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The Meaning of Collections between Media and Practices

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The Meaning of Collections between Media and Practices: An Introduction

BY: **Gabriele Marino** and **Bruno Surace**

ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roberta Cicchirillo's article focuses on the collection as a rhetorical device in the Italian language that manifests itself through lists. Starting from a semiotic bipartition between *everything-here lists* and *etcetera lists*, she moves in two directions: on the one hand, through the analysis of some grocery lists Cicchirillo lays the groundwork for a kind of semiotics of everyday life sub *specie collectionis*; on the other hand, the investigation of how lists are used in Italian political communication highlights the strategic-rhetorical value of this specific linguistic figure in terms of effectiveness in public persuasion processes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The set of contributions summarized here ultimately constitutes a semiotically oriented cartography of the notion of collection, explored as a theme cutting across a complex series of expressive fields. It is consistently understood as a semiotic-interpretative category that does not merely indicate a set of objects (material or symbolic) but highlights the dynamics of internal organization and peculiar forms of semantic configurations. In conclusion, we should emphasize a gratifying observation: this coherence is undoubtedly the result of extensive previous work on the collectivist horizon, bibliographically and methodologically shared by many contributions and a solid state-of-the-art to build further reflections. It is also a sign of a common sensitivity and a communion of visions regarding what has emerged as a still-relevant issue, especially considering its constant modification over time. In light of what has emerged, we hope this issue will be placed in the tradition of studies on the subject (a heterogeneous tradition, given the disparate variations on the theme that the collection and its almost synonyms inevitably entail) as a vital bibliographical resource. After all, even a bibliography is, in every respect, a collection.

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

BY: **Sebastián Moreno Barreneche**

ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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2. Cultural semiotics and the characterization of semiospheres through music

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

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

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

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

Anna Maria Lorusso (2010: 5, my translation) defines cultural semiotics as a lens, that is, as "the particular optic that serves to focus on certain specific problems." For Lorusso, the defining traits of this account of cultural phenomena are its generality, its "ability to create correlations between sets of values and sets of morphological-formal traits," and a functional perspective. As Geertz proposed in the 1970s, for Lorusso, studying culture – including a particular culture in a specific period – implies studying not only the output of that culture in the form of the particular texts it produces but also analyzing the relationships between these texts as elements that are related and that belong to a semiotic system. According to Lorusso,

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1-3. Summer albums from 2022.[3]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The semiotics of lists and collections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Three non-musical criteria used to create playlists

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

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

A. **Playlist created taking space as the grouping criterion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

B. Playlists created by taking time as the grouping criterion

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

Figure 4. CD compilation using a temporal criterion.[5]

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

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

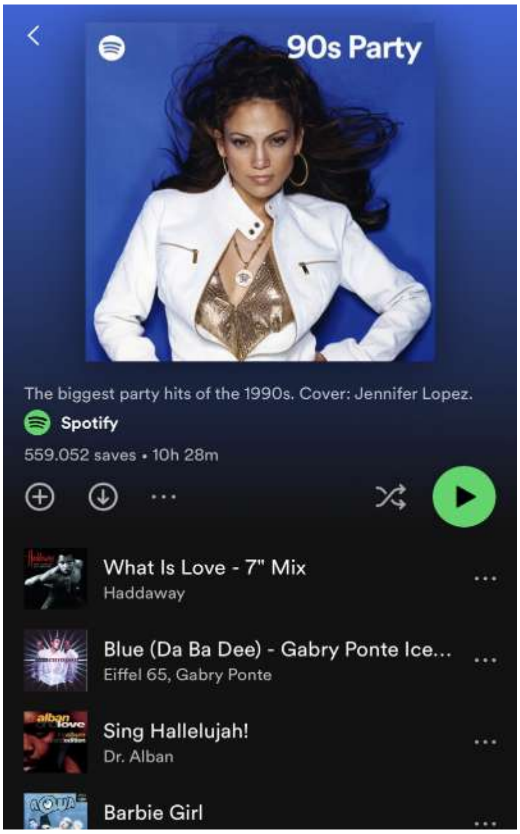

Figure 5. Spotify playlist using a temporal criterion.

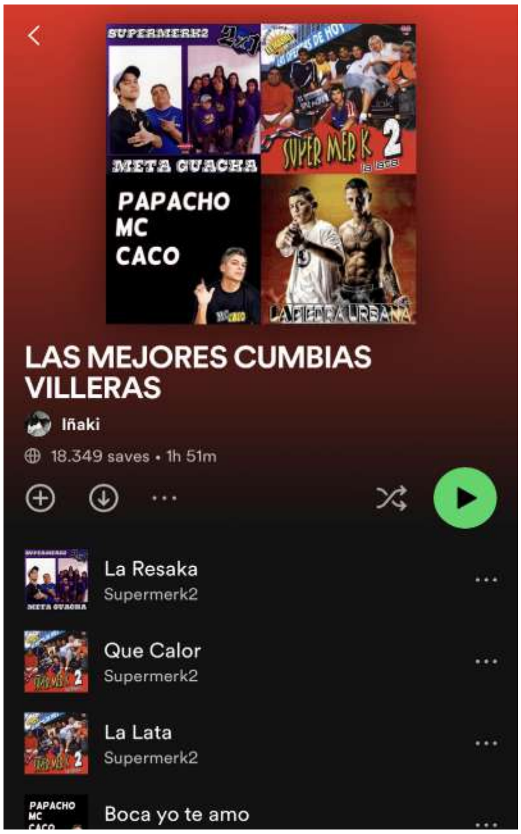

Figure 6. A *cumbia villera* playlist on Spotify.

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

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

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

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5. Conclusions

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

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

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

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Collecting movie posters:
Changes in the digital age

BY: Margaux Cerutti

ABSTRACT

While the film poster took over fifty years to become a collector's item, the alternative poster was born as such. The article has five parts. The introduction explores the acknowledgment of the film poster as a collector's item through the advent of Pop Art. The second and third parts propose a brief historical survey of the film poster and its difficult life. This survey and the presentation of some of its protagonists help us understand why the poster obtained its artistic autonomy, overcoming its function as a pure advertising medium. The fourth part analyses three posters diversified by production: (i) the Official poster distributed in cinemas and elsewhere; (ii) the Alternative movie poster created by young independent artists; (iii) and the poster created for distribution on the Netflix platform. This analysis highlights how the different contexts of use influence the structure and composition of the posters. In this sense, the development of the Alternative poster is a perfect example of what Jenkins intends as a participatory culture, made explicit by the rise of new movements born with the affirmation of technologies based on deep-learning systems.

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Pop art is an artistic movement that originated in the United Kingdom in the mid-1950s and became established in the United States in the 1960s. Umberto Eco defines this movement as

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> an acronym [around which] are gathered artists who draw on the popular imagination, now definitively influenced by advertising, television, and information, artists who also appropriate the mechanisms and practices of mass media such as obsessive reproduction and repetition, the manipulation of colors, sizes, and shapes of objects that populate the collective imagination. (Eco 2014)

It is a movement characterized by the reappropriation of the iconography of consumer society, reproducing the stereotypical artifacts of mass industry to enhance the language of commercial art and advertising. Currying the connotation of subversive art (Eco 2014), pop art led to the conception of *everything* as an aesthetic experience. The movie poster turns out to have been a perfect example of pop art even before this art movement took hold, as it was understood as an art object conceived for advertising purposes for mass society (originally understood as industrial society); thus, an object from another era that, starting with pop art, acquired a new artistic status. This new connotation led collectors to take an interest in movie posters mainly for their stylistic 'pop' nature, conceived for mass communication, and as a collector's item because of their difficult availability. Albeit belatedly, it seems that collectors have understood and grasped this object's aesthetic and historical value, so much so that today, the poster is widely considered a visual text endowed with its autonomous artistic dignity, no longer just a functional paratext to advertise the film. If one wants to understand the collector as "an artist who accepts to express himself through images endowed with a strong symbolic power, which become an extension of the person" (Grazioli 2012), then one can easily understand why posters have become collectible. However, while the movie poster has taken over fifty years to become a collectible item, the alternative poster was born as such.

Historical survey of the film poster and its hard life

According to Barbieri (2011), the poster exemplifies extraordinary narrative figurativeness in which figures and words cohabit in the same representational space in a symbiotic relation. We typically encounter paintings in a space devoted to their enhancement so the viewer can contemplate the work. Instead, the poster "is made to impose itself autonomously on the viewer in a context full of a thousand other stimuli, conveying its message with the utmost rapidity" (Barbieri 2011: 69). The poster occupies, therefore, a chaotic space, amid which it struggles to attract the viewers' gaze and cope with the countless stimuli crowding their visual field. To do this requires a composition characterized by unprecedented, contrasting lines and shapes of immediate perceptibility (Barbieri 2011:71). At the same time, it comprises figures that, in most cases, are accompanied by a written text that explains them to ensure a fuller understanding of the image, as is often the case with paintings. The poster's goal is to convey a message and some necessary information almost instantly, so its figures must have a clear and powerful visual impact whose precise meaning will later be confirmed and deepened by the textual components.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, posters became rampant, becoming a massive and intrusive presence in the center of metropolises and profoundly changing the citizenry's walking experience. Posters, particularly movie posters, after a stunted beginning, found considerable success thanks to poster artists, that is, real artists who understood their communicative importance early on and devoted in-depth study to them, offering an innovative and novel product for the mass communication techniques of the time. A final point to consider is "the difficult life of the film poster"[1] due to its widespread perception as an advertising product. Scholars only belatedly took an interest in movie posters, considered merely a colorful and decorative frame of film history for a long time. Moreover, it is interesting to note that even cinephiles initially did not appreciate the originality of the movie poster,[2] as their interest was motivated mainly by an emotional and passionate drive for the reference film, thus enhancing only their decorative and visual function. Ferdinando Salce, an important Italian collector, is a prime example of this because, within his collection, there are significant absences, such as the cult phenomena of the 1920s and 1930s or masterpieces belonging to French expressionism and realism (Brunetta et al. 1992).

Gian Piero Brunetta, a great historian of cinema, emphasizes two elements: on the one hand, the importance of writing a history of the film poster, but on the other hand, the difficulties that can be encountered in attempting to draw a general picture of it consisting of definite and clear-cut contours. Since the origins of cinema, the period around the release of a film has been characterized by a massive production of material – for example, posters, playbills, and set photos posted outside movie theaters, or even brochures dedicated to individual actors. One could rely on this range of materials to attempt to reconstruct the story; however, this would turn out to be only a trace, a synopsis of a fresco of which we know only the myth (Brunetta 2002: 81). As mentioned earlier, the film poster had a difficult life, mainly due to the lack of interest shown by historical, scientific, and other communities. However, it is necessary to point out that the poster, by its very nature, is a product characterized by a short life due to the advertisement of films that only occupy movie theaters for a limited time, beyond which the promotional materials become obsolete.

[1] https://www.museofermoimmagine.it/la-difficile-vita-del-manifesto-cinematografico/ (site closed)
[2] At the same closed site

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Moreover, it is a product made of an easily perishable material; paper, in fact, by its very nature, is already susceptible to the passage of time. In this context, the issue is exacerbated since movie posters, primarily until the mid-twentieth century, were generally posted outside movie theaters without any kind of protection, thus exposing the product to sunlight or bad weather and promoting its deterioration. In any case, despite the difficulties mentioned above, some scholars have taken an interest in the history of the movie poster, attempting to trace a continuous line of it by following different references. Some have traced the history of the poster by applying it to the history of cinema (Dacre 2020); others have problematized its iconography and memory (Brunetta 2002); and still others have traced the different cultural styles or focused on the stylistic evolutions of a single country (Della Torre 2014). There remains, therefore, no doubt that the history of the film poster is difficult to make autonomous since it remains irrevocably linked to cinema or other fields, such as advertising. Many volumes dedicated to the history of advertising posters consider the seventh art posters an excellent example of promotional efficiency. Only but a few, though, deal solely with the history of film posters.[3]

At the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was born, and in a short time, its public performances became regular events. Early forms of film publicity developed simultaneously, improvising the use of hand-painted wooden boxes or the typical sandwich board.[4] Jules Chéret is considered the pioneer of modern poster artists. Being able to best interpret the atmosphere of his era by tracing it through his poster illustrations, he became a key figure in the development of the film poster. In 1890, Chéret produced a lithograph for the short film program *Projection Artistiques*, which depicts a young woman holding a sign with showtimes. Generally, early film posters contained a single block of written text announcing the film's title, the producer, and the director. It was not until 1896 that lithographer Marcellin Auzolle created a poster for a specific movie. This contained some scenes from *L'Arroseur arrosé* by the Lumière Brothers (A. and L. Lumière 1895). Until 1910, movie posters consisted mainly of a drawing of an audience, usually of an elitist nature, sitting in a cinema or theater intent on watching a short film.[5] The audience, drawn in color, watched black-and-white images from the advertised short film. Until this time, actors remained anonymous for several reasons, chief among them not wanting to be directly associated with this new medium whose future or true essence was unknown. However, as early as 1908, production companies began to receive mail addressed to 'nameless actors.'

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3 For more on the relationship between cinema and advertising, see Codeluppi (2020), Federico and Ragonese (2020), and Mazza (2019).
4 Sandwich board advertising is a promotional technique that involves dressing a person with two boards tied by two ribbons placed on the shoulders.
5 For more on the link between audiences and cinema, see Brunetta (1989).

One case that led the major film industries to deal with the novelty was that of the Biograph Girl. Carl Laemmle, a film producer, and owner of IMP enacted one of the first publicity stunts of the time, announcing the supposed death of the actress known as Biograph Girl. He subsequently arranged for her to appear in a plaza in St. Louis. The case became sensational when many more people showed up to see the actress than had shown up a week earlier to see then-U.S. president William Howard Taft (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997). Suddenly, movie posters had to incorporate the new status of the actor figure. Beginning in 1910, therefore, there were significant changes in the advertising sphere. Lobby cards were introduced, consisting of eight small posters (8'' x 10'') printed in two colors and hand-colored, which contained scenes from the promoted film and were serially displayed in theater foyers. Moreover, a new poster format was introduced, changed from 'one sheet' to 'three sheets,'[6] giving the posters a larger physical space and, consequently, more useful visual space in the eyes of the users. The Motion Picture Patents Company[7] was dissolved, favoring greater freedom in creating movie posters, no longer limited by the censorship guidelines imposed by the company. Finally, a muslin backing, a kind of very fine-weave cloth, was added to the posters, thus encouraging their reuse.

During the 1920s, the seventh art was finally established as a mass product, elevating the first stunted posters to artistically illustrated ones. The approach of well-known artists commissioned to portray the era's first stars led to the final abandonment of announcements and a clear shift to the graphic illustrations of film scenes. In the same years, a new printing process known as heliotyping was also developed and used mainly for lobby cards. With the advent of sound in the cinema, the demand for new films increased exponentially, and with it, so did advertising, with an ever-increasing demand for producing movie posters. Their appearance in these years changed dramatically. First, due to the introduction of color offset developed by the Morgano Litho Company:

> This process made it possible to photograph the artwork provided by studios through screens separated by color. While not as colorful as the stone lithography posters, the color offset process produced sharper images. Over the next twenty years, the two processes would continue to be used. However, by the 1940s, the color offset would replace stone lithography for all poster printing. (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997)

[6] One sheet, the first standardized measure of movie posters, corresponds to 41'' x 27''. Other sizes were later introduced, such as three sheets (41'' x 81''), six sheets (81'' x 81''), and twelve sheets (82'' x 162''). We even had twenty-four sheets (246'' x 108'') capable of being recognized from a distance, such as from highways (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997).

[7] Founded in 1908, the Motion Picture Patents Company was a consortium bringing together the major U.S. motion picture production companies.two ribbons placed on the shoulders.

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Secondly, due to the rise of Art Deco, whose wide-ranging influence also impacted movie posters. Specifically, detailed backgrounds were eliminated, leaving an entirely white or at least monochromatic space on which letters of different styles and sizes underscored represent the poster's typographic creativity.

In the 1950s, the rapid spread of television brought cinema into its first crisis; in fact, the film industry focused production almost exclusively on films that could achieve great success, leading to the development of the blockbuster phenomenon. The movie posters for these films were characterized by rich details with bright, vivid colors – iconic connotations that would continue to be significant elements of posters throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The movie posters of Philip Castle, a professional in airbrushing, encapsulate all these features. Castle worked closely with director Stanley Kubrick, who commissioned him to create posters for his most famous films and allowed him to work directly on the sets, thus fostering a perfect interpretation of the film setting in his movie posters. Two works are the most representative of this close collaboration: the illustrated poster for *Full Metal Jacket* (S. Kubrik 1987) and the poster for the film *A Clockwork Orange* (S. Kubrik 1971) (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Examples of Philip Castel's movie poster art.

Both posters are a perfect example of the detailed and colorful style of the time, typical of the modernist aesthetic (Edwards 1989). Toward the end of the 1960s, a further change brought low-budget cinema to the top of the box office, which, by dealing with unprecedented themes – bringing then-taboo topics such as loneliness, youthful restlessness, and sexuality to the forefront – interested the new generation. The low-budget production of these independent films – that is, films produced without the intervention of a major film studio – also affected the style of their posters: dry, often monochromatic, and with few compositional elements. Many of these posters, however, were quickly replaced by their photographic versions – a phenomenon that, as will be seen later, will cause the abandonment of the movie poster in its original format. During these years, posters were generally divided into two main compositional forms. The first had a choral characteristic, attempting to encapsulate several film scenes in a single image through an illustrated collage, transforming heterogeneous chaos into a single harmonious image. In the second case, a single expressive figure capable of summarizing and symbolizing the entire film was chosen or specially created.

The 1970s witnessed the beginning of the gradual transition from illustrated to photographic posters, which, however, would only be completed in the 1990s. Due to the advent of the digital age, the illustrated poster had to struggle for survival till its ultimate demise in the early 20th century. One of the last illustrated posters in the entire film production is from 2001, namely *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (C. Columbus 2001). Another critical factor for the final abandonment of the illustrated poster was the popularization of video players, which landed in all American and European homes from the beginning of the 1980s.[8]

However, despite the 1950s, cinema did not experience a real crisis as posters did. Given the changed distribution, with film tapes or DVDs available on supermarket and store shelves, the poster had to transform and become reusable and available in multiple formats, thus losing its original intrinsic value. Although the need to draw attention became increasingly prominent, the production of posters and videotape covers became bland, uniform, and stereotypical. Significant causes included the development of computer graphics, which drastically reduced the time frame for work: If an illustrated poster required long months to produce, with technological developments, it would take only a few hours to create a composition of frames and photos taken from the set. In addition, stereotypes began to characterize and symbolize the various film genres. For a love story or romantic

[8] The abandonment of the illustrated poster is closely related to the advent of videotape distribution since a simple image with easy technical reproducibility was chosen for the covers, thus favoring a photographic-style image.

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comedy, a half-length couple intent on lovemaking would be depicted; for an action film, the protagonist would be placed in the center of the poster with his back turned but slightly looking toward the viewer and holding his weapon; or again, in horror films, the close-up (for example, eye detail) became almost a ritual imperative for every film.

The end of the illustrated poster led to a flattening of the originality of the poster itself. This statement is not meant to generalize; in fact, some of the photographic posters are anything but banal and conventional – in some cases, photography and graphics ideally identify the essence of the film. However, for some cinephile collectors, the photographed poster will never acquire the value of an illustrated poster.

The poster artist, this unknown

Poster artists, often anonymous, are film painters in an ongoing struggle to have their works recognized, elevated, as autonomous, and not serving the commissioning needs of the film industry. This hard struggle began with the origins of the film poster and continues to the present day, fought by poster artists with the sole weapon of perfecting their style and making it particularly recognizable and unique since poster artists were seldom allowed to sign their works. Indeed, as Burke argues, "Film artists, historically have had to be people who could put away their egos, because that studios and design were hitting there, didn't want them to get credit."[9]

Only in the 1960s, therefore, artists started receiving credit for their work, and only a few became famous. Among them is Reynolds Brown, a poster artist who created the movie posters for most science fiction and horror films of the 1950s and made his work a true art. His works, such as *Tarantula!*, *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (N. Juran 1958) or *Ben Hur* (W. Wyler 1959), are among the most sought-after by collectors (J. Arnold 1955) (Fig. 2). For these film genres, the poster was essential, because it was also characterized by a solid creative component capable of recreating otherworldly worlds and creatures that attracted the interest of the audience; something quite difficult to achieve with the special effects of the time.

In that same period, there were rare cases in which artists collaborated directly with studios, an example being the American painter Norman Percevel Rockwell, whose peculiar style, recognized as romantic realism, characterized some film posters of the period, such as *The Magnificent Ambersons* (O. Welles 1941), *A Time to Love and A Time to Die* (D. Sirk 1958) and *Along Came Jones* (S. Heisler 1945) (Fig. 3).

[9] Quote taken from the documentary 24x36: A movie about movie posters (K. Burke 2016).

Figure 2. Examples of Reynolds Brown's movie poster art.

Figure 3. Examples of Norman Percevel Rockwell's poster art.

It was in the 1960s that the figure of the poster artist began to be considered fundamental to the graphic communication of posters by American studios. This new partnership developed thanks to figures such as the illustrator Robert M. Peak, known as "the godfather of the movie poster," [10] whose unique and distinct yet malleable style created a wealth of posters for Hollywood, as he was able to adapt to and

[10] Artist's webpage: https://www.illustrationhistory.org/artists/robert-peak, last access May 11, 2023.

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Figure 4. Examples of Robert M. Peak's movie poster art.

communicate any film genre. From the quintessential romantic comedy *My Fair Lady* (G. Cukor 1964) to historical films and dramas such as *Apocalypse Now* (F. F. Coppola 1979), or from the musical *West Side Story* (J. Robbins and R. Wise 1961) to the pure action films of the infamous James Bond, such as *The Spy Who Loved Me* (L. Gilbert 1977) or *Superman* (R. Donner 1978) (Fig. 4).

One of Hollywood's most sought-after artists, and one who has undoubtedly influenced other great poster artists – such as John Alvin, known for being the artist of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (S. Spielberg 1982) and *Blade Runner* (R. Scott 1982) – is Steve Chorney,[11] who created the posters for *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Q. Tarantino 2019) and *The Greatest Showman* (M. Gracey 2017). Also worth mentioning is Richard Amsel, known for the first Indiana Jones, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (S. Spielberg 1981), and *The Sting* (G. Roy Hill 1974) (Fig. 5). The lack of popularity of these artists is mainly because most studios did not allow poster artists to sign their pieces; nevertheless, it is unavoidable to understand their value.

When one thinks of a film, especially before the advent of the digital poster, one is much more likely to think of its poster rather than of a single scene as, for example, in the case of the iconic shark in *Jaws* (S. Spielberg 1975), designed by Roger Kastel. However, artistic creativity in the 1980s increasingly gave way to photographic super-realism, resulting in the advent of the photographic poster. It was much less demanding in time and money and would replace the illustrated poster from the 1990s onward. Another astute idea in the 1990s was that illustrated movie posters should represent animated films exclusively. Coming out of nowhere, the idea was eventually abandoned.

