HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF SEMIOTICS

PERCURSO HISTÓRICO DA SEMIÓTICA

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Abstract: This work presents an exposition of the historical involvement of semiotics, covering different currents of thought – philosophical, literary, and linguistic – seeking to demonstrate the divergences and convergences between them, moving towards French semiotics, in which it outlines the Semiotics of Cultures' profile and its work looking for humanity and its relationships with the environment. It constitutes a moment of the dissertation that we elaborated to obtain the title of *Master of Arts* by the Federal University of Paraíba, in August 2023.

Keywords: Semiotics; Concept; History.

Resumo: Este trabalho apresenta uma exposição do envolvimento histórico da semiótica, abrangendo diferentes correntes de pensamento – filosófica, literária e linguística – buscando demonstrar as divergências e convergências entre elas, caminhando em direção à semiótica francesa, na qual delineia a Semiótica das Culturas 'perfil e seu trabalho buscando a humanidade e suas relações com o meio ambiente. Constitui um momento da dissertação que elaboramos para obtenção do título de Mestre em Artes pela Universidade Federal da Paraíba, em agosto de 2023.

Palavras-chave: Semiótica; Conceito; História.

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Introduction

Before we face the challenge of discussing and reflecting about the "Semiotics of Cultures", we must revisit the idea of "sign" and "semiotics", which encompasses several schools of thought — philosophical, literary, and linguistic — to highlight their divergences and convergences. Then, we will move towards the French semiotics, outlining the Semiotic of the Cultures' profile. We believe that understanding this development and mechanisms of this science will enable us to delineate a trajectory that originated in Greece, equipping us with the means necessary to understand human actions and their relations with the environment. This is a part of the dissertation we elaborated to obtain the title of *Master in Arts* by the Federal University of Paraíba, in August of 2023.

I.   Semiotics: concept and origin of study in Greek philosophy

The term "semiotics" has Greek roots, originating from the word *semêion* — which can be translated as sign, *sema*, signal — and currently designates the science that studies signification, aiming to establish a General Theory. It is crucial to define what Semiotics views the concepts of "sign" and "signification". In this context, semiotician Décio Pignatari (2004) offers a valuable contribution. In his words, signs are "each and every thing that substitutes or represents another, to some extent and for certain effects" (2004, p. 16). But the signification, understood as a semiotic function, is a "relation of dependence which is established between the plane of content and the plane of expression" (BATISTA, 1999, p. 20).

However, limitations of this science have not always been clear. This is partially due to terminology, but the existence of similar sciences with closely related objects of study contributes to the confusion.

It seems reasonable to infer that the idea of a complex universe of signs, even in its embryonic form, was already present in pre-Socratic times. Pythagoras of Samos (540-490), founder of the Pythagorean movement would say that everything that exists is

"*uno*". He proposes *arithmós* as the unifying principle. To the Pythagorean school, numbers are the soul of things, the essence of what exists, and therefore, represent harmony and order of the universe. To Pythagoras, the world to be discovered and unveiled is the world of the signs – mathematical signs, to be precise.

Thales of Miletus (624-546), Anaximander of Miletus (610-546), Heraclitus (540-470), and Parmenides (530-460), each in their way, rationalized the world from an originating principle (*arché*): water; *apéiron* or the infinite; *devir* or continuous change; and constancy or permanence. With different formulations, the pre-Socratics invoked the cosmos' signs nature, initiating the movement that transformed Western thought and decisively influenced thinkers who succeeded them.

Around the 4th century B.C., Plato (427-347) wrote *The Republic* and within the work he attributes to his teacher, the philosopher Socrates, the conception of what we now know as the "Allegory of the Cave". In this allegory, the platonic character postulates the separation between the essence and appearance of things. Once again, even if Plato (427-347) did not express it in that way, we can deduce, without the risk of anachronism, that for this thinker and his successors, the world is composed dialectically[4].

In *Cratylus* (2001), another text by Plato (427-347), the nature of the signs is once again investigated and, within in, both elements of signification and verbal elements are pointed out. Considered as the oldest treatise on language in Western culture, this dialogue introduces, for the first time in history of Western knowledge, a triadic model of sign. According to the author, it distinguishes three components: the name (*onona*), the notion or idea (*eidos* or *logos*); and the referent (*pragma*).

Aristotle (384-322) studied signs from the perspective of logic and rhetoric. He restricted the concept of a sign to verbal sense, employing inductive methods in processes of signification. In alignment with the Platonic model, Aristotle's sign also has a triadic nature. Unlike his predecessor, the Stagirite named these components as conventional (*symbolon*), affections of the soul (*phathémata*) and representations of things (*prágmata*).

Aristotelian logic represented the pinnacle of development in this field until the 19th century. Nevertheless, the ancient philosopher never considered this area of knowledge to be a science, but a tool for measuring the relationship of implication

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[4] Plato's theory of ideas posits that the cosmos is made from an essence and appearance, and it is only through ideas that humans can come to know the essence of things.

between premises and conclusions, more than that, an instrument (*órganon*) which allowed us to evaluate if there is a coherent conclusion derived from the premises — correct reasoning.[5]

Even though these first investigations are important, the merit of the most elaborate conception of a signification theory belongs to the Stoics (300 BC – 200 AC). This school takes back from Plato's the sign's triadic character. They have named, however, these components as *semaínon*, the perceptible part of the sign, *semainómenon* or *lékton*, its meaning, and *tygchánon*, the referred object.

