas charts redundant as it would be easier nowadays for many songs to enter the Hot 100 singles chart. This means that research focusing on ‘living’ or ‘re-living’ the musical past could provide valuable insights into how society and the popular music industry operate nowadays.

Over the years, different disciplines have tried to demystify the subject of popular music utilizing diverse approaches. Semiotics broached the subject only recently, mainly through critical discourse analysis and social semiotics (McKerrell and Way 2017:1). The need for using popular music as raw research data has been long discussed among researchers; Dunbar-Hall (1991:13) has pointed out that popular music suffers from the lack of musical analysis, and a method to carry it out. Through its development as two broad streams covering an analytical and an interpretative approach, semiotics can be considered both a method and a model to solve emerging problems (ibid).

Especially for younger generations, old songs are memory conduits that allow them to access music periods they do not have first-hand experience with, while for older people, they’re a way to relive their formative years. For the recording industry, however, such songs mainly target the latter, more affluent groups (Bennett 2009, Holbrook and Schindler 1989, Van der Hoeven 2014). In all cases, we need to consider Pickering and Keightley’s suggestion that audiences do not engage with the past passively but through various forms of meaning-making processes (2006: 933). Eliseo Verón applied this idea to media studies, while subsequent studies have also utilized his methodology in marketing and film studies (e.g., Kotler 1987, Triquell 2000, Verón 1992, Verón 2014).

1. Literature review

Nostalgia has been generally related to homesickness, while in popular music, it is often associated with a feeling of loss in the face of a society that favors the present over the past (Grainge 2000, Pickering and Keightley 2006, Sedikides et al. 2008:304, Van der Hoeven 2014:318). Nostalgia in music has been extensively researched, usually in psychology and literary studies. In semiotics, Hakanen (1998:97) stressed the need to study “the structural meanings of the charts per se.” Communication scholars have used music charts to investigate the impact of MTV on award-winning records or the presence and influence of women in the music industry (e.g., Cooper 1985, Hesbacher et al. 1977, Phillips and Schattmann 1990, Schlattmann 1991, Wells 1986 and 1991).

1.1. Nostalgia in popular culture

The subject of nostalgia has a long tradition, with Jameson (1991) discussing its impact on popular culture, especially as it concerns the construction of a ‘utopia’ in popular

cinema. Nostalgia's impact on popular music has been studied by music critic and historian Simon Reynolds (2011), who noted several nostalgia-infused pop cultural events in the early 21st century (i.e., band re-formations, reissues of 'classic' albums) and a massive music retromania fuelled by the digital availability of pop history's archive. Still, this was not entirely unprecedented. Reynolds (2020:4) names several trends, such as the 1950s rock & roll revival and Beatles nostalgia in the 1970s. In the 1980s, this phenomenon of retro pastiche was seen as a symptom of 'postmodernism,' a term coined to describe the broader shift to recycling and referencing cultural heritage.

Pop culture's fascination with science fiction and technology has allowed the melding of visions of the future with the past, reflecting art's obsession with the recuperation of modernism and the former's inability to transcend historicism (Aguirre 2011:125–126). Postmodern artists are reluctant to innovate, instead settling for the creation of various forms of pastiche; such an inclination creates an endless recycling of modern cultural products and potentially leads to the exhaustion of invention (ibid: 130, Bove and Funcke 2009: 92–93). Putting the theories above in the context of popular music, these phenomena are apparent in the ties between nostalgia and dance music, which have received their fair share of attention, with recent research pieces and news articles focusing on 1990's-themed Eurodance parties, on the rise of conceptronica in the late-2010s, and on the 21st-century disco revival (e.g., Rees 2021, Reynolds 2019, van der Hoeven 2014).

The subject of 'nostalgia' in popular music resurfaced in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bashirat 2020, Richards 2021). Related phenomena included large amounts of people streaming old 'classic' songs; this was reported to be a result of the excessive stress people endured throughout the pandemic, paired with a notable rise of music streaming through platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music (Sinker 2021). This led to algorithms being delegated the duty of curating the music through vast omni-archives (ibid). The pandemic also coincided with the rapid rise of TikTok, an application that, by reinforcing phenomena of 'virality,' quickly became sought-after in the music industry (Smith Galer 2020). Since 2020, TikTok often worked to remember old songs, like Phil Collins's 'In the Air Tonight' and Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams' (CBC News: The National 2020, Respers France 2020).

This could be considered the peak of a phenomenon that started at the beginning of the 'new' millennium. It has been pointed out that the music industry seemed to be 'looking towards the future' both musically and style-wise before 2000. However, this phenomenon ceased in the early years of our century (E.R.T. Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation 2021). This could be partly attributed to technology delivering the future in an undramatic way (Sinker 2021). After 2000, we noticed a shift in visual and musical styles, which used signs referring to previous decades and already published bodies of work (E.R.T. Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation 2021). Therefore, the current problem with nostalgia is that it hinders our efforts to experience the present (Richards 2021).

1.2. Music charts as documents of consumer activity

As our primary focus is popular music, music charts have provided a relatively straightforward image of the popularity of singles and albums for decades. Throughout the years, national music charts have utilized algorithms, including sales of vinyl records, cassettes, CDs, and digital downloads, radio airplay, requests to radio DJs, and the number of streams on specific streaming platforms.

The *Billboard* magazine has been the primary source of music charts in the United States, with its first chart being published on July 27, 1940 (Billboard 1940:11, Trust 2022). The Billboard Hot 100 songs chart premiered on Aug. 4, 1958, with Ricky Nelson's 'Poor Little Fool' being the first song to reach the summit (Billboard 2021, Trust 2022). The chart was an effort to cater to the music industry's need to find a "hotter, quicker way of getting chart information," according to Seymour Stein, one of the people who helped start the chart; up to that point, there were several different charts with their methodologies (Billboard 2021). Recently, many consider streaming responsible for most of the charting songs' points, followed by radio airplay, with sales figures coming last. This indicates a shift in how the public consumes music, with the magazine altering its rules on 'recurrent songs'¹ in 2015 (ibid.).

The *Billboard* magazine is one of many places to find the chart template. Plenty of charts in television and radio top-hits programs function as a marketing tool in the music business, influencing many of its aspects (i.e., the composition of playlists and determination of stock ordering) (Hakanen 1998: 96 - 97). Moreover, popular music charts are complex signifiers of relationships among businesses, musicians, consumers, and the music itself (ibid). For most consumers, charts directly represent the music business and define what is 'popular' and 'popularity' (ibid). Focusing on the intermediality of the music charts, Straw (2015:129) emphasized that a music chart is essentially "a list that both presumes and constructs a certain simultaneity," meaning that it "processes a set of events" that consists of the various measurable acts by which a recording is consumed.

Like the Recording Industry Association of America, the Billboard music charts – and charts in general – have shifted the way they operate (Phillips and Schattmann 1990:87). This type of alterations concerning how chart points are estimated for a song include modifications on the calculation of streaming numbers,² an element which potentially makes the charts more prone to manipulation, pushing artists' fanbases to take advantage of loopholes in Billboard's methodology; up to that point, record labels were responsible for driving up a song on the charts (Billboard Staff 2018, Leight 2023).

¹ According to Billboard's rules, descending songs are removed from the Billboard Hot 100 after 20 weeks if ranking below No. 50, or after 52 weeks if they rank below No. 25; the latter rule went into effect in the week ending December 5, 2015 (Billboard n.d., Trust 2015).

² According to Billboard's methodology, a greater emphasis is given to paid subscription streams, with ad-supported streams and streams on non-paid tiers of hybrid paid/ad-supported services being of lower value for both the Billboard Hot 100 chart, as well as for the Billboard 200 albums chart (Billboard Staff 2018).

Nowadays, social media have reduced the distance between the production of popular musical culture and people's actual needs and desires, as they have given the latter a potentially false sense of having real-time contact with their creators of choice and their cultural products. Overall, social media and streaming convey a feeling of immediacy and instantaneity (Jones 2021: 148 - 149). Streaming, however, is not the only format prone to manipulation that Billboard has tried to crack down on; other recent regulations include restrictions on the incorporation of digital downloads on the main singles chart, with the latest one concerning the disqualification of song downloads from artists' websites (King 2023).

Streaming was a product of the expansion of technology in favor of the audience desiring to listen to music without the need to make an actual transaction. This phenomenon coincided with the popularization of DIY production techniques for aspiring musicians, with the former challenging the established routines and traditional promotional cycles imposed by the music industry (Jones 2021:38). Although there is no consensus over DIY practitioners' preferred practices, some of the creators above choose to release their output at a much higher rate than they would (*ibid.*). These factors have led to a relative 'temporal' tension, with a cluster of such creators expressing concern over cultural production being a priori commodified and exploited (*ibid.*). The demise of gatekeepers in the music industry may lead to the oversaturation of the market and the life of relevant cultural products significantly reduced or extended.

1.3. Semiotics and popular music

Before explaining Verón's grammar of production and grammar of recognition methodologies, we should mention some notable relevant works. The field of music semiotics can be traced as far back as the 1970s (Dunbar-Hall 1991:127). Nattiez and Ellis (1989: 23) suggested that the term 'musical semiotics' can be interpreted in diverse ways, and it is up to the analysts to clarify how they define it. According to Dunbar-Hall (1991:128), approaches to 'musical semiotics' can be divided into two broad groups: the analytical (e.g., Molino Underwood and Ayrey 1990, Nattiez 1990, Nattiez and Barry 1982, Pople 1983, Ruwet and Everist 1987) and the interpretative (e.g., Lewis 1982, Noske 1977, Tarasti 1979, Tarasti 1986). Van Leeuwen's (1999) semiotic approach to sound qualities has also been very influential in the field, as well as Cooke's (1959) and Tagg's (1990) work on the language of classical music and the social meanings of sounds, respectively. In addition, Stefani (1987) analyzed the different forms of popular melodies, while Tagg (1999) emphasized listener feedback in music communication.

All these works have significantly influenced later investigations, like those by Machin (2013) and Inskip, MacFarlane, and Rafferty (2008). Still, they do not offer us a clear image of issues such as the social processes reflected in popular music. This area of research has long yet to acknowledge the relations between musicology

and popular culture (Dunbar-Hall 1991:127, McClary and Walser 1990:280, Middleton 1990:172). Researchers have been reluctant to combine these two fields due to lacking a suitable method (Dunbar-Hall 1991:128, Račić 1981, Taylor 1985, Wicke 1982). Several alternative approaches have been proposed over the years (e.g., Middleton 1990), all stressing that popular music is different from art music and does not offer itself to analysis based on functional tonality, melody, and harmony (Dunbar-Hall 1991:128).

1.4. Migration metaphors, political cartoons discourse and metaphor research

Verón's approach to examining the social life of discourses is primarily built on the terms of the 'grammar of production' and the 'grammar of recognition'; these are never identical (Verón 1993:20–21). The 'grammar of production' is essentially a complete description of the rules of production of a particular type of discourse under the light of the specific conditions according to which the production process took place (*ibid.*). We couldn't interfere with this description, and the process is solely determined by the final product's reception (*ibid.*). The concept of 'circulation' carefully designs the process according to which the system of relations between the conditions of production and those of reception is socially produced; thus, 'circulation' is the combination of mechanisms that form the system, refining the relations between the grammar of production and the grammar of recognition (*ibid.*). However, Verón distinguishes the discourses in mass media as a particular category characterized by an 'instant' process of consumption-circulation.

The distinction between the concepts of production and recognition is a foundation on which it is hypothesized that discursive circulation is a non-linear process; the hypothesis above is equally in accordance with hypotheses of the semiological school of Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as with Peirce's pragmatics (Verón 2019a:165). However, Peirce's theories were significantly more influential in developing Verón's grammars (*ibid.*). Peirce's perspective emphasizes the notion of 'reality,' which is based on the idea of 'community' and put forward by the concept of 'truth'; in other words, the processes above are, on one hand symbolic, but on the other hand they are also social and temporal (Verón 2019b: 97). Aside from Verón's methodologies, we must also note Dunbar-Hall's (1991:131) reflections on Eco's theories relating to codes. Eco (1979) pointed out the link between a musical event and its significance. This aspect is potentially crucial for musical semiotics, as it questions how signification occurs.