[11] Artist's personal page: http://www.stevenchorney.com/ - last access date May 11, 2023.

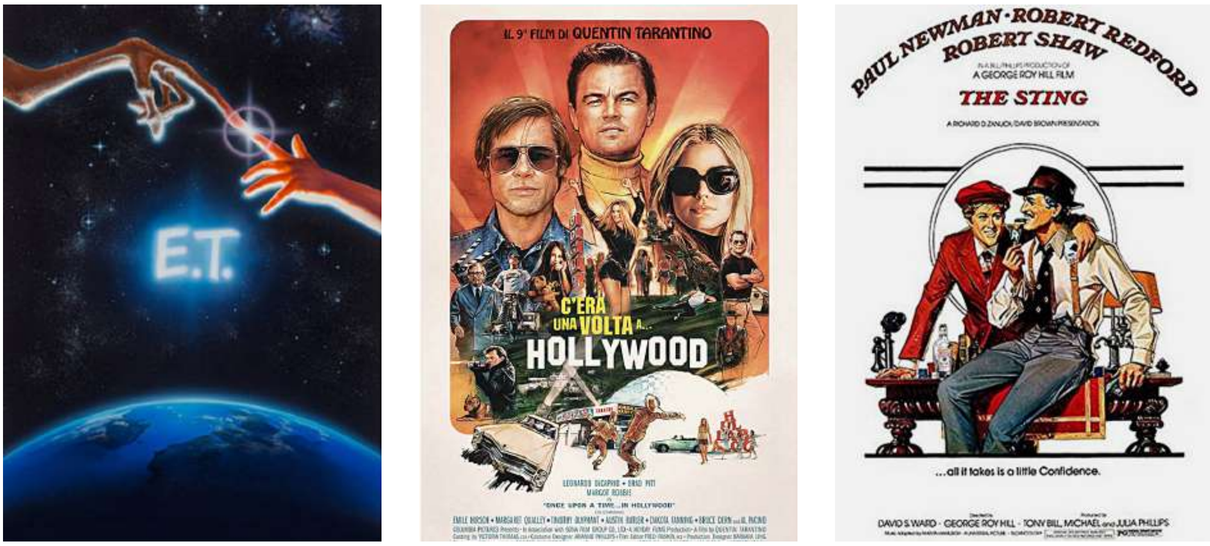

Figure 5. Examples of John Alvin, Steve Chorney and Richard Amsel's movie poster art.

In the mid-2000s, to fill the void left by the definitive abandonment of illustrated movie posters, especially by Hollywood, independent artists, and galleries began selling limited-edition screen-printed posters. This choice led to the rapid growth of a multimillion-dollar industry, with prints selling out online in seconds, again attracting the attention of Hollywood studios to reconsider the illustration of their posters.[12] Moreover, from here arose a common need for all enthusiasts in the field, whether illustrators, graphic designers, or collectors, to design or commission alternative posters to the official ones, bringing to light a new artistic movement from the constant production of artwork. The most famous include Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and Mondo, a movement that, probably for the first time in history, allowed an alternative output to be more successful than the official one.[13]

Comparing posters: The official, the alternative, and Netflix

A common trend in today's movie poster landscape is to create several posters for the same movie. A proper advertising campaign unravels gradually to generate a sense of expectation and desire to know the story hinted at by the poster. As noted above, computer graphics not only benefited production timelines – from months of work to a few days – but also reduced production costs. These advantages led to the conception of new types of posters marked by different names, styles, and strategies

[12] Source from 24x36: *A movie about movie posters* (K. Burke 2016): a documentary exploring both the world of movie posters and the birth, death, and resurrection of the illustrated movie poster.
[13] For further study, see Chojnacki (2013).

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used to promote the movie, following the typical laws of advertising campaigns. In this case, we can differentiate three categories of posters: Official, Alternative, and On-demand. The first category concerns posters produced by the Studios for the film's advertising campaign and its audience. In this case, the poster designer follows a precise scheme for the composition dictated by the marketing department. These are, in fact, standard types that have been established over time and follow a precise order of release. The main types include the Advance, the Character, and the Main (or Official) posters. The second category, Alternatives, as we have seen, involves the creation of posters after the release of the movie for an audience of fans or collectors. Therefore, poster makers enjoy unlimited creative freedom and offer their own interpretation of the movie's central themes. Finally, the third category concerns on-demand posters, created solely for online distribution, so it varies depending on the platform and usually involves the re-use of the Main or Character poster or simply a frame to which the title is added. This initial categorization was necessary to introduce the following analysis, specifically for the chosen poster sample. Therefore, the object of study is three posters (Fig. 6) of *Lord of the Ring: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), an iconic film of the new millennium. Therefore, a brief plastic analysis is proposed by applying the three categories identified by A. J. Greimas (1984): *topological*, *eidetic*, and *chromatic*.

The first poster presented, as mentioned above, belongs to the movie's official campaign and features a two-dimensional rectangular format that runs vertically. Starting from the base of the poster, we find the title *The Lord of The Ring* – featuring the iconic Anikon font, now culturally associated with the trilogy after its worldwide success – and the subtitle *The Fellowship of the Ring* (font: Albertus MT). Next, the illustrated part of the poster is always developed vertically. In this case, we can easily distinguish two parts. The first, placed above the title sees a single block of faceless knights positioned within a light fog that makes the background blurry in contrast to the figures with sharp lines and dark colors of the knights. The second part characterizes the entire upper part of the poster; the illustration is organized to present hierarchically all the characters in the story. In the center, we find Frodo Baggins, the one who wears the ring and, in this case, even marked by the inscription that marks the trilogy's principal object. All the other characters appear on two levels: a first level featuring the protagonist's faithful traveling companions in half-length and a second level where we find the faces of four other helpers. The hierarchical order in appearance follows the implicit laws of movie poster construction and the imperatives of strategic marketing. It reflects the relative importance of the characters in the storyline while prioritizing names and faces familiar to the audience.

Figure 6. Official, alternative and Netflix's posters, of the movie *Lord of the rings. The fellowship of the ring.*

Some things need to be said about the chromatic category. The whole poster is composed of a continuous juxtaposition of light and dark colors with mainly brown tones, a color predominantly associated with earth and materiality. The trilogy tells the story of a company that undertakes – on foot (= earth) – a journey, a mission that has as its goal the destruction of a ring (= material). Another interesting aspect is that every member of this company, representing the *good* in the story, is delineated by sharp lines. Each character, though small, is clearly discernible by the viewer, who in turn is directly addressed by the characters' gaze. On the other hand, the characters representing the *Bad* side appear as an indistinct group of knights whose identity we need not even care about.

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The Alternative poster takes on the same *topological* category as the official poster. It is a two-dimensional rectangular format that runs vertically. Again, at the base of the poster, we find the title, but this time, it is drawn following only some features of the trilogy's official font (this detail concerns, in particular, the letters L, R, and S). Another textual element we find in the upper part of the poster where, contrary to the other two examples, we see a tagline, "One ring to rule them all." The illustration created by Paige Reynolds and Justin Erickson, known as Phantom City Creative,[14] is a typical, well-constructed *trompe-l'œil* highlighting the figure of Gandalf, the wizard protagonist of the saga. In this case, the play of light and dark is crucial. The entire illustration uses colors in green tones and is placed in sharp contrast to an all-black background. Green is the color predominantly associated with destiny (Pastoureau 2018: 217)[15] and, in this case, with the hope of succeeding in the company's mission to destroy the ring. The physical element with which green is associated is nature, characterized by its richness and abundance, again highlighting the theme of travel and land (the movie was predominantly shot in New Zealand, a country famous for its varied natural landscapes). But returning to the illustration, we can see how the *trompe-l'œil* construction takes up three land levels. First, the underground caves where Gollum lives. A second level is represented by Gandalf's thick foliage, associated with growing grass and, thus, the meadow, on which the small, stylized silhouettes of the company walk. Each character is rendered in a stylized manner, but with details that leave no doubt as to which character we are looking at – in order from right to left, for example, we find Gandalf with his hat, Legolas distinguished by his bow, and Gimli with his ever-present axe. The stylized characters walk along the brim of the wizard's hat, which makes mountains out of meticulous shading and jagged contours that fade toward the black background.

Finally, we turn to the poster made for On-demand distribution. In this case, we chose the poster distributed by the Netflix platform.[16] It is in a rectangular two-dimensional format, but unlike the posters just analyzed, which are vertically developed, it is developed horizontally. For this poster, a single image was chosen, a frame from the movie, with only one character represented: Gandalf. The spatial representation in a horizontal format dictates the entire construction of the poster, which consists of only two elements from left to right: the title and Gandalf. The simplicity of the poster's construction involves choosing a few emblematic elements easily associated with the movie. The title repeats the graphic features of the Official poster, and the selected character is undoubtedly among the most representative of the saga. Choosing to focus the construction of the poster on a couple of emblematic graphic elements and to

[14] Artists' page: https://www.phantomcitycreative.com/ - last access May 11, 2023.
[15] For further study, see Agnello (2017).
[16] Movie selected on May 4, 2023.

place its format horizontally is closely related to the context of the poster's use. The placement and horizontal format reflect the so-called *scrolling*, the characteristic way the user moves to choose the movie on the streaming platform. Finally, this poster echoes the color category of the official poster, permeated with colors in brown, predominantly dark tones, from which a single light source comes from the upper right corner, toward which Gandalf is heading, thus evoking the theme of the journey.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is necessary to make some brief remarks on the concept of *paratext*, introduced by Gérard Genette in 1982, since we want to understand the movie poster as a paratextual element of the filmic text. First, the concept of *paratext* means a group of elements that represent the text – in Genette's case, a literary text – that give it the nature of a book (i.e., title, subtitle, notes, cover, illustrations, etc.). However, it is essential to draw attention to the presentational function associated with these elements, more precisely, the "strictly functional character" of the paratext. In other words,

> The paratext, in all its forms, is a fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary discourse in the service of something else that constitutes its raison d'être, [...]. The functions of the paratext constitute a very empirical and very diverse object, which must be grasped inductively. (Genette 1987:13-14)

Wanting to understand the movie poster as a paratextual element of the filmic text and Genette's definition – which considers each element capable of giving identity to the text and being a product of a specific cultural and social context – we can categorize certain graphic elements. To further clarify, some choices in constructing the posters we analyzed are closely related to their function of identifying the filmic text – such as the title, characters, and colors. A specific context of production and reception influences other choices.

Consider the first poster analyzed, which is of the Official type and produced to be posted in movie theater lobbies. It places all the trilogy's main characters at the center of the composition, with their gazes directed toward the viewer, creating a feeling of the latter's participation in the story. In this case, the context of production and fruition projects the advertising function of the poster, designed to convince the viewer to choose *The Lord of the Rings* as the next movie to see at the cinema. On the other hand, the construction of Alternative and Netflix posters ties to the *rhythm* of the "production and reception context of the product" (Marrone 2007: 239). A poster designed for on-demand distribution needs fast production and fruition – think of how we choose a movie by quickly going from one poster to another until we find the one that catches our attention.

In contrast, Alternative posters are associated with a much slower production and reading time. Since this is a personal creative process, the artist dictates the processing timeframe that will end when he is fully satisfied. Regarding fruition, taking up Barbieri's (2011) differentiation we have already discussed, the Alternative poster enjoys a

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space dedicated to its enhancement as for a painting. In this case, therefore, the context of fruition changes totally, as the paratextual element lives an autonomous life, no longer linked to the advertising function of the movie.

In recent years, mainly due to the fame gained by these posters, many studios have opted to collaborate with artists belonging to the Alternative Movie poster world. We should emphasize, however, that such collaborations never concern main Main or Advance posters, characterized by an advertising purpose, but always artistically independent posters. Illustration survives today thanks to this world that devotes time and creativity to making movie posters, disregarding their aspect as viral marketing media. By problematizing their context of use, it becomes essential to understand that with the advent of digital platforms for movie distribution, the illustrated poster is not the medium designed to attract the viewer's attention immediately. It is intended for a longer reading time and is more suited to projects like exhibitions or festivals such as those commissioned by Mondo[17] or galleries specializing in pop culture like Grey Matter Art[18] or Hero Complex Gallery.[19]

The Alternative movie poster as visual participatory culture

The Alternative Movie Poster Movement began not as a current defined by a precise theorization but by a circle of artists, fans, and cinephiles moved by a common goal. As it turns out, the difficult life of the poster and the complex process of recognizing the work of illustrators and poster designers do not allow for a linear historical and stylistic trace of the film poster, even though it has been part of the collective vision for much of its existence. Indeed, it is the context of the use of this object that has determined its evolution: Throughout its history, it has gone from the walls of houses in new and large metropolises to the lobbies and facades of cinemas, and then to a digital screen, which defines its size depending on the device used.

However, the sharing of posters, whether on a cell phone, a computer, or a TV, does not transcend the fact that the printing of posters has become a vain practice, not only for commercial but also for creative reasons. Indeed, the compositional and creative standardization dictated by the rules of the advertising market has created a lack and, at the same time, a need around the film poster. In other words, the lack of creative freedom in the stylistic construction of movie posters has generated a collective need on the part of a

[17] For further study, see Bird and League (2017).
[18] Grey Matter Art, founded in New York in 2013, is a company specializing in creating limited-edition movie and entertainment posters. They aim to make this product unique and original, especially a collector's item. Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/greymatterartllc
[19] Hero Complex Gallery in Los Angeles specializes in contemporary and pop art-themed exhibitions, presenting both established and emerging artists. Fb page https://www.facebook.com/HeroComplexGallery/?ref=page_internal

specific community – consisting mainly of illustrators, graphic designers, cinephiles, and fandom[20] – who expressed the will and the need to return the movie poster to its original version, a tangible object, a space of creativity that gives life to an extraordinary narrative figurativeness. This need was born 'from below' and involved only film art fans, not the producers. Creating a movement typical of the participatory community (Jenkins 2006) – that is a set of activities and practices that are structured around the media, in this case, the cinema, promoted by people who are not limited to being just consumers but who also take on the role of producers (prosumers), playing an active role in an event or process. In this view, 'participation' means not only taking part in a particular movement and being able to influence and shape the outcome of the process, distinguishing it from other forms of interaction. In the case of the alternative movie poster, it is what Jenkins calls 'bottom-up creativity' – a drive from interested audiences, often marginalized at the boundaries of a dominant discourse, that becomes capable of appropriating in an original way many products intended for a generic "mass audience" (ibid. 2006).

This is the correct interpretation of what the Alternative Movie Poster Movement has succeeded in doing, that is, appropriating the movie poster intended for the public and offering an original alternative that is creatively free from imposed schemes and intended for a niche audience, thanks to which it has developed and allowed the emergence of new artists and new compositional techniques. When we think of the world of the alternative poster, we can, therefore, speak of the manifestation of a participatory culture that has developed from below and established itself thanks to the community of fans that has been created around it to such an extent that it has become a proper, well-organized and designed industry, in which products not only sell in a very short time but are also very successful on platforms such as eBay or Amazon, where some pieces are resold for ten times the original price. Communities have been created, for example, by Mondo, whose posters have been so successful that they have been included in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's[21] film poster archive and the Heritage Actions catalogue[22] and have also led to collaborations with major film industries, such as the 2011 collaboration with Paramount Pictures, for which they made custom posters for *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (M. Bay 2001) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (J. Johnston 2011). Mondo is just one example of how a community, such as a fandom, can actively create new movements to support their passions. With the advent of new technologies based on deep learning, new creative movements have emerged, like the

[20] Jenkins (2006) introduced the notion of fandom to acknowledge the emerging interactive dynamic between content producers and their audience. In this context, fans actively engage with the media, contributing fresh content.

[21] The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science, founded in 1927, is an honorary professional organization to support the development of the domestic and international film industry.

[22] Heritage Actions is the largest collectibles auctioneer and third largest auction house in the world, as well as the largest auction house founded in the U.S., https://www.ha.com/ - last access date May 12, 2023.

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creation of movie posters of films that do not exist, showcased with the example of *Goncharov*.[23] In 2022, a user of Tumblr[24]– a microblogging and social networking platform that allows people to post multimedia content – created a fake movie poster (Fig. 7), sparking lengthy discussions about the film's main themes, inventing multiple intertwined storylines, an imagining a stellar cast (Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Gene Hackman, and Harvey Keitel) with actors closely associated with the role of gangsters.

Figure 7. Goncharov's movie poster.

Another case is the creation of sites such as This Movie Does Not Exist,[25] where, using artificial intelligence, movie posters or synopses of movies that do not exist are created. Such examples make one understand the importance of the film poster, which cannot be considered merely as a decorative object of a film advertising campaign but a true poster bearer of signs capable of recreating a reality belonging to an existing film or of an imaginary nature.

In conclusion,[26] we have demonstrated how a movement such as the Alternative Movie Poster Movement, born to propose an alternative, has become the favorite choice of the audience, meaning not only cinephiles but also collectors. We have also shown that the collection of official posters no longer happens for various reasons and that the collection of alternative posters has become a real independent case. The collection of movie posters deviates from the typical collections of the early twentieth century, where entrepreneurs, wealthy bourgeois, financiers, or high-society women formed important collections by making them public to expand their self-image and status – a part of social rituals to be exhibited (De Benedictis 1998). Nowadays, alternative movie poster collectors, for the most part, are personalities who tend to hide their hobbies at

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[23] For more: https://www.ilpost.it/flashes/goncharov-tumblr-martin-scorsese/, last access May 15, 2023.
[24] Link: https://www.tumblr.com/, last access May 15, 2023.
[25] Link: https://thismoviedoesnotexist.org/, last access May 15, 2023.
[26] I would like to thank the reviewers for giving me insights for possible further study, specifically a comparison with another paratextual element such as the trailer (and its possible fake version), and a comparison with other types of alternative movie, for example, the one concerning variant covers of comic books.

home, jealously guarding their objects; this choice is probably dictated by the fact that the posters satisfy their intimate desires.

Francesco Poli's description reflects this phenomenon as concerns a specific category of collectors, namely those who feel "an almost pathological attraction to collecting, as a satisfying activity in itself. For many, one's collection becomes a totalizing reality, in which one projects one's identity entirely as if it were a kind of organism endowed with an autonomous life" (2009). Poli also emphasizes how an alternative movement has successfully brought out the empathetic side that posters manage to bring out in their audience. The advent of online distribution platforms has moved audiences away from sharing the movie theater. Simultaneously, though, it has fostered the emergence of new communities and sharing experiences inspired by a common passion for cinema, particularly its visual aspect. The outcome is the creation of a new community based on participatory visual culture.

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Accumulations of words: Lists in the Italian public discourse

BY: **Roberta Cicchirillo**

ABSTRACT

In written and spoken language, lists are flexible instruments that take on different functions, such as grouping elements in a stable set or suggesting others to come. Umberto Eco perceives lists as a semiotic modality of vertigo-like accumulation, which offers a way to speak of something whose boundaries one does not know and to place a limit upon the entropy of the mass of things (Belknap 2004; Eco 2009). In public discourse, lists are a helpful device to express opinions and slogans in a constrained space (for example, on Twitter) through a cohesive and coherent collection of elements placed on the same level around a semantic area that the recipients must interpret. This article examines how verbal lists exploit two basic textual strategies in Italian public discourse. The first strategy consists of a collection with precise extensional boundaries and no alternative items. The second is an assortment of items that allude to a set of possibilities with nuanced extensional boundaries. Through these two strategies, the recipient can create two textual semiotic modalities due to the inference procedures: lists with a closed textual modality, *closed fabula*, and lists with an open textual modality, *open fabula* (Eco 1979a).

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1. A general outlook: putting things in order. Between everything-here lists and etcetera lists

According to Umberto Eco (2009), a way to represent something whose boundaries or limits one does not know is the list. It puts in order, organizes, and makes perceptible what appears as one and indistinct whole in reality. Lists are conceived as devices

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employed to place a limit on the entropy of the mass of things in the world; they constitute a formally organized block of information composed of a class of items, forming relationships between each other: "if the items display no obvious relationships, no discernible pattern, the brain will invent relationships, imposing some arbitrary order on the disorderliness of the material" (Belknap 2004: 5). Archives, catalogues, and collections are among the many means by which we try to order our accumulation frenzy, not only of things, but also of data and information, and placing all of these in a list is one way to make this heap accessible and somehow legible (Eco 2009). Therefore, to be known and shared, the accumulation needs to be decoded and ordered: "every archive consists, in fact, of a certain accumulation of materials and requires a spatiality where these materials need to be stored and clustered for the embedding of memory and, therefore, of information" (Voto 2022: 50). Even ideas, concepts and experiences, whether abstract or concrete, need to be ordered and arranged clearly to be shared, so that the complexity of the concepts does not also influence the structures and linguistic forms used to convey the message. Putting in order implies finding coherence between the elements that comprise a list. Searching for a coherent and cohesive pattern builds relations between items linked through attraction forces. As Belknap suggests, "[lists] are plastic flexible structures in which an array of constituent units coheres through specific relations generated by specific forces of attraction" (2004: 2). In example (1),[1] the set leads the recipient to infer the virtual exclusion or inclusion of other possible items within the assembled category, such as drug addicts or homeless people.

(1) [Thieves], [drug dealers] [or simply people in need of a roof over their heads to sleep]. You can find pretty much anything in the grand hotel of desperation that is via Cuneo.
[TorinoToday]

The nature of verbal lists is at once simple and complex. The structural simplicity of a list, ensured by the repetition of elements[2] of the same type, allows the recipient to focus on and interpret the more or less complex relations holding the elements together (Hofstadter 1979). Thus, the sense relations between the conjuncts are maximized, indicating which inferential processes create more or less stable categorizations. To organize the world's entropy, we need to order, categorize, and archive it.

The recipients try to find the principles underlying the connections between items, recognizing a distinction between two types of lists,[3] the ones with the *everything-here*

[1] The term 'class' means any collection of individuals held together based on any criterion (semantic, discursive, metalinguistic or contextual) (Lyons 1977). The items of a class can be both abstract and concrete.
[2] In this article, the elements which constitute a list will also be called items or conjuncts.
[3] In this article, every item in bold in a list is enclosed within square brackets [].

poetic (2) and the ones with the *etcetera* poetic (3) (Eco 2009). The former implement a *putting in form*, a confinement of what is said because all one wants to say is expressed fully, defining a referent (cf. Eco 2009:12). The latter, on the other hand, come to our rescue when what we want to say eludes our capacity for classification. Thus, they try to reduce the burden of the inexpressible: "the author tells us he is unable to say, and so he proposes a list very often as a specimen, example, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest" (Eco 2009: 9).