There were others, less prominent, who dedicated themselves to the task of studying signs. The Epicureans (300 B.C.) envisioned a dyadic model, composed solely of a significant part, the *semaínon*, and the referred object, the *tygchánon*.

An interesting development in this journey is the advancement, starting from the 2nd century, of Medical Semiotics. A research field that studies clinical signs and symptoms and seeks to provide more accurate diagnoses and prognoses. Its first exponent was Galeano Pergamon (139-199).

II.   Theocentrism in Semiotics

Considered the founder of Semiotics, it was Aurelius Augustine of Hippus (354-450), known as Saint Augustine, in the 4th century of Christian era, who deepened the studies of signs. This author defined — in works such as *De Magistro* (389), *De Doctrina Christina* (397) and *Principia* (384) — the sign as "something that, in addition to the impression it produces on the senses, causes something else to come to mind as a consequence of itself" (Christian Doctrine). The Christian philosopher and theologian also described the existence of natural signs (non-verbal) — those that involuntarily signify something, such as smoke and fire — and conventional signs (verbal) — those that are products of human creation.

This conception of sign is the result of a specific context that must be taken into consideration: medieval theocentrism. The doctrine asserted that God was the center of

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[5] Organon (from the Greek, ὄργανον) is the traditional name given to the collection of Aristotle's works on logic. It means "instrument" or "tool." Aristotle himself did not designate these books as a set, nor did he give them a single title that encompassed them. This was the work of the Peripatetics, Aristotle's followers. For them, logic was an instrument of philosophy.
The Organon opens the *Corpus aristotelicum* and consists of the following books: Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, and Sophistical Refutations.

everything[6] and guided all domains of human knowledge. All existence — whether natural or social — was seen as a material representation of spiritual reality. Therefore, the sign represented a metonymic nature. According to Greimas, it is "the material, visible part of broader, invisible spiritual reality" (1978, p. 215).

The strength of these ideas originates beliefs that persist in modern times. Still today, children from various social classes are taught not to vocalize "bad illnesses," or to not evoke "demons" by uttering their names, or not to verbalize negative phrases, because all these actions attract undesirable evil.

Scholasticism[7], departing from Platonic and Patristic thought, sought to rationalize the mysteries of faith. So, they appropriated Aristotelian writings and became the first responsible for the translation and interpretation of that philosopher's work. According to this school, knowledge can be found in three disciplines: moral philosophy, natural philosophy, and science of the signs or rational science.

It was the thinkers of Scholasticism who were responsible for the development and distinction of highly important concepts to the research field of Semiotics, such as connotation and denotation; signs, symbols and images. Thomas Aquinas (1589-1644) made significant contributions to this reflection,

> "[…] and because the intellect knows through significant concepts, which are expressed by meaningful sounds, and in general, all the tools we use to understand and speak are signs; therefore, for the logician to accurately understand their tools, it is necessary for them to also understand what a sign is… So, for the subject to be treated more clearly and fruitfully, I thought it best to separately create a treatise on this… Therefore, it seemed better to me now, instead of the doctrine found in the end books 'De Interpretatione', to present those things meant to explain the nature and division of signs." (Aristotle, 2001, p.52).

Roger Bacon (1215-1294) and Jean Poinsot (1589-1644) were other prominent scholars on this subject. While Roger Bacon, in his work *De Signis*, tried to classify the existing signs, Poinsot, in his *Tractatus de Signus* (1632), approached the theme from logic, creating the tools to think and talk about them.

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[6] In the centuries that followed, significant challenges were posed to the foundation of Christian religious truth. According to Freud (2013), humanity suffered three mortal wounds to its inherent narcissism. First, it discovered its position on the periphery of the solar system – the cosmological or heliocentric wound. Then, it no longer recognized itself as the image and likeness of God – the Darwinian wound. Finally, the last and more severe blow, humans ceased to the masters of their own house – the wound of a psychological or Freudian nature.

[7] Scholastic philosophy is a Western method of critical thinking that originated in Catholic monastic schools during the Middle Ages. It aimed to reconcile Christian faith with a system of rational thought, particularly that of Greek philosophy.

III.   Semiotics in Renaissance

From the 14th century, the Renaissance[8] brought significant changes in Western thought. Faith and its divine revelations — God, that is — ceased to be humanity's guiding principle. Theocentrism was replaced by trust in reason and, therefore, in humanity itself, marking the ascension of anthropocentrism. Natural phenomena ceased to be interpreted as mysteries of the trinity, backing away from metaphysics, and instead became issues of nature that needed to be addressed through rationality. This transformation extended from the outskirts of thought to the more complex social relations. In this context, the sign is apprehended as a representation of the natural world, "[…] it ceases to be a part of the object to become its representative. It is a return to the conception of Classical Antiquity, where the sign is always a sign of something" (BATISTA, 2003, p.61).

In the 17th century, Semiotics flourished from three distinct philosophical perspectives: French Rationalism, English Empiricism and German Enlightenment.

René Descartes, one of the founders of the first perspective, conceptualized signs without a referential character. According to him, the sign, as well as reason, exists independently of experience or the world. Therefore, words and names would be arbitrary, having no direct relation with what they represent. They exist solely to express human thoughts.