2. Methodology

Having explained Verón's theories, we will attempt to apply them to several songs that reached the peak of their success or significant levels of pop-cultural relevance several years after their first release. Our research question is how this musical 're-emergence' or 'late blooming' phenomenon reflects changes in how music has been consumed in

the past thirteen years and how this process has been altered with time. The qualitative aspect of this investigation aims to create a set of phenomena by grouping cases to locate the contexts in which a song’s popularity can be significantly increased.

The time frame of our choice emphasizes the 2010s decade, when streaming on platforms like YouTube and Spotify gradually replaced digital downloads and was subsequently incorporated into Billboard’s methodology. Although we could use the Billboard Global 200 chart, accounting for the 200 best-performing songs worldwide every week, as the chart officially launched in September 2020, our sample would not be sufficient for the conduct of this research; thus, we selected the Billboard Hot 100 chart because it reflects the popularity of songs in one of the largest music markets worldwide.

Table 1. The corpus of 18 singles examined for this research.

	Song Title	Artist(s)	Release Date	Week of Hot 100 Top 10 Entry
1	A Holly Jolly Christmas	Burl Ives	Nov. 1964	Jan. 5, 2019
2	All I Want for Christmas Is You	Mariah Carey	Oct. 29, 1994	Dec. 30, 2017
3	The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)	Nat King Cole	Nov. 1946	Jan. 7, 2023
4	Die for You	The Weeknd	Sept. 19, 2017	Jan. 14, 2023
5	Feliz Navidad	José Feliciano	Nov. 9, 1970	Dec. 19, 2020
6	Good as Hell	Lizzo	Mar. 8, 2016	Nov. 9, 2019
7	It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year	Andy Williams	Oct. 14, 1963	Dec. 29, 2018
8	I Will Always Love You	Whitney Houston	Nov. 3, 1992	Feb. 25, 2012 (re)
9	Jingle Bell Rock	Bobby Helms	Nov. 28, 1957	Jan. 5, 2019
10	Last Christmas	Wham!	Dec. 3, 1984	Jan. 2, 2021
11	Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!	Dean Martin	1959	Jan. 2, 2021
12	Purple Rain	Prince & the Revolution	Sept. 26, 1984	May 14, 2016 (re)
13	Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree	Brenda Lee	13	Oct. 19, 1958
14	Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)	Kate Bush	Aug. 5, 1985	Jun. 11, 2022
15	Run Rudolph Run	Chuck Berry	1958	Jan. 2, 2021
16	Safe & Sound	Capital Cities	Jan. 6, 2011	Aug. 17, 2013
17	Sleigh Ride	The Ronettes	Nov. 22, 1963	Jan. 1, 2022
18	When Doves Cry	Prince	May 16, 1984	May 14, 2016 (re)

Our criterion for a song to be included in the corpus is whether it reached the Hot 100 top 10 at least two calendar years after its first release as a single, having appeared in the region from the first tracking week of January 2010 up to the final week of August 2023. In the case of remixes, we only included them provided that the songs' core sound was kept intact, and we did not include complete re-recordings of songs released several years after the original recordings' first release as these have their proper grammar of production and recognition. Having filtered the relevant singles, we will apply Verón's theories to them to try and locate their common characteristics. This means that emphasis would be placed on the context surrounding the songs' releases and commercial peaks while considering the media ecology of the time, the way that these songs entered popular culture, as well as how the shift in formats and chart methodologies favored older songs to succeed in several instances.

However, to fit the two grammars in the context of this research, we will slightly modify them by reformulating their terminology; this means that in our case, the 'grammar of production' will refer to the period when a song was first released to the public, while the concept of the 'grammar of recognition' will refer to the period around which a song received the peak of its attention and subsequent commercial success. At this point, we should clarify that there is no specific duration for any of the grammars, with each one ranging from a few weeks to a few months.

3. Analysis

3.1. Posthumous entries

According to the table featured in the previous chapter, we observe three songs that re-entered the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. The first out of these songs is Whitney Houston's cover of 'I Will Always Love You,'³ released on November 3, 1992 (Music Week 1992: 21). The song was very successful upon release, breaking the record for most weeks on top of the chart above, with 14 weeks (Bronson 1994). It became the most successful single of the year in the United States in 1993 and the 7th most successful single of the 1990s while massively successful worldwide (Billboard 1993: YE-20, Billboard 1999: YE-20). 'I Will Always Love You' was reported to enter the real-time iTunes charts only hours after Houston's death on February 11, 2012, resulting in the single re-entering the Hot 100 chart in the week ending Feb. 25, 2012, at No. 7, reaching No. 3 the following week.

A similar case – albeit with two singles simultaneously – happened after Prince's passing. 'When Doves Cry' and 'Purple Rain' were the first and the third single,

³ Originally performed by country singer-songwriter Dolly Parton.

respectively, off the album *Purple Rain*. Both the album and the singles above were released in 1984, with 'When Doves Cry' reaching the top of the chart for five weeks and 'Purple Rain' reaching No. 2 for two weeks, like Houston's single, 'When Doves Cry' was the best performing single of 1984 in the United States (Billboard 1984:14). After Prince's death on Apr. 21, 2016, 'Purple Rain' re-entered the chart at No. 17 and 'When Doves Cry' at No. 20 on the week ending May 7, 2016; the songs rose at No. 4 and 8 respectively in the following week.

Applying Verón's grammar of production in this group of instances, we should note that all these singles belong to the so-called 'physical era'⁴ of music. This means that a limited number of vinyl and CD copies of the singles would be manufactured, as record companies focused on album sales. This phenomenon is apparent if we take into account the Platinum certification for 'When Doves Cry,' awarded for the sales of 2.000.000⁵ copies sold in the United States on August 21, 1984, and compare it with the most recent update concerning the digital sales of the single in the country, which shows more than 1,7 million downloads sold up until 2017 (Recording Industry Association of America, n.d., Nielsen SoundScan 2017:2).

Moving on to the grammar of recognition, looking at the Billboard Digital Songs chart, we find that digital sales drove the first half of the 2010s decade. The latter, along with streaming, which essentially replaced the former in the latter part of the decade, allows a potentially large group of people to create a 'trend' by buying a song on services like iTunes or by streaming it on repeat on platforms like Spotify; as the services above have their charts which are updated at a much higher rate than their Billboard counterparts, it is significantly easier for music fans to discover what is 'hot' in real-time.

3.2. Christmas classics

Eleven out of the 19 songs included in our corpus are Christmas songs. The most successful is Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas Is You,' which showcases how Christmas songs surge in popularity during the holiday season (Greene 2019). It reached No. 1 on the Hot 100 chart dated Dec. 21, 2019, 25 years after its original release in 1994, breaking an array of records, becoming the first holiday song to top the chart since 1959 and second overall (Molanphy 2019; Trust 2019b). However, this was

⁴ The term 'physical era' refers to a period of time when physical sales (in vinyl or later in CDs) were the driving force of sales; we can assume that this era's demise came around the 2000s, especially if we take into account the debut of the Billboard Digital Songs chart on the week ending Jan. 22, 2005 (Billboard 2005: 57). The chart was created to keep track of all versions of a song sold from digital music distributors (ibid: 6).

⁵ Gold certifications were awarded for sales surpassing 1.000.000 from 1958 until 1988, and 500.000 from 1989 until today (Whitburn 2010:15). Platinum certifications were awarded for sales surpassing 2.000.000 from 1958 until 1988, and 1.000.000 from 1989 until today (ibid).

merely the first time the single topped the Hot 100, not the first time it entered the Top 10; this was when it reached No. 9 on the chart dated Dec. 30, 2017 (Trust 2017).

According to the single's grammar of production, we should note that the song did not receive a commercial release as a physical single, which made it ineligible to chart on the Hot 100 due to a relevant rule preventing radio-only singles from entering the main singles chart; this rule lapsed in 1998, and the song was able to chart at No. 83 on the chart dated Jan. 8, 2000 (Trust 2019b). Five years later, in December 2005, the song topped the Billboard Digital Songs chart, but as the single was considered 'recurrent,' it was not able to chart on the Hot 100; it topped, however, the Hot 100 Recurrents⁶ chart every December from 2005 to 2008. This means the song had multiple 'phases of recognition' throughout its run.

It was first recognized when Billboard modified its chart methodology in 2012 with the addition of streaming numbers; that year, the song re-entered the chart at No. 29 and has been appearing on the chart every year since (Trust 2019b). A vital element in the song's grammar of recognition is the fact that Carey promoted the single in 2019 due to its parent album's *Merry Christmas*' 25th anniversary; in the weeks preceding the holidays, Carey released an anniversary edition of the album above, a music video featuring previously unreleased footage and a new CD single, with the latter being the song's first-ever release as a stand-alone commercial single (Trust 2019b).

Another song with similar success was Wham!'s 'Last Christmas,' initially released in 1984. Like the abovementioned song, 'Last Christmas' was unavailable as a commercial release in the United States until November 2014. The single eventually debuted on the Hot 100 after George Michael's passing on Christmas Day 2016, on the chart dated Jan. 7, 2017, and five years later, it reached its peak of No. 4 on the chart ending on Jan. 7, 2023 (Trust 2023a; Trust 2018c). Another element that potentially contributed to the song's success in recent years is the release of its 4K Ultra HD resolution music video on Dec. 13, 2019 (Post 2019).

Examining the rest of the Christmas singles, we ought to take into account the increasing number of holiday songs making up the chart's top 10 in the weeks preceding and following the holiday season; in the 2018-2019 holiday season, three songs entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time,⁷ four in the 2020-2021 season,⁸ one in the 2021-2022

⁶ The Hot 100 Recurrents chart collects the songs that have gone 'recurrent' on the Hot 100 chart; weeks on chart and the song's peak are counted from the start. It is possible for a song to re-enter the Hot 100, particularly re-releases and tracks receiving sudden resurgences in popularity that have taken a very long time to gain mainstream success (Trust 2019b).

⁷ 'It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year' by Andy Williams entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Dec. 29, 2018, and 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' by Brenda Lee, 'Jingle Bell Rock' by Bobby Helms and 'A Holly Jolly Christmas' by Burl Ives did so on the chart dated Jan. 5, 2019 (Trust 2018a and 2018b).

⁸ 'Feliz Navidad' by José Feliciano entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Dec. 19, 2020, while Wham!'s 'Last Christmas,' Dean Martin's 'Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!' and Chuck Berry's 'Run Rudolph Run' did so on the chart dated Jan. 2, 2021 (Trust 2020a; Trust 2020b).

season,⁹ and one in 2022-2023.¹⁰ In the latter holiday season, eight holiday songs appeared on the Hot 100 chart's top 10 on the week ending Jan. 7, 2023, with this being the first time holiday songs occupied the entire top 7 of the chart (Trust 2023a). Of these songs, Brenda Lee's 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' is the most successful, having peaked at No. 2 on the Hot 100 for nine weeks, from December 2019 to January 2023 (Trust 2023a).

The production grammar of 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' entails multiple releases of the single in 1958 and 1959, although it didn't prove successful until 1960 when it peaked at No. 14 on the Hot 100 (Thanki 2015). The song experienced a significant resurgence in 1990 due to its use in the film *Home Alone*. Still, the essential element we have to note when examining Lee's single, as well as other Christmas songs, is the shifts in technology and public perception and the extent to which the charts took these into account (Golsen 2022, Molanphy 2019). Consequently, it would not be unusual for other Christmas songs to be placed highly on the charts since they can benefit from this advantage. Likewise, on the chart dated Jan. 2, 2021, Chuck Berry's 'Run Rudolph Run' broke the record for the longest climb to the top 10 since its first release in December 1958. Ronettes' 'Sleigh Ride' entered the region in 2022, a few years after its parent album *A Christmas Gift for You from Phil Spector* received retrospective acclaim¹¹ (Dolan 2019, Pitchfork 2017, Trust 2020b).

3.3. Hits featured in shows

It is widespread for songs featured in audiovisual products to receive renewed attention. A significant case of such a hit was Ben E. King's 'Stand by Me,' initially released in 1961 and peaking at No. 4 on the Hot 100, which re-entered the chart in 1986, reaching No. 9 after being featured in the film the same name. This phenomenon was relatively common in the 2000s, with several songs gaining traction due to being featured in TV shows, a trend that continues to this day, with examples including TLC's 'Waterfalls'¹² being featured in *Scream Queens*, Bronski Beat's 'Smalltown Boy'¹³ in *Euphoria*, and 'Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)'¹⁴ by Kate Bush being featured in *Stranger Things* (Brown 2022, Rai 2023).