(2) In the morning, the former minister announces that [Renzi], [Gentiloni] [and Minniti] have accepted his proposal. But the former secretary hits the brakes: "They're lifting vaccine mandates, and our guys are talking about dining out. That is crazy". Zingaretti replies by spending the evening at a tavern with [an entrepreneur], [a student], [a professor], [an administrator], [a freelance professional], [a volunteer]. And in the end, even Calenda decides: "There's no deal." (Goffredo de Marchis, *La Repubblica*, September 17, 2018, Online article)

(3) But afterward, Mother Leonora's voice, composed again and sweet as always, would once more start murmuring beautiful words, like ['infinity'], ['blue'], ['gentle'], ['celestial'], ['magnolias']… How beautiful the names of flowers were: ['geraniums'], ['hydrangeas'], ['jasmine']…what marvellous sounds! Now, once she wrote the words down on the blank page, in black and white, she would never lose them, never again forget them.
[Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*]

According to Eco (2009), we can define *everything-here* lists through their relation with a possible world; they take on a purely referential function, indicating objects placed in an ordered fashion for practical purposes. In their attempt to make order, lists contribute to building a form, defining a closed and determined set, and obeying contextual pressures regulated by the constituent items. *Etcetera lists*, on the other hand, concern the sense of the inexpressible; they try to enumerate what escapes our control or our mind.[4] A list's goal, therefore, is to order its elements by placing all of them on the same level so that they share one common property, expressed through the relations between conjuncts weaving ties. The need to describe a possible world is

[4] In this regard, we quote the words of Soren Kierkegaard from his work *Repetition* (1843:223) on the subject of the inexpressible and the use of imagination to find connections between seemingly distant elements: "A wit has said that one might divide humankind into officers, serving-maids, and chimneysweeps. To my mind, this remark is not only witty but profound, and it would require a great speculative talent to devise a better classification. When a classification does not ideally exhaust its object, a haphazard classification is altogether preferable because it sets imagination in motion".

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precisely expressed by the attempt to make a state of things clear and ordinate, and in doing so, one searches for elements that entertain relations of similarity and suggest an internal organization of the set that the list refers to. Due to this, Schiffrin (1994) considers lists as descriptive structures that allow to place distinct items inside a common conceptual space where different elements are placed on the same level. The list, therefore, becomes the linguistic reflex of the coexistence and cohabitation of the same elements in a conceptual space, also given by the repetition of the same structural and syntactic scheme (cf. Schiffrin 1994: 394). Insofar as it is an instrument to order objects, states of things and properties, the list searches for an underlying principle that can bring apparently different and distant elements closer. One could, therefore, conceive the list as the representation of an open structure (Eco 2009), which connects and ties together rather different elements to allow the recipient to attribute new senses and new possible orders. In example (4), taken from Saramango's *Death with Interruptions*, the items of the list cluster internally and describe different categories of individuals bound by blocks of common sense, like religion or justice. The conjuncts of the list do not present distinct and explicit relations with all the other conjuncts, but there is the general shared condition of immortality. Therefore, we can conceive lists as a net, which concatenates different parts, different conjuncts connectable to any other.

(4) a whole country being given, so to speak, the elixir of eternal life, and not only [the believers], who, as is only logical, might expect to be singled out, but also [atheists], [agnostics], [heretics], [apostates], [unbelievers of every kind], [devotees of other religions], [the good], [the bad] [and the worse], [the virtuous] [and the maphiosi], [executioners] [and victims], [cops] [and robbers], [murderers] [and blood donors], [the mad] [and the sane], all, without exception, were at the same time witnesses and beneficiaries of the greatest marvel ever seen in the whole history of miracles, the eternal life of a body eternally bound to the eternal life of the soul. (José Saramago, *Death with Interruptions*)

Some lists seem like a deliberately chaotic mass of things, devoid of apparent relation, like the case of Borges's infamous Chinese list:

(5) In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: [(a) belonging to the emperor], [(b) embalmed], [(c) tame], [(d) sucking pigs], [(e) sirens], [(f) fabulous], [(g) stray dogs], [(h) included in the present classification], [(i) frenzied], [(j) innumerable], [(k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush], [(l) et cetera], [(m) having just broken the water pitcher], [(n) that from a long way off look like flies]. (Jorge Luis Borges, *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*)

Therefore, the main function of lists is to create order within a reality consisting of accumulations, catalogues, and sets. Upon closer observation, though, one can intuit that not all sets are defined by the same forces of attraction and the same objects, and, consequently, not all order-creating instruments follow the same principles (Gass 1985). So, a list can have a dual nature: on the one hand, there are the single conjuncts that compose it; on the other, the relations that surface between them, which make a mere sequence of items into an actual list. As Belknap notes, "lists are personal constructions that invite different interpretations from different readers. The value of lists is that they ask us to make them meaningful" (2004: xv).

Consequently, a list structure can be interpreted both as the sum of its parts, and as a global unity populated by elements simultaneously taken in their individuality and their relation with similar elements. One can, therefore, envision both an associative and a distributive nature, both relational and differential, in a constant fluctuation between the partition in single elements and the inclusion given by the forces that keep the items together (Burke 1979; Belknap 2004). The list reveals an associative and distributive relation; it expresses a unity given by the association of the single elements, which in turn are themselves distributed in a structure that develops linearly and also vertically, where the items can ideally pile onto each other, expressing paradigmatic relations between present and possible[5] elements. Lists, therefore, propose a regulatory principle that unites the various constituent elements, both implicitly and explicitly, in a process that forces the recipient to find the red thread that ties together the items of a set into the expression of a new meaning. We may interpret them as complexes of two or more conceptual entities, which reflect an inferential process that revolves around the processes of construction of the reference and of *ad hoc* categorizations tied to the notions of exhaustivity and non-exhaustivity, roughly corresponding to the *everything-here* lists and *etcetera* lists described by Eco (2009).

In lists, the relation implied between the elements they comprise mainly pertains to extemporary or *ad hoc* categorization (Mauri 2017), defined by the relation between the elements that identify inferential operations, also implemented by the lists. The list creates a coherent unity whose parts remain identifiable, without a complete assimilation between the result of the combinatory and its internal elements. Considering how to utilize a list is a process that allows to create new meanings through an interpretive action that exploits the decoding and inference phenomena. The decoding allows to access stable and conventionalized meanings, which, in practice, are accompanied by inferential phenomena seen as cognitive processes that enable to integrate the various implicit and explicit meanings to formulate hypotheses aimed at resolving ambiguity (Eco 1975, 1979a, 1979b; Recanati

[5] "Because of their dual nature, lists must, therefore, be looked at from two opposing viewpoints: the individual units that make up a list (what does it hold?) and the function or purpose of the list as a whole (how does it hold together?)" (Belknap 2004: 16).

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2002; Prandi 2006; Sbisà 2009; Ferrari 2014). The tight connection between lists and *ad hoc* categorization processes also regards the phenomena of exemplification that are tied to the notion of non-exhaustivity for which the speaker describes the explicit elements, allowing for the implicit to be foreseen (Voghera 2013, 2017; Barotto and Lo Baido 2021). On the contrary, exhaustivity is a fundamental feature in determining categorization processes.

2. Accumulations of things and words: grocery lists

When speaking of a list, what immediately comes to mind is a grocery list. According to Eco, we usually compile a shopping list for ourself or somebody else and functions as a memo of what one needs to buy. The grocery list is the maximum expression of *everything here*, its only goal being to provide an aseptic listing of things to buy. However, besides being a well-known and malleable instrument, a list does not only create a *concluded* world. Even shopping lists can be the theater of attractional forces; that is, they can hold together elements that respond to regulatory principles and goals beyond the products we wish to buy at the supermarket, as is shown by the comparison between grocery lists[6] described by Annie Erneaux (Example 6).

(6) Black ballpoint pen shopping list found in a shopping cart:
puff pastry
flour
ham, bacon
grated parmesan cheese, yogurt
vinegar

I compared it with my own:
ricoré
ladyfingers
mascarpone
milk, cream
white bread
cat [moist food and crispy treats]
post-it notes

There are about 50.000 food items in a hypermarket. Considering that I will use about 100 or so, that leaves 49.900 that I ignore. (Annie Ernaux, *Look at the Lights, My Love*)

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[6] Translated by the author

Grocery lists have gone from simple memos to entertainment content on social media. An Italian Instagram page called 'insta_della_spesa,' which translates as 'shopping_insta,' daily publishes posts of grocery lists written by ordinary people. While scrolling through the posts, grocery lists are never simple lists of things to buy but hide worlds of possible sense, specifically created by combining the elements in the list (Figure 1). The cohabitation of the conjuncts does not always indicate *everything-here* lists. The relations between the elements may also indicate that they are *etcetera* lists whose boundaries are unclear (Example 7).

Figure 1. Post on the Instagram page insta_della_spesa

(7) toothpicks
knockoff Coca Cola
water x2
big garbage bags
cheap wine
will to live (in sachets)
Turnips (like a lot!
With many leaves yes!)

(insta_della_spesa)[7]

Every time two or more elements are tied inside a list, their interpretation does not only go through the individual conjuncts but through the identification of something that holds together heterogeneous things (Lang 1984; Barotto and Mauri 2018; Barotto and Combei 2021). The regulatory principle holding the items together is not univocal but plurivocal. Hence, by uniting different elements, the list can open to endless interpretive paths, thanks to the categorization processes, which are the foundation of list construction. The possibilities that lists express, including grocery lists, cannot but recall the concept of an encyclopedia and, thus, the possibility of considering lists as semiotic devices that open up possible worlds of meaning through endless inferential paths, depending on the issuer and the recipient. The list in example (8), taken from an election campaign slogan, is not just an *everything-here* list (Figure 2).

[6] Translated by the author

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Figure 2. Campaign slogan by La Lega Salvini Premier. Italian political elections September 25, 2022.

(8) Zero VAT on
Bread, Rice, Milk, Fruit and Vegetables
I believe that no Italian should be left behind
(Matteo Salvini, Campaign for the Italian political elections of 2022)[8]

This list of staple foods presumably reflects the grocery lists of lower-middle-class people who have to meet their primary nutritional needs. Therefore, the VAT on these products would significantly impact the purchasing power of social classes who have more financial difficulties.

3. Lists in public discourse and political communication

Making lists is a widespread strategy in political discourse; they can convey messages (even manipulative ones) in a way that is simple, effective, and easily memorized by the receiver. The list is a very flexible device, extensively used to express not only the order of things but also complex concepts. Not surprisingly, it is widely used in political and journalistic public communication. Conveying one's messages through brief, flexible, and immediate communication is a pervasive tendency in the Italian public debate, where political communication is more about the flow of tweets than issuing official press releases. Social media foster a lighter, more flexible, and more structurally simple communication. The character limits on posts imposed by Twitter are a telling instance of this bias. Space constraints and the need for speedy reactions force those participating in the political debate to use simple and clear linguistic forms

[8] Translated by the author

to deliver effectively condensed content. Lists are handy because, despite their structural simplicity, they can convey even complex content through repeated brief and light syntactic constructs without many relative clauses. Repetition has always been a standard device of political communication. *Ars retorica* always considered repetition to be a powerful means to persuade and convey even complex content through a simple and flexible structure. Repetition can be used consciously by speakers to enhance and intensify their arguments, to make a message more effective and as economically inexpensive as possible, to the detriment of variation in communication.

From a cognitive perspective, therefore, the repetition of any linguistic object is a less challenging device and serves to convey content in the most effective way possible, intending to be understood without excessive cognitive effort (Voghera 2018). A key aspect of repetition is regularity because what is regular is also easily fixable in mind and memorizable (Tannen 1987; Khdair 2016; Voghera 2018; Favilla 2022). In certain circumstances, the repetition of linguistic elements through lists is a valuable and potent tool that can strengthen the content of a message, which acquires more credibility and, thus, a higher truth effect the more it is repeated (Ernst et al. 2017). Therefore, repetition, especially in political communication, is a mechanism used to enhance persuasion and fixate beliefs (Bartels 2006).

By their repetitive character, lists are structurally regular devices. What is iterated is also expected, and the recipient anticipates what will follow, i.e., the production of lexical elements, syntactic or linguistic patterns more or less conventionalized. Given that the list requires a minimal cognitive effort, the recipient focuses not so much on the structure of the message or the syntactic relations of the enunciated but on the possible relations between the conjuncts and their common denominator.

In political communication, from rallies to Twitter, repetition and lists are devices used to convey, enforce, and convince the audience about some issue. Not coincidentally, the list creates a redundancy effect, whereby its content is amplified and emphasized: "[…] to avoid ambiguities of meaning and reference, to facilitate connections between parts of the text that are more or less distant from each other, and therefore to facilitate comprehension of the whole" (Mortara Garavelli 2010: 121).[9]

One of the Italian politicians who has made list-making the signature style of his communication is Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing party La Lega. His rhetorical preference for lists did not go unnoticed. Facebook pages and YouTube channels collect his lists,[10] as shown by the following tweet, posted in response to Salvini's Valentine's Day wishes on February 14, 2021 (Figure 3).

[9] Translated by the author.
[10] Facebook page "Salvini che elenca cose" (https://www.facebook.com/SalviniElencaCose123456), which translates into "Salvini listing things." A YouTube channel that collects countless long lists by Salvini, which he produced throughout his public political activity (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_2IG4cukhE&t=16s).

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Figure 3. Tweet by Matteo Salvini taken from the Italian television programme "Propaganda Live".

(9) Salvini: «Happy Sunday and happy Valentine's Day to those who love who dream who suffer who fight to change the world who never give up»

Twitter User: «Why do you always have to make a list… Happy Valentine's Day, and That's it» [11]

In the above example, Salvini's list presents a simple repeated syntactic structure, where the nominal part of every item is the only variable portion. Every conjunct of the list represents general classes of people to whom the Valentine's Day wishes are sent. In this case, the conclusion of the list does not complete the set it defines. Despite lacking an explicit etcetera, the list is not defined only by *"those who love who dream who suffer who fight to change the world who never give up."* Implicitly, Salvini wishes everyone a Happy Valentine's Day and leaves the possibility of including other potential conjuncts to the interpreter. Someone could enrich the message of Salvini's set by adding, for example, *'all stamp collectors'* as potential recipients of his wishes.

Hence, the list allows recipients to keep the boundaries of the listing open. Depending on their beliefs, they can produce potentially endless interpretations of the issuer's intention. Paola Taverna, Senator of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5s) party, wrote a post (see example 10) that references a piece of news regarding the Partito Democratico (PD) party.

(10) [Dinners], [more dinners], [postponed dinners], [called off dinners], [cancellation of dinners]. If this is how they managed Italy, I finally understand why the country finds itself in its disastrous situation. #SiSonoMangiatiTutto [which translates to "they ate everything up"] (Senator Paola Taverna, Twitter, September 18, 2018).

The senator is referring to the fact that Nicola Zingaretti, the PD's secretary, was not invited to a dinner organized by members of his party. Paola Taverna not only comments

[11] Translated by the author.

on the incident ironically but also takes the opportunity to rail against the work of the previous government, guided by the Partito Democratico, without openly naming it. According to the Senator, the Partito Democratico has ruled Italy the same way it organizes its dinners, namely disastrously. The unsaid in the Tweet makes the recipient responsible for forming a negative judgment, finding information, and reconstructing the facts.

Taverna's list does not aim to underscore the indecisiveness of dinner planning but rather the inadequacy of Italy's previous government. The list, therefore, organizes concepts that refer to an open category, strictly rooted in the co-text that comprises a simple succession of linguistic expressions based on a quite simple formal operation, like syntactic and structural repetition. Here, the senator dismisses the previous government's work more effectively than generic statements like *"The government has proven to be totally incapable and disorganized."*

The persuasive mechanism used by listing is based on its simple and linear structure; the typical repetition of lists may have a rhetorical relevance in persuasion. In particular, whether a list is composed of a series of connotations, the same value expressed by the list is reinforced by the repetition by listing a series of connotations, as in (10), which is related to *different kinds of dinners*. In contrast, a list of denotations, such as a grocery closed list, while having simplicity and linearity in structure, represents less committed and persuasive rhetoric than a list of connotations.

The list, especially in the context of politics and propaganda, uses a straightforward structure to convey evocative and vague content through the mere juxtaposition and cohabitation of conjuncts, creating endless paths of meaning that exploit inferential and categorization mechanisms. Lists can be viewed as a particular instance of linguistic repetition, which helps to maintain textual cohesion and unity in the discourse. Repetition serves to fixate ideas, states of things, information, and concepts in the minds of the recipients. From this viewpoint, repetition aims at intensifying the message and, hence, can be used in persuasive contexts, insofar as the idea one wants to convey is reiterated not only lexically but also using the same structure and the same thematic values, to convince and strengthen the rightfulness of what has been said. In this regard, we can consider lists as a repetition device that recurs frequently, not only in language in general but also in particular persuasive and public situations.

4. Lists as a semiotic device

At the beginning of this work, we defined the list as a device to make order in the world's entropy: a device to create unity, whereby elements form semantic relations of various types. Lists have the function of building the reference through *ad hoc* inferential and categorization processes. The possibility of including conjuncts within a list is given by the existence of extensional mechanisms, which are operations that allow the

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attribution of meaning to an expression. One can suppose that the speakers act precisely through these operations, which carve out an encyclopedic portion aligned with the communicative needs and the circumstances of a possible world (Eco 1962; 1979a). The extensional mechanisms evoke individuals, concepts, or even objects with certain properties that allow for their inclusion in a class. Contextual and discursive pressures give the choice to use expressions that carve out certain levels, and also by interpretive frames shared with the other person so that one can find possible outcomes in the repertoire of the already said (cf. Eco 1979b: 34).

At the same time, the speaker *narcotizes* other expressions that are not activated in that circumstance and co-text. The latter, therefore, is no secondary fact and no accessory in the interpretation of lists because it defines which properties to actualize and which, on the other hand, to narcotize. Based on extensional mechanisms, we can classify lists into two groups, which somehow reprise both the opposition of *exhaustive* vs. *non-exhaustive* lists and *everything-here* vs. *etcetera* lists. In other words, some lists have well-defined extensional boundaries that indicate specified areas, enclosing actual and discrete individual elements, and other lists, though, possess less clear extensional boundaries and describe general and continuous spaces built with actual elements and possible ones. The *everything-here* or exhaustive lists belong to the first type, while non-exhaustive *etcetera* lists belong to the second.

Whether a list is exhaustive or non-exhaustive is determined by the semantic relation realized by the conjuncts, which define the class or the set indicated by the list. There can, hence, be sets that indicate defined areas of sense or sets that indicate less defined areas. In this alternation between defined and undefined, without any descriptive claim on our part, we see a recall of Charles Peirce's Theory of Determination,[12] used to describe the semio-linguistic[13] system, where the values determinate and indeterminate are described through two types of sets: collections and multiplicities, in turn reprised by the Cantorian set theories (Cantor 1915).

Collections indicate determined, precise, and thus discreet sets. Conversely, multiplicities describe continuous, undefined, and thus vague sets, which are irreducible to numbers and open to possibilities. Using these terms cautiously, one might think that collection lists are composed of explicit, individual, actual, and determinate elements

[12] For a more in-depth treatment of this semiotic theory cf. Paolucci (2010). We will only state that for Peirce, the pre-logical level is the area in which a positive term and its contrary are held together (extensive value); the logical level, on the other hand, is the striated area where there will be exclusive opposition between terms (intensive value).

[13] We cannot discuss this subject comprehensively because of the topic and space limits in this article, but we again refer to Paolucci (2010). The relation between intension and extension, and between defined and undefined areas, has also been studied, as is well known, by Hjelmslev (1935). According to the Danish linguist, the semio-linguistic system is considered an area where precise and vague areas alternate one another, populated by intensive and vague terms. In light of these considerations, Peirce (1976) also defined semio-linguistic systems as a succession of defined and undefined areas. The former mark the space of individuality and the discreet, whereas the latter indicate general and continuous areas.

that create an unambiguous reference. These lists express sets whose extension is known, thanks to the items indicating a class with clear and recognizable boundaries. The contextual pressures guide this differentiation process between what is part of the list and is hence actualized and made explicit and what remains outside and is hence discarded. The fact that a list only includes within itself the explicit conjuncts and has clear extensional boundaries is a matter that not only concerns the encyclopedic cut-out and the communicative intention but also the discursive co-text that guides and gives indexical signals for the interpretation of the list itself (Stalkaner 1976; Lyons 1978; Caffi 2007; Braun 2016).

Multiplicity[14] lists indicate determinate, actual, individual, and explicit elements but also possible and implicit elements. As a result, heterogeneous items blend to form an indeterminate and general set in which the identification of a referent is a little predictable and blurred. In this respect, it is interesting to quote Peirce on the definition of multiplicity. According to him, a mere assemblage of conjuncts does not give a multiple set but only by the relation that connects these conjuncts. We might be tempted to say that continuous multiplicities are incapable of discrimination.

> For the nature of the differences between them does not depend upon what multiplicities enter into the denumerable series of discrete multitudes out of which the continuous multiplicity may be compounded; but it depends on the manner in which they are connected. This connection does not spring from the nature of the individual units, but constitutes the mode of existence of the whole. (Peirce, CP 4.219 Cross-Ref:††)

The multiplicity list shows constant openings and possibilities of meaning because it holds both explicit and implicit conjuncts together. Within these lists, hence, actual and explicit conjuncts cohabit with virtual and implicit items; each explicit conjunct brings with itself other implicit ones, which firstly amplify the extension of the list itself, while maintaining an internal coherence, which cannot be separated from the encyclopedic levels and communicative intentions. These paths of meaning allow us to determine which elements to include and exclude.

4.1. Lists with open and closed boundaries: closed and open *fabula*

How can we understand which path of meaning the speaker follows to actualize only certain items while muting others? To answer this question, we can think of verbal lists as devices that generally realize the conditions of actuality and possibility through two narrative mechanisms: closed *fabula* and *open fabula* (Eco 1979a, 1979b). Although we

[14] In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari address the issue of multiplicity as an intrinsic principle of the rhizome: "An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections."

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use these two operations to define cooperation mechanisms in narrative texts, they can also help to describe the process of actualizing the conjuncts in a list. In short, story (*fabula*) and plot are two opposed traditional narrative schemes, thematized by the literary criticism of Russian formalists in the XXth century (Propp 1928; Segre 1974). The *fabula* indicates the narrative scheme par excellence and expresses the order and development of actions or, for instance, events in a storyline, which can also revolve around inanimate objects, concepts, or ideas. On the other hand, the plot sheds light on the discursive organization, namely, which narrative schemes are employed at a superficial level to tell a tale. As Eco (1979a) argues, even texts that appear devoid of a narrative structure, such as descriptive texts or elementary linguistic acts like orders or questions, can express a story because these types of text can still expand and narrate worlds. These texts can also build *small stories* (Eco 1979a) starting from superficial discursive structures. In this regard, Eco explains how non-narrative texts can present a narrative construction.