John Locke (1632-1704), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1639), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776) developed their semiotics based on the English Empiricism model. These thinkers' contributions extended across many fields of knowledge: law, sociology, practical philosophy, and philosophy of nature.

To Locke — maybe the most celebrated of the empiricists — the understanding is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate without any inscription, onto which are deposited ideas derived from experience. Based on this, he classified signs in two categories: ideas and words. The ideas being perceptions of sense that react to objects, sensations later

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[8] Cultural, economic, and political movement birthed in Italy that spread all over Europe. The thinkers of this movement were inspired in classic reasoning to formulate its thought about the world. Renaissance jumpstarts modernity.

transformed into reflection. To him, an idea is a sign of the object, while the word is a sign of the idea.

In the Enlightenment era, Etienne de Condillac (1715-1780) classified signs into three types: causal or accidental, natural, and conventional. His studies ranged from the relationship of signs with the human genetic base to the cognitive processes involved, like reflection.

In the following centuries, Diderot (1713-1784), Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Heinrich Lambert (1728-1777) and Hegel (1770-1831) worked to delineate the theoretical boundaries of semiotics.

In 1749, French philosopher Denis Diderot published his first book about the science of signification, *Lettres sur les aveugles*. Two years later, in 1751, he continued his studies by publishing *Lettres sur les sourds et muets*. In these works, he did extensive research about the relationship between signs and genetics and differentiated verbal communication from non-verbal communication.

Some say that the eminent German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1830), one of the most important thinkers in philosophy history, addressed and shed light on almost every important subject in the theory of knowledge. In Semiotics, he described the difference between a sign and a symbol. To him, a sign represents something, while a symbol is the manifestation of that same object.

Other highly celebrated work was written in the 19th century by linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). In his book *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die* geistige Entwickelung des Menschengeschlechts, translated into Spanish as *Sobre la diversidad de la estructura del lenguaje humano y su influencia sobre el desarrollo espiritual de la humanidad* (1990), Humboldt defines sign based on the relationship between substance and form and between system the system and usage of language. According to him,

> Llamamos palabra al signo que corresponde a un concepto. La sílaba forma una unidad sonora; solo se convierte en palabra cuando obtiene una significatividad propia, lo que con frecuencia requiere la unión de varias sílabas. Por eso la palabra muestra una doble unidad, la del sonido y la del concepto. Es así como las palabras se convierten en los verdaderos elementos del habla, ya que las sílabas carentes de significación propia no pueden considerarse realmente como tales. Si imaginamos la lengua como un segundo mundo, objetivado por el individuo desde sí mismo a partir de las impresiones que recibe del mundo verdadero, las palabras serán los objetos individuales de ese mundo, y por ello les conviene La condición de individuos, que debe preservar se también en su forma (...) En la realidad no es el habla la que se

> compone de palabras que le preceden, sino que son, a la inversa, las palabras las que nacen del conjunto del discurso (1990, p. 98).

The theoretical development of signification sciences in the 19th century laid groundwork for the specialization of this field and, at the same time, as is characteristic of modernity, for its fragmentation.

In the United States, philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) developed a logic-empiricist based Semiotics. In France, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the founder of scientific linguistics and heir to rationalism, pursued his investigation based on language structures. In Russia, philologists Potiebniá (1835-1891) and Viesselovski (1838-1906) developed a culturalist perspective in Semiotics. These currents of thought — logic-empiricist, linguist and culturalist — to a certain extent, influenced many contemporary trends in the study of signs.

IV.   The Logic-Empiricist Current of Thought

Initiated in the era of industrial revolutions, the "society of images" took on its definitive contours in the 20th century. Ever since, a transformation has occurred at all levels of human existence. Individuals and their communities start being bombarded with images. More than that, there is a new strategy of control and discipline, affecting both bodies and societies, operated through signs. Humanity is now permeated by nazi propaganda, consumer brands, fake news that guide, dominate, limit, or amplify — according to the underlying interests — their capacity to perceive the world.

Faced with this new reality, philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was driven to develop his general theory of signs in the United States. "Peircean Semiotics is, above all, a sign theory of knowledge that, in a logical diagram, outlines the blueprint for rethinking the eternal and age-old questions about reality and truth." (SANTAELLA, 1994, p. 119). He starts from the premise that everything is a sign, including humans – in a permanent state of construction —, their actions, ideas, and objects.

> The third principle, whose consequences we must deduce, is that whenever we think, we have something present in consciousness, some feeling, image, conception, or other representation that serves as a sign. But it follows from our very existence (which is proven by the occurrence of ignorance and error) that everything that is present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. This does not prevent there from being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is simultaneously a manifestation of both the sun and the

rain. Therefore, when we think, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, emerge as a sign. (PEIRCE, 2005, p. 269).

His inclination for math studies led him to seek a regulating principle of logic or a tool for defining concepts. According to Peirce himself, he was never able to:

[...] "to study anything — mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economy, history of science, card games, men and women, wine, meteorology — except as a semiotics study." (1977b, p. 64).

From a pragmatic perspective, the American philosopher of language reflects on the relationship of signs with the social world. Amongst his many fundamental contributions, he is responsible for defining the categories of the sign, semiosis, and the pan semiotic cosmovision. According to him,

A sign is anything related to a second thing, its Object, with respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a third thing, its interpretant, into relation with the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a fourth into a relation with that Object in the same way, ad infinitum. If the series is broken, the Sign, at that point, loses its perfect signifying character (PEIRCE apud SANTAELLA, 1995, p. 29).