The latter song made a significant impact following its appearance on *Stranger Things*. By applying Verón's grammar of production, we discover that it was initially the lead single off Bush's fifth studio album, *Hounds of Love*. It originally peaked at No. 30 on the Hot 100, her biggest hit then, but it was part of an album that emphasized its experimental nature and was not a commercially focused body of work. The single's

⁹ The Ronettes' 'Sleigh Ride' entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Jan. 1, 2022 (Trust 2021).

¹⁰ Nat King Cole's 'The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)' entered the Hot 100 top 10 for the first time on the chart dated Jan. 7, 2023 (Trust 2023a).

¹² Originally released in 1995.

¹³ Originally released in 1984.

¹⁴ Originally released in 1985.

relative underperformance was probably also hindered by the fact that Bush didn't perform it live until 1987 at the Secret Policeman's Third Ball, along with Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour (Miles and Mabbett 1994).

Moving on to the grammar of recognition, we have to note that after the premiere of *Stranger Things'* fourth season, Spotify (2022) reported a 9.900% increase in the track's streams, and a snippet of the song was used in over 500.000 videos less than a month after the season's premiere (Kaye 2022). Thus, Kate Bush became known to a young audience that wasn't familiar with her music, with the phenomenon leading to the song re-entering the Hot 100 chart at No. 8 on the week ending Jun. 8, 2022, eventually peaking at number 3. We also must note a difference in how the song was promoted, as this was the first time it received a CD single release (Campbell 2022).

3.4. Miscellaneous cases

'Running Up That Hill,' however, was not the first song to peak after its inclusion in an audiovisual production; Lizzo's 'Truth Hurts' was featured in the Netflix film *Someone Great* and became a viral sleeper hit on TikTok, eventually reaching No. 1 on the Hot 100 (Trust 2019a). Although 'Truth Hurts' didn't qualify for this research, its follow-up, 'Good as Hell' did. Like 'Truth Hurts,' the single was released in 2016 as part of the promotion for her *Coconut Oil* extended play. The single's grammar of production shows that it received a full rollout upon its original release; it was part of the original soundtrack album for the film *BarberShop: The Next Cut*; it received its first music video on May 11, 2016, which was related to the film, and a remix extended play was released the following month.

However, by applying the grammar of recognition for the single, we observe that it received a second full rollout following the success of 'Truth Hurts,' which consisted of the inclusion of the single in a medley performed by Lizzo at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2019, a high-profile remix with pop singer Ariana Grande in October of that year, a second music video with a new concept released on December of the same year, and two more live performances of the single on *Saturday Night Live* and at the 2020 Brit Awards (Hughes 2019; Payne 2020; Weatherby 2019). This rollout was an apparent attempt to capitalize on a performer who had one of the biggest hits in the country at the time. The MTV performance was defining for the success of the single 'Truth Hurts' which topped the Hot 100 on the week ending Sept. 7, 2019, with 'Good as Hell' debuting at No. 52, eventually peaking at No. 3 on the week ending Nov. 30, 2019.

The penultimate song we studied is The Weeknd's 'Die for You.' Applying Verón's grammar of production, it is evident that the song had distinct runs in public memory. 'Die for You' was released as the sixth single in September 2017 off his third studio album, *Starboy*, released on Nov. 25, 2016 (Navjosh 2017). The single peaked at No. 43 on the Hot 100 during its original run. Concerning the grammar of recognition, the single's second run

took off in late 2021 when the song started gaining traction on TikTok, which continued in 2022, eventually helping the original version peak at No. 6 on the week ending Jan. 21, 2023. Unlike 'Good as Hell,' however, the single did not receive a music video during its original run, with the latter debuting on Nov. 25, 2021, coinciding with the fifth anniversary of its parent album (Navjosh 2021). The release of the song's original remix with Ariana Grande on Feb. 24, 2023, was a defining moment, with the single finally reaching the top of the chart on the week ending March 11, 2023, on the track's 31st week in total (Trust 2023b).

The last song we analyzed was 'Safe and Sound' by indie pop duo Capital Cities. The song's grammar of production includes its release as a single off their eponymous debut extended play in January 2011. Capitol Records, however, serviced the single to the modern rock station format in the United States on Nov. 27, 2012; this was almost two years after its original release, and, therefore, from that point on, we have moved from the grammar of production to the grammar of recognition (Friday Morning Quarterback, Inc 2013). Additionally, the song was featured on a Vodafone commercial in Germany, leading to the former's entry on the country's singles chart in April 2013 (Offizielle Deutsche Charts n.d.). According to its chart history, we can reach a consensus that the single was a sleeper hit, entering the Hot 100 chart on the week ending May 18, 2013, and peaking at No. 8 almost five months later, on the week ending Sept. 7.

4. Discussion

The effect of songs experiencing a 'late blooming' on the charts is not limited to the cases we examined above, given that we haven't covered several minor cases. Verón's approach enabled us to examine pop cultural events through the lens of 'delayed pop cultural significance.' Through this lens, including the partial modifications we made to Verón's model, we can distinguish the times when the song's success was a bottom-up process, as opposed to the industry's top-down practices of promoting the music and manipulating its success.

We claim that the posthumous re-entry of songs into the charts follows the bottom-up model. This is corroborated by the instantaneity of these songs' success and that the latter is driven mainly by digital sales. This leads us to the following conclusion: Since the era of digital downloads, the music industry does not have to deal with the issue of scarcity interfering with a song's success. According to an anecdote, Shania Twain's country-pop hit 'You're Still the One' peaked at No. 2 on the Hot 100 in 1998 instead of topping the chart due to stores running out of physical copies. This story provides us with the prospect of a music format's limitations potentially hindering a record's commercial success; digital sales and now streaming pose virtually no restrictions on the number of copies a music consumer can buy or the number of times a person can stream a song.

In the case of songs or artists gaining mainstream exposure due to their affiliation with other cultural products, we can easily observe that their early success functions as a sign for the music industry to push their success further by creating physical editions of these singles or relevant albums – e.g., CD single release of ‘Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)’, – *I Will Always Love You: The Best of Whitney Houston* – greatest hits album release in November 2012 – or releasing remixes to renew interest – e.g., the remixes of ‘Good as Hell’ and ‘Die for You’ both featuring Ariana Grande. Additionally, we should note that once an artist or a song is viewed as capable enough to generate income, the industry strives to expose them as much as possible on mass media, usually through television performances (e.g., Lizzo, Mariah Carey), potentially leading to a top-down-leaning approach for mainstream success.

Nevertheless, we should highlight a shift in how we experience music, indicated by the reappearance of holiday songs at the top of the charts every Christmas. Until recently, music charts demonstrated that the public experienced the production of relevant cultural products linearly. Since the dawn of the era of musical downloads, the average consumer has been liberated from a condition of ‘scarcity’ since music consumption is no longer dictated by the number of physical copies manufactured or radio playlists. Consequently, for the past few years, we have witnessed the Billboard charts materializing a ‘full circle,’ with the latter starting and ending around Christmas.

However, it isn't certain if this is a recent event, given that the Holiday 100 chart has been running since 2011. It seems that the function of weekly music charts has shifted from calculating commercial success and all this entails, to calculating records' popularity. Although these two concepts are close, we should remember that the focus on radio-only songs in 1998 was a pivotal moment for the Hot 100's identity. Once both radio airplay and streaming were incorporated into its methodology, public perception of a song's popularity was significantly altered since someone could consume music legally without actually buying a music product. Billboard reflected the above changes to keep up with the ever-changing power relations between contemporary society and the music industry.

5. Conclusions

To answer our main research question, we have made some observations: First, as the concept of ‘musical consumption’ has changed through the years, with scarcity no longer being an issue and the industry seeking ‘virality’ nowadays, we should not be surprised to see older material enjoying an extra 15 minutes of fame. Second, we should acknowledge that the industry tends to follow the trends created in social media to capitalize on the virality of videos utilizing snippets of songs. However, the industry fares better when it can predict potential consumers' activity in specific periods, like

Halloween or the Christmas holiday season. The industry needs long-term planning to prepare a product's rollout, especially if they need to book live performances or order the manufacturing of physical copies of records.

Verón's grammars of production and recognition are especially helpful for assessing popular culture phenomena through a socio-temporal lens. Besides music, other popular culture sectors that can benefit from such an approach include those that have fallen victim to 'cancel culture,' especially audiovisual media, as well as singular cultural events or trends that have moved beyond time and space restrictions to achieve worldwide success, such as K-pop music.

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AUTHOR

Georgios Sklavounakis Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.



The circulation of meaning: a biosemiotic perspective on the functional circle

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BY: Nicola Zengiaro

ABSTRACT

The research field of contemporary biosemiotics is heir to the thought of Jakob von Uexküll, who focused on investigating the subjective world of animals. The Estonian biologist's theory showed how sense-motor organisms' perceptual and operational worlds are expressed in coordination based on signification. The umwelt comprises the interwoven relationship between organisms' operational and perceptual marks. In this sense, the 'functional circle' notion has particularly interested investigations in biosemiotics. According to Uexküll, the functional circle is a general pattern that underlines the relationship between any animal and the world. Thus, the relationship between the subject and the world can only occur through recursiveness that constructs a semiotic signifying circle. The circulation of meaning has ripple effects concerning recursiveness: memory, anticipation, perception, and learning. The semiotic circle is thus the condition of possibility for experience, perception, and movement in the world. This article aims to analyze the idea of circularity within the research field of biosemiotics, with particular attention to Uexküll's legacy, which is also carried on by cybernetics. Also, we will try to show how biosemiotics investigates the emergence of meaning in this signifying circle. The main aim is to show that recursiveness and circulation of meaning originate from a cognitive semiosis of a corporeal type.

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1. Introduction

The thought of Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) is crucially important in building the theoretical foundations of contemporary biosemiotics. Described as a “crypto-semiotician” by Thomas Sebeok (1979: 9), Uexküll is unanimously considered one of the fathers of biosemiotics – along with Charles Peirce. Although he never described his biology in semiotic or biosemiotic terms, with the publication in 1940 of his major work *Bedeutungslehre*, he indirectly influenced part of the semantics and phenomenological currents of the time, as well as the revival of his thought by philosophical anthropology, ethology, and ecology.¹ Born in Estonia, he studied zoology first at the University of Tartu (Dorpat), after which he moved to Germany, initially to Heidelberg and later to Hamburg. He did much of his experimental work in Italy, at the Zoological Station in Naples, spending summers with his family in Estonia, writing in Germany, and periodically to Capri, Italy, where his grave is currently located.

In the first part of the article, I will briefly introduce the spirit of the time in which Uexküll worked. This will enable us to understand how his theory could have arisen amid this great panorama of scientific innovations in biology and the life sciences. The historical reconstruction is not intended to be complete, but it will try to weave those relationships necessary to understand how biosemiotics emerged from these assumptions. Indeed, the second part will attempt to frame the legacy of Uexküll’s thought by tying it to the field of biosemiotics. This will show how “functional circle theory” and the notion of “umwelt” have enormously impacted semiotic theory. This will be seen from the fact that the functional circle can theoretically be identified as an intrinsic circulation of the meaning of the living. In this way, the idea is to show that the circulation of meaning occurs in organic life even before the complexity of society and culture. In a broad sense, this is meant to present itself as a suggestion to show that the circulation of meaning between texts in semiotics can and perhaps should take its cue from the circulation of meaning in organic bodies. Finally, from a biosemiotic perspective, we propose that functional circle theory can be considered a good indicator of cultural theoretical change.

2. The uexküllian time

Biosemiotics appears today as a new branch of not only semiotics but also theoretical biology. This new paradigm in biology (Anderson et al. 1984, Eder and Rembold 1992, Kull 1993, Anderson 1990) and the goals of the emerging field of research were defined by Claus Emmeche and Jesper Hoffmeyer in 1991:

¹ See the special issue dedicated to him in the journal *Semiotica*: “Jakob von Uexküll: A paradigm for Biology and Semiotics”, Vol. 134 (1/4), and (Deely 2004).