> Therefore, we can assume a more flexible notion of story (not so dissimilar from the one proposed by Aristotle's Poetics) in which it is enough to isolate an agent (no matter whether human or not), an initial state, a series of time-oriented changes with their causes, a final (even if transitorily so) result. In this sense, there is a story even in the chemical description given by Peirce […] about the production of lithium. (Eco 1979b: 30)

In this sense, we believe that even verbal lists create narrations despite generally viewed as mere descriptive texts that allow the ordering of states of things and objects with regularity (Schiffrin 1994). From the examples presented and those that follow, we surmise that lists are not only simple descriptions of listings of things but constitute and structure worlds through more or less extended narrations by using a *fabula*. This operation is enabled and realized by the list's conjuncts and co-texts.

The mechanisms of *closed fabula* and *open fabula*, used in narrative texts, are tied to two types of diagrammatic representations that help describe the course of a narrative and the realization of the elements and interpretive backdrops that happen in a story.[15] The *closed fabula* is represented by a linear and serial diagram, structured in a predictable sequence where every expressed element excludes its alternative, thus eliminating the *vertigo of possibilities*. One could think that the *closed fabula* could recall collection lists or *everything-here* lists, composed of conjuncts whose belonging to a class can only be explicated. The *open fabula*, on the other hand, possesses a structure that holds together both actualized and virtual elements. The undefined list could also follow this type of representation because it involves the compresence, or cohabitation,

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[15] To gain insight on the representation of the two types of *fabula* we refer to Eco (1979b:34).

of actual and virtual elements, and therefore both explicit and implicit: "The type of cooperation requested of the reader, the flexibility of the text in validating (or at least in not contradicting) the widest possible range of interpretative proposals – all this characterizes narrative structures as more or less 'open'" (Eco 1979b: 34).

To better understand what we have argued before, we quote two examples from the speeches of the Italian politicians Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. The first example refers to the speech delivered by the leader of the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) during the rally of her party in 2019 in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. The speech replicated, simply and potently, her party's political and cultural manifesto with an argumentative style that utilized, among other things, repetition. Moreover, the second list in example (11) became Giorgia Meloni's values manifesto. The list of simple words has defined the calling card of the FdI leader, made up of single elements that exclude and silence other possible ones.

> (11) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be Parent 1, Parent 2, LGBT gender, Citizens X, just codes. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. [I am Giorgia] [I am a woman] [I am a mother] [I am Italian] [I am a Christian]. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Hence, the list in question describes a well-defined path that takes on rhetorical power thanks to the presence of those specific elements and not others. One can argue that the list (11) is a collection list that follows a textual modality typical of closed stories because the sequence of conjuncts describes the only possible adaptable path in that co-text. Considering the circumstances, no expressions allow us to include other possible items: Giorgia, Italian, or woman, exclude other virtual elements, thus defining a case of closed fabula in which the narrative and descriptive path is univocal and built as the conjuncts follow. Of course, there are always other possible elements, but only if we do not respect the list's primary intention. For example:

> (11a) [I am Giorgia] [I am a politician] [I am from Rome] [I am a Roma football club fan] [I am a forty-year-old]

The conjuncts on the list (11a) do not recall other alternatives and do no amplify the extensional boundaries of the set. Instead, they limit the list, defining a precise foreseeable path of meaning composed of determined individual elements belonging to a specific encyclopedic level, selected and actualized by communicative intentions and contextual pressures.

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Clearly, Meloni intends to describe herself through traits of a distinctive value. In this communicative context, the list's extension is firmly bounded, inhibiting the addition of any other possible elements. The list creates a class with the elements sharing the properties: *distinctive and relevant qualities and values of Giorgia Meloni that set her apart from other Italian politicians*. In the same speech by Giorgia Meloni, we find another list, which appears to follow a path with an *open fabula*, which opens to a list of possible conjuncts as the *etcetera* list pattern (11b).

> (11b) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be [Parent 1], [Parent 2], [LGBT gender], [Citizens X], [just codes]. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia I am a woman I am a mother I am Italian I am a Christian. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Example (11c) is a nominal list, negatively characterized by the issuer, and it describes a rather vague ad hoc category, which indicates the identity outlooks for Italian society by the Italian progressive movements and parties. Due to the vagueness expressed by the category, the list offers the possibility to add elements that remained implicit and have not been silenced by the actualized conjuncts. In this regard, we note that it is not obligatory to construct an *etcetera* as a vague set. In this sense, an *etcetera* list may indicate only some elements, leaving others implicit. The implicitness expressed by an *etcetera* list is not necessarily related to vagueness. The vagueness of the lists may be dealt with in two different ways. Some lists are vague as such, having fuzzy boundaries; others, though, are composed of vague elements. In the first case, the category constructed by the list is vague, while in the second case, the boundaries of the list are determined, but the elements it comprises are vague.[16] The interpreter can insert other elements, like [intersectional feminists] or [third-worldists]. The actual and explicit items[17] on the list, hence, do not exclude the virtual and possible items. Therefore, as in an open fabula, there could be

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[16] As reviewers highlighted, which we thank them for, there is a difference in terms of vagueness between such as the list of the example (12c) and a closed shopping list in which one may find any vague elements as "a handful of salt" or "a few dozen eggs."

[17] In this respect, Peirce distinguishes between what is vague and possible and what is general [cf. CP 5.505]. In our article, we do not focus on this distinction, but it is interesting to introduce the topic as a hint to reflection in the future. A sign is vague and possible when someone is "leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination […] The vague might be defined as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply." On the contrary, a sign is general when someone is "leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself." In this latter case, the principle of the excluded third does not apply.

a hypothetical coexistence and cohabitation of different conjuncts like [Parent 1] [Parent 2] and [rainbow families], [Citizens X], and, for instance, [surrogate motherhood] (11c).

(11c) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be [rainbow families], [Parent 1], [Parent 2], [children of surrogate motherhood], [third worldists], [numbers]. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia I am a woman I am a mother I am Italian I am a Christian. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Another example of a list with an *open fabula* mechanism is taken from an interview by Matteo Salvini at a rally for the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna in November 2019. Example (12) presents two lists: the first, *[and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and the gut] [and populism] [and sovereignism]*, has a polysyndetic structure which in itself conveys a sense of continuity, suggesting that the realized set of conjuncts also includes virtual items, which have not been expressed but can still be added. The second list, on the other hand, does not present the conjunction and is composed of four elements *[a different president], [a different attitude], [a different team], [a different future]*.

(12) if on a November Thursday evening many many people meet up to build something great that is clearly not: [and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and the gut] [and populism] [and sovereignism], it is the future we are convinced that after fifty years the people of Emilia can choose [a different president] [a different attitude] [a different team] [a different future]. (RadioCast-it_EN_141119_L1)

To evaluate the sense of continuation expressed by the list, we can try to perform a test in this case as well and add more conjuncts to the list, with similar properties as the ones in (12) and evaluate if the sense of the whole list chances. The list in –isms (along with the gut) refers to the *ad hoc category: right-wing political movements, thoughts, and attitudes*. We will now substitute part of the conjuncts with others with a similar[18] intension. The result is the following:

(12a) [and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and xenophobia] [and the gut] [and qualunquismo] [and nationalism]

[18] On the relation between synonymy, extension, intension and context we refer to Basile (2023).

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We feel that the sense of the list does not change, and the conjuncts made explicit in (12) do not exclude further possible alternative terms like the ones in (12a), namely nationalism, xenophobia or qualunquismo. In fact, as the number of conjuncts rises, so do the possible realizable alternative items, which, despite remaining virtual, still contribute to the list's function and sense. The extensional boundaries of the set do not appear as stable and well defined: every conjunct made explicit moves the extensional boundaries of the list, building new potential relations on the considered encyclopedic levels. The conjuncts create a unity of the relations between explicit and implicit conjuncts, which is not exhausted with the explicit and actual elements, as in examples (12 and 12a). The second list, included in the same example (12), despite not being a polysyndeton, presents a similar mechanism. Each conjunct repeats the same element, the different modifier, and this continuous iteration conveys a sense of continuity, ensuring that the set identified by the list is not exhausted with the actually appearing conjuncts. The realized ad hoc category seems to want to express novelties in the political and institutional assets of Emilia-Romagna that the citizens feel a need for. We will now propose another list composed of both the conjuncts that are made explicit and the possible alternative and potentially realizable conjuncts (12b).

(12b) [a different president], [a different attitude],[a different administration], [a different perspective], [a different regional health care system], [a different regional counsel].

In this case, the sense of the entire list does not vary, and every conjunct allows for the broadening of the extensional boundaries of the construction, which in turn keeps together both the actual and the possible elements. Concerning this, the first conjunct – 'president' (12) (12b) – represents the actual and individual office because it does not allow many other alternatives and excludes other possibilities.[19] From the second item on, the explicit and possible elements cohabit in the list in the process of opening that holds together the virtual members we can include. In example (12b), only specific potential alternatives are made explicit. In contrast, others are not mentioned, like, for instance, *a different system of public procurement* or even a *different attitude or way of doing*.

5. Conclusions

This work has highlighted how verbal lists, both written and spoken, are pervasive and widely used in many fields of public and political communication. Their frequent use is primarily due to their flexible nature, which, thanks to elementary structures realized

[19] We can think of terminological variants such as maybe *governor*.

by repeated conjuncts placed on the same level, one can build inferential and categorization paths that express interpretive textual modalities with closed or open *fabula*. These semiotic textual modalities make a list a construction of possibility. It can define sets with closed boundaries and be well delimited from an extensional standpoint, which excludes and silences some possible items; in this way, linear and schematic interpretive paths are created that do not give much freedom to the recipient. On the contrary, lists can describe sets with vague and extensionally open boundaries, composed of virtual elements, not concretely made explicit in the text but distributed on the same encyclopedic level indicated by the list. The conjuncts of a list present themselves like actually realizable possibilities that the interpreter must simply understand; this interpretive freedom and, therefore, creates tortuous paths that are not univocal: "the list as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements [...] to baste the representation of something whose identity we do not yet know but wish to catalog first and sort later" (Paolucci 2023:16).[20]

Lists seen in public contexts are an instrument which, compared to the textual modality of *open fabula* leaves the recipient the responsibility and the task to build, relative to the messages and the contents that are received, paths of meaning and interpretation that are themselves vague and undefined, but not therefore ineffective or not persuasive. Hence, lists are flexible structures we can represent through free and open schemes. This possibility, generated by the multitude of virtual elements, reflects the tendency of the list to look at that entropy of infinity hinted at in the beginning as an attempt to order it without forcing and confining it within too narrow boundaries.

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[20] Translated by the author. For a distinction between cataloguing and ordering we refer to Paolucci (2023).

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L'analyse sérielle des œuvres picturales[1]

BY: **Jacques Fontanille**

ABSTRACT

We cannot reduce a pictorial work to an image or painting. As a work, it invokes, from the outset, other paintings, sketches, variants, a creative practice, a know-how, materials and gestures, forms of legitimation, exhibition, publication and archiving devices, etc. Therefore, we can consider each painting part of one or several series. The work is then the series, not each of the paintings taken separately. We thus adopt a conception of the work as fundamentally being plural, hybrid, heterogeneous, and one of the effects of this is the series. If we consider a painting as an image, the presentation space is flat and delimited by edges: exploration and interpretation are constrained by this elementary topology. But, if one adopts the perspective of the work as a series, the evoked space-time is multiple, stratified, and multi-dimensional. Choosing the serial analysis of the works does not imply that they are already classified as 'serial' but that the method that will apply to them will reveal serial properties. In this article, seriality is approached only in a comparative way, as the comparison of the work of two painters who oppose formidable difficulties: an Iranian painter, Medhi Sahabi, and a French painter, Georges Laurent. In both cases, the serial structure

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[1] Cette étude est une version réduite, remaniée, et en français, d'un chapitre de livre publié en anglais, sous le titre "Serial analysis of the pictorial work: series, networks, rhizomes, interstitial space-times," dans *The semiotics of the image. The analysis of pictorial texts*, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou et Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, dirs., De Gruyter, Berlin, 2003. (Avec l'accord des deux directeurs du livre et de l'éditeur De Gruyter).

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and meaning have a concrete impact on understanding the work and the choices we must make when presenting them in public: How do we organize the exhibition? How do you configure the archiving? From a methodological viewpoint, this serial analysis involves identifying the syntagmatic forms of associations and metamorphoses within the series and then the properties of the space-time in which they unfold.

1. Préambule

1.1. L'œuvre d'art

L'*effet de l'art* est un événement esthétique, affectif, cognitif et pragmatique, qui implique un objet (l'*œuvre*), un effet (le *saisissement artistique*) et un processus spécifique (l'*artistisation*). L'*œuvre* suscite le saisissement artistique et manifeste le processus d'*artistisation*. Ainsi, une œuvre picturale ne peut pas se réduire à une image, ni même à une peinture. Elle invoque d'emblée, en tant qu'*œuvre*, une pratique, une action créatrice, un savoir-faire, des matières et des gestes, des esquisses, des variations, des séries, des formes de légitimation (Bourdieu 1992), des dispositifs d'exposition et d'archivage, etc., dont la manifestation visuelle est rarement un seul tableau, le plus souvent un ensemble de tableaux. Du point de vue de l'effet de l'art, le spectateur collectionneur n'est donc pas le seul à composer des séries picturales: le peintre lui aussi, lui en premier, conçoit son œuvre en série de variations. Du moins telle est notre hypothèse de travail: l'artistisation serait, entre autres, un *processus sériel*.

La question n'est pas uniquement théorique et méthodologique. Elle est l'une des premières questions pratiques et déontologiques qui se posent aux commissaires d'expositions, aux archivistes qui doivent rassembler tous les éléments pertinents de l'œuvre, ou tout autre responsable d'un processus de patrimonialisation de l'*œuvre*: quelle est l'entité de base du patrimoine? de quoi est-elle composée? comment associer les tableaux les uns aux autres? quelles sont les interactions de proximité les plus pertinentes? Etc. Pour répondre à de telles questions, il faut partir du principe que l'œuvre par définition est un ensemble sémiotique composite et hétérogène, un *hybride* qui peut comprendre à la fois le processus, l'effort de création, des supports, des matières et des énergies, ainsi qu'un ensemble d'éléments textuels, pratiques, matériels et architecturaux qui lui procurent un mode d'existence social et culturel.

Il en résulte que, pour le sémioticien, l'analyse d'une œuvre ne coïncide ni ne se confond avec l'analyse d'un tableau, d'un seul texte visuel. La première décision qu'il doit prendre porte sur le niveau et le périmètre d'intégration des composants potentiels de l'œuvre, car cette décision non seulement circonscrit le corpus d'étude, mais aussi et surtout l'ensemble des éléments pertinents pour rendre compte du processus d'artistisation: elle répond en effet à la question des composants requis pour parvenir au “saisissement artistique”, ce moment toujours singulier, propre à chaque œuvre. Pour se maintenir dans les limites du champ méthodologique propre à la sémiotique, l’analyse doit également se donner une contrainte minimale: quelle que soit l’extension retenue pour les composants considérés comme pertinents pour l’intégration dans l’œuvre, ils doivent pouvoir être associés à *des configurations ou opérations observables sur le plan de l’expression*. Par exemple, si les perspectives d’exposition publique sont retenues, le plan de l’expression devra en porter la manifestation; ou encore, si les débats, émulations et compétitions concernant la légitimité artistique sont intégrés au champ de l’œuvre, il devra être possible d’en repérer aussi les manifestations sur le plan de l’expression (Bourdieu 2014); ou enfin, si les relations avec des esquisses, entre plusieurs versions, ou même entre plusieurs tableaux conçus et peints sur un même principe générique, sont considérés comme des composants de l’œuvre, on devra pouvoir en repérer les traces et les effets dans les diverses expressions de ces composants (Estay Stange 2021).

1.2. La stratégie de l’analyse sérielle

Nous choisissons, pour cette présentation, de nous restreindre à la situation où l’œuvre est constituée par ses variations, ses alternatives, ses phases d’élaboration, voire les associations de ses variantes en “airs de famill”. Autrement dit, nous choisissons de nous cantonner à ce qui impose une *analyse sérielle des œuvres*. Cela ne signifie pas que ce sont des œuvres déjà classées comme ‘sérielles’ par la critique ou le marché de l’art; cela signifie que la méthode que nous allons leur appliquer va faire apparaître des propriétés sérielles et que la première décision est d’analyser pour commencer des groupes de tableaux et pas des tableaux isolés. On considère dans ce cas que l’œuvre n’est pas le tableau, mais ce que nous allons constituer comme séries, et que la série, dans sa dynamique de variations, porte le processus d’artistisation. ‘Sérialité’ n’est que le titre d’un problème, et le problème se révèle complexe: on peut à la rigueur se représenter la manière dont un peintre peut concevoir une série de tableaux, comme une succession programmée de moments de création, mais cela se révèle vite être une illusion, non seulement parce que dans la réalité concrète de la production picturale, la conception sérielle ne se manifeste souvent qu’indirectement et incomplètement, mais surtout parce que, du côté du lecteur-spectateur, la signification de la série ne peut pas être construite à partir d’une simple succession; il doit même résister à cette succession, et reconfigurer un autre type de relations.

On en voit tout de suite les conséquences pour l’espace-temps de l’œuvre, et, par extension, à la plupart des collections: que ce soit dans une exposition, dans un catalogue, sur un site internet ou dans un archivage, que l’on adopte une présentation linéaire, tabulaire, hypertextuelle ou autre, on propose toujours des *modalités de la contiguïté* et des *connexions entre les maillons* de la série. La question pratique qui se pose

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alors est de savoir comment et jusqu'à quel point de tels espaces de présentation tiennent compte de l'espace-temps de la production de l'œuvre, et de celui de son exploration et de son interprétation comme œuvre. L'analyse sérielle est une tentative pour, au moins, poser le problème explicitement.

1.3. Deux peintres, deux œuvres

Nous nous intéresserons ici, et dans cette perspective, aux œuvres de deux peintres contemporains mais fort différents: un peintre iranien, Medhi Sahabi (Mojdeh 2021), et un peintre français (et limousin), Georges Laurent (Laurent 2019-2023). Dans les deux cas, la structure et la signification sérielles ont un impact concret non seulement sur la compréhension de l'œuvre, mais aussi sur les choix à faire pour leur présentation publique: comment organiser l'exposition? comment configurer l'archivage? Comment 'faire collection' de leurs œuvres? Elles ont même un impact problématique sur la constitution d'un corpus, les séries de l'un et de l'autre n'ayant pas encore été institutionnellement identifiées et fixées. En effet, Sahabi et Laurent, contemporains et récemment disparus, ont peint, pour la plus grande partie de leurs œuvres, des séries de tableaux, de manière systématique pour le premier, erratique pour le second, de telle sorte que leurs œuvres respectives se composent de centaines de tableaux déjà assemblés en une quinzaine de groupements attestés pour l'un, et de quelques milliers, distribuables en un nombre indéterminé de groupements possibles, pour l'autre.

Chez Sahabi, chaque série est une œuvre complète et close: il n'a peint que des séries fermées, chacune étant dédiée à une seule thématique, et destinée à une seule installation pour la première exposition. La signification sérielle peut alors être explorée en identifiant les schèmes dominants et invariants, les divers noyaux de variations, la distribution des variétés: on doit alors imaginer les parcours, soit physiques (dans une salle d'exposition), soit seulement visuels et/ou virtuels (dans un catalogue, ou dans une archive numérique) que le spectateur doit accomplir dans un espace réticulaire mais fermé, pour en construire la signification. Des modèles de séries non-linéaires en espace-temps fermé seraient alors requis pour en rendre compte.

Mais la situation de cette œuvre est plus complexe: les informations recueillies personnellement auprès du Musée d'art contemporain de Téhéran, et auprès de la Mojdeh Art Gallery, montrent que, même si Sahabi a supervisé et ordonné la disposition des tableaux de ses séries picturales, il n'en reste aucune trace aujourd'hui, hormis les groupements thématiques (à séries indéfinies) propres à chacune des premières expositions (par exemple, les groupements *Puzzled Cars, Junkyard Cars, Figures, Flowers, Graffiti*). C'est donc la directrice de la Mojdeh Art Gallery qui, en son rôle de commissaire de la récente exposition commémorative des oeuvres de Sahabi, au Musée d'Art Contemporain de Téhéran, à l'automne 2021, a choisi, avec ses collaborateurs, l'ordre et la numérotation des composants de chaque série. Il faut donc admettre que l'œuvre de Sahabi a été 'réinventée' par cette disposition sérielle de l'exposition de 2021 (et qu'elle pourra l'être encore, pour d'autres expositions), et, ajouterai-je, que cette sérialité réinventée est tout aussi légitime que celle, aujourd'hui inaccessible, que Sahabi avait probablement choisi pour les premières expositions.[2]

De son côté, Georges Laurent a peint tout au long de sa vie, sans jamais exposer publiquement; il n'est identifié ni par la critique, ni par les acteurs du marché de l'art, et en outre il n'a proposé que très rarement de classement de ses séries de tableaux, quelques rares séries partiellement numérotées, toutes incomplètes, et dans une proportion quasi négligeable au regard du nombre de séries que nous avons pu identifier. Cette œuvre étant composée de très nombreux groupes de tableaux, l'analyse sérielle, et la réflexion sur les formes de la sérialité auraient une incidence directe sur des choix institutionnels qui restent à faire, en matière d'archivage et de publication.[3]

Cette évocation préliminaire des œuvres de ces deux peintres révèle l'une des propriétés essentielles de la sérialité picturale: l'œuvre s'en trouve ouverte, disponible pour des métamorphoses et des expériences d'agencements différents, mais, de ce fait même, particulièrement vulnérable en tant qu'œuvre. Le paradoxe de la sérialité, c'est que les collections constituées par les amateurs ou les professionnels sont plus stables et plus résistantes, pour des raisons principalement patrimoniales, que les séries élaborées par les peintres eux-mêmes. La vulnérabilité, en l'occurrence, est celle des énonciations et du champ d'application de l'auctorialité: du côté du peintre, il semblerait qu'il se considère plus auteur de chacun des tableaux que de leur série; la preuve en est qu'il ne fixe pas lui-même ni l'étendue et l'effectif, ni la disposition de la série, ou, s'il le fait, il n'en conserve que des traces erratiques et lacunaires. Nous dirions en ce cas que l'énonciation des tableaux est fortement assumée, alors que celle des séries l'est bien plus faiblement. Inversement, du côté des responsables d'exposition, d'archivage ou de collections particulières, faute de pouvoir assumer l'énonciation des tableaux, on assume explicitement celle de la disposition sérielle. Cette dissymétrie nous semble révélatrice du dispositif énonciatif propre au principe qui préside à la

[2] Cette situation s'explique en partie par le fait que, si Sahabi a toujours été en Iran publiquement reconnu et loué comme traducteur de la littérature mondiale en persan, il a été largement ignoré, en tant que plasticien, par les institutions politiques, culturelles et universitaires. Il semblerait, via cette exposition récente et ambitieuse, que son œuvre plastique sorte enfin de l'ombre, et cette mise en lumière est soutenue par le principe de sérialité. Toutes ces informations, de même que le corpus complet des œuvres peintes de Sahabi, nous ont été procurées par notre collègue Marzieh Athari Nikazm, de l'Université Shahid Beheshti à Téhéran.
Dans les fichiers d'images dont nous disposons, chaque série est complète, ordonnée et fixée par l'équipe de la Mojdeh Art Gallery. Cet ensemble était, au moment où cette recherche a commencé, en 2021, disponible sur le site de cette Galerie; il ne l'est plus au moment, en 2023, où cet article est déposé auprès de Punctum. Il le sera probablement plus tard, dès que le site sera reconstitué et accessible.