Following the platonic model, Peirce conceived the sign as having a triadic structure, composed of a referent – the *object*, the effect of the sign on the interpreter's mind – the *interpretant*, and the element perceivable by the receiver – the *representâmen*. Here's an illustration:

According to him, this interpretative process is dynamic. The mind of the receiver generates a *representative* for each sign, which functions as the *representamen* of a new sign. "It is part of the very logical form of generation of signs that it be the form of an unbroken process without finite limits" (SANTAELLA, 1994, p.31). In Peirce's own words (1975, p.94):

"A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates

> in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. To the sign thus created, I give the name of the interpretant of the first sign."

According to Batista (2003, p.62), after Peirce, semiotics evolves from being the study of the sign to becoming a field of investigation of semiosis, "defined as the process during which the sign acts over the interpretant, that is, the process of interpreting the sign by the interpretant and without which the former would not exist".

Another valuable information — the understanding of the sign's unfinished nature — allowed Peircean logic to classify signs into three categories: regarding their own material nature (*quali-sign*, *sin-sign, and legi-sign*); regarding the object (icon, index, and symbol); regarding their relation to the interpretant (rheme, dicent, argument).

The first type groups signs based on their qualities in themselves. It is the Firstness of the sign. "A sign has the nature of an appearance and I call it a *quali-sign*, or it is an individual object or event and I call it a *sin-sign*… or as a third hypothesis, the sign has the nature of a general type and I call it a *legi-sign*" (PEIRCE apud BACHA, 1997, p.58).

In the Secondness, the relationship of the sign to the object is emphasized, and it can be of three types: icon, index, and symbol. The icon is a *quali-sign* that has with its object a quality of mere resemblance. This class of signs "is a *representamen* whose representative quality is its firstness. That is, the quality it has with 'the thing' makes it fit to be a *representamen*. Thus, anything can be a substitute for anything it resembles" (PEIRCE, 2005, p.64). According to the author, the only way to convey an idea is through the icon.

The index is a *sin-sign* that is characterized by a certain independence of the sign while not losing its existential connection to it. Peirce describes it as "a *Representamen* whose Representative character consists in being an individual second" (2005, p.66).

On the other hand, the symbol is a *legi-sign*, "a *representamen* whose representative character consists in being a rule that will determine its Interpretant. All words, phrases, books, and other conventional signs are Symbols" (PEIRCE, 2005, p. 71).

Finally, the Thirdness combines signs based on the relationship they stablish with the interpretant. This trichotomy arranges signs in *Rheme, Dicent and Argument*. Let us see the definition, according to Peirce (2005, p.53):

> An *Argument* is a Sign that, for its Interpretant, is the Sign of the law. We can say that a Rheme is a Sign that is understood as representing its object only in its characteristics; that a Dicent sign is a sign that is understood as representing

its object with respect to real existence; and that an Argument is a Sign that is understood as representing its Object in its character as a sign.

V.   Linguistic semiotics

In France, Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) developed the foundations of what would become an autonomous science with the object of study being the sign: scientific language. Saussure advanced in the investigation of language, understood as a system composed of concrete linguistic signs of essentially psychological nature,

> Language, not less than speech, is an object of concrete nature, which offers great advantage to its study. Linguistic signs, even when essentially psychic, are not abstractions; the associations, ratified by collective consent, which together constitute the language, are realities that located in the brain. (SAUSSURE, 2006, p. 23)

Saussure conceives the sign as a two-faced arrangement (dyadic) with the signified, which corresponds to the concept; and the signifier to the acoustic image. In the interactions between these two interdependent and inseparable poles, the phenomenon of signification takes place. He named semiology as the study of the signs "within social life", (p.24), which:

> "[..] would constitute a part of social psychology and, consequently, of general psychology [...] it will teach us in what signs consist of and what laws govern them […] Linguistics is only a part of this general science; the laws that semiotics discovers will be applicable to linguistics, and thus it will be linked to a well-defined domain in the realm of human facts".

Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965), inspired by scientific linguists, delved deeper into Saussure's understanding of the sign. He updated the Saussurian notion of signification, which, within his theoretical framework, was referred to as "content", and the signifier, understood as "expression". He divided them into substance and form. Substance would be formed by smaller particles called "figures", which, when combined, would make up the "forms". Language was no longer the study of signs but the study of figures that compose the signs. The author considered the existence of substances of content and expression.

> In this context, substances are the semes (minimal units of meaning), and expression consists of sememes (a grouping of semes). The expression forms

the sound chain and has sound figures (sounds) as its substance and phonemes as its form, which is an organized set of sounds. (ALMEIDA, 2018, p. 17).

Signification, as should be clear, is a central category of semiotic theory and must be understood as a relationship of dependence between the content and expression. Besides, according to Batista (1999, p.26-27)

[...] it is constituted and manifested throughout the discourse, only being complete in the syntagmatic course of the entire discourse. Only the entirety of the discourse (text) will account for the semiotic function. It also has a pragmatic function since it carries an ideological load by accounting for the sign-user relationship, meaning what the sign signifies for the user, which ideology it supports. All verbal or non-verbal signs carry an ideological load, and it is the enunciating subject who actualizes them and selects them based on the value they represent for themselves.