What we propose, then, is that the traditional paradigm of biology be situated by a *semiotic paradigm*, the core of which is that *biological form is understood primarily as a sign*. (Emmeche and Hoffmeyer 1991: 138)

The innovative view of biology through biosemiotics derives from an extraordinary scenario of innovations that animated the debate in the scientific field throughout the twentieth century. Kalevi Kull (2005), tracing the atmosphere of biology during the period when Jakob von Uexküll was giving birth to his theory of biology, cites different breakthroughs in the scientific field: (i) the beginning of genetics through the rediscovery of Mendel's laws, (ii) the beginning of mathematical biology and research in population variability, under the name of biometrics (K. Pearson), (iii) the beginning of biophysics (D'Arsonval et al. 1901), (iv) the first book on theoretical biology (Reinke 1901), (v) the expansion of neovitalism (H. Driesch), (vi) intensive work in the field of morphogenesis (W. Roux) and (vii) the establishment of ecology as an independent science.

All these advances in the scientific field affected biology in the 20th century and influenced the theoretical discussion of biology in the 21st century. As Kull (2001: 1) rightly notes, Uexküll was "a starter and a pioneer of the semiotic approach in biology in the twentieth century" because he was the first to propose the idea that "sign systems embrace all living systems." Kull references Jakob von Uexküll's historical period because he was one of the most critical figures in biosemiotics for the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, to his research, we owe the early development of biological semiotics. His books *Umwelt un Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909, 1921), *Bausteine zu einer biologischen Weltanschauung* (1913), *Theoretische Biologie* (1920, 1928), *Bedeutungslehre* (1940), and the more popular *Biologische Briefe an eine Dame* (1920), *Streizüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren un Menschen* (Uexküll and Kriszat 1934), as well as his many articles, introduced new terminology and approaches initially accepted by a small group of researchers, but later founded an innovative vision in the works of semioticians and also psychologists, anthropologists, ecologists, philosophers, and computer scientists.

J. v. Uexküll's approach, as he himself pointed out, derives from the development of the view of German physiologist Johannes Müller (1801-1858), whose laws of sensorimotor energy state that "the modality of sensation depends immediately only upon what region of the central organism put into a corresponding excited state, independent of the external causes bringing about the excitation" (Schlick 1977: 165). From this idea, Uexküll builds on to later construct an epistemology regarding the subjective animal world. Already in 1909, he used the term *Umwelt*, whereas earlier in his 1907 article, he still used the notion of *Milieu*.

Another point of reference for Uexküll's theory was embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792-1876), especially concerning the theory of biological time, an author that was considered as important in the field of biology as Darwinism (Gould 1977, Salthe 1993). But it is equally well known that although Uexküll was not directly familiar with semioticians, he knew people who remained on the periphery of the field of semiotics, such as Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and Heinz Werner (1890-1964). In the same period, new holistic views about biology began to emerge by Gustav Bunge (1887), for example, when neovitalism re-entered the scene (Hartmann 1906), and an innovative definition of "theoretical biology" appeared in the research of neovitalist biologists. It is important to note these nuances since the vibrant theoretical renewal of the life sciences also led Hans Driesch (1867-1941) to construct a view of biology that is not far from recent analyses in biosemiotics (Karpinskaya 1994). His study of biological forms underscores the positive importance of neovitalist opinions of the time, in which holistic concepts could introduce a complex view of life forms (Kull 1999). Ernst Mayr himself, referring to the soft versions of neovitalism, calls them organicist since "vitalism has become so disreputable a belief in the last fifty years that no biologist alive today would want to be classified as a vitalist" (Mayr 1988: 13).

In this context, different anti-Darwinist theories (in which Uexküll is included) arise, developed through an immanent (intrinsic) view of evolutionary change in organisms, concerning not only the diversification of structures but also of behavior (Csanyi and Kampis 1985).

Indeed, the belief in a teleological force in nature was so firmly anchored in the thinking of many that even among the evolutionists, this belief had more followers in the first 80 years after 1859 than Darwin's theory of selection. (Mayr 1988: 59)

3. The uexküllian legacy

In 2001, a special issue dedicated to Jakob von Uexküll was published in *Semiotica*. Barbieri (2002) stated that biosemiotics had two phases: first from 1961 to 1977 and second from 1977 to 2001. This second phase was remarkably influenced by Thomas Sebeok, who succeeded in giving impetus to this innovative field of research that needed to unify a collective ground. Sebeok (2001) recalls that the great desire to bring together heterogeneous ideas under the same field came to him from intellectual influence and encounters with other leading biosemioticians of those years. Sebeok mentions three figures in reconstructing the roots of biosemiotics: J. von Uexküll (1864-1944), Heini Hediger (1908-1992), and Giorgio Prodi (1928-1987).

Sebeok was crucial for internationally disseminating Uexküll's thoughts (Kull 2003). J. v. Uexküll's book, *Theoretische Biologie*, was first published in 1920 and republished as

wholly revised with a new edition in Hamburg 8 years later and reprinted posthumously in 1973. The unique English translation was published in 1926, a translation of the first edition that appeared in 1920. Sebeok (1998) suggests that the delay in receiving Uexküll's theories internationally must have been caused precisely because the first translation was of mediocre quality and referred to a first edition that was not mature. Sebeok first read the English edition in 1936 and found that book obscure and, to a large part, hard to understand. But when he read the second German edition in 1976, he found it much more understandable. Subsequently, in the late 1970s, Sebeok began researching Jakob's writings at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study while he was there as a Fellow.² The result of his research is the famous³ paper entitled "Neglected figures in the history of semiotic inquiry: Jakob von Uexküll," first presented in 1977 in Vienna and later appearing in an expanded version in his book *The Sign & Its Masters* (1989 [1979]). Sebeok, on that occasion, strongly asserted that Uexküll, with his theories, introduced a new domain (*Umweltlehre*) and, in so doing, placed him in the new field of study of biosemiotics as an incomparable pioneer.

Jakob's son Thure was among the audience members at the Vienna conference. This is how the friendly collaboration between Thure von Uexküll and Thomas Albert Sebeok began, leading to a series of ideas that would later form the pillars of modern biosemiotics. The first idea was to hold a series of annual international conferences devoted to biosemiotics (Sebeok 2001: 65). But before that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Thure organized several conferences held at the Glotterbad Clinic for Rehabilitative Medicine in Glottertal, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, under the direction of Jörg M. Herrmann, director of the clinic. There, during the introduction to one of the sessions titled "Models and methods in biosemiotics," he indicated explicit goals, including supporting the experiment of uniting the humanities, represented by semiologists, natural sciences, represented by molecular biologists, medicine, discussed by internists, psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists (Sebeok 2001: 65). From that series of conferences, Sebeok announced that in May 1990 together with Thure he would found the *International Biosemiotics Society*: "the foundation of the IBS took place in May 1990 [...] with the new society beginning to function fully in May 1991" (Sebeok 1991:7).⁴ Here Sebeok had the opportunity to meet and share the results of his research with two other scholars who were dedicated to the theoretical enrichment and promotion of biosemiotics: Jesper Hoffmeyer and Kalevi Kull.

² Precisely in 1973/74 as is indicated in the *Fifty Years of academic freedom. The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Science*, published in the 2021. <https://nias.knaw.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NIAS-Fifty-Years-of-Academic-Freedom.pdf>, visited 12/12/2023.

³ "Famous" because this would properly mark the beginning of a new phase for biosemiotics.

⁴ Although, as Donald Favareau (2005) noted, the time was not yet mature enough to draw attention to this new field of research, so it remained a dream for quite some time.

4. The functional circle

Among the many concepts offered by Uexküll's theoretical biology, we can note the importance of the notion of "functional circle" [*Funktionskreis*], which appeared clearly in the second edition of his book *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*. Although the term presumably first appeared only in 1919 (Uexküll 1919: 144), the formulation of this concept began with Uexküll's work on neural feedback mechanisms of animal muscle activity and tonus in the Heidelberg Physiological Laboratory and at the Naples Biological Station in the 1890s. Investigating the realization of these functional circles, his theories continued to develop with increasing evidence from studying the rules of the excitation process (Uexküll 1905). Indeed, his early interests were in invertebrate physiology and sea urchins, later formulating a law relating nerve excitation to muscle stretching. With this law, it was discovered that the nervous system's activity tends to shorten a stretched muscle by counteracting it. The nervous system's activity partly caused this type of negative feedback. Uexküll's law formulation is the first articulation of the principle of negative feedback taking place within an organism.

The development of the functional circle from the reflex arc led his theory to rethink the relationship between the animal and its environment completely. He emphasized the existence of an inner environment (*Innenwelt*) of the animal subject. Animal subjectivity arises in encounters between the inner and outer worlds, expressed through the different functional circles.

The concept of the functional circle, in its most mature form as a fundamental model of behavior and meaning-making, is described in the second edition of Uexküll's (1921) monograph. As pointed out by Carlo Brentari (2015), in the first version of the book, a chapter was entitled "The reflex," which was replaced in the second edition with the title "The functional circle" [*Der Funktionskreis*]. In the reconstruction offered by the Italian philosopher, there are two reasons behind this change in terminology: the first is that in the scientific research of the time, especially in the first two decades of the 20th century, the reflex movement model (understood as stimulus/response) had severe limitations. Indeed, in high-complexity behaviors, applying this notion to describe the general coordination of a complex living system in a given environment was challenging. The hegemony of the reflexive model in animal behavior, of particular importance to Jacques Loeb and Ivan Pavlov, was sharply criticized by scientists (Jennings 1906), psychologists, and philosophers of the time. The criticism was based on the fact that this model could not fully satisfy the interaction between the external stimulus and the cause of behavioral action. In determining the cause of action in animal behavior, a more complex view of the situation had to be maintained, considering intra-organic conditions, autogenous rhythms of arousal, threshold values, and other factors internal to the organism.

Second, in the first edition, Uexküll had already incorporated a different view of the stimulus model, in which the stimulus was seen as a part of a larger ordered whole, namely the environment. However, from his perspective, the stimulus depended on the animal's receptor organs. Thus, the stimulus was a part of the plan for constructing the animal environment, of which the organs are components. The change in outlook occurs precisely when Uexküll theorizes that the stimulus is neither an original nor isolable cause but is dependent on the overall structure of the organism. Here, the finalistic interpretation and the first cause status of the stimulus, as it had always been defined, is lost. The most innovative cue of Uexküll's functional circle theory lies in determining the overall structure of the organism as one that actively selects sensory influences from the particular needs of the species to which it belongs. Thus, the holistic view emerges in a rational and scientifically justified explanatory context, whereas before then, the teleological principle dominated the scene in the life sciences.