[3] L'archivage actuel de son œuvre se limite à une répartition entre plusieurs lieux de stockage et d'accrochage, dans les différentes pièces d'une même maison, son ancien atelier (François Laurent 2019-2023). Un projet est en cours (CeReS, direction du projet: François Laurent et Nicolas Couegnas), pour valoriser et faire connaître cette œuvre, la classer, l'archiver et la présenter dans un des musées d'art contemporain du Limousin.

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série picturale, et à toutes les collections qui sont impliquées par les expositions, l'archivage patrimonial ou les collections particulières: à savoir, une corrélation entre, d'une part, l'énonciation des composants de séries (EC) et celle des ensembles de composants, les séries (ES), et d'autre part, entre l'énonciation en tant que production (EP) et l'énonciation en tant que réception (ER); cette corrélation a la forme approximative d'un chiasme qui explicite la corrélation entre les énonciations respectives des auteurs, d'un côté, et des collectionneurs et acteurs institutionnels de l'art, de l'autre côté:

$$\text{EP (EC+ \& ES -)} \Longrightarrow \text{ER (EC- \& ES+)}$$

2. Les objectifs de l'analyse sérielle de l'œuvre

2.1. Variations et invariants: un espace-temps dédié au traitement de l'itération

L'analyse sérielle traite l'œuvre comme un ensemble d'artefacts dont le regroupement en sous-ensembles permet une construction pertinente de la signification: ce sont alors les séries qui sont des œuvres. L' 'esprit sériel'[4] s'est particulièrement développé dans les arts modernes et contemporains, ainsi que dans les médias et l'édition, au point de procurer aux premiers les fondements de leurs manifestes esthétiques et de leurs regroupements en écoles, et de susciter chez les seconds la naissance et le développement massif de genres à part entière (les 'séries' des chaînes TV et des plateformes de streaming).

Dans l'ensemble de toutes ces manifestations, la série convoque une forme particulière de l'espace-temps d'énonciation qui ne repose pas sur une expérience de type phénoménologique: la temporalité des séries ne peut être saisie que par projection dans un espace structuré spécifiquement pour la diagrammatiser; la spatialité des séries implique de complexes régimes temporels dans le processus de son interprétation. Les séries spatio-temporelles suscitent globalement des mouvements et des transformations qui ne peuvent être saisis et compris à partir des seuls phénomènes visuels, et qui échappent entre autres au principe méthodologique de la 'perception synchrone,' posé par Greimas au début de *Sémantique Structurale* (1966), principalement dans le but de procurer une base phénoménologique standard à l'identification des différences et des relations. Par conséquent, les séries impliquent un 'espace-temps' globalement aspectualisé et modalisé, en partie indépendamment de l'expérience sensorielle, et qui fait

[4] Jean-Yves Bosseur, musicologue et critique d'art, commente ainsi la diffusion et le développement de *l'esprit sériel*: "Ce qui est particulièrement significatif, c'est que son avènement coïncide historiquement avec l'apparition du nouveau roman, de l'art concret, de la 'nouvelle vague' cinématographique, voire du développement du structuralisme, de la phénoménologie dans le domaine de la philosophie, du constructivisme dans celui des mathématiques." (Jean-Yves Bosseur, *L'esprit sériel, d'un art à l'autre*, Résumé, Paris, Minerve, 2018).

appel à un imaginaire supra-sensible. La perception sérielle de l'œuvre d'art est d'une tout autre nature que celle d'un seul artefact isolé et délimité par son cadre.

Dans le cas particulier des œuvres picturales, la série manifeste des invariants et des variations. Le *schème visuel directeur* (l'invariant), *la composition singulière et non générique* de chaque tableau, les *dominantes chromatiques, texturales et topologiques*, etc., c'est la série, par sa redondance et la superposition mémorielle qu'elle suscite, qui les fait apparaître. Dans une série, la variation implique une itération, une forme aspectuelle qui comprend une facette de similitude/dissimilitude (la *répétition*) et une facette de quantification (la *multiplication*). La *répétition* peut être modulée par des substitutions ou permutations locales, portant sur un seul trait ou un petit groupe de traits (par exemple, dans l'œuvre d'Andy Warhol, les chromatismes varient soit en tonalité, soit en saturation, soit en luminosité); elle peut être également l'occasion de transformations plus conséquentes, jusqu'à compromettre même l'effet de répétition. Les deux œuvres sur lesquelles portent notre analyse se caractérisent à la fois par le nombre, la portée et la complexité combinatoire de ces transformations sérielles, qui procurent à ces dernières une identité faible du type 'air de famille,' et qui affaiblissent l'effet de répétition. Parallèlement, la *multiplication* peut adopter trois modes élémentaires: (i) restreinte, elle ne suffit pas à l'effet de répétition, et la reconnaissance de la similitude entre les maillons de la série reste faible; (ii) *médiane*, elle contribue au contraire à l'effet de répétition et à la reconnaissance de la similitude; (iii) *étendue*, elle conduit à la saturation, c'est-à-dire à un épuisement des possibilités de variations combinatoires, un seuil au-delà duquel l'itération devient monotone.

2.2. Organisations syntagmatiques

L'œuvre composée de séries implique une forme de présentation sémiotique différente de celle de chacun des tableaux. *L'apparaître* de l'œuvre picturale en séries est activé à la fois par la répétition, la variation, la superposition et la saturation par le nombre: c'est la *parution d'une métamorphose en cours*. A cet égard, l'œuvre picturale exploite deux dimensions de l'*inter-picturalité*: d'un côté, l'inter-picturalité externe, par laquelle elle convoque des figures, des modes de composition et des traitements iconiques et plastiques appartenant à la tradition ou à l'actualité des esthétiques dominantes; d'un autre côté, l'inter-picturalité interne, par laquelle ces mêmes configurations convoquées, ainsi que toutes celles propres au peintre, sont reprises, et soumises aux métamorphoses en séries.

Les métamorphoses peuvent être soumises à de nombreux et divers agencements syntagmatiques sériels. Le principe à partir duquel ces agencements peuvent être décrits est celui des *lignées métamorphiques*. Ces lignées doivent être strictement distinguées de la *séquence de présentation* déjà existante, quand il y en a une (comme pour toutes les séries numérotées de Sahabi, ou pour les rares et incomplètes séries numérotées de

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Laurent). La superposition parfaite entre une séquence de présentation et une lignée métamorphique est pleinement réalisée par exemple dans un dessin animé: l'effet de sens syntagmatique de cette superposition est celui d'une animation séquentielle de la série, mais ce n'est pas le cas dans notre corpus, car les lignées métamorphiques, reconnues par l'analyse, n'y sont presque jamais superposables aux séquences de présentation proposées par le peintre ou par le commissaire d'exposition.

Dans ce cas, la dissociation entre la séquence de présentation et la lignée métamorphique, les agencements prévisibles reposent sur les propriétés suivantes:

- Les tableaux les plus similaires dans la lignée métamorphique sont contigus ou distants dans la séquence de présentation: (i) agencements *proximaux*, (ii) agencements *distanciels*.
- Les relations entre les tableaux dans la lignée métamorphique peuvent être projetées (ou pas) sur la séquence de présentation: cette projection peut faire apparaître
  (i) soit des pertes ou des gains cumulatifs de propriétés (agencements *progressifs* ou régressifs),
  (ii) soit des pertes suivies de gains, ou l'inverse, induisant des retours entiers ou partiels au point d'origine (agencements *cycliques*),
  (iii) soit des pertes ou des gains sur plusieurs dimensions successives, induisant des phases distinctes (agencements *périodiques*).

En l'absence de projection possible de la lignée métamorphique sur la séquence de présentation, on a affaire à un agencement apparemment *aléatoire*, mais qui, de fait, implique non pas une lignée, mais un *réseau* métamorphique, inconciliable avec une séquence linéaire de présentation. Cette observation concernant la compatibilité ou l'incompatibilité entre le processus métamorphique et la séquence de présentation conduit enfin à distinguer trois cas de figure possibles:

- Compatibilité totale: les agencements syntagmatiques sont *unilinéaires*,
- Incompatibilité partielle: les agencements sont *multilinéaires* et la série est disposée en réseau (des tableaux-nœuds et des parcours-lignes)
- Incompatibilité totale: les agencements sont *multidimensionnels*, dans un réseau où sont intriquées plusieurs séries, car chaque nœud peut appartenir à plusieurs lignées ou réseaux métamorphiques.

A cet égard, les productions de Georges Laurent se prêtent tout particulièrement à des agencements *progressifs* et *multidimensionnels*, alors que celles de Medhi Sahabi adoptent systématiquement les agencements aléatoires et en réseau multilinéaire.

3. L'espace-temps multilinéaire des séries de Sahabi[5]

3.1. Tensions icono-plastiques

Lorsque Medhi Sahabi parle de son travail d'artiste, il évoque la parenté entre ses traductions et ses expositions, comme dans cet entretien donné au journal *Etemad Melli*: "Je travaille toujours sur une exposition et une traduction en même temps."[6] Pour Sahabi, l'équivalent de la traduction d'une œuvre littéraire n'est pas un tableau, mais une *exposition*, c'est-à-dire une *série rendue publique: Puzzled Cars, Junkyard Cars, Figures, Flowers, Graffiti*, etc. Pour lui, faire œuvre d'art consiste à concevoir, peindre et réaliser des *séries picturales* destinées être exposées en entier.

Chaque œuvre est ainsi un projet de *multiplication et de répétition*, d'invariance et de *variations, une séquence de métamorphoses*, en principe ouverte, mais de fait close au moment de la publication et de l'exposition. Dans l'œuvre de Sahabi, les métamorphoses en série affectent principalement la distinction et les relations entre les deux types de figures, les *figures iconiques* (propres à ce que les critiques d'art appellent la 'figuration') et les *figures plastiques* (l'organisation et la présentation matérielle et sensible des traces, des formes, des textures, et des chromatismes). Les relations entre les deux types de figures peuvent se désaccorder autant que s'accorder: la stratégie sérielle de Sahabi repose sur la tension entre ces deux dimensions.

Dans cette stratégie, des solutions plastiques, des motifs de composition sont disponibles, convoqués, combinés, reconfigurés ou révoqués la tendance à la figuration pèse sur les organisations plastiques, et inversement, la tendance à l'abstraction dissout les facteurs de reconnaissance iconique. On peut observer par exemple, à l'intérieur de chacune des séries, des sous-groupes de tableaux où on identifie les processus de décomposition ou d'altération iconique des objets, des visages, des fleurs, des oiseaux ou des automobiles. On observe à l'inverse l'affaiblissement, ou la déstabilisation ou la neutralisation de la composition en quatre carrés, caractéristique d'une tendance de l'esthétique contemporaine. Le travail des couches et des textures (brumeuses, lisses, rayées, etc.), les variations de focale (plan moyen / gros plan), l'imposition progressive des aplats chromatiques à la place des modelés (des taches rouges en aplat au lieu des pétales de fleurs en modelé) sont les expressions des déplacements de tensions et de la dégradation critique des éléments iconiques, donnant la prééminence aux figures plastiques (Fontanille 2021).

Dans la série *Graffiti*, par exemple, nous pouvons observer que des éléments sensibles (plages colorées, traces et lignes, figures, textures) semblent distribués *en épaisseur* sur plusieurs strates imaginaires. Nous ne voyons que des contrastes chromatiques,

[5] Cette analyse a fait l'objet d'une première publication, plus détaillée, dans la revue de sciences du langage de l'Université Modares de Téhéran (Fontanille 2021).
[6] *Biography*, Fondation Medhi Sahabi. Souligné par nous.

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graphiques et texturaux, sur un seul plan en deux dimensions, mais nous percevons en imagination des *couches* superposées, puis des *strates disposées en épaisseur*. Il suffit de projeter sur la stratification en couches un caractère *animé* pour aboutir à une stratification et à une interprétation actantielle, chaque strate devenant ainsi un *actant plastique*. Ces conversions de la disposition en couches picturales, à la stratification actantielle, adviennent, rappelons-le, dans les relations entre les tableaux de la série, c'est-à-dire non pas dans le plan de chaque tableau, mais dans l'espace-temps intersticiel de la série.

3.2. Graffiti: les détails du réseau de métamorphoses

La série Graffiti 1[7] offre la possibilité d'identifier de très nombreux appariements possibles.

Par exemple, les tableaux 9 et 25 (Figures 1 & 2) se composent tous deux de deux bandes horizontales, celle du haut étant dans le n°9 d'un chromatisme irrégulièrement mélangé, fortement désaturé er faiblement contrasté, au point d'effacer le graffiti, et dans le n°25, d'un chromatisme saturé et contrasté. La bande du bas est approximativement la même dans les deux tableaux, désaturée et de texture lisse, et portant le même amas de couleurs vives, résultant de la dégradation de la figure iconique de l'oiseau, et où se dissimule, en bas à droite, les traits d'un visage.

Ou encore, les tableaux 5 et 36 (Figures 3 & 4) tous deux constitués des mêmes teintes pastel délavées, des mêmes motifs, de la même bande horizontale portant le graffiti, sont faiblement différenciés par les teintes des motifs, par leur degré de

Figures 1 & 2

[7] Cette série rassemble 43 tableaux.

Figures 3 & 4

désaturation, et par l’effacement du graffiti dans le n°5. On notera l’impossibilité d’attribuer ces différences à une transformation linéaire: le motif coloré du haut se désature du n°5 vers le n°36, alors que le graffiti s’efface du n°36 vers le n°5. Observons enfin que le groupe ‘oiseau + tête,’ entre les n°9-25 (Figures 1 & 2) et les n°5-36 (Figures 3 & 4), passe du bas vers le haut, et se désature en même temps.

D’autres nombreux appariements sont envisageables, mais tous témoignent en faveur d’une lecture multilinéaire en réseau: les tableaux appariés ne se succèdent qu’à distance dans la série, et même à une grande distance (9/25, 8/20, 5/36…) dans la version fixée récemment (2021) pour l’exposition du Musée d’Art Contemporain de Téhéran, et leurs appariements récurrents multiplient les possibles parcours de transformations, qui se croisent et se dispersent dans le réseau. La disposition linéaire de la présentation en séquence numérotée, quelle qu’elle soit, contraint le spectateur à faire des appariements à distance, à inhiber les appariements proximaux, quelle que soit la nature de ses parcours sémiotiques, de ses déplacements dans le lieu d’exposition, de ses déplacements oculaires sur un écran, ou de ses déplacements mentaux dans la mémoire acquise lors de la lecture.[8] En outre, l’agencement syntagmatique est aussi *aléatoire*, puisqu’aucune séquence linéaire de présentation ne peut prendre en charge une lignée de métamorphoses (par exemple les degrés de désiconisation des oiseaux, ou des têtes), sans occulter toutes les autres.

En somme, l’impossible coïncidence entre la lignée métamorphique et la séquence de présentation, qu’elle quelle soit, est un défi lancé à la construction de l’espace-temps imaginaire de la signification de la série.

[8] La distinction proposée par Umberto Eco, entre ratio *facilis* et ratio *difficilis*, pourrait être ici sollicitée, mais elle ne suffit pas à rendre compte des pressions qui s’exercent soit sur la scansion de l’espace-temps de la linéarité, soit sur l’émergence d’un espace-temps multilinéaire et multidimensionnel.

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Cet espace-temps multilinéaire et aléatoire induit une sémiose très particulière: pour l'association entre des expressions et des contenus plastiques, par exemple, le parcours d'interprétation se concentre (c'est le noyau des variations) sur l'association entre les *couches picturales* (des expressions regroupées) et les *strates actantielles* (des formes de contenu, des intentionnalités imaginaires). Cette particularité de la sémiose conduit à distinguer quatre types de couches pertinentes: (1) les couches de l'écriture du graffiti, (2) les couches marquées par un creusement, où apparaissent en enfoncement des figures, visages ou oiseaux, (3) les aplats chromatiques et leurs textures intégrées ou surajoutées, (4) les couches réservées aux traits épais, barres et bandes étroites de couleurs fortement contrastées.

Les tensions plastiques entre les types de couches, voire les impossibilités iconiques, ne peuvent se résoudre que si les couches sont senties et imaginées comme *autonomes*, comme des *strates*, et la dynamique qui en résulte prend alors la forme des *confrontations actantielles* entre les strates. Les relations dans l'expression plastique étant alors associées à des interactions entre entités animées, des 'actants' picturaux se disputent en quelque sorte des places et des positions relatives dans l'épaisseur stratifiée. Cette épaisseur est actantielle et modale, en ce sens qu'elle met en tension la strate de l'*ostension maximale*, vers le spectateur, et la strate de l'*enfouissement* maximal, à son opposé; *actantielle*, en raison du caractère animé attribué aux strates; *modale*, parce que l'ostension et l'enfouissement sont des figures dérivées des positions véridictoires (vérité ostensible, secret par disparition). *Ostension et enfouissement* sont les deux pôles de l'isotopie dominante du contenu plastique dans la série *Graffiti*.

Le lecteur-spectateur identifie les couches et les tensions entre elles, imagine des rapports de force entre les strates actantielles, et peut donc finalement, en synthèse, percevoir une compétition pour l'ostension visuelle: il identifie d'abord les couches qui sont recouvertes, repoussées, occultées par les autres, et celles qui s'avancent, qui recouvrent et accèdent à une position d'ostension. Ces tensions sont alors interprétées comme des *mouvements dans une épaisseur constituée de strates en compétition*, qui impliquent un autre type d'espace-temps que celui des parcours multilinéaires de la synthèse sensible: d'un côté, un réseau, pour les parcours sensibles multilinéaires, et de l'autre côté, une stratification, pour la dynamique et la compétition actantielles.

Dans les séries de Sahabi, on compte donc trois types différents d'espace-temps: (1) celui de la série linéaire (la séquence de présentation) des objets peints, fermée, et soumise à un rythme figé, celui d'une numérotation continue; (2) celui des parcours multilinéaires, retours en arrière ou projections en avant, et synthèses sensibles, et enfin (3) celui de la sémiose proprement dite, avec émergence d'un contenu, et l'advenue du saisissement artistique qu'elle suscite, et qui, dans la série *Graffiti*, aboutissent à une stratification orientée à la fois vers l'ostension en surface, et vers l'enfoncement en profondeur.

Mais cette sémiose n'est pas stable, car ces trois types d'espace-temps se conjuguent. D'un côté, les parcours multilinéaires tissent un réseau dont les nœuds sont les différents tableaux de la série. D’un autre côté, la métamorphose des dispositifs de strates en compétition, tout au long de la série linéaire interdit à ce réseau de se stabiliser, notamment en une hiérarchie. C’est pourquoi l’espace-temps global ainsi obtenu *pour chaque série* s’apparenterait à *un réseau multilinéaire fermé*, un *quasi-rhizome*, au sens de Deleuze et Guattari (1972 et 1980), c’est-à-dire une structure sans hiérarchie, acentrée et en métamorphose constante, susceptible de se stabiliser localement et provisoirement (ces zones stabilisées sont appelées ‘plateaux’ par Deleuze et Guattari). Il resterait à caractériser ce que pourrait être la morphologie et la dynamique d’un espace-temps rhizomatique; elle devrait notamment interroger les équilibres et déséquilibres entre espace et temps, et caractériser respectivement les ‘plateaux’ de stabilisation à dominante temporelle et ceux à dominante spatiale; elle doit également comporter un principe de contamination (plutôt que de combinaison), parallèle à celui de la ‘reprise’ de telle ou telle figure iconique ou plastique, contamination qui se traduit en chaque occurrence par l’adaptation aux propriétés locales des configurations qui accueillent la migration des figures en question. Dans ce quasi-rhizome des parcours interprétatifs, il n’y a ni prototype, ni modèle originel, ni point d’entrée et de sortie, mais en chaque tableau, un nœud fonctionnant comme tête de réseau, pris dans le tissage de tous les autres. Chaque lignée de métamorphoses réorganise donc les équilibres du quasi-rhizome.

4. L’espace-temps progressif et multidirectionnel des séries de Georges Laurent

Chez Georges Laurent, les séries ne sont ni fermées, ni figées, ni finalisées par la perspective d’une exposition. Il y a certes des séries bien identifiables, et ce sont pour l’essentiel des séries de transformations progressives, mais surtout chaque tableau peut appartenir à plusieurs séries, de sorte que les parcours de migration des formes et des compositions picturales sont difficiles à reconstituer: il n’y a pas d’autre solution, pour l’analyse, que de sélectionner, d’extraire et d’isoler provisoirement des groupements de tableaux. Du côté de la production de l’œuvre (par exemple, sous forme de numérotation), nous avons déjà constaté que la sérialité explicite est rare et lacunaire. Du côté de la réception et de l’interprétation, les séries et les parcours du spectateur et de l’analyste sont entièrement soumis à leurs focalisations et hypothèses de travail. Chaque tableau pouvant participer à plusieurs lignées de métamorphoses, nous avons affaire à un agencement *multidimensionnel*.

Par conséquent, la sérialité implique ici un espace-temps ouvert sur de nombreuses dimensions et non hiérarchisable; concrètement, la possibilité de concevoir une exposition, une publication, et un archivage est un véritable défi. Nous avons ici surtout pour objectif, par comparaison avec les séries de Sahabi, d’identifier les effets du caractère globalement erratique de la construction sérielle: de nombreuses séries sont identifiables, des migrations de figures et de compositions sont constatées, mais étant

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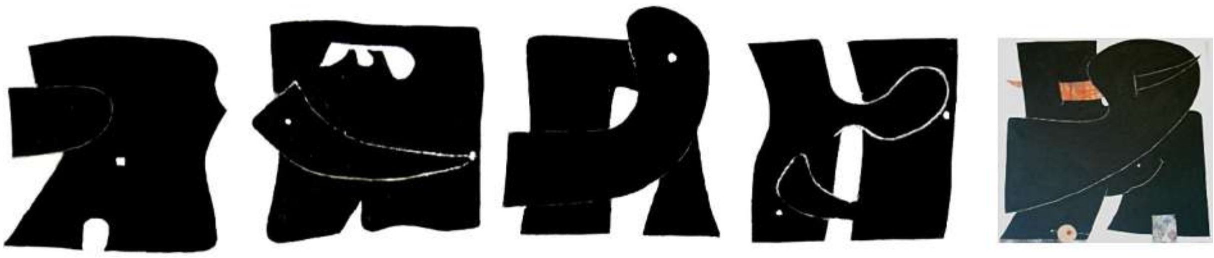
donné la taille du corpus, il serait même imprudent de décider, à ce stade, qu'il s'agit d'un mode de création systématique.