In Greimas, semiotics is a generative theory, meaning that signification is understood as a generative path of meaning, consisting of three levels or structures: the fundamental, narrative, discursive. Each level has its own syntax and semantics, as taught by Batista (2001, p.10).

At the fundamental level, syntax appears in situations of conflict, in other words, in dialectical tension, from which relationships of contrariety, contradictoriness, and implication are subtracted. In the semantics of this level, there is tensive categorization which takes on semantic values of a positive (euphoric) and negative (dysphoric) nature.

At the narrative level, syntax reveals actantial and predicative relationships: the semiotic subject seeks its value, aided by a helper, hindered by an opponent, and directed by a sender. Semantics encompasses the mode of subject establishment or semiotic modulation: the subject is established through a desire to be, a desire to do, a duty to be, or a duty to do, and so on.

At the syntax level, intersubjective and spatiotemporal relationships of enunciation and statement are identified. In the semantics of the discursive structure, thematic and figurative pathways within a text a text are observed. (2018, p.19)

Semiotics is a metatheory, a general science that originates others — socio-semiotics, psycho-semiotics, ethno-semiotics — and methodologically supports research in several fields of knowledge, from medicine to anthropology, to marketing and philosophy. Semiotics' dialogues with other areas of inquiry have produced relevant literature about social phenomena, disruptions of power and identity transformations, as we will see. But before that, let us contextualize the third semiotic current of thought.

VI.   Literary semiotics

While Peircean semiotics is philosophical and developed within a logic-empiricist tradition, French type semiotics, as developed by Greimas, País, and Rastier, primarily concerns the linguistic sphere. On the other hand, Russian semiotics is literary. It emerged in the 19th century, enriched by an awareness of signification studies and a global perception on culture. According to Boris Solomonovitch Schnaiderman, a Russian-born Brazilian intellectual, translator, and essayist,

> Most of those who write in the West about Soviet Semiotics considers Russian Formalism as their starting point, and the contemporary semioticists are seen as its direct successors. The most common notion is as follows: the Russians had their forerunners in the structural view of the Human Sciences, like the great philosophers A.N. Veselovsky (1838-1906) and A.A. Potebnia (1838-1891), who were also precursors to Russian Formalism. Then comes Russian Formalism itself (1914-1930), which was abruptly cut short by a Stalinist act of force. From the 1960s onward, the school of its successors, the current Soviet semioticians, finally developed (1979, p. 9-10).

Professor Irene Machado, a specialist in artistic-scientific theories, has dedicated decades to research and disseminate Russian Semiotics thinkers. In her words (2003, p.24), "the Tartu-Moscow School[9], this hermetic group, was interested — differently than sister doctrines — in the 'intricate relationship between nature and culture and its implications in the process of semiosis in various communication spheres'". They understood language as a semiotic problem. Probably influenced by the material conditions of Russian life, these Soviet theorists intended to do more with their work than escape from the world around them; they wanted to transform that reality."

Their research was based on a postulate: "the link that connects different domains of life on the planet is language" (MACHADO, 2003, p. 24). Using a category of Russian Semiotics itself, more precisely from Yuri Lotman (1922-1993)[10], humans move through and inhabit a sphere of meanings, a space where existence is crossed and permeated by signs, by all sign systems, from language to cultures: the semiosphere. This macrosystem

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[9] The Tartu-Moscow Semiotics School (TMSS) is a philosophical current within the field of Semiotics, consisting of scholars such as Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspensky, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Toporov, Alexander Piatigorsky, Isaak I. Revzin, Mikhail Gasparov, Yuri Levin, and others. This group of scholars came together in the 1960s at the University of Tartu, Estonia, with the initial goal of creating a space for academic discussion and production focused on understanding the role of language in Cultural Studies from a semiotic perspective.

[10] Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman was an eminent scholar, semioticist, and cultural historian. He was the founder of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School.

supports, combines, and unites a complex range of other systems. These, in turn, order and disorder themselves, exchange their signs, imply, reshape, and generate meaning. From this idea stems the definition of "secondary modeling systems," another expression for the term culture:

> Under the term "secondary modeling systems," those semiotic systems are considered how models of the world, or its fragments are constructed. These systems are secondary in relation to the primary natural language, on which they are built directly (the supra-linguistic system of literature) or as parallel forms (such as music and painting). (MACHADO, 2003, p. 125).

That said, the Russian school of Semiotic of Cultures is the conceptual camp that made as an assignment the investigation of language in culture. The need to understand this phenomenon, that is, the various phenomena coming from countless systems, in this sphere of sense denominated semisphere, gave origin to a applied general theory of signs and signification. To Irene Machado (2003, p.25)

> If language occurs on scales beyond the process of social interaction, encompassing the biological, the cosmic, the semiotic, it is impossible to confine culture to the social realm. Understanding the interaction between nature and culture is indeed the central challenge for the semiotic approach to culture with Russian origins.

The importance and influence of Russian thinkers on the study of culture cannot be underestimated in the research being undertaken here. However, our primary focus will be on the French semiotics — without excluding the theoretical contributions of other models. In recent years, names such as Algirdas Julien Greimas and François Rastier have developed and published essential works in Semiotic of Cultures.