In his 1913 essay *Bausteine zu einer biologischen Weltanschauung*, Uexküll distinguishes three spheres of the animal subject: the perceptual world (*Merkwelt*), the operational world (*Wirkungswelt*) and the surrounding environment (*Umwelt*). The perceptual world consists of the features the animal can perceive from the external world. The perceptual markers the animal discerns in the world depend on the organization of the animal's sense organs and nervous system. In other words, what the animal perceives of the world is what its species-specific physiological constitution allows it to perceive. The relevant signs to which it has access are, in this sense, determined by the functionalities of its biological organization. The perceptual world, however, is complemented by the operational world as a complementary counterpart of a single process. The operative world includes all those objects adapted to the animal's organs of feeding and locomotion. Uexküll defines the functional circle in this way:

In any action, the subject and object are linked by a closed chain of cause and effect. This chain starts from the objects' perceptual mark carriers, in the form of one or more stimuli that affect the animal's receptors. In the animal, the latter are connected in the perceptive network and then have an effect on the operative one. The operative network transmits to the effector organs a certain motor modality, which becomes part of the operative carriers of the object. The perceptive mark carriers are connected to the operative carriers by the counter-structure. This is how the circle I defined as a 'functional circle' is closed. (Uexküll 1921: 46)

However, we should point out that the objects with which an organism comes into contact are not necessarily perceived cognitively by the subject. In other words, to perceive such objects, the animal needs to be made aware of them or have complex levels of interpretation or representation. The environment, which surrounds and constitutes the animal's surroundings, is but the union of the perceptual and operational worlds. And the *umwelt*, because it is the union of these two worlds, becomes a complex layering or, rather, a circle that complexly connects multiple worlds (Fig. 1). As John Deely wrote:

Each biological life-form, because of its distinctive bodily constitution (its "biological heritage," as we may say), is suited only to certain parts and aspects of the vast physical universe. And when this "suitedness to" takes the bodily form of cognitive organs, such as our own senses or the often quite different sensory modalities discovered in other lifeforms, then those aspects and only those aspects of the physical environment that are proportioned to those modalities become "objectified," that is to say, made present not merely physically but cognitively as well. (Deely 2001: 126)

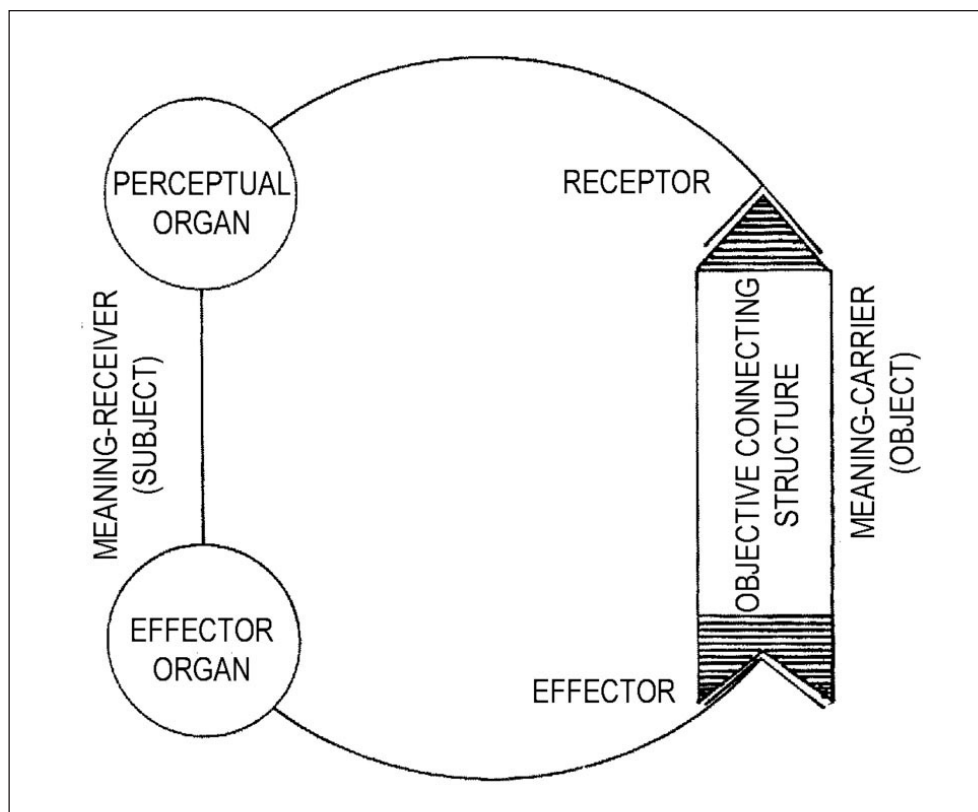


Figure 1. «In Jakob von Uexküll's model of a functional cycle, the subject and the object interrelate via the perceptual world (*merkwelt* O → S) and the operational world (*wirkwelt* S → O) (after Uexküll 1982: 32)». Source: Maran (2002: 72).

Brentari analyzes the same pattern of connection, which shows three essential and innovative features of the functional circle. 1) The organism's very high selectivity toward the stimuli that trigger the functional circle. The important thing is that there is a principle of selectivity that, at the same time, functions as a blocker for the rest of the stimuli. This explains why, for certain animals (such as the tick analyzed by Uexküll), the world of stimuli is reduced to a few environmental signs. The fact is that these few signs relevant to the animal are its entire world, that is, all that it can experience of that world. 2) The functional circle is not merely a substitute for reflex behavior; instead, it is a highly differentiable structure within which there are different dynamics of different complexities, divided initially into four functional circuits: the medium, nutrition, enemy, and reproductive circles. Entering one of these circles can cause others to be closed to stimuli of other kinds. In this sense, a chronological framework represents various circles depending on the stages of the organism's life and its intra-organic conditions (birth, growth, reproduction, and death). 3) The moment a given perception-action sequence in a single functional circle is concluded, the object disappears from the animal environment (either physically, as in the case of nutrition, or cognitively speaking). Disappearance is a cognitive event. To explain this event, Uexküll speaks of predator receptors that make the object disappear from the environment once the appetite stimulus is satisfied. In a certain way, the "hunting" mode and the "prey" object switch off. The mode by which such objects are extinguished is crucial. What interests us most is that each functional circle, concerning this idea of the object's disappearance, is disconnected from the others even when it invests the same object. The idea that supports the distinction between different functional circles is found under a different name in *Leiftaden in das Studium der experimentellen Biologie der Wassertiere* (Uexküll 1905).

5. Influences on cybernetics

In theoretical biology, Uexküll can be seen as the precursor and conceptual pioneer of the study of feedback and control in the functioning of complex adaptive self-organizing systems. After nearly a century, his work brought out the terminologies we commonly use today in different fields of knowledge regarding autopoietic explanations. As Donald Favareau has correctly pointed out,

Yet Ludwig von Bertalanffy's (1901-1972) "general systems theory" – as well as its increasingly sophisticated descendants (i.e., cybernetics, catastrophe theory, chaos theory, and complexity theory) – all issue from von Uexküll's notion of the Funktionskreis or "functional cycle" of perception and action that effectively 'couples' the ever-changing system that is the organism to the ever-changing system that is the world. (Favareau 2010: 42)

Uexküll's approach influenced the development of organismic biology and systems theory by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901-1972) and ethology by Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) and Niko Tinbergen (1907-1988). As early as the early 20th century, Uexküll recognized the vital role of negative feedback and afferent control in organisms; similarly, the concept of the functional cycle, to illustrate behavior as a regulated process, can be seen as a predecessor of cybernetic models. For these assumptions, Uexküll has been discussed as a pioneer of cybernetics and artificial intelligence (Lagerspetz 2001, Emmeche 2001, Roepstorff 2001).

We can take, thus, J. v. Uexküll as a precursor of contemporary biocybernetics and ethology. But in semiotics, especially in cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics, these theories are crucial because they explain that every animal, be it an amoeba, a grasshopper, or a tiger, behaves meaningfully based on sign processes with a functional cycle that forms signs and by its corresponding signals as meanings.⁵ This *Umweltlehre* justifies how the organism and the environment are connected, indirectly showing the existence of an "intrasemiotic" (Brier 2003) whose meaning can arise from the generative functional cycle of perception, action, and consequence.

6. The subject-environment circle

The Umwelt is how aspects of the environment accessed by sensation are related. Importantly, this Umwelt explains how objects are constituted as "objects of experience." It is well known that during the Gymnasium, Uexküll had read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which greatly influenced his whole research. Uexküll's desire to understand the cognitive modes that shape the perception of the environment in animal species came from the Kantian thesis that *a priori* categories determine the experience of living beings. Uexküll's idea was to apply Kantian transcendental analysis not only to humans but also to other animals. In other words, he carried the study of the transcendental structures of the mind inside the field of natural sciences, that is, cognitive sciences.⁶ With such spirit, Uexküll not only argued that our bodily constitution filters and limits sensations within our perceptions of the world.

⁵ Niccolò Monti (2023) provides an interesting historical overview, emphasizing the relationship between Umberto Eco's semiotic theory and cybernetics.

⁶ One of the first attempts to apply Kant's philosophy to biology is found in his 1902 essay *Im Kampf um die Tierseele* [In Battle over Animal Psyche]. (Brentari 2015)

But what my eyes objectify and what my mind makes of that vision remain as distinct as sensation as such in contrast to perception, which alone transforms sensations into experienced objects, like dark rectangles against lighter surfaces “seen” to be chalkboards on walls. (Deely 2001: 127)

Due to his theories, ecosemiotics developed in a manner that has allowed us to rethink animal subjectivity in relation to the ecosystem. However, the relationship between the organism and its environment remains largely an abstraction in modern evolutionary biology (Maran 2002). For this reason, biosemiotics and ecosemiotics play an influential role in resetting the space for the emergence of meaning in the organism-environment relationship. Viewing organisms as subjects makes it possible to examine the qualitative side of the relationship between different living things in each ecosystem. Indeed, from the semiotic point of view, when we discuss this relationship, the placement of living things in a particular environment becomes essential (Maran 2014). The relationship between the subject and its environment determines a series of typically semiotic phenomena of the individual, such as that of experience and memories, but also of species (integrating features that develop only partially during evolution) because the environment prescribes certain characteristic features to the living subject. In other words, the subject’s interpretive activity bases its dynamics on a series of functional circles that stand out between the inner and outer worlds, between perception and action. Therefore, the environment’s characteristics are the source of semiosis, with direct and indirect effects on the processes according to which the subject assigns reflexive meanings. This is demonstrated by the fact that if we change the environmental elements, the whole system of meanings changes. Any pattern of feedback communication between a subject and its environment can be analyzed as a fundamental mechanism that leads to the development of a series of inescapable correspondences, namely adaptation or what Jesper Hoffmeyer (1998) later called “semiotic fitness”: the indicator that characterizes the relationship between the subject and its environment.⁷

The innovative proposals of biosemiotics *vis-à-vis* Uexküll’s theories have opened the door to several new dynamics for biology and general semiotics (Cobley 2016, Zengiaro 2023). Indeed, although we do not have a definitive description of these mechanisms in living systems, it is still possible to approach this question from a semiotic perspective. All these mechanisms in living things are part of a summation of interpretive and meaning-making processes. What can be said with certainty is that Uexküll’s functional circle model remains at the center of the biosemiotic debate, along with the whole range of phenomena that the functional circle creates meanings, signs, and semiosis in the *umwelt* (Kull 2020).

⁷ For the difference between adaptability and semiotic fitness see (Maran 2002).

7. The circulation of meaning

The metaphor of the circle, relating to the spread of the image proposed by Uexküll in his drawing (Fig. 2), an actual graphic scheme of the circulation of sense, was very influential in the articulation of the paradigms of the life sciences in the first half of the twentieth century.⁸ His drawing appeared in 1920 in the first edition of *Theoretische Biologie*. Still, its argumentative framework had already appeared in *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* of 1909, and in its problematic methodological theorizing in the introduction to the second edition of *Theoretische Biologie* of 1928, we immediately detect the semiotic marker.

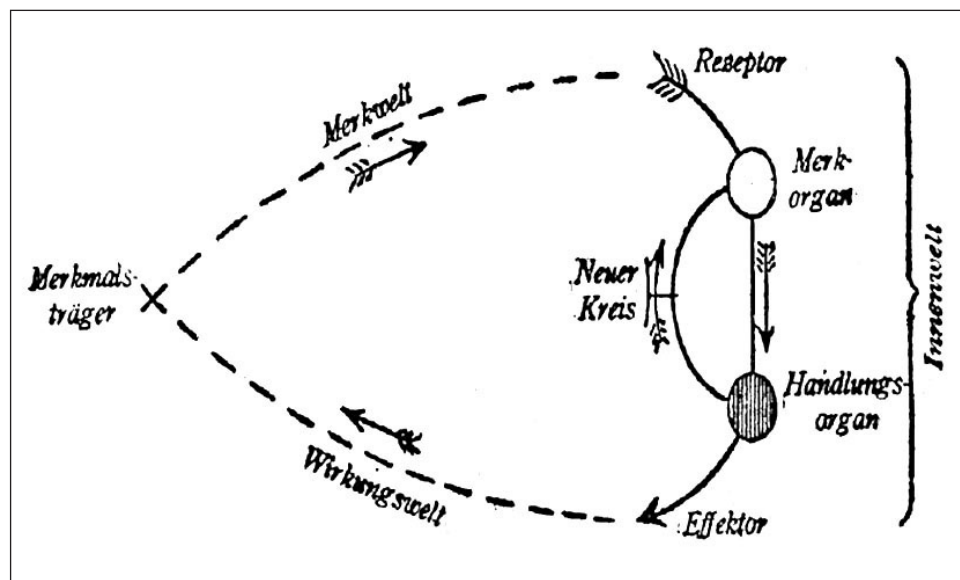


Figure 2. Early Scheme for circular Feedback Circle, from von Uexküll (1920: 117).