Voici quelques séries identifiables qui permettent de faire des hypothèses sur la nature des agencements syntagmatiques dominants:

- Métamorphoses de formes noires sur fond blanc[9]

A partir de formes noires évoquant des caractères typographiques, le peintre exploite la composante plastique de l'expression de toute écriture en lui associant des contenus plastiques: les conditions de la superposition et d'interpénétration des formes, notamment, sont progressivement déclinées, diversifiées, testées. Quatre propriétés *plastiques de l'expression* y concourent: (1) les formes verticales sont traversées par les formes horizontales; (2) les tracés en réserve blanche délimitent les formes ou parties de formes traversantes; (3) les parties de bords traversants et non traversants des formes traversantes sont similaires (une légère irrégularité continue); (4) les bords de formes discontinus (donc 'derrière'), car interrompus par une autre forme, s'opposent aux bords de formes continus (donc 'devant'), car non interrompus.

Les *contenus plastiques* sont des thématiques prédicatives associées aux différents modes de traversement; dans l'ordre de notre sélection: (5) superposition, (6) disposition en strates, (7) pénétration, (8) interpénétration, (9) encastrement avec liaison par chevillage. Les images ne comportent aucune numérotation; les caractères d'écriture ne sont pas agencés en alphabet. Mais globalement, et irrégulièrement, la série manifeste une même transformation; selon l'orientation: soit une émergence progressive des caractères d'écriture enfouis dans des configurations plastiques, soit inversement une désiconisation de leur forme-type, et une libération de leur potentiel plastique, permettant d'aboutir à une sémiose originale. Dans les deux cas, il n'y a pas à proprement parler de progressivité, et la série se lit globalement comme une reprise cyclique des mêmes tensions entre la forme-type des caractères et la configuration plastique correspondante.



Figures 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9

[9] Cette série comprend 45 tableaux.

Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 & 15

Figures 16 & 17

● Empilements étagés [10]

Les empilements étagés sont obtenus à partir d’une forme allongée verticalement, qui peut être (1) une figure iconique anthropomorphe ‘en mouvement,’ et dont les membres se distinguent donc du tronc, (2) une figure iconique anthropomorphe statique et réduite à des protubérances arrondies distribuées verticalement, (3) une configuration plastique qui comporte plusieurs ‘étages’ d’excroissances anguleuses, (4) une configuration dont les ‘étages’ sont des formes autonomes, (5) une configuration dont les étages sont des formes qui s’interpénètrent et se chevauchent en se croisant de manière paradoxale, et enfin (6) une configuration de formes à la fois empilées et encastrées les unes dans les autres.

L’agencement syntagmatique qui en résulte est de type globalement *progressif*: il procède, à partir de figures humanoïdes, par effacement successif de leurs traits anthropomorphes (disparition des formes arrondies, et des excroissances rattachées de manière continue à une forme centrale, etc.), puis par substitution de traits plastiques non anthropomorphes (végétal, technique), et surtout par reconfiguration des relations entre composants (méréologie). Cet agencement aboutit en effet à des configurations plastiques dont les parties autonomes sont associées par un montage qui n’a plus de caractère anthropomorphe, et qui peut enfin être mis en relation avec des contenus plastique: étagement, tressage par interpénétration, emboîtement par encastrement.

[10] Cette série comprend 22 tableaux.

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Pour confirmation de l'existence d'une nombreuse lignée de figures à protubérances horizontales arrondies ancrées à une forme verticale, voilà deux échantillons (ci-dessus), dont le caractère anthropomorphe féminoïde suggère une relation inter-picturale externe avec l'une des expressions les plus connues du cubisme: la suspension des effets de perspective et la conjugaison sur le plan originel des points de vue complémentaires.

● Triangle et figure ronde concave [11]

Figures 18, 19, 20, 21 & 22

Les combinaisons entre les triangles pointés verticalement et les formes arrondies concaves, posées sur la pointe, le tout lié au sol par des «roulettes», sont à la fois extrêmement nombreuses, et d'une grande diversité d'expansion et de migration dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre. Le montage qui serait le point d'origine de la série – de fait une ébauche graphique, à peine une esquisse – est de type anthropomorphe: une tête (la forme horizontale supérieure), un corps dont la concavité est dirigée vers le haut, des jambes, d'abord parallèles, puis triangulées, avec une séparation du triangle en deux secteurs verticaux, par une forme allongée. Les variations concernent principalement (1) la forme supérieure (en prolongement d'une des branches de la forme concave → autonome), (2) concavité fermée → ouverte, (3) la forme des jambes (rectangle ouvert → triangle), (4) le nombre de 'roulettes,' et enfin (5) les chromatismes.

[11] Cette série comprend 24 tableaux ou dessins.

L'agencement syntagmatique de la séquence de métamorphoses est celui de la conquête de l'autonomie plastique: le triangle à la place des jambes séparées, les roulettes alignées à la place des orteils stylisés, les chromatismes de plus en plus saturés. Mais cette syntagmatique reste globale, sans effet sur l'ordre linéaire, de sorte que la séquence des métamorphoses ne peut être stabilisée.[12] En outre, nous en proposons une lecture orientée vers la désiconisation et la désanthropisation, sur le fond d'un stéréotype selon lequel les versions esquissées et à expression raréfiée précèderaient les versions à expression dense et diversifiée. La lecture inverse étant également possible, nous vérifions ici une hypothèse antérieure: face à un peintre-énonciateur qui assume faiblement la sérialité, c'est à l'interprète d'assumer cette dernière. Assumons!

En outre, chacun des formants composants participe à d'autres séries, qui permettent d'en apprécier soit la généalogie, soit le devenir et la signification projective. Le triangle des 'jambes' s'autonomise ailleurs, et la forme triangulaire participe à de tout autres compositions. De même, les 'roulettes' commencent dans d'autres tableaux comme des orteils et des doigts iconiques, se transforment en petits ronds-doigts et orteils désiconisés, et aboutissent à ces petites roues sur lesquelles de nombreuses compositions, sans anthropomorphisme apparent, sont néanmoins supposées pouvoir se déplacer.

Comme autre exemple de cette dispersion des lignées métamorphiques, on observe, dans d'autres séries, d'autres rôles plastiques du triangle. Voici l'une de ces autres séries, où le triangle a la forme-type géométrique, et où il entretient d'autres relations avec une forme concave.[13]

Figures 23, 24, 25, & 26

[12] Le peintre a numéroté une partie de cette série, mais, semble-t-il, pour trois sous-groupes de tableaux. L'agencement de l'ensemble n'en est que plus instable.
[13] Cette série comporte 11 tableaux.

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Dans ces quatre tableaux, on notera que (1) la concavité est dissymétrique, avec un évidemment oblique régulier, et qu'elle est systématiquement traversée par la forme anguleuse dans son évidement, (2) le triangle traversant peut appartenir à un quasi-rectangle portant à sa base des roulettes, et (3) ces deux formes sont systématiquement associées, dans cette configuration-là, à une troisième forme autonome et superposée, de couleur différente fortement contrastée (rouge), verticale, rectiligne d'un côté, et à protubérances de l'autre côté, dont la généalogie féminoïde a déjà été signalée (cf. supra).

La précédente série avait un ancrage anthropomorphe apparent, celle-ci aussi, mais les traits anthropomorphes ne sont plus agencés dans la même configuration, et distribués sur plusieurs. Cet autre groupe de tableaux avec triangle, forme concave et forme anthropomorphe autrement distribuées et agencées, est une série à part, mais elle participe à la même lignée métamorphique que la précédente série. En effet cette série participe elle-même à la fois à la série des configurations traversantes et pénétrantes, et à celle des configurations à protubérances arrondies associées à une forme verticale (les petites figures rouges) qui, comme nous l'avons vu plus haut, est de caractère anthropomorphe féminoïde. On appréhende ici la complexité de l'analyse sérielle: chaque série pouvant accueillir des composants qui participe à d'autres séries, l'analyste doit pouvoir faire la différence entre des coïncidences peu significatives, qui témoignent uniquement du caractère fini et forcément limité du répertoire plastique du peintre, et de véritables lignées métamorphiques.

La différence est d'une réelle pertinence sémiotique, car dans le premier cas, on ne trouvera pas, en matière de contenu, de conséquence de ces intersections occasionnelles, alors que dans le deuxième cas, la lignée métamorphique incite à rechercher les contenus communs et sous-jacents. C'est ainsi que dans la lignée qui articule dans l'expression le triangle, la forme concave et la forme anthropomorphe, on peut faire l'hypothèse d'une sorte de méditation picturale sur les avatars combinés du corps humain et des formes géométriques de base. La dernière série que nous commentons ici manipule des formes qui appartiennent à la fois à la précédente série 'triangle + forme concave,' et à la série des empilements étagés plus ou moins anthropomorphes. La confrontation permet alors d'identifier un groupe de transformations singulier: à la disposition anthropomorphe (montage vertical sur une seule couche) du triangle et de la forme concave, est substituée une disposition traversante sur deux couches (devant/derrière), ce qui neutralise son caractère anthropomorphe; cette neutralisation est pourtant compensée par l'insertion de la forme rouge à protubérances étagées, sur un troisième plan, dont la présentation ostensive, en surimpression sur les autres couches, est confortée par un chromatisme chaud qui 'avance' vers le spectateur. En somme, dans ces réseaux et parcours multidimensionnels, des opérations de constitution ou de réparation peuvent à tout moment intervenir, au profit de la reconnaissance d'une isotopie du contenu (les avatars géométriques du corps humain).

Si on part du principe que le nœud problématique des métamorphoses est l’association et la tension entre les manifestations respectives des sémioses iconiques et des sémioses plastiques, on doit alors observer que ces manifestations sont, dans les séries, alternativement *patentes* et *latentes*: quand la manifestation de l’effet iconique de type anthropomorphe passe en latence, il peut être indirectement réactivé par une manifestation plastique patente, comme celle de la figure rouge à protubérances étagées.

Les séries de Georges Laurent sont presque toujours globalement progressives, dans leur conception d’ensemble, et souvent dans leur agencement linéaire. Mais elles sont aussi bien souvent, et en même temps, multidimensionnelles, comme on vient de le montrer, chaque série pouvant comporter un maillon d’une ou plusieurs autres, qui elles-mêmes comportent des configurations prises encore dans d’autres séries. Ce caractère multidimensionnel implique un espace-temps doté d’*une configuration globale d’intrication*, selon laquelle toute métamorphose de l’une des séries peut avoir des incidences sur plusieurs autres à distance, sans association intentionnelle et directe. Cette intrication est en outre renforcée par les modes latents et patents de la manifestation: une figure *patente* de la féminité, appartenant à une lignée de métamorphoses étrangère à la lignée étudiée, y réactive néanmoins un caractère anthropomorphe qui était devenu *latent*.

Cette configuration d’intrication aurait alors quelque parenté avec un *rhizome* deleuzien, mais dans le cas de Georges Laurent, à hauteur de l’œuvre tout entière, ou du moins d’un ensemble de réseaux de séries.

Le concept de rhizome a été inspiré à Deleuze et Guattari[14] par les travaux de l’anthropologue André-Georges Haudricourt,[15] qui a eu l’intuition, et a trouvé des preuves de tous ordres, de l’existence de grands modes d’interactions transversaux dans l’existence du monde vivant, et en particulier du monde humain. Il en vient à opposer la culture des plantes à racines (céréales, arbres, etc.) et celle des plantes à rhizomes (plantes à tubercules, iguame, herbes diverses, etc.), il constate la parenté de cette distinction avec celle des pratiques humaines (par exemple les modes d’élevage et de conduite des troupeaux: d’un côté, des moutons avec berger omniprésent, et, de l’autre, des rennes sans guide ni protecteur).

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[14] Une autre source d’inspiration avouée, avec commentaires dans *Mille Plateaux*, est l’article des mathématiciens Rosenstiehl & Petitot (1974), mais sans relation directe avec le rhizome.

[15] André-Georges Haudricourt, à l’origine ingénieur agronome, était un chercheur atypique, multidisciplinaire et en grande partie autodidacte. Il n’était donc guère enclin à de grandes synthèses surplombantes, et la question du rhizome apparaît plusieurs fois dans son œuvre, parfois même sans être directement mentionnée. Le point de départ de sa réflexion apparaît dans André-Georges Haudricourt, *L’Homme et les Plantes cultivées*, Paris, Métailié, 1987.

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Deleuze et Guattari extrapolent un usage philosophique de cette distinction entre deux modes d'interaction, qui deviennent ainsi utilisables pour distinguer des manières de penser, de conceptualiser et de discourir. Les caractéristiques d'un rhizome deleuzien sont l'ouverture, l'absence de hiérarchie, de centre fixe, ainsi que de point d'entrée et de sortie: chaque nœud du réseau est le point de départ pour des connexions multidirectionnelles et multidimensionnelles, et ces ensembles de connexions sont reconfigurés à chaque nouveau nœud. Il en va ainsi des séries de séries de Georges Laurent: chaque tableau peut être le point de départ de connexions multiples, et ainsi de suite.[16]

5. Ouverture, en guise de conclusion

Quelques hypothèses de travail, deux peintres peu ou mal connus, un petit nombre d'analyses sérielles: il y a ici tout juste de quoi poser un problème, et tracer quelques directions de recherches. Le problème est celui des opérations sémiotiques qui sont à la disposition du spectateur et de l'analyste d'une œuvre picturale: quand l'objet visé

[16] Le plus simple est de lire Deleuze et Guattari, pour percevoir les dimensions anthropologiques, épistémologiques, culturelles et politiques de la pensée rhizomatique, et pour comprendre pourquoi et comment une œuvre comme celle de Georges Laurent se prête à une telle lecture: " […] à la différence des arbres ou de leurs racines, le rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec un autre point quelconque, et chacun de ses traits ne renvoie pas nécessairement à des traits de même nature, il met en jeu des régimes de signes très différents et même des états de non-signes. Le rhizome ne se laisse ramener ni à l'Un ni au multiple. […] Il n'est pas fait d'unités, mais de dimensions, ou plutôt de directions mouvantes. Il n'a pas de commencement ni de fin, mais toujours un milieu, par lequel il pousse et déborde.[…] A l'opposé d'une structure qui se définit par un ensemble de points et de positions, de rapports binaires entre ces points et de relations biunivoques entre ces positions, le rhizome n'est fait que de lignes : lignes de segmentarité, de stratification, comme dimensions, mais aussi ligne de fuite ou de déterritorialisation comme dimension maximale d'après laquelle, en la suivant, la multiplicité se métamorphose en changeant de nature. […] Le rhizome est une antigénéalogie. C'est une mémoire courte, ou une antimémoire. […] Contre les systèmes centrés (même polycentrés), à communication hiérarchique et liaisons préétablies, le rhizome est un système acentré, non hiérarchique et non signifiant, sans Général, sans mémoire organisatrice ou automate central, uniquement défini par une circulation d'états. Ce qui est en question dans le rhizome, c'est un rapport avec la sexualité, mais aussi avec l'animal, avec le végétal, avec le monde, avec la politique, avec le livre, avec les choses de la nature et de l'artifice, tout différent du rapport arborescent : toutes sortes de "devenirs". Un plateau est toujours au milieu, ni début ni fin. Un rhizome est fait de plateaux. […] Nous appelons "plateau" toute multiplicité connectable avec d'autres tiges souterraines superficielles, de manière à former et étendre un rhizome. Nous écrivons ce livre comme un rhizome. Nous l'avons composé de plateaux. […] Chaque plateau peut être lu à n'importe quelle place, et mis en rapport avec n'importe quel autre. […] En aucun cas nous ne prétendons au titre d'une science. Nous ne connaissons pas plus de scientificité que d'idéologie, mais seulement des agencements. Et il n'y a que des agencements machiniques de désir, comme des agencements collectifs d'énonciation. […] Un agencement dans sa multiplicité travaille à la fois forcément sur des flux sémiotiques, des flux matériels et des flux sociaux (indépendamment de la reprise qui peut en être faite dans un corpus théorique ou scientifique). On n'a plus une tripartition entre un champ de réalité, le monde, un champ de représentation, le livre, et un champ de subjectivité, l'auteur. Mais un agencement met en en connexion certaines multiplicités prises dans chacun de ces ordres, si bien qu'un livre n'a pas sa suite dans le livre suivant, ni son objet dans le monde, ni son sujet dans un ou plusieurs auteurs. […] Ne jamais faire racine, ni en planter, bien que ce soit difficile de ne pas retomber dans ces vieux procédés. […] Pourquoi est-ce si difficile? C'est déjà une question de sémiotique perspective. Pas facile de percevoir les choses par le milieu, et non de haut en bas ou inversement, de gauche à droite ou inversement: essayez et vous verrez que tout change. […]" Deleuze et Gattari, *Mille-Plateaux* (1980: 31-34).

est une image, un tableau, la construction s’appuie sur l’évidence phénoménologique du plan originel et des limites du cadre, mais quand l’objet visé est une *œuvre picturale*, nous devons faire l’hypothèse qu’elle doit être soumise à une analyse sérielle, nous perdons l’appui d’un plan originel unique, et nous sommes conduits à supposer un espace-temps non linéaire et non planaire, propre à un imaginaire pictural. Un tel espace-temps pourrait être dénoncé comme spéculatif, s’il n’était étayé par l’analyse des dépendances et corrélations du plan de l’expression. Un tel imaginaire pourrait se voir refuser un statut sémiotique, si ces agencements multilinéaires et multidimensionnels d’expressions ne pouvaient être associées à des plans du contenu. Mais ils sont bien respectivement empirique (et non spéculatif) et sémiotique (et pas seulement expressif).

Quant aux directions de recherches, ouvertes par l’hypothèse de travail d’une nécessaire analyse sérielle, elles concernent principalement les interactions entre les deux dimensions iconique et plastique, dont nous avons pu suive en détail les tensions, les conflits, les accords et désaccords. Mais, plus généralement, dans la perspective d’une anthropologie sémiotique, une autre direction de recherche se dessine, en prolongement de la précédente: les interactions entre l’iconique et le plastique ont également pour enjeu la déconstruction et la reconstruction morphologique, et notamment celle des aspects biomorphes (anthropomorphes, zoomorphes, etc.) ou matériomorphes,[17] que l’œuvre picturale s’approprie et qu’elle soumet à ses métamorphoses.

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La crise d'accumulation du passé au risque de la mort des sémiophores

BY: **Daniel Jacobi**

ABSTRACT

Many museums have undertaken to dispose of their collections. They are forced to do so by the overcrowding of their storerooms and the real estate pressure in the centers of the large cities where they are located. Should all or part of the collections be discarded, donated, or digitized? Because of the detailed inventory, the ten-yearly recoiling, and the creation of the French Joconde database, supposed to gather all the descriptions and photographic reproductions of all the works and items of the 1,100 museums in France, the management of the collections has become a colossal task that may never be completed. There is a high risk that the disappearance of the collections will be accompanied by the de-semiotization of the museological masterpieces created and set up in the different types of exhibition discourse in the course of the history of museums and their exhibitions.

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1. Introduction

Les professionnels des musées n'ont sans doute pas tous lu l'ouvrage si bien illustré *Vertige de la liste* d'Umberto Eco (Eco 2009). Pourtant, eux qui gèrent des collections qui comptent des centaines d'items (des milliers pour les musées d'archéologie et même des millions pour les muséums d'histoire naturelle) ne rêvent que de les augmenter et de les faire connaître au plus grand nombre. Mais, comme les collections, précise la loi française, sont juridiquement *"imprescriptibles et inaliénables"* et

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qu'une de leur priorité est d'étendre et d'enrichir leurs fonds, on devine que le vertige les guette ou bien est sur le point de les atteindre. Ils se sont habitués à travailler dans cette ambiance d'encombrement, de saturation ou de démesure.

Le musée est, par définition, une institution qui possède, entrepose et valorise des collections. Plus étendues et riches sont les collections et plus la réputation du musée et l'étendue des valorisations potentielles de ce stock sont riches et multiples. Quand communément l'on dit que l'on *visite un musée*, on ne découvre en fait qu'une infime partie de l'institution, celle qui est ouverte au public (par opposition aux espaces réservés aux professionnels et aux chercheurs). C'est-à-dire l'exposition permanente (appelée souvent, de façon métaphorique, *collection*, mot très réducteur pour cet emploi). L'exposition permanente du musée (ou *collection*) n'est que la présentation sobre, ordonnée selon des principes taxonomiques invariants, d'une sélection de quelques dizaines de pièces ou d'œuvres extraites d'immenses réserves dans lesquelles les collections sont entassées. En effet, la plupart des collections sont stockées sur place dans des réserves qui, quant à elles, sont interdites d'accès. Pourtant, leur aménagement est crucial et elles ont bien changé au cours de ces trente dernières années. Les réserves destinées à abriter les collections sont devenues une annexe de luxe: excentrées, climatisées, automatisées, équipées d'un mobilier spécifique qui optimise l'espace toujours insuffisant et qui peine à tout contenir, elles sont parfois robotisées pour faciliter la recherche d'un item. Voire pour faciliter sa monstration dans le cas des réserves visitables.

Plusieurs grands musées (le *Musée des arts et métiers* à Paris, *Confluence* à Lyon ou le MUCEM à Marseille) ont construit des bâtiments nouveaux pour leurs réserves. Enterrées, bunkérisées et implantées dans des sites élus pour être au-dessus du niveau prévu même lors d'une crue millénaire des grands fleuves, elles font le pari de l'éternité. *Le Louvre*, comme d'autres grands musées, a pour projet de déménager ses réserves hors de Paris (à Lens soit, à 200 Km de la capitale, où il a déjà créé une annexe appelée le *Louvre-Lens*).

2. Les collections menacées

A priori, les musées pour revendiquer leur spécificité doivent prendre appui sur des collections prestigieuses (ou pas) mais le plus souvent multiples, très étendues et donc encombrantes. Or, les musées et leurs réserves, pour d'évidentes raisons pratiques, sont situés dans les centres des grandes villes européennes… où le prix du mètre carré atteint des coûts vertigineux. C'est pourquoi les gestionnaires leur demandent de justifier le bien fondé de cette occupation, certes culturelle, mais par nature non rentable économiquement. Et plus encore quand ces collections ne contiennent que ce que les ethnologues appellent des 'objets témoins' c'est-à-dire des pièces artisanales ou industrielles et qui n'ont pas un caractère de rareté ou des qualités esthétiques remarquables puisqu'ils ont été fabriqués en série, parfois à des milliers d'exemplaires. Que faire de ces collections?