VII. Semiotics of Humanity and its Will on the World

"*Sertão*: it is within us"[11]. This description — not of a territory, but of being itself — articulated by a *jagunço*, a *sertanejo*[12], is a literary expression of the idea of belonging and identity. From this aphorism, we can also abstract a concept of "culture" as a realm

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[11] Free translation of the original quote: "Sertão: é dentro da gente". Aphorism found in Grande Sertão: Veredas, by Guimarães Rosa.

[12] *Sertão* usually describes a semi-arid region in the interior regions of Brazil and is characterized by dry climate and sparse vegetation. *Jagunços* were armed mercenaries who were often employed by landowners in the *sertão* to protect their property and interests. *Sertanejos* are born or live in the *sertão and* are known for their sense of community and resilience. (Translator's note)

of meanings that envelops the individual, giving signification to their existence. In the words of Professor Irene Machado (2015, p.240):

> The semiotic conception that defines culture as a generator of structurality comes from a fundamental attribute: its capacity to transform all surrounding information into diversified yet organized sets of sign systems capable of constituting languages as distinct as the expressive needs of different cultural systems.

Therefore, culture is an agglomerate of signs — social constructs —, preceding man but posterior to mankind. From the teachings of François Rastier, we can redefine identity as being a sign system located in the identity zone of the obvious world. This system keeps a homeostasis relationship with other sign systems. The described dynamics operates in a constant cultural transformation within the social context and an identity transformation within the individual. However, this process is influenced by "power" strategies, as Zygmunt Bauman teaches us (2005, p. 21-22):

> [...] "identity" is only revealed to us as something to be invented, as the target of an effort, "an objective"; as something that still needs to be built from scratch or chosen from alternatives and then fought for and protected, even if, for this fight is victorious, the truth about the precarious condition and eternally inconclusive nature of identity must be, tends to be, suppressed and laboriously hidden.

In an apparent contradiction, these hidden signs are everywhere, not always realized, but at least as a potential. The methodological models of natural sciences, and even almost all human sciences, do not account for this object: "When we study humans, we seek and find signs everywhere and strive to interpret their meaning" (BAKHTIN, 2003, p. 310).

Rastier faced this problem. In his work *Action and Meaning towards a Semiotics of Cultures* (2010, p.10), he argues that "[…] cultural sciences are the only ones capable of accounting the semiotic character of the human universe".

Another analytical difficulty comes from this object's nature. According to British-Jamaican cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall (1997, p.16), "every social action is cultural, […] all social practices express or communicate meaning that, in this sense, are practices of signification". Since culture encompasses everything produced, material or immaterial, by humans to satisfy their needs, what is the appropriate methodology for this investigation?

Cultural sciences, unable to adopt the model of non-reproductible parameters, apply a comparative methodology to their subject, namely, human, and social facts

elevated to the category of observables. In the words of Rastier (2015, p.16), "[…] understanding internal otherness commands the understanding of external otherness, which is why a culture can only be characterized and find its own meaning within the *corpus* of other cultures". In other words (2010, p.15):

> A culture cannot be comprehended solely from a cosmopolitan or intellectual point of view. For each one, it is a collective of other contemporary and past cultures that plays the role of the *corpus*. Indeed, a culture is not a totality, as it forms and disappears through exchanges and conflicts with others.

Besides, culture is never pure "because it is the product of its history" (RASTIER, 2010, p. 15). It is only possible to study it through interpretative constructions, making culture a product of this knowledge. We can define Semiotic of cultures as a comparative, historical and interpretative science that maintains a multidisciplinary relationship with Philosophy, Sociology, and Anthropology. It shares with them the purpose of conducting an inventory of the characteristics of the historical process of culture, proposing a typology based on this. This network of meanings — value systems or ideology — produces discourses within literary works that, under the lens of semiotic analysis, can be stripped bare, revealing anything from the macro to the microstructures of power in operation.

Irene Machado (2015, p. 239) teaches us that:

> Considering that the elementary mechanism of semiosis is the transformation of perceived information into codified information, generating meaning, the semiotics of culture reframes its object of study. It is not exactly "culture" that is the subject of semiotic study, but rather the systems of signs formed by the internal dynamics of structural relationship.

This system of signs is interwoven with macro-texts taken by Semiotic of cultures as a subject of investigation. This grants the humanities theorist — or scientist of meaning — the license to analyze social phenomena, such as identity, from a semiotic perspective. About this relationship between culture and text, or rather, the transformation of culture into text, there is a relevant passage in the work of Machado (2015, p. 239) that deserves attention:

> By choosing the text as the privileged object of the semiotic approach to culture, semioticians accepted the challenge of investigating language in action, or as Roman Jakobson would say, "language in all its complexity" (Jakobson, 1971: 16-7) — and in its semiosis. To semiotician Yuri Lotman,

> this challenge translates into the need of understanding complexity of cultural languages constructed by different systems of signs with specially formulated cultural codes.

Taking advantage of this semiotic relation between discourses and creation of objects — signs, in last instance —, relevant to material existence (lodging and tools to its cultivation, for example) and transcendental (myths and invention of religion) of "being", Stuart Hall (200, p.111-112) builds his definition of category of identity. According to him,

> "[…] the meeting point, the point of stitching between discourses and practices that attempt to "interpellate" us, speak to us, or call upon us to assume our positions as social subjects of discourses, and, on the other hand, the processes that produce subjectivities that construct us as subjects to whom one can 'speak'."