If we look closely at the drawing, the object of environmental interaction, the 'x,' is reduced to a punctiform *Merkmals-träger*, the semiotic marker that would later be profoundly rethought (Uexküll and Kriszat 1956). 'Merkmals' are the semiotic markers, what Leibniz and Christian Wolff would have called *notae*, representations. In the drawing, it becomes clear that the graphic circulation represents the semiotic system, in which the object becomes the bearer of a semiotic mark open to cognitive reading. Thus, the circle is the semiotic space *par excellence*, and the resulting circulation describes the process of functions (nutrition, sexuality, defense, etc.). The circle

⁸ It would be very interesting to do a semiotic analysis like Françoise Bastide's on the figurative meaning of the circle in the life sciences. Unfortunately, we do not have the opportunity to carry it out here, however, as far as I know, there is still no semiotic analysis on the relationship between circle design and scientific theory in J. v. Uexküll (and other authors).

is also a visualization of what, for Uexküll, was a kind of ‘predetermined harmony’ under the sign of the semiotic relation (Tedesco 2014). The geometric form of the design indicates the ‘adaptedness’ [*Einpassung*] of the animal to its environment, aimed to replace the Darwinian term ‘adaptation’ [*Anpassung*]. Semiotic adaptedness is properly seen as a theory of perception or immanence of perception (Uexküll 1922). Thus, it is interesting to note how the relationship between the subject and the external world in processing and transposing signs to the external world that makes up the environment can be described as “a true *transcendental biosemiotics*” (Brentari 2015: 111).

We find the structural aspect of circularity in other authors, such as Juri Lotman and his notion of semiosphere.⁹ The dynamics of these complex semiotic systems, cultural or biological, present isomorphisms yet to be investigated. Both culture and the individual world are fields of sign processes that co-implicate each other. According to the biosemiotic and ecosemiotic perspectives, it is impossible to understand culture without integrating the ecological dimension (Kull and Maran 2014). Human semiotics, in its circulation of meaning among texts, codes, practices, and interactions, are part of a more extensive ecological system. Understanding the semiosphere of the living, or what has recently been called the *ecosemiosphere* (Maran 2021), helps us understand that the circularity of meaning does not exist only in a culture, but stands in an ancient, embodied relationship between the organism and the environment. The semiosphere is a necessary medium for all sign processes, just as the biosphere, the organic totality of living matter and the precondition for the persistence of life, is the precondition for the development of culture.

8. Conclusion

In contemporary semiotic and biosemiotic studies, the circularity of meaning in its embodied aspect, as in embodied cognition, and enactivism, shows how J. v. Uexküll’s theories can offer a solid starting point for understanding meaning formation differently. It is a matter of identifying the points of contact between the theory of perception and communication from the idea of functional circles in organisms. The functional circle model gives us a broad spectrum of applications of semiotics related to the possibility of interpreting entities interconnected by their own values and meanings.

⁹ Taken up from Vernadsky.

Functional circle theory has historical and theoretical implications for the theory of culture and the study of culture in semiotics (Magnus and Kull 2012). In our biosemiotic perspective, the theory of culture is nothing but an extension of the same interaction between functional circles, where it is presented as a process of evolution from previous morphological and physiological features within a symbolic and complex structure. This allows us to consider the circulation of meaning as a possible semiotic pursuit common to all living beings. All this gives a certain innovative emphasis to biosemiotic theory, which is presented as a reinterpretation of cultural meaning from the point of view of an organicity of social relations. Breaking through the nature-culture dichotomy brings us precisely this legacy: reconsidering culture and the circulation of meaning as something not external to the nature of the human and nonhuman environment (Zengiaro 2022). Faced with this evidence and the fact that the circulation of meaning exists in the lowest living things, what can still lead us to think that semiotics is not closely related to every form of life on this planet? This is what biosemiotics, with all its forces, is trying to understand along the pathways that intersect life, semiosis, and the circulation of meaning.

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AUTHOR

Nicola Zengiaro PhD candidate at the Department of Philosophy and Communication, University of Bologna, Italy.

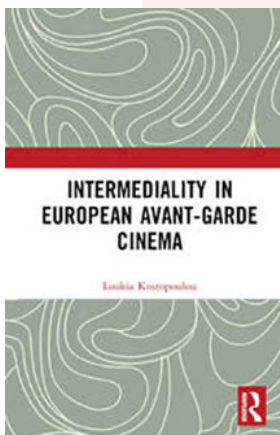




Cinema and intermediality: Enhancing the spectator

BY: Nicola Dusi

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Loukia Kostopoulou

Intermediality in European Avant-Garde Cinema

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The introduction to Loukia Kostopoulou's interesting work, *Intermediality in European Avant-Garde Cinema* (Routledge, 2023), explains that the book will address some "important research questions", such as: "How do intermedial experiments convey meaning in films? And how are the contemporary films of Jean-Luc Godard, Lars Von Trier, and Alexander Sokurov innovative and experimental?" The book lives up to its promise by proposing to gather these three contemporary filmmakers under the label of "avant-garde cinema," both for their experimental approach to film techniques, which includes work on the materials and forms of cinema, and for their search for contamination, transformation and hybridisation of languages in an intermedial way, for instance with respect to painting and theatre with the use of *tableaux vivants*, or with respect to literature and music. Kostopoulou draws a parallel between a certain modern and contemporary auteur cinema, or "art cinema," and the experimental cinema of Man Ray, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp and Louis Buñuel (among others) in their quest for innovation, which challenges the limits of the medium and opts for non-linear narratives and the creation of "uneasiness to the audience" (p. 2). Kostopoulou accepts the critical hypotheses that place *art cinema and mainstream cinema*, or "classical cinema" and "post-classical cinema," in sharp opposition, with an experiential turn involving a shift towards

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“spectacle” rather than “narrative” (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002). Like any categorisation by opposites, the risk is sometimes to go to extremes, and to assume that experimentation in film history only comes from films that break with traditional narrative, bring their own “idiosyncratic personal vision”, and create stylistic and formal innovation. Art cinema is in fact a macro-category, which includes for instance almost all European directors studied in film history (from De Sica and Rossellini to Kubrick). For Elsaesser and Buckland, it is a matter of innovating by emphasising the modes of spectacle at the detriment of narrative, e.g. by challenging the spectator’s skills with respect to the conventions of cinematic techniques and genres. Within this macro-category, avant-garde cinema “engages the audience both intellectually and emotionally”, and Kostopoulou rightly recalls directors such as Michael Hanneke and Yorgos Lanthimos who do so in their films by practising the approaches theorised by Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, so as to activate the spectator’s critical skills, challenging her/him to understand. It is a dimension of political engagement that aims at “annulling the boundaries of the medium and assuming an enhanced idea of the spectator” (p. 9).

Quoting scholars of film history and visual and media studies, Kostopoulou explains that experimentation with the “intrinsic qualities” of the medium of cinema, such as movement and visibility, is a fundamental part of the research of the cinema of the historical avant-gardes, who work to find new ways through abstraction from representation, experiments with editing and collage, and the destruction of narrative logic, creating “intermedial crossover” (p. 112) with other art forms such as painting, photography, theatre, installations, and so on. Changing historical and technological conditions (primarily thanks to the digital turn), this research can be found in the contemporary directors that Kostopoulou chooses to investigate: Godard, Sokurov and Von Trier. The intermedial perspective in this book becomes both an aesthetic and a socio-cultural choice, with a focus on the effects on the spectator: “in this book, intermediality is used to refer to the mixedness or crossing of various media within the medium of film and to describe the implications these crossings have on the spectator and the nature of the medium itself” (p. 27). But it is important to note that this is not just about an intermediality understood as a “crossing the borders between media” (Rajewsky 2005), but rather an intermediality that becomes “deep imbrication” between media and the arts. In the films she analyses, in fact, innovation is produced through “transformation” and “fusion” (p. 31), creating “intermedial crossovers” that offer a “new sensuous experience to the viewers” (p. 40). In her research, Kostopoulou fully embraces the theoretical perspective of Ágnes Pethő, for whom “reading intermedial relations requires [...] an embodied spectator who gets ‘in touch’ with the world of the film” (2011: 1).

We should remember, however, that prior to the recent intermedial turn, structuralist textual semiotics used to reason about codes and systems of signification in relation to each other, at least since Metz’s definitions of “semiological interferences” (1971: 218)

among languages, with respect to borrowings, imitations and adaptations of signifying figures, e.g. between cinema and literature. In the transition from one text to another, according to Metz, a figure can not only produce a new signifier, but also change in meaning, and in many cases one does not share actual substances of expression with the other but an identical code, which manifests itself in two different languages. This occurs, for example, between pictorial *chiaroscuro* and that of cinema or photography, or when sharing rhythmic patterns between a visual series and a musical series in a film sequence (Metz 1971). In the 2000s, we reason about these “semiological interferences” in terms of intermediality and embodiment, but for contemporary media semiotics, these are basic problems of intersemiotic translation, which reopen the sensuality expressed in texts (in film and in the arts, as in music or the novel) (Calabrese 2000, Fabbri 2000, Dusi 2000, Marrone 2005), and produce media experiences for the spectator (Eugeni 2010). According to this perspective, it is at the sensory and experiential level that intermediality and translatability are accumulated by “figural” relations (Dusi 2015a). Pethő also puts a strong emphasis on figurality, but these themes remain implicit in Kostopoulou’s book. We will return to them at the end.

Jean-Luc Godard, the restless soul of the French New Wave, continued to experiment throughout his life. Among his many films, Kostopoulou analyses in particular *First Name: Carmen* (1983) and *Film Socialisme* (2010). In the former, Godard “multiplies intermedial strategies to reflect on the gestural nature of the cinematic image” (Giraud 2018: 127). In the latter, Godard experiments in a metanarrative manner with the hybridity of the digital medium, with a visual and narrative fragmentation, even at the verbal level (with dialogues in many languages and subtitles that confuse the viewer), “forcing the viewer to react, to watch closely, and to try to decipher its signification” (p. 56). This complicated media experience, which does not find a foothold and is instead disconfirmed on a perceptual and sensory level by the different sound and visual rhythms, is summarised by Kostopoulou with the Godardian formula of “dissonant resonances”, between contagion and difference (p. 60). As in all of Godard’s later films, for example in *Adieu au langage* (2014), the fragmentary, interrupted and syncopated narration annihilates the viewer’s expectations of coherence, adding to the difficulty of relating to and empathising with the characters: we could call it a *discontinuity* of narrative, of stylistic construction, of digital effects, seasoned with polyphonic editing and ruthless irony. This, for Kostopoulou, produces an “errant spectator” (p. 62).

From Alexander Sokurov’s films, Kostopoulou is interested in the “intermedial crossovers” of films such as *Mother and Son* (1997) and *Russian Arc* (2002), in which the director experiments with the relationship between cinema and painting, but also in a kind of “slow cinema [that] makes time visible and hence felt by the viewer” (p. 69). In *Mother and Son* Sokurov “wants the audience to focus on the details” (ibid.) particularly of the protagonists’ faces in close-ups. In the contrast between these, the use of slow pace

and long takes of landscapes, the film produces a tension between movement and stillness which approaches the pictorial mode. In *Russian Arc*, on the other hand, Kostopoulou investigates intermediality with respect to the “revitalizations” of *tableaux-vivants* (Pethő 2014), in the use of continuity shots of the sequence plan (the whole film is shot in a single take), blurring the boundaries between cinema, theatre and installation art, to create “an enhanced cinematic experience” (p. 86).

Looking at Lars Von Trier, Kostopoulou analyses the film *Dogville* (2003), in which experimentation with theatrical modes blends cinematic and performing arts techniques. Kostopoulou explains how the film achieves an effect of alienation for the viewer through the use of intertitles that narrate the film as if it were a novel, and the constant voice-over narrator who describes the context, the characters and the narrative situation. And clearly also with the use of the white lines that are drawn on the floor to designate the rooms of the village, the houses and the rooms, in a minimal and empty theatre space, that “creates space in the spectator’s imagination [...] enabling him/her to visualize the setting” (p. 102). At the same time, the film’s expressive power comes from the use of voices, noises and sounds contextual to the actions, which make the narrative situations grounded in realism, and open up to sensoriality and proximity to the actors’ bodies including through the fluid use of steady cam shots. Von Trier, indeed, “deploys specific techniques to emancipate the audience and make them more reactive to what they are watching rather than immersed in the plot” (p. 94).