Deux options se font face aujourd'hui: garder les collections car elles font partie de l'arsenal du musée et qu'elles peuvent devenir une ressource avantageuse (Jacobi 2019). Et cela surtout au moment où le paradigme de la priorité aux grandes expositions temporaires prestigieuses, sortes de blockbuster très couteux, vacille. Comme on a déjà beaucoup produit des grandes expositions monographiques de peintres renommés, il est difficile d'innover et la concurrence entre grandes expositions est devenue internationale et acharnée. Ainsi, l'exposition *Vermeer* a ouvert en 2023 à Amsterdam dans laquelle sont exposés 28 des 37 tableaux peints au cours de sa vie, tableaux qui sont possédés par d'autres musées européens mais aussi américains. Le coût de cette exposition, à cause du transport, des assurances et des restaurations de certains tableaux, est astronomique; on y vient, en réservant son ticket d'entrée longtemps à l'avance, du monde entier. La réservation est obligatoire afin de respecter la jauge du nombre de visites quotidiennes autorisées et ainsi assurer le confort des visiteurs et la fluidité des visites guidées. Au passage, il faut remarquer que les tableaux du grand maître hollandais du dix-septième siècle sont tous visibles en ligne et certains même dans le célèbre programme *Google Art* en très haute définition. Ne serait-il pas préférable pour les grands musées de mobiliser des pièces moins connues et jamais exposées? Ou encore, pourquoi pas, exhiber des œuvres extraites de leurs propres collections, habituellement cachées dans leurs réserves mais qui sont gratuites. Ce qui répondrait à deux critiques devenues communes: diminuer le coût de production des expositions et leur empreinte carbone…

3. Le pari impossible de l'exhibition des réserves

Montrer des collections est de peu d'intérêt... Certes, il y a des exceptions comme les collections de Walter Benjamin qui ont été montrées dans plusieurs musées européens (Wizisla 2011). Intimes et peu connues, elles révèlent beaucoup de la personnalité secrète de cet éminent intellectuel.

Pourtant, dans un certain nombre de musées, il a été décidé d'exposer les réserves. C'est le cas du *Brooklyn Museum* à New-York. Parallèlement au parcours de l'exposition permanente, tout le reste de la collection de ce musée est exposée à touche-touche sur des étagères métalliques d'entreposage partant du sol pour atteindre plus de 3 mètres de hauteur. Elles sont protégées par un grillage à larges mailles qui laisse apercevoir les pièces bien rangées par catégories. Un dispositif numérique

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mobile, remis à l'entrée aux visiteurs qui en font la demande, les invite à rechercher et repérer certaines catégories d'items qui ne sont visibles qu'au sein de cette ribambelle. Outre les informations minimales autonymiques, les objets sont parfois commentés très sommairement. Peu de visiteurs s'y promènent et encore moins recherchent tel ou tel item. C'est un peu comme si cette syntagmatique de l'exposition par entassement ôtait au public toute envie de regarder ou d'observer.

Deux autres exemples permettent de confirmer cette observation. Il y a quelques années, le département *des Antiquités Egyptiennes du Louvre* avait adopté, pour le renouvellement d'une partie de son exposition permanente, un parti pris peu commun. Au lieu d'exhiber une seule pièce, bien éclairée et commentée comme il est de tradition pour une pièce rare et un chef d'œuvre, c'est-à-dire comme un paradigme puissant et fort isolé de ce qui est montré avant comme de ce qui exposé après, il était accompagné de plusieurs pièces, soit similaires à ce paradigme, soit tout à fait comparables. Ce parti pris, affirmaient les concepteurs de cette nouvelle mise en exposition, était de transformer les conceptions naïves ou erronées du public à propos des vestiges égyptiens vieux de plus de 3000 ans. Ils ne sont ni rares, ni toujours prestigieux. Ainsi, dans la section consacrée à ce qu'on ajoutait à la tombe d'un prince pour son voyage dans l'au-delà, était exposé un curieux exemplaire de momie de chat au niveau de la ligne de regard des visiteurs. Mais il y avait aussi une dizaine d'autres chats momifiés alignés, en bas et visibles en dessous de l'expôt vedette. Une façon de banaliser l'objet exhibé et de le priver de son halo de mystère.

Dernier exemple de la collection qui neutralise le discours d'exposition. A la *grande Halle de La Villette*, une exposition temporaire de design ayant pour thème le design de la vie quotidienne des années 70-80 avait cru surprendre les visiteurs en choisissant une scénographie qui singeait le déballage d'un marché aux puces. Pas des puces chic comme les étals de brocanteurs qui sélectionnent des objets rares, parfois signés et tous côtés; mais une scénographie qui mimait le déballage des vides greniers des quartiers populaires où on ne trouve que des vêtements de seconde main et des objets de bazar ou de supermarché pour un prix qui ne dépasse jamais la dizaine d'euros.

Donc les objets les plus célèbres des années 70-80 comme le stylo-bille Bic, la machine à écrire Valentina d'Olivetti, la bouteille en verre de Coca–cola de Maurice Lœwy, le tabouret en plastique Tam tam de Henry Massonet, les premiers petits ordinateurs cubiques Macintosh étaient déposés pêle-mêle et en vrac sur une vulgaire bâche chinoise étalée sur le sol. Ni étiquette, ni numéro pour les identifier. Seul un dépliant remis au visiteur à l'entrée lui fournissait la liste des objets au design remarquable. A lui de se débrouiller pour les retrouver et s'en délecter. Autant dire que ce fut un échec et une grande déception…

4. L'inventaire de la collection, raison graphique du musée

Jack Goody, dans son génial essai sur la *Raison graphique*, suggère que l'invention de l'écriture et la possibilité d'utiliser des listes et des tableaux a profondément transformé le mode d'utilisation de la mémoire humaine et au-delà du mode de pensée (Goody 1979). La mémoire de travail, dispensée de tâches fastidieuses et encombrantes, peut dés lors être utilisée pour des activités intellectuelles plus nobles de calcul ou de création. C'est précisément cette fonction que tient dans les musées ce qu'on appelle l'*inventaire*. Les opérations d'inventaire consistent à inscrire la totalité des biens composant les collections du musée sans introduire une quelconque hiérarchie dans des listes numérotées qui se doivent d'être exhaustives. L'inventaire se matérialise sur un registre papier infalsifiable (dit *inventaire réglementaire*). Cette opération permet donc de définir précisément les contours de la collection (nature des biens, nom de l'inventeur, lieu de collecte, date d'entrée, état, etc.). Le propriétaire et le gestionnaire des collections peuvent opposer ce document à toute personne qui détiendrait des biens appartenant au musée et s'appuyer juridiquement sur eux pour introduire une action en revendication. Les organes de contrôle de l'Etat et des collectivités territoriales et la représentation nationale (services d'inspection et de police, cour et chambres régionales des comptes, commissions du Parlement) peuvent également s'y référer pour s'assurer de la bonne gestion de toutes les collections (musées, bibliothèques, monuments) du domaine public.

Pas de collection publique sans inventaire précis et exhaustif donc. Mais l'inventaire n'est pas une opération ponctuelle. Les opérations d'inventaire n'ont d'efficacité que si elles sont doublées évidemment d'opérations de marquage et de localisation (le numéro sous lequel le bien est inscrit dans l'inventaire doit être reporté sur le bien lui-même; on doit également enregistrer sa localisation topographique de rangement dans les réserves). En outre, la loi française contraint les musées de France à conduire périodiquement des opérations de vérification, qu'on désigne sous le terme de *récolement*. Le récolement consiste en effet "à vérifier, sur pièce et sur place, à partir d'un bien ou de son numéro d'inventaire, la présence du bien dans les collections, sa localisation, l'état du bien, son marquage, la conformité de l'inscription à l'inventaire avec le bien ainsi que, le cas échéant, avec les différentes sources documentaires, archives, dossiers d'œuvre, catalogues."

En d'autres termes, le récolement est une opération de constat visant à s'assurer que les biens appartenant aux collections des musées de France sont correctement identifiés, décrits et localisés. Pratique ancienne, le récolement n'est devenu obligatoire et systématique que depuis la loi de 2002 sur les musées de France. Cette dernière a imposé de faire le récolement complet des collections tous les dix ans (on parle de récolement décennal). Il s'agit donc, de facto, d'une mission permanente.

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Dans le cadre de l'exercice de son contrôle scientifique et technique, le ministère de la culture (direction générale des patrimoines/service des musées de France; directions régionales des affaires culturelles) suit l'avancement de ce chantier qui permet, non seulement, de connaître le volume des collections (environ 123 millions de biens, dont la moitié dans le seul *Muséum national d'histoire naturelle* de Paris), mais aussi de mieux en apprécier la consistance (nature des biens, état de conservation, présence de marques et d'inscriptions, existence de photographies, etc.).

A cette mission traditionnelle et ancienne, s'est superposé un chantier non moins gigantesque dit de *numérisation* des collections. Dans une seule base appelée *Joconde*, une version informatisée de tous les inventaires des 1100 *musées de France* serait à terme consultable sous deux formats. Un format textuel tel qu'il est inscrit dans l'inventaire officiel réglementaire; et de plus, chaque notice doit être accompagnée d'une photo haute définition. *Joconde* est le catalogue collectif des collections des musées de France. Cette base de données ne compte aujourd'hui qu'à peine plus de 600 000 notices d'objets de toutes natures (archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnologie…), en majorité illustrées. Ces informations sont en ligne et les données publiques de *Joconde* sont librement consultables et réutilisables sur un site du ministère de la Culture. Cette mission qui paraît simple et évidente est en réalité une tache titanesque ou peut être plutôt un nouveau *rocher de Sisyphe* des collections. Impossible de faire une photo qui ne soit ni soignée, ni objective (neutre en quelque sorte). Impossible de la publier et de la mettre en ligne sans vérifier l'exactitude des renseignements scientifiques mis en ligne. Autrement dit, ce n'est pas le stockage ou l'archivage qui est compliqué et lent mais tout le travail d'amont minutieux et qui ne peut être réalisé que par un personnel très compétent de façon à ne pas introduire d'erreur dans la base. Au rythme actuel, ce chantier pourrait durer des dizaines d'années, voire ne pas être achevé. En effet, nul ne sait si la technique choisie et le support de stockage retenu sont voués à rester les mêmes puisqu'ils risquent, comme cela a été le cas pour les sons et la musique, d'être balayés par l'obsolescence technologique que les commerçants appellent de leurs vœux pour stimuler le renouvellement des biens d'équipement…

5. Le futur des collections patrimoniales entre dématérialisation et aliénation

Il est évident que nous sommes à un tournant. Il sera difficile de préserver la présence de collections étendues dans d'immenses réserves situées au centre d'une capitale alors que la pression immobilière devient de plus en plus forte. D'autant que les collections ne sont en rien un atout touristique. Résister à la pression immobilière risque de devenir impossible pour les réserves des musées. C'est sans doute pourquoi beaucoup d'acteurs du patrimoine et des musées se demandent si le moment n'est pas venu de repenser le statut des collections patrimoniales, voire comme l'a évoqué Marchis (2021), de les mettre à la poubelle (voir aussi Harrison 2013).

Au moins trois pistes se dessinent quant au futur des collections (Winkin 2021): la première est de les aliéner pour les offrir à d'autres musées qui manquent de collections et de matériel d'exposition (DeSylvey 2020; MacDonald 2020). Les musées d'histoire sociale anglais ont aussi suggéré de les donner à des artisans qui pourraient remettre en service quantité de machines et d'outils dans des pays en voie de développement alors qu'ils sont aujourd'hui inutiles et inertes dans des réserves de musées (Betersman 1992).

La seconde piste est de parier sur la dématérialisation des collections pour libérer l'espace où elles sont entreposées. Ainsi ne circuleraient et ne seraient exposées que des copies fidèles, soignées mais multiples et très peu couteuses. Enfin, comme la patrimonialisation des collections est une démarche juridique, il est toujours possible d'entreprendre des démarches administratives pour que la loi autorise à défaire ce qu'elle avait décidé.

Remarquons que, d'un point de vue sémiotique, le fait de ne plus exposer des œuvres ou des objets authentiques est évidemment une révolution. Si sur le plan éducatif ou culturel, les copies ont beaucoup d'avantages, la dé-sémiotisation des objets vedettes ou des œuvres originales, le plus souvent uniques, des grands peintres et sculpteurs, ouvre sur des questions pas simples à trancher. Elles sont pourtant irrémédiablement liées à l'histoire des musées.

Les muséums ont été créés au dix-huitième siècle et se sont généralisés au dix-neuvième et au début du vingtième. Beaucoup d'entre eux ont été transformés et ils n'ont pas cessé d'évoluer. Au point que l'histoire de la muséographie y soit devenue parfaitement invisible. Il ne reste rien de l'accrochage touche-touche allant du sol au plafond des grands musées de peinture royaux. Une anecdote révélatrice mérite d'être rappelée. A La Rochelle, a été crée en 1745 un muséum d'Histoire naturelle. Il a succédé à trois cabinets de curiosités datant de la fin du dix-septième dont celui de Clément Lafaille. Pour diverses raisons, ce muséum a décliné puis a été fermé pendant plus d'un quart de siècle. Quand on a décidé de le moderniser et de le rouvrir, les aménageurs ont eu l'heureuse idée de reconstituer le plus fidèlement possible l'exposition permanente datant de la création du musée. La présentation taxonomique faite méticuleusement dans des armoires vitrées de bois fruitier est apparue comme une merveille… Ce ne sont pas les animaux naturalisés ni ce qu'on peut voir dans tous les muséums qui produisent ce choc sémiotique mais la mise en exposition elle-même qui apparaît comme singulière, cohérente et très efficace sur les visiteurs.

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Pour aller au-delà de cette anecdote, ce qu'elle révèle est que la mise en exposition crée des unités d'exposition cohérentes, c'est-à-dire des paradigmes typiques ou exemplaires qui sont des créations à part entière. Or, on ne sait ni les archiver, ni les conserver et donc elles ne se transmettent pas ou très mal. Les mots d'un poème de Rimbaud ou de Verlaine sont tous dans un dictionnaire de langue. Mais les poèmes qu'ils produisent et qui bouleversent les lecteurs n'ont été mis en phrase que par eux seuls. Toutes les collections des muséums se ressemblent et elles sont présentées selon les principes des taxonomies du dix-huitième siècle.

Les collections patrimoniales ne sont en quelque sorte que les dictionnaires qui permettent à certains conservateurs de musées d'inventer des expôts (unités d'exposition) comme autant de paradigmes différents des uns des autres. Inédits et sensibles, ce sont eux qui captivent les publics. Même si le contexte est tendu personne ne peut affirmer qu'on peut se débarrasser des collections. Par contre, quand on détruit un musée, ou qu'on démonte une exposition ou qu'on rénove une exposition permanente, c'est aussi une création sémiotique fragile et instable qui est irrémédiablement détruite et qui disparaît alors qu'elle devrait être conservée et transmise de génération en génération.

6. Vie et mort des sémiophores

Donner à d'autres des collections encombrantes, s'en défaire afin qu'elles retournent dans la sphère matérielle d'où on les a extraites pour les collecter et les rendre immortelles et partiellement au moins les interpréter et les exposer est une politique susceptible de se généraliser. De même numériser les collections et les archiver dans des inventaires pour qu'elles libèrent de l'espace ne pose pas question. Il est légitime de le faire. Ensuite, n'utiliser que des copies et les diffuser avec les moyens et les techniques de très large diffusion contemporaines sans contrôle ou sans limite, pourquoi pas. Mais, il est à craindre que, dans le même mouvement on dé-sémiotise les unités vedettes des musées et des expositions. Et cette perte sera irréparable.

Si de multiples travaux ont été consacrés à décrire ou à commenter la patrimonialisation, on peut se demander si le moment n'est pas venu d'analyser comme va être opérée la dé-patrimonialisation. Pourquoi ce que l'historien Krystoff Pomian a appelé un sémiophore (Pomian 1987) destiné à être transmis éternellement de génération en génération, un chef d'œuvre de l'humanité, un bien de très haute valeur, voire de *valeur culturelle universelle exceptionnelle* (pour l'UNESCO) quand il est inscrit sur la liste du patrimoine mondial, est-il menacé de disparaître? Disparaître, non pas matériellement mais comme unité sémiotique originale et singulière.

Pour Pomian, en quoi les objets vedettes des collections muséales sont-ils des sémiophores? Pour expliquer ce qu'est un sémiophore, Pomian, cite l'exemple d'une usine qui cesse de produire et que l'on décide d'abandonner. Autrement dit, comme elle n'a plus de fonction productive et économique, elle devient un ensemble de déchets (parfois encombrant et polluant). "Est déchet écrit-il, tout objet visible qui n'a aucune fonction à cause de sa destruction ou de son usure ou parce qu'il est devenu obsolète" (Pomian 1987: 181).

Ce n'est qu'après avoir été tirée de l'oubli que l'usine, ou ce qu'il en reste, cesse d'être un déchet parce qu'elle acquiert une nouvelle fonction qui n'a plus rien d'utilitaire ou de productif. Elle renvoie au passé et témoigne de ce qui a disparu. En la découvrant, on peut retrouver son process de fabrication disparu, assimiler des connaissances sur les techniques anciennes, sur les conditions de travail des ouvriers. Aux yeux de ceux qui la font visiter et de ceux qui se déplacent pour la découvrir, l'usine est un nœud de significations socio historiques, une accumulation de sémiophores. A ce titre l'usine elle-même, ses vestiges nettoyés et les machines remises en place sont un sémiophore résume Pomian (Pomian 1987:185). C'est-à-dire un ensemble qui a une valeur signifiante singulière de nature strictement culturelle

Il faut pour cela se rappeler qu'un tableau de peinture ou un objet de la vie de travail sont devenus objet de musée et expôt par une démarche systématique de collecte, de nettoyage, de fixation et de transformation en un sémiophore porteur d'une valeur sensible ou documentaire donc culturelle, toujours symbolique et destinée à être transmise de génération en génération.

Un tableau n'a jamais, sauf exception, été créé pour un musée (Baxandall 1985). Sa présence dans une exposition muséale est devenue une question de goût culturel par nature instable (Haskell 1999) alors qu'auparavant, inamovible, il était destiné aux murs des églises ou à ceux des palais princiers et des hôtels bourgeois.

Par nature différente d'une œuvre d'art, la machine à écrire (modèle Erika des années 30) qui a ému aux larmes Luis Prieto (Prieto 1990) dans un musée de Berlin a été produite en des milliers d'exemplaires. Mais dès qu'elle a été collectée, nettoyée et protégée, munie d'un architexte retraçant son histoire d'objet témoin, elle a acquis un statut de sémiophore. Elle a été exposée parce qu'on sait qu'elle a été utilisée par des résistants durant la seconde guerre mondiale pour diffuser des tracts anti-nazis. Mais la police a arrêté à cause des défauts des lettres-frappe de cette machine… Elle a été d'abord un objet de la vie quotidienne produit en des milliers d'exemplaires. Comme l'avait fait remarquer Baudrillard (1968), dans son "système des objets," elle est devenue un objet démodé et ancien. Puis, l'historien ou l'ethnologue qui l'a retrouvée, l'a transformée en un objet-témoin puis en un-objet-de-musée (potentiellement immortel). La décision de l'exposer et de l'inclure dans un discours d'exposition en a fait un sémiophore singulier et unique (transmetteur de sens et porteur de valeur). Ce que confirme Prieto car il écrit:

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> Le dimanche précédent, en revanche, j'avais vu, sur l'inventaire d'un marchand des Puces de Berlin-Ouest, une machine à écrire de la même marque et plus ou moins du même modèle, et bien que, à vrai dire, je n'eusse aucune raison de penser que cette machine n'avait pas servi elle aussi aux résistants (ni, certes, non plus, de penser le contraire), le fait est qu'elle me laissa totalement indifférent. (Prieto 1990: 5)

Le fait que le même objet utilitaire de série devienne un sémiophore et puisse, d'un coup perdre ce statut et cesser d'en être un, résume parfaitement le propos de cet article. Ce qui se joue dans la disparition de la collection ou dans son décrochage est un mécanisme de dé-sémiotisation: il efface l'institution patrimoniale et son cérémonial; il fait disparaître le discours d'exposition et sa structure de média déployé dans un espace ou le public déambule; et, en définitive, il empêche pour toujours de reconnaître et apprécier des sémiophores construits à l'intention des visiteurs. Les sémiophores muséaux redeviennent des déchets anonymes à nouveau enfouis dans des collections immenses et trop vastes.

Oubliés par le patrimoine culturel encore vivant et actif, ils n'ont qu'à attendre et espérer qu'un expositeur malin et inventif leur offre un nouvel avenir de sémiophore exposé dans un autre musée ou pour une nouvelle création expographique…

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To do-lists and to-be lists: identities as inventories in Bouvard et Pécuchet and À rebours[1]

BY: Rocco Pellino

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the inventory as a literary strategy in the nineteenth-century French novels *Bouvard et Pécuchet* by Flaubert (1881) and *À rebours by* Huysmans (1884). We argue that the authors adopt the inventory process to determine the main characters' identities in the lack of a proper plot line. For the petty-bourgeois Bouvard-Pécuchet couple, life is a plotless repetition of something ever new to do; for the sophisticated aesthete des Esseintes, it is a plotless repetition of what he wants to go on being. In comparing the two texts, we establish a reversal symmetry between depth and surface. Des Esseintes' inventories (flowers, perfumes, books, gemstones) are presented as solid and deeply meditated, their narrative status relating to categories like mastering, intimacy, and distillation. In contrast, Bouvard and Pécuchet's inventories sound precarious and spontaneous, relating to categories like naivety, extraneity, and cluttering. The same reversal symmetry is also found when comparing the ending of the two novels when their protagonists' fates are decided. Taking inventories as a critical part of the social negative of the era, the two novels represent the pathological poles of the same generational malaise.

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[1] The author thanks the reviewers of this manuscript for their insightful remarks. If in writing *Vertigine della lista*, Eco could recall an anthology of literary lists (Spufford (ed.) 1989) and a monographic study on the same subject (Belknap, 2004), his work, on the other hand, would have inspired a variety of further researches (Milcent-Lawson, Lecolle and Michel (eds.) 2013; Laemmle, Scheidegger Laemmle and Wesselmann (eds.) 2021; *Style* 50 (3), 2016).

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1. Introduction

Addressing a topic such as collections or inventories within the cultural framework of nineteenth-century France allows us to neatly grasp the experience of a double tension, or contradiction, between the theoretical establishment and the practical experience of such concepts (or devices): on the one hand, the rationality and utilitarianism of the paradigmatic construct (its ergonomic function, we might say, which justifies its use); on the other hand, a pragmatics that can run into problems of manageability, even to the point of provoking that sense of 'vertigo' evoked by Umberto Eco (2009) in the introduction to the book he wrote to accompany the Louvre's exhibition on lists he curated in 2009.