In the book *Cultural identity in post-modernity* (2011), Hall distinguishes three concepts of identity: the identity of the liberal subject from the Enlightenment, the identity of the sociological subject, and the identity of the postmodern subject. The classification is significant because it reveals the dynamics of the relationship — a relationship of subjection, of determination in some cases — between the cultural signs prevalent in a given society and the identity of the historic "being".

The identity of a liberal subject of Enlightenment is grounded in a solid, unified *persona* with defined values, centered, "endowed with the capabilities of reason, consciousness, and action" (HALL, 2011, p.11) and the author continues:

> "[...] this was a very 'individualist' conception of the subject and their identity (actually, *his* identity: the Enlightenment subject was usually described as a male)"

The sociological subject, on the other hand, exists in the interaction between "self" and society, despite of still possessing a stable identity core, the "real self." The conception of this subject occurs in the "continuous dialogue with 'external' cultural worlds and the identities that these worlds offer" (HALL, 2011, p.11-12). It is a complex subject, tied to modern structures but flirting with the rupture or at least the redefinition of these limits. In another words:

> Identity, in this sociological perspective, fills the space between the "interior" and the "exterior" – between the personal world and the public world. The fact

> that we project "ourselves" into these cultural identities while internalizing their meanings and values, making them "part of us," contributes to aligning our subjective feelings with the objective positions we occupy in the social and cultural world. Identity sews (or, to use a medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject to the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both more unified and predictable in a reciprocal manner. (HALL, 2011, p. 12).

Both François Rastier and Zygmunt Bauman, from distinct theoretical perspectives and legitimate concerns, formulated calculations about the relationship between anthropic[13] zones and identities, or, in another words, about the correspondence between the domains of proximity and of the social being. "The association of a living being with its environment is the universal condition of biological evolution. The connection between the global and the local is thus thought of in terms of belonging to the world of life" (RASTIER, 2010, p.18).

Using, in an illustrative way, a passage of political history of Poland, his home country, Bauman (2005, p.23-24) (2005, p. 23-24) supports what he taught us a few lines before, Rastier,

> As would be predictable in a modern state, census takers were nonetheless trained to expect that for every human being, there was a nation to which he or she belonged. They were instructed to collect information about the national self-identification of all individuals in the Polish state (today one would say: "their ethnic or national identity"). In about a million cases, the census takers failed: the interviewees simply did not understand what a "nation" was or what "having a nationality" meant. Despite the pressures – threats of fines combined with truly exceptional efforts to explain the meaning of "nationality" – they stubbornly stuck to the only answers that made sense to them: "we are from here", "we are from this place", "we belong to this place." In the end, the census administrators had to give in and add "people of the place" to the list of nationalities.

A few years later, some specialists in France conducted a similar study with similar conclusions: for many peasants, the feeling of belonging, their homeland, their country *extended to no more than a 12-mile diameter*. For most of human history, social relationships have been concentrated in the domains of proximity. This only started to

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[13] The relationship between the surrounding regions and humans is an indispensable condition for life and biological evolution. At the semiotic level, according to Rastier, this proximity exhibits four ruptures: personal rupture, local rupture, temporal rupture, and modal rupture. The grammatical homologies between these ruptures are classified into three zones: the identity zone, the proximal zone, and the distal zone.

change very recently. Big techs, social media, and communication technologies have, since the 20th century, brought about a true revolution in the old model of coexistence, in the conception we have, or rather, had, of community — in relationships, intimacy, and familiarity. Bauman (2005, p.24) makes an interesting insight about this:

> Keep in mind that in the 18th century, a journey from, for example, Paris to Marseille took as much time as it did during the Roman Empire. For most people, "society," understood as the largest totality of human cohabitation (if they even thought of it like this), was equivalent to the adjacent neighborhood. "One could speak of a society of mutual knowledge," as Robert suggests. Within this web of familiarity from cradle to grave, each person's place was too obvious to be assessed, let alone negotiated.

We reiterate, this is precisely what is changing. The renovation and spread of the multiple forms of coexistence experienced today could not have been imagined a hundred years ago. All that was considered solid and enduring has thawed. Shattered and swaying, humans are the side effect of this process, but that also was unexpected. The economy of power has taken its colonization of the public sphere by the private sphere to its ultimate consequences. The postmodern subject, the last of Hall's (2011, p.13) classification is a fractal, a fragment of several identities, many of them contradictory. The roots that anchored it — its faith, its beliefs — have been lost; ancestors have been forgotten, and all the ballasts that supported it have melted away, including those under its feet — its homeland, its nationality. Identity has become a "volatile agreement," easily made and easily broken. In fact, nothing that breaks — neither things nor identities — is restorable, nothing is recyclable; we have entered the era of the replaceable, the dispensable. This subject assumes different identities at different moments, identities that are not unified around a coherent 'self'.

Given this cataloging of identities over time — but also in space, considering that the signs of identity in Europe differ from the rest of the world, and even within Europe, there are national, state, and territorial variations — we can conclude that humans are more than the product of their era; they are the measure of it.

Bauman (2001, p.10) views postmodernity as a transitional period. The degeneration of the early sacred — "traditional loyalties, customary rights, and obligations that bound hands and feet" — would, for him, be nothing more than a rearrangement of the world, a reordering of signs. With that being true, there an underlying danger: the resurgence of fundamentalism and totalitarianism. Rastier (2015, p. 18) warns that:

> Vindication for diversity may lead to the nationalist or ethic confrontation if it conceals specificities in an identity: it is enough to consider that the ethnicity, language and cultural specificity and the same territory, define the scope of identity to justify a program of ethnic purification.