The theoretical definition of avant-garde art cinema, which produces “intermedial crossover”, could be extended to films by many younger directors. They include, to name a few, Pietro Marcello, for instance in the 2009 documentary film *The Mouth of the Wolf*, for its use of film archives mixed with storytelling; Alice Rohrwacher, think of *La chimera*, from 2023, which mixes the modes of cinema with the oral modes of ballad-singing; and Radu Jude, whose provocative film *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, from 2020, mixes cinematic genres such as porn and satirical comedy with photographic modes and social denunciation, proposing three different endings. We would also mention Yorgos Lanthimos, whose recent *Poor Things* (2023) manages to hybridise the science-fiction genre with the search for visual innovations in framing and décor, and imaginative post-production creations. In all these films we can see both the search for an expressive intermedial innovation and the “distancing” effect for the spectator, preventing narrative immersion and the process of “secondary identification” (Metz 1977) with the characters. And leading the spectator to live in a kind of constant emotional discomfort and to reflect on the medium of film. To use the terms explained by Loukia Kostopoulou in her book, “avant-garde films aim at creating a degree of alertness in the spectator” (p. 94).

However, I would like to return to the definition of medium, understood as a “apparatus” or as a “assemblage”, to try to better understand Kostopoulou’s research. Indeed, cinema is not only a matter of techniques, codes and languages (to a greater or lesser

degree intermedial), but also a set of cultural conventions and discursive practices. It is precisely on these semiotic conventions that the notion of intermediality operates – which, as Kostopoulou reminds us, is not only the transfer and migration among media of forms and content (Gaudreault 1998), a transfer more transparent and immediate or more opaque and hypermediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999), but is above all intersections between media, thanks to sociocultural practices that construct hybrid configurations.

We would like to contribute to Kostopoulou's reflection by adding a focus on textual hybridity, as a product of a broader, intersemiotic and intercultural translation process, because if in intermediality "the material quality of each medium is affected" (Müller 2010: 18) we must bear in mind that "intersemiotic translation" from its earliest definitions (Jakobson 1959) deals with semiotic systems that are transformed in the shift from one medium to another, focusing in particular on the "matters, substances and forms" of expression (in Hjelmselv's terms, see Eco 2003) and their relation to the content plan in the new target text, particularly if it is a film (Dusi 2003, 2015b). The exchanges and overlaps made possible today by digital fluidity reduce the differences between media by drawing new border zones that are boundary lines or common areas, and in this direction the notion of intermediality draws attention to the dialogical dimension of intermedial relations. In my view, which partially follows the proposals of the Lotman School (Torop 2000), there is always intersemiotic translation in intermedial relations, but intermediality opens up a broader discourse on the notion of medium and the event of mediation, understood as an "assemblage" that is simultaneously a material communication channel, an organised set of technologies (a digital or analogue "device") and a set of semiotically organised cultural conventions (Zecca 2013, Eugeni 2015, Casetti 2015). Furthermore, the semiotic perspective allows us to grasp the translational and interpretive relations that bind or differentiate media products, thinking of a continuum that crosses the ecosystem. It thus becomes a "semiosphere" (Lotman 2005) of intertextual, intermedial, transmedia and crossmedia relations, that is, a complex set of relations that can be interpreted coherently (Saldre and Torop 2012, Dusi 2015a).

In her book, Kostopoulou cites many analyses by scholars with different theoretical perspectives, unfortunately leaving little room for her own analysis. But perhaps dealing with sacred monsters like Godard, Von Trier and Sokurov does not allow many alternatives. However, I believe that work on intermedial relations would benefit from a more defined methodology. Adopting that of textual semiotics, for example, it seems useful to distinguish the plan of expression from the plan of content, in order to be able to reason about the filmic languages (or codes) that organise and run across a film. If, for example, on the level of expression one analyses colours, brightness, spatiality, framing and movement, these are figures and formants of the "plastic" level of the film, which go on to configure the "figurative" or expressive level of the film (Dusi 2003, 2015a), thanks to the different forms of editing and precise stylistic choices. In terms of content, on the other

hand, each film structures not only the narrative level and modes of narration, analysed by Kostopoulou, but also a more abstract (or profound) level of values, and a discursive level in which thematic isotopies are developed supporting the more concrete and figurative ones. And one could consider how a stylistic coherence stitches together substances and forms of both expression and content (in the Hjelmslev sense), through what Greimas' semiotics calls "strategies of enunciation." In her book, Kostopoulou examines the level of enunciation, albeit without calling it that, when her analyses show the organisation of the substances and forms of a film at work, both in their internal interweavings and in their communicative openings towards the viewer (e.g. with the forms of the gaze shifting between objective, interpellative and subjective). Though without using semiotic metaterms, Loukia Kostopoulou's analyses equally touch upon many of these narrative, discursive and stylistic problems; and, we suppose, the lack of an explicit methodology then becomes a conscious choice, in order to open up to a wider readership and to be able to compare different theoretical and epistemological perspectives.

A recurring topic throughout the book is that of the spectator's experience of contemporary European avant-garde cinema. A *trait d'union*, as we said, is found in the construction of a critical, Brechtian distancing, which creates estrangement or discomfort in the spectator, while inviting him or her not to fall into identification and empathy with the characters. In order to investigate this mechanism, in my view, the media semiotics proposed by Eugeni (2010) is useful today. It distinguishes between "direct" and "medial" experience, and allows us to analyse the construction of the viewer's media experience through the different layers of an audiovisual product (a film or a TV series). In this perspective, through the filter of discursive construction, the sensory recognition of a film reconstructs a perceptual-sensory (plastic and rhythmic) design, which is linked to a narrative design, in which the viewer activates, for example, situational maps to understand the unfolding narrative. These two layers, the sensual and the narrative, are organised into the layer of "relational syntony" (or enunciation), where the characters relate to each other while the film relates to the viewer cognitively and affectively. The complex sociosemiotic interplay of these stratifications composes a "media experience design" (Eugeni 2010: 45).

One last consideration to reason about figurality. According to Pethő, intermediality should be conceived as a kind of excess, "a surplus in the cinematic image" (2011: 7), and in order to study it, it is necessary to address the sensual aspect of texts, which Pethő investigates as a problem of the figurality of intermedial relations. Following Lyotard and Deleuze, it is a textually excessive figurality, of the order of force and libidinal strength (in psychoanalytic and aesthetic terms): it is the figural studied by film and video art scholars, which is now part of the dictionaries of the image (Juhel, Vanoye, et. al. 2006). Nevertheless, textual semiotics proposes a second meaning of figurality, understood as a more abstract network of dynamic, semi-motivated

systems with “semi-symbolic” functioning. It is a poetic mode of language theorised by Greimas (1984) and Floch (1995), which is based on the affective and sensual logics that arise from the tensive, plastic and expressive construction of a text. This textually motivated figurality can be played out in analyses alongside the energetic, affective and impure figurality. It is this double gaze that allows us to find systems of coherence and cohesion in the intersemiotic and intermedial relations (Dusi 2015a), identifying a series of textually organised sensory and experiential logics that are in dialogue with the users of media products, semiotically producing affects and logics of sensation.

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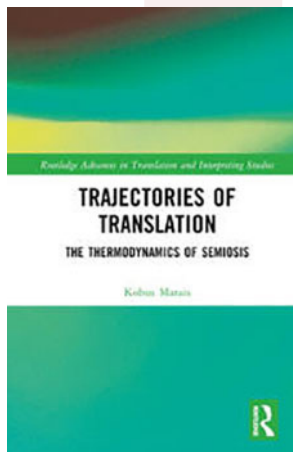
Nicola M. Dusi Associate professor of Media Semiotics,
Department of Communication and Economics, Università
degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Italy.



Matter, energy, and identity in Translation Studies

BY: Sergio Torres-Martinez

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Kobus Marais

Trajectories of Translation: The Thermodynamics of Semiosis.

Routledge, London, and New York, 2023, 170 pages, Hardback £ 108.00,
ISBN: 9781032455433, eBook £ 31.99, ISBN 9781003379713

Writing a review on the thermodynamics of semiosis in the context of translation is a challenge and a pleasure, considering the innovative character of such an endeavor. Indeed, despite its daunting title, the book *Trajectories of Translation: The Thermodynamics of Semiosis*, introduces an accessible body of knowledge regarding the nature of meaning and its constitution through sign and sign-system action (semiosis) in the context of translation.

How can semiosis be understood as a product of the Second Law of thermodynamics in the first place? Drawing on my research on the matter, I first surmised, quite correctly, as I later confirmed, that the author wanted to make a case regarding the role of physics in the construction of a type of meaning-making that emerges from the very substrate of materiality to become an asset of biological systems such as ourselves. My first hunch, which I attribute to the predictive character of the human brain, took me through a universe rarely explored either in semiotics and translation studies where uncertainty reduction, through prediction and corroboration, operates as the best means to reduce *entropy*; that is, the collapse of organisms because of the dissolution of their boundary defining them as symbolic natural entities/objects. It has to be said,

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however, that Professor Marais does not necessarily adhere to specific terminology associated with, for example, the notion of the predictive brain (Clark 2013) or Bayesian inference, which he dubs as trajectory: “Trajectory 1.0 constrains Trajectory 1.1 in such a way that the child is likely to respond emotionally to an emotional greeting, but it does not determine that this will happen, and it does not specify to which extent it will happen” (Marais 2024: 84). Yet, the child-agent must reconcile previous knowledge with incoming information by defining how much a prediction error may emerge and ultimately create novel knowledge.

That said, the book explores just that: the complex relationship between matter-energy and ideational systems, advocating for their simultaneous study to enhance comprehension of meaning, meaning-making, and their material substratum. This holistic approach sheds light on social-cultural realities by accommodating local nuances alongside comparative generalizations. In this sense, concepts like *constraint* and *trajectory* emerge as valuable tools to connect matter-energy and ideas, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of emergence instead of *reductionism*. This is a crucial point since, as those conversant with the history of the philosophy of biology may corroborate, entities and objects in biology have been categorized either as manifestations of fundamental properties, aligning with metaphysical reductionism, or as complex constructions of relationships requiring more nuanced descriptions reflecting metaphysical non-reductionism. This dichotomy becomes the first conceptual hurdle of the book.

Expanding on this argument, one could argue that assigning ontological status to objects, whether through reduction to fundamental properties or scalar descriptions, introduces a risk of *epistemic blindness*. This blindness arises from a systematic adherence to conventions, leading to a linear and uniform approach to explaining, predicting, and intervening in natural phenomena. This is precisely one of the points expressed in various ways in Professor Marais’s book, namely that the idea of translation as passing content from one realm of experience to another is a significant conceptual error.

Indeed, this linear approach encounters limitations when confronted with the inherent unpredictability and complexity of natural phenomena. *Surprise*, indicating the failure or potential failure of explanation, prediction, or intervention, challenges the notion that linear and uniform approaches to the conceptualization of biological entities are universally applicable (Elliott-Graves 2023: 3).

Recognizing the need for propositions in biology to surpass conventional, linear approaches suggests that these propositions should not merely conform to specific sets of relations in positing objects in the world. In this sense, the book manages to extend beyond conventional boundaries in the philosophy of biology by drawing connections to conversational analysis and gesture studies, thereby providing a versatile framework applicable to any social-cultural interaction mediated by the body-as-sign.

Through the lens of constraint, the author illustrates how children navigate the influence of care workers and abstract ideas. This aptly showcases that constraints operate not only in matter-energy interactions but also in the participants' memories, influenced by cultural or psychological motivations.

In Chapter 5, Professor Marais delves into translation processes within the context of the MBTI and its aim to popularize Jung, encompassing scholarly work, application, critical appraisals, layperson interpretation, and representation in popular culture in South Africa. Questions arise about the distinctions between application and critical processes, as well as the origins of problematic aspects in the *Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) trajectory. According to Professor Marais, the data reveals the complex interplay of material, economic, psychological, political, intellectual, social, and religious trajectories in semiotic trajectory emergence, which ultimately points to the need for nuanced research methods that transcend the reduction of social phenomena to *habitus* and field (Marais 2026: 119). Additionally, the author suggests that there is a constraining effect of ideas on concepts and matter-energy, a reflection that prompts contemplation on the concept of 'downward causation' in scholarly discourse.