In a period of transition — where the constraints are loose, the signs of truth, or rather post-truth, are manipulated and redefined by different groups, and all compasses have been dislodged or discredited, the risk of ending up in an authoritarian or totalitarian state is imminent. The dark side of the force is always lurking[14]. The invention — the myth, if you prefer — of the pure race, which provided a false scientific basis for the Nazi endeavor, for example, arose from this incorrigible human need to "spend their whole lives searching for a father" (BLIKSTEIN, 2020, p.159).

But what is authoritarianism? According to Brazilian philosopher José Chasin (1937-1998), the notion of authoritarianism is mainly sustained by two mental operations:

> The first operation isolates and autonomizes the political realm from the interweaving of all other circuits that blend into the concrete societal existence, particularly and radically from the foundational mesh of the production and reproduction of life. It is not an original or innovative procedure, yet it remains effective and essential. Due to its homogenizing effect, it is an indispensable moment in making the forms of political domination non-specific, (…). The fact that this prevents the actual intellectual appropriation of each specific case poses no difficulty for this type of theoretical stance since it does not claim that the configured abstractions correspond to any reality as such but only that they are subjective tools of cognitive approximation. For this theoretical stance, this exhausts all possible knowledge. The second operation establishes a classification framework based on the paradigm of democracy. By negative definition, at the symmetrical pole to democracy, totalitarianism appears as a fully developed expression of its absolute negation, and authoritarianism as an intermediate figure, without achieving the complete cancellation of freedoms seen in the totalitarian format (2000, p. 254).

This definition seemed insufficient and incomplete to us. We understand, based on the work of French theorist Michel Foucault, that this phenomenon also operates in the microphysics of relationships, in the capillarities of the social fabric, trespassing, controlling, and subjecting the bodies through disciplinary power and communities through biopolitics. Therefore, authoritarianism, just like power, is not a substance that can be possessed or even lost — it is not a privilege of kings, or an elixir positioned at the

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[14] Reference to science fiction movies and its universe's guardians of the Republic. In them, the Republic succumbs to the Empire and totalitarianism.

highest point of the social pyramid, taken by dictators or through democratic elections. Instead, it is a practice — a strategy of domination — hence culture and identity.

François Rastier, in an interview published on July 19, 2018, when talking about lurking antisemitism, alerted: the threat is present. Nowadays, we could reconstruct this sentence as follows: the threat has always been among us, ashamed, quiet, hidden; in recent years, however, this unnamable vice, this poverty of spirit, the hatred, these fascist principles, have turned into a virtue in thesick, deluded collective imagination. Signs and their meanings have suffered from improper reductions or expansions, but they serve the purpose of power and authoritarianism. Learning the dynamics that made this possible, that make it possible, to fight it, to prevent it, depends on a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, meaning, this exercise of power: the sign is also a practice, a concrete instrument under the tyrant's control.

Neosaussurean and neocassirerian semiotic theory, developed by Rastier (2010, p. 16), abandoned the abbeys erected by heirs of Platonism, distanced itself from the ancient temples of ontology and theology, renounced the myth of essence, truth, soul, reason, lights, of static signs that inhabit the world of ideas; conceived, in their place,

> [...] a program of a semiotic anthropology, disconnected from any theological postulate, grounded not on the postulates of a universal faculty of Reason, nor, as in the past, on the dan, but on the diversity of languages and the multiplicity of sign systems.

The itinerary for this purpose goes in the opposite direction to what was taken decades earlier by social scientists. "Once we went from philosophical anthropology to comparative linguistics (cf. Friedrich Schlegel), today we can take the opposite direction, but to move forward towards a comparative historical anthropology" (Rastier, 2010, p.16). Culture and its objects, from this new perspective, are recognized as social phenomena that can be apprehended, studied, analyzed, and dissected through the methods of the social sciences. In the words of Rastier,

> Culture can then become a domain of federative objectivity within the social sciences. Semiotics anthropology, of which linguistic anthropology is a part, thus departs from the realm of philosophy and enters the realm of social sciences. Its objective is to pursue the movement of historical and comparative linguistics, extending it to other sign systems, such as comparative musicology (2010, p. 18).

Conclusion

Here, we aimed to trace the historical path of the science we now call Semiotics. Thus, we sought the traces of this metatheory in the annals of philosophy, from the Greeks, through the modern and contemporary development of logic-empiricist, linguistic and literary currents of thought, until reaching Semiotics of Cultures. If it is true, as Irene Machado (2015, p. 239) teaches us, "culture is not only a center that produces texts but also manifests itself as a text for the observer", there is no doubt about the urgent task of the Semiotics of Cultures.

1.   To decipher this intriguing and dangerous object of research before it devours us;

2.   To unveil the hidden signs of power, the marks, scars, and traces left by the control devices operating in Latin America. This pressing endeavor might lead us, perhaps, to the resolution of this fractured of a people.

This work extends itself, attempting to understand and unveil, in subsequent phases, from this new area of knowledge, the relationship between "power", "meaning", "culture", "identity", and "authoritarianism" in Latin America. Therefore, a research project that lays its foundations in what we have tried to present briefly in this scientific article: the history of the development of the General Theory of Signification – Semiotics.