In my opinion, the chapter's strength lies in its stated skepticism regarding progress and the refusal to engage in an undue idealization of translators as a caste of intelligent workers:

The translation process is a process of creating interpretants from previous interpretants. This is always done against the background of a context, which means in a context of power, interests, competition for scarce resources, et cetera. (Marais 2023: 110)

Chapter 6 highlights the prevalence of translational processes in both lingual and non-lingual material, while acknowledging the nuanced differences in their execution. The chapter introduces questions about mapping non-lingual semiotic systems onto one another, addressing the challenge of comparing systems lacking the same level of pattern or structure as language:

Translation studies, in the way I conceptualize it, is not about the music or the photo but about an inter- or transdisciplinary interest in the relationship between the two, about an interest in how music becomes visual in a photograph. (Marais 2023: 126)

Here, Professor Marais emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary work involving experts in color, sound, smell, taste, and touch to provide insights for mapping these semiotic systems. This appeal to interdisciplinary collaboration correctly interprets current

trends in cognitive sciences that see the phenomenon of mind as a radically embodied reconstruction of reality that defines perception as an instance of representation.

In the context of translation studies, the author challenges binary perspectives, suggesting alternative options that include a strong comparative element to make students aware of contextual foundations. Thus, the importance of resemiotizing Western textbooks in an African context is emphasized, as it requires students to reinterpret the relevance of literature across different contexts.

The discussion extends to decolonization in translation studies, portraying it as a retranslation process whereby semiotic agents rework incipient signs of precolonial and colonizing society-cultures into subsequent signs of a new South African society-culture. Professor Marais contends that decolonization involves retranslating, reinterpreting, and resemiotizing experiences of being human, thereby acknowledging the complexity and hybridity of subsequent signs woven from multiple texts and experiences.

Although the integration of semiotics into translation studies is increasingly accepted, since “translation is not always limited to verbal languages” (Munday, Ramos Pinto & Blakeley 2022: 9), the introduction of a project that casts the semiotic net wider to capture the role of biological, predictive types of cognition in human meaning-making, is a significant turn in the conceptualization of a type of translation that reconciles mind and matter. Central to this is the need to understand the workings of translation as events occurring on paths, following the unexpected trajectories of intention and goal through (responsive and responsible) embodied experiences. As in art, exchange replaces (content) translation:

Individuation of the self occurs through ‘intercorporeal interdependence,’ separating the viewer from ‘other(nes)s’ and recognizing difference through experiences ‘embodied and materially located’ in spaces opened to the imagination necessary for transformation. (Devine 2023: 73)

The book leaves readers with crucial questions: How can non-lingual semiotic systems be effectively mapped onto one another, considering their lack of pattern and structure akin to language? How can translation studies navigate the challenges of colonial legacies and decolonize curricula effectively? What interdisciplinary approaches are needed to bridge the gaps in mapping different semiotic systems?

This pivotal inquiry positions semiotics at the forefront, reclaiming for the field the crucial recognition it deserves as a discipline capable of providing more nuanced responses regarding the role and scope of translation than previously acknowledged. The idea of sign-system hybridization during semiosis is by far more effective than that of “adaptive social, political, economic and educational systems,” allowing

them to “respond to disturbances and pressures from outside and, thus, to cope with stress and contingency” (Hermans 2023: 100). It also does away with the misleading idea of a Eurocentric “disciplinary territory” misleadingly construed as “a ghost-like presence to haunt us out of enclosures and rigidities” (Ferreira Duarte, Assis Rosa & Seruya 2006: 4).

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AUTHOR

Sergio Torres-Martinez Researcher at the University of Antioquia, Colombia.

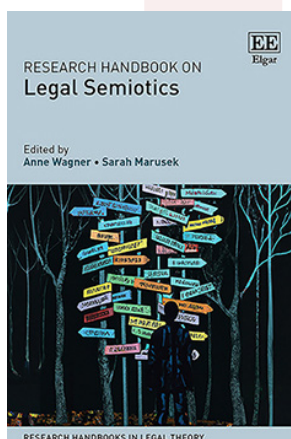




Semiotics in matters legal

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BY: Panagiotis G. Krimpas



Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek

Research Handbook on Legal Semiotics

Research Handbooks in Legal Theory Series. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Elgar, 2023, pp. 516, Hardback £ 230.00, ISBN 9781802207255, eBook £ 48.00, ISBN 9781802207262.

The purpose of this comprehensive Research Handbook is to explore the multifaceted research conducted in the field of legal semiotics to get insights into the sign and symbol-based function of law and, ultimately, show the nature of law as a strategic system of fluctuating signs, the ever-evolving conceptualizations of non-verbal and verbal aspects of law. Unfortunately, the space limitations of a short review make it impossible to discuss all 33 contributions comprising the volume. Necessarily adopting a selective approach, based not on merit but on my more immediate research interests, I will limit myself to discussing only one contribution from each part.

The volume opens with a Foreword by John Brigham, Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, who recalls his first contact with semiotics in the 1980s at a law-and-semiotics roundtable. Significantly, he addresses semiotics “in the context of the current confusion about the authority of law” (p. xx) and explores the symbolism of power by studying the semiotics of the Trump-Biden electoral encounter. Turning to law perceptions in Western democracies, he reminds us that “[r]especting the semiotic means respecting ideas and symbols as part of our reality.” In their Preface, the editors retrace the history of the *International Roundtables for the Semiotics of Law* (IRSL), reminding the prime movers and the spirit and

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objectives of this renowned association of semiotically-minded scholars of law, that next to its heavily attended annual meetings also publishes the widely respected *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*.

In their Introduction, the editors Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek initiate the reader to the cultural dimension of law and legal semiotics, drawing on legal theorists like Gény (1922) and Hart (1961), semioticians like Peirce (1931-1966) and Eco (1984, 1995), legal linguists like Mellinkoff (1963), Gémar (2023) and Mattila (2016), and philosophers like Wittgenstein (1958). They proceed to outline the relationship between legal semiotics and legal reasoning and the field of visual legal semiotics as a figurative sign system. Their conclusive statement “[t]he variety of legal semiotics” covered by the contributors to the volume “provides the reader with a broad understanding of how the law works through signs and symbols,” briefly summarizes the Handbook’s project and value.

Part I of the book, titled “Legal semiotics as an arena for legal thoughts,” comprises ten chapters and mainly addresses philosophical and rhetorical aspects of legal semiotics. In Chapter 9 (‘Classical rhetoric, legal argumentation and the semiotic of law’), Miklós Könczöl draws on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Bernard Jackson’s *Law, Fact, and Narrative Coherence* (1988) to look at the technical sources of legal persuasion from a semiotic standpoint. In highlighting “the connection between *ēthos* and *logos*, character and argument, in rational persuasion” (p. 156), Könczöl addresses such issues as judicial rhetoric, legal definition, equity, style, and character. He explains that Aristotle “seems to limit *lexis* to linguistic form and regards substantive elements supporting the expression of character as topics” (p. 155). Evoking the Aristotelian definition of *epieikia* (clemency), which includes toning down one’s own strongest arguments against the opponent, explicitly passing over specific facts, and “speaking in an easily accessible manner,” Könczöl explains that, in Aristotle’s thought, the rhetorical concept of style seems to have two different aspects, and hence a bi-directional use of signs, namely, meaning-making as *perception* and style as *construction*. He concludes that arguments can establish character, and the latter can provide the speaker with arguments. Apart from jurists, this chapter would be equally exciting and helpful to philosophy and classical philology researchers.

Part II, titled “Culture-bound legal semiotics, the backbone of the law,” comprises eleven chapters and addresses religious, visual, journalistic, cognitive-linguistic, forensic, human rights, commercial, cultural heritage, gender, childhood, and colonial aspects of legal semiotics. By titling her contribution, ‘Beware of (bad and dangerous) metaphors: Remarks made at the intersection of cognitive linguistics and law’ (Chapter 14), Angela Condello explicitly evokes Ebbesson’s suspicion about metaphors (2008). After clarifying the etymological and semantic basics of *metaphor*, she examines the semiotic aspects of metaphors used by government and health authorities during the

first phases of the pandemic, all of which involved a comparison between the virus and a war enemy. In her fascinating analysis, she cautions against metaphors that “seem to work well, and instead, they can be more confusing than a complex or long and detailed explanation,” without, however, negating that war, as a prototypical event, was indeed “useful to understand those situations where the features were similar to the paradigmatic or symbolic features typical of warlike times (for instance the frequent use of curfew)” (p. 212). Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Vaihinger (2021), Condello explains that “[t]he problem with metaphorical conceptualization, in other words, is that, to be used properly, it requires more discernment and capacity for judgment than ordinary conceptualization,” which she reasonably ascribes to the inherent tendency of metaphors to “absorb” some of the characteristics of the metaphorized concept, even though such traits “might be relevant from perspectives which hadn’t been taken into consideration” (p. 215). Discussing the intersection of cognitive linguistics and law, and mainly drawing on Goodrich (2017) and Ebbesson (2008), Condello explains that “[i]nasmuch as in ordinary language, in legal language figurality plays an essential function. In the legal realm, in fact, we find metaphors anywhere and everywhere,” like the widely entrenched terms *defence* and *defendant*, both borrowed from military terminology (216 - 217). Condello’s valuable conclusion is that, after all, metaphors are not inherently good or bad since the interpreter is responsible “to pick the right parallels and build on them, in the awareness that those parallels – [...] – all have consequences” (p. 219). Let me note that Chapter 26 of the volume, authored by Nathalie Hauksson-Tresch, also discusses, in a very insightful way, the semiotics of the pandemic, mainly from a visual standpoint.

Part III, titled “Visual legal semiotics as a figurative sign-system,” comprises eleven chapters and addresses visual and artistic aspects of legal semiotics, with emojis, comics, photography, scenography, and music being its primary foci. In ‘Law, music, and semiotics’ (Chapter 33), Robbie Sykes and Julia J.A. Shaw begin by aptly criticizing many jurists’ obsession with the linguistic aspect of law and their self-image “as guardians of these sacred artifacts which establish law’s authority and, being convinced of their completeness and rightness, tolerate no resistance or attempts at revision and advancement” (p. 460). Sykes and Shaw ingeniously put legal semiotics in the broader framework of interdisciplinary fields, including, e.g., law and literature and visual jurisprudence, all of which investigate “the primordial connection between the arts and humanities and law’s social context,” reminding that “aesthetic ideals are shown to perform a role of equivalent value and significance as that played by formal legal structures and institutions” (ibid.). Drawing on work by Shaw (2019), Watt (2020), and Manderson (2014), and even bringing in Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones, the authors discuss law and music “in concert,” in the light of the “ancient art of weaving.” Their problematic highlights the influence of music on law through the

societal shifts it both reflects and generates, as well as the theatrical aspect of the law, i.e., law as performance, which is intriguingly explored through Ramshaw's concept of "law as improvisation" and his enlistment of the saxophonist Ornette Coleman and the philosopher of deconstruction Jacques Derrida. The authors explain that music, as an ancient form of communication, was thought by philosophers such as Rousseau, von Humboldt, or Jespersen to predate and shape language in terms of syntax and prosody. This view faded after the 12th century with the rise of Roman law and Gutenberg's printing press. Among their main conclusions is that music "responds to any context; and perhaps most importantly, stimulates the senses of the *iuris civitatis* and creates a sense of participation, engagement, and agency which is too often lacking in the legal context alone" (p. 476).

All chapters in the volume are infused with an interdisciplinary perspective and offer valuable insights into law's cognitive, affective, social, cultural, and political dimensions. As such, they provide a new impetus to legal research, disentangling it from traditional, language-centered views and foregrounding law as a broader semiotic system where signs, texts, and interpretations interact with a view to regulate human action. The volume can be of interest not only to jurists but also to linguists, semioticians, philosophers, philologists, and others. However, notwithstanding the standpoint from which one tries to understand how legal meaning works, one thing is sure: law itself is elusive, and even legal meaning is negotiable (see McBarnet and Whelan 1991: 848, 872, 873). But this is an excellent reason to try more ways to decode and comprehend the multi-layered character of legal semiosis.

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AUTHOR

Panagiotis G. Krimpas Associate Professor, Democritus
University of Thrace, Greece



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