It is true that contemporary literary studies have tackled both sides of this problem on a broader ground, which ranges from ancient epics (Laemmle et al. 2021: 197-302) to the estranging surrealist lists (Kleiber 2013) or metafiction in the postmodernist narrative (Alber 2016). In the field of novel theory, the listing technique is often associated with narrative realism. For Hamon, for example, a list represents a zero degree of world description: "Une liste c'est une sorte de 'tel quel' à la fois du monde et du langage" (Hamon 2015: 167). In its aspect of mastering and accounting, ordered enumeration can be seen in modern-age fiction as reflecting the progressive establishment of a proto-capitalist mercantile mentality (Lukács 1970), simultaneously faithfully representing it and seeking to undermine and mock it.

This way, from the brute realism of the catalogue of objects, according to Jean Serroy (1989), a list presented in a literary text can move to a regime of unbridled fantasy, fueled by its own growing out of proportion to the normal flow of the narrative (Rabelais's lists, for example):

> L'inventaire est là pour capter la réalité nue. Il est recensement minutieux, enregistrement quasi mécanique, opération d'absolue décalque. […] Et pourtant, de Rabelais à Prévert, de Mathurin Régnier à Balzac ou à Jules Romains, l'inventaire a excité, aussi, l'imagination des écrivains. […] Tout se passe comme si la chose perdait toute matérialité pour ne plus exister que par le mot. L'inventaire ainsi conçu ne consiste plus à répertorier le monde réel: il est création d'un autre monde, où l'esprit n'obéit plus qu'à la seule logique de sa fantaisie. (Serroy 1989: 211-15)

However, the question I would like to raise with this essay concerns a specific aspect of 19th-century French literary production. In this period, between the 1830s and 1840s, Honoré de Balzac composed the novel mosaic that he was to call *Comédie humaine*, declaring, in the *Avant-propos* of 1842, his intention to classify human society according to a kind of zoologically inspired *Systema Naturae*. Individuals, types, social spaces, and habits of post-Napoleonic society were to be read through various taxonomic levels (Balzac 1951: 3-16). In an introduction to Balzac's *Romans et contes philosophiques*, the famous Romantic critic Philarète Chasles described the French reading public of the time as an audience of skeptical and bored rationalists:

> Quel conte allez-vous faire à de telles gens? Ils vous répondront qu'ils ont vu Bonaparte, bivouaqué au Kremlin et couché à l'Alhambra. Ils mettront vos sylphides en fuite, et vos magiciens n'auront pas le moindre intérêt pour eux. Ils vous demanderont par quel procédé chimique l'huile brûlait dans la lampe d'Aladin. […] L'analyse, dernier développement de la pensée, a donc tué les jouissances de la pensée. C'est ce que M. de Balzac a vu dans son temps: c'est le dernier résultat de cet axiome de Jean-Jacques: *L'homme qui pense est un animal dépravé*. (Balzac 1959: 181)

This is, of course, that social negative that the Romantic-era writer would negotiate through a mixture of critical realism, mysticism, and reverie. The perspective we follow for analyzing this complex cultural atmosphere focuses on what we might call *accumulation policies* in a specific phase of the growth of modern consumer society.[2] Such policies affect the production/organization/dissemination of knowledge, as well as that of material goods. In his study on the rise of the modern material culture, Frank Trentmann points out that:

> The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries put in motion the pendulum of consumption. Possessions, comforts, tastes, and desires were all growing and becoming more elaborate, setting off a backlash of worries about excess and corruption. More goods provoked greater fear of goods. (2016: 118)

This paragraph highlights our motivation to retrace the literary figures into which nineteenth-century material culture was transposed. The *collector* and the *curious*, as literary characters, feed, respectively and often bulimically, on "objects" whose complexity and/or variety is made possible by certain advances in the technology of artifice and 'notions' – i.e., the theoretical nodes on which those technologies are based, available for reading in manuals and handbooks. Hovering over such characters is the irony, or the fear with which a particular author represents to himself the risk of

[2] That is the theoretical framework explored in Janell Watson's *Literature and material culture from Balzac to Proust* (2006), which has been one of our primary sources for this study.

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(1) foundering in that apartness from the world claimed by his collections or (2) being reduced to a kind of living catalogue of concepts and theories, seemingly valuable for society, but ultimately doomed to inaction and failure.

Addressing such characters as des Esseintes[3] (Huysmans' alter ego in *À rebours*) and the Bouvard-Pécuchet duo (Flaubert's alter ego in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*) as examples of such a procedure, however, we find ourselves dealing with fictional actors whose narrative identities are entirely derived from the lists of objects/concepts they are concerned with: identities that, with these, or in these lists end up getting lost as a result of prolonged *vertigo*. Let us briefly recall, for now, the apparently simple and circular plot of the two novels.

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (first printed in 1881),[4] two retired clerks buy a country estate in Chavignolles (Normandy), leaving Paris to focus on learning a series of disciplines, or techniques, initially triggered by an attempt to engage in agronomy and gardening. The chapters follow one another as they move from one topic (or fixation) to another, marked by the duo's constant failure (in understanding, applying, or publicizing their supposed knowledge to the villagers).

In *À rebours* (first printed in 1884),[5] the former dandy and of noble birth Jean Floressas des Esseintes retires from Parisian social life to his estate in Fontenay-aux-Roses, devoting himself to perfecting his ideal of the domestic interior, whose elements, from furniture to artificial plants, from art prints to ancient and modern books, are the subject of the protagonist's meditations. Within a few days, exhaustion and a constant state of *'neurotisme'* lead his doctor to order his return to the city to receive proper care. If Huysmans lived long enough to get through the debate around his work, even to the point of giving a sketchy account of it in the famous *Préface écrite vingt ans après le roman* (Huysmans 2022: 317-37), Flaubert, on the other hand, in addition to nine complete chapters, would leave behind a set of documents that would go on to a complex publishing history.

While des Esseintes' affair closes on his forced and dramatic return to Paris, Bouvard and Pécuchet's tale is interrupted in the middle of the tenth chapter – leaving open the question of a second volume in which the two characters, now reduced to inaction, would figure as copyists of a kind of enormous catalog of notions from the most varied spheres of knowledge (thus somehow returning to what they were doing in their former jobs as secretaries). The most extensive and articulate preparatory texts for this second part are *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (BP: 485-555; Jacquet 1987; Herschberg-Pierrot 1988).

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[3] I will employ the lowercase letter for the particle 'des,' as used in huysmanian bibliography.
[4] I will abbreviate as *BP* Claudine Gothot-Mersch's Gallimard edition of this novel (Flaubert 1999). This edition also contains Flaubert's main preliminary texts (like the *Scenarios* and the *Sottisier*) along with the sketches of the second volume, known as *Dictionnaire des idées reçues, Album de la marquise and Catalogue des idées chic*.
[5] I will ebbreviate as *AR* the later Galliamard edition by Pierre Jourde (Huysmans 2022).

Even from this summary description, the similarities and oppositions between the two stories reveal a reverse symmetry in how they manage listing as a narrative agent. This is what I will try to demonstrate in this study, but before I proceed with this task, it is essential to recall the cultural context of the 1880s, when the initial reception of these novels took place.

1. Dictionaries, bazars, consumerism

Max Milner and Claude Pichois' seventh volume of Arthaud's *Littérature française* defined the French 1800s as the century of dictionaries: "les encyclopédies, répertoires, dictionnaires enregistrent en les classant les connaissances qui s'étendent chaque année plus loin" (Milner and Pichois 1990: 171).[6] It is important to note how this formulation emphasizes the double track on which this work flows (*record* while *classifying*), which responds, on the scholarly level, to the rapid increase in complexity of disciplines and technologies and, on the editorial level, to that increase in the readership that will be the basis of the modern, industrially organized publishing system (Durand and Glinoer 2005).

One could say that the ground for what we would today call 'scientific popularization' was thus both prepared and, at the same time, undermined by the distrust held by specific sectors of the literary and philosophical community, now towards faith in the general progress of humankind and the actual usefulness of the new sciences for our lives. But what is particularly interesting is why the term 'popularization' is profoundly mistaken when employed about the nineteenth-century literary consumption of accounts and debates on the new scientific discoveries. There is an issue here to consider regarding the distances between insiders and outsiders, as Laura Otis reminds us in presenting the Oxfordian anthology *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*:

> The notion of a 'split' between literature and science, of a 'gap' to be 'bridged' between the two, was never a nineteenth century phenomenon. (…) Science was not perceived as being written in a 'foreign language' – a common complaint of twenty-first-century readers. (Otis 2002: xvii)

[6] I will recall here some of the most relevant examples: firstly, the most known 1883 Littre's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* – whose preface still remains an insightful witness of a certain step of the *words-things* relationship inquiry (Littré 1883: i-xxxix); Louis Gabriel Michaud's *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne*, subject of various releases and expansions from 1811 onward; the *Larousse's Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^{e} siècle*, issued between 1866 and 1876.

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In the absence of a specific editorial work of mediation to fill a gap not yet perceived by the public, the idea that a curious reader could get lost and almost stupefied in the face of direct access to the innumerable "news of the day" in technology and biomedical sciences begins to peep out of authors who engage in the analysis of customs – hence specific novelistic images of characters reduced to walking catalogs of notions, or skills, whose practical usefulness will eventually stumble in their enumeration.

This is how Balzac presents the experts to whom the protagonist of *La peau de chagrin* (1832) turns in search of the solution to the mystery of his fatal talisman (a naturalist, a chemist, an expert in mechanics) and who take care to list the guiding principles and basic vocabulary of their field before an impatient Raphäel, eager to see actual proof of the banality of the object in question (Balzac 1950: 191-206). However, while the 'curious' – armed with magazines and handbooks – may attempt to purchase his abstract skill sets the same way he acquires material goods, the typical nineteenth-century 'collector' seeks to treat certain material goods as bearers of abstract and highly symbolic value.

In this regard, Janell Watson recalls the nineteenth-century aesthetic phenomenon of the 'artistic interior' (2006: 57-82), ideally summarized in Edmond de Gouncourt's *La maison d'un artiste* (1881): "a two volumes annotated inventory of his and his late brother's collections, inscribing the myth of the artist in the title" (67). But whereas the consumption of curiosities turns into clumsiness and dullness for a merely curious person, collecting rare objects can arouse a kind of *nausea* that pleads for the intervention of decluttering mental hygiene (43).[7]

We could imagine an axis connecting the *ridiculous* to the *perilous*: this would link (in *La peau de chagrin*) the scientific laboratory with the bazaar where the novel's protagonist had initially found his talisman. There confusion (visual, historical, symbolic), disorder and fragmentation reigned: "trois salles gorgées de civilization," elements of interrupted series alternating in a picture ("de raison et de folie") impossible to recompose, "un miroir plein de facettes dont chacune représentait un monde" (Balzac 1955: 23). One might consider the elements in Balzac's bazaar as *highly and obscurely representative*, as opposed to the scientific lab instruments that will instead appear to us as *poorly and plainly representative* – each of these two settings hiding some pitfalls.

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[7] We may further notice, along with Watson, that a collecting space, of any kind, would summon a domestic dimension whose nurturing practice would not be gender-neutral throughout Eighteenth-century novel (72-82). Since such spaces as the family foyer, or the courtesan's boudoir – both envisaged as women-managed areas – were so distinctively associated to feminine accumulation of fashionable bibelots, then an exceptional *bachelor*-domesticity would have had to deal with certain *masculinization* strategies for the fictional presentation of the collections it held. According to Watson, such strategies (like *aestheticization*, or *femininization* of the bibelots) could be read as efforts to build what she calls a *macho domesticity*, dealing in artistic and scientific issues, in opposition to a feminine collecting habit associated with fashion and decoration issues.

If we follow Oscar Wilde in his statement about the "1800s as we know it," being essentially an invention by Balzac (Wilde 1891: 33), we will not be surprised to find in *La peau de chagrin* an axis connecting the two later novels with which we shall now deal. But, as we shall soon see, in the bookish and encyclopedic order of the subjects addressed by Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert triggers the chaos whose problematic management will serve to flesh out his two characters. By contrast, in the chaos of objects and valuables collected by des Esseintes,[8] in his refined *intérieur*, Huysmans builds an order through the archaeological survey of a specific intellectual identity, exposed list after list.

2. Two novels from the 1880s

Within the vast range of possible connections between Huysmans's work and its evident Flaubertian sources (Issacharoff 1976: 21-72; Lalonde 1993; Cassou-Yager 1997; Rowell Blackman 2003), an initial juxtaposition between the two novels we are discussing is due to the journalist, and Huysmans's friend, Paul Ginisty, in a review of *AR*, a few months following its first release. Pierre Jourde provides an excerpt from it in his introduction to the Gallimard edition I am referring to: "la névrosé de M. Huysmans, comme un Bouvard ou un Pécuchet d'une éspece nouvelle, passa, lui aussi, en revue, le répertoire des connaissances humaines" (*AR*: 17). Both works in fact, as Jourde puts it, could fit into the genre of the *roman encyclopédique*, or *roman d'idées*, declinations of that splintering of narrative structures that Paul Bourget recognized as hallmarks of the new 'decadent novel.'[9] But where BP would recall the Flaubertian dream of the 'book about nothing,' AR could be seen as a 'book about everything' (*ibid.*) as long as it shifts the focus of its encyclopedism from *surface* to *depth*:

> Là où Flaubert met en scène l'impossibilité pour l'homme du XIX^{e} siècle de maîtriser l'accumulation des savoirs, et donc d'avoir une vue globale de la réalité, l'encyclopédie de des Esseintes lui sert à tenter de passer à une autre réalité. (ibid.)

[8] This chaos is perceived by a reader who is unfamiliar with the specific terms used by Huysmans for his gems, his rare plants, nor with the names of the various minor authors of Latin Decadence. Jean de Palacio devoted a section of his essay on Decadence to the problem of glossaries as part of novel setting in *fin-de-siècle* culture (De Palacio, 2012: 55-73).

[9] Reference is to the first series of Paul Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883: 25), a collection of XIX literary portraits which was to elaborate a positive sense of *decadent style*, based on Baudelaire's aesthetics.

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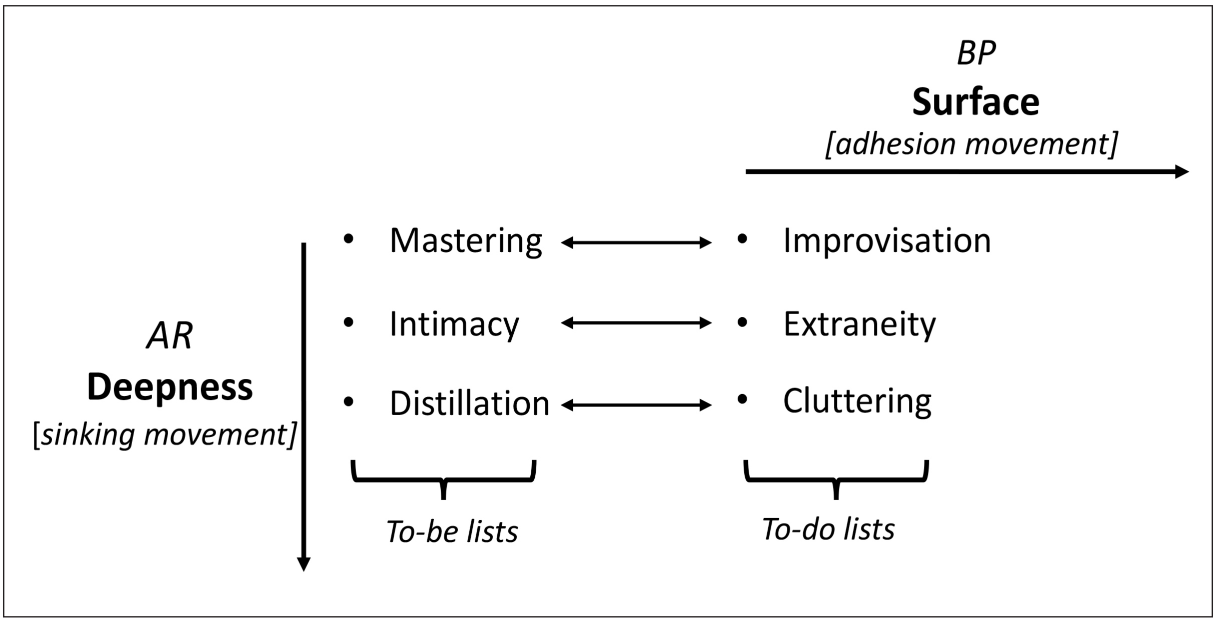
Such a reverse symmetry (depth/surface) is made possible in the novel text by the specific ways in which the enumeration device is used in relation to the actions, or non-actions, of the characters: We get to know des Esseintes through a *one-man's encyclopedia* – the inventory of what he has been, is and would like to be, reflected in value-bearing objects. And the Bouvard-Pécuchet duo, on the contrary, through an ideal everyman's encyclopedia, fit for the one who decides to put himself up-to-date with the knowledge of his time and set himself up with a series of lists about things to do or to read.

In the next part of this essay, I will illustrate how these reverse and symmetrical sense paths unfold on the terrain of different narratives of the list and lead to two equally symmetrical forms of the characters' loss of identity: one (des Esseintes) goes too far in the refinement of his senses to be able to adapt to the outside world, so he must abandon them or die. The other two (Bouvard and Pécuchet) fail to identify themselves and wander in the encyclopedia. So, there is nothing left for them to do but copy.

We will thus have two forms of reaction to vertigo, or rather, two paths through the vertigo of the list, representing the pathological poles of the same generational malaise. But through novels such as *BP* and *AR* we might see that as a discomfort in controlling, not the content, but rather the simulacra of knowledge, i.e., the written/oral traces that are turned into circulating precepts – and through which the aesthete proceeds by *filtering*, while the curious confusingly *piles up* the most disparate items.

To explore this opposition further, I will detail a possible tripartition based on some text passages I will compare. The overall picture can be rendered through the following diagram.



In both cases, however, a specific *list policy* is challenged: the one based upon the notion of a descriptive insert that interrupts a narrative flow or that comes between key events in the storyline (Hamon 2015: 171; Von Contzen 2016: 246). In this regard, it is noteworthy that both Flaubert and Huysmans described the process of composing their respective novels by associating specific chapters with the 'matter' inventoried in each.

> Et à mesure que j'y réfléchissait, le sujet s'agrandissait et nécessitait de patientes recherches: chaque chapitre devenait le coulis d'une spécialité, le sublimé d'un art différent; il se condensait en un 'of meat' de pierreries, de parfums, de fleurs, de littérature religieuse et laïque, de musique profane et de plain-chant. (*AR*: 321)

So Huysmans wrote in his 1903 *Préface*. Similarly, Flaubert described the challenges he met when drafting *BP* in several letters:

> Je suis perdu dans les combinations de mon second chapitre, celui des sciences [10] (…). […] Je succombe sous la théologie! et je t'assure, loulou, qu'il faut avoir la tête forte et vaste pour coordonner et rendre plastiques toutes les questions qui sont à traiter dans ce gredin de chapitre-là! [11] […] Je suis perdu dans la Pédagogie. (…) Mais je sens mon chapitre.[12] (Flaubert 1963: 278-91)

What is noticeable about these accounts is that they seem to refer to the work of drafting an encyclopedia rather than a novel. But if we assume these two textual types can meet, a question could come to mind: how can an encyclopedia fit into a novel? A possible approach might be to feature an encyclopedist as a novel character – this being what Queneau would have done with his Henry de Chambernac writing an encyclopedia of 'literary fools' in *Les enfants du limon* (1938).[13]

However, in *AR* and *BP*, we are not confronted with the problem of one or several characters struggling with making a more or less circumscribable text. Here, the encyclopedia does not feature a character-related item but appears as a textual template upon which the storyline is flattened. For such cases, we should rephrase the previous question to ask how a novel can *be situated* within an encyclopedia.

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[10] Letter to M^{me} Roger des Genettes, April 1877.
[11] To his niece Caroline, January 1879.
[12] To the same, March 1880.
[13] Queneau himself gave an account of his reinterpretation of Bouvard and Pécuchet's task in his *Comment on devient encyclopédiste* (1963); see also: Tononi, 2022.

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If we look for an answer in the overall structure of *AR* and *BP*, it would seem that two different pathways open up for writing – both based on the author's work on his sources (what we might call his primary inventory) returning, on the diegetic plane, through an *ostensive* rather than *allusive* way:

1) A dramatization of inventories that deals with the lists as a series of micro-actions. This is the route Flaubert takes in BP through the dialogue between his two protagonists who reason about one topic, or one book passage after another – or through descriptions of their attempts to make a series of practical techniques work.

(2) An exasperation of the rhetorical effects of an inventory, such that it reshapes a list of items into a kind of prose poem. This is the direction Huysmans took in describing both the ideas and the objects called upon to form the whole man-thing identity that is des Esseintes.

3.1. How to manage objects (*mastering vs naivety*)

A primary symmetry between AR and BP emerges from describing the respective characters' settings. At this level, two opposite 'retreats' from the world unfold, the aesthete's and the bourgeois's.

Des Esseintes escapes from Paris to take refuge in his 'house museum' at Fontenay, isolating himself from any unnecessary contact with the outside world. The story opening, however, presents him with the need to complete his work of furnishing and decorating the house interior. We learn, then, that both the objects that have already entered his household routine (certain varieties of tea, specific first editions of books) and those he is in the process of sorting out for purchase, such as gems for the tortoise, furnishings, rare plants, may come from the most varied parts of the world, through the medium of merchants, artisans, or highly specialized workshops. There is thus a closure of the domestic environment to its local surroundings, coexisting with a virtual openness to the global luxury market.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on their side, after having bought their small country estate and land in Chavignolles, get introduced to the local notables and are eager to engage with the townspeople throughout their stay. They offer the products they are trying to cultivate, propose guided tours of their archaeological museum, and essay their new ideas through the public exchange of mundane conversations. They even try to bring medical help to the poor when they improvise themselves as physiologists or phrenologists. But this local openness is short-sighted: to get books, they rely on certain acquaintances who provide them with what they need in drips and drabs. For garden work, they go on the cheap, as well as for the tools and objects they buy here and there. Even among their geological or archaeological finds, there is nothing of value.

What we can notice beyond this luxury vs. cheapness comparison is that both stories are presented as *domestic affairs*. What distinguishes des Esseintes and the Bouvard-Pécuchet couple from later literary encyclopedists is that they are encyclopedically managing the living space of household inhabitation (Watson 2006: 83-108). The arrangement or coordination of 'things,' whether animate or inanimate, is one aspect of the direct representation of a character's relationship with his space. It seems appropriate, therefore, to start from this shared framework the series of textual comparisons between the two works, verifying an initial symmetry between the ability and inability of des Esseintes and Bouvard-Pécuchet, respectively.

Chapter V of *AR* is organized around two 'reasoned enumerations': the first illustrates a connection between des Esseintes's artistic tastes and the domestic use of a particular set of paintings useful for inducing a certain kind of reverie (123-37). We read nothing about the material circumstances of the staging of this 'exhibition'; its narrative role is not to show us how des Esseintes works in his surroundings. Instead, the second enumeration presents the solutions adopted by the latter for a specific problem of style – the decoration of a bedroom that imitates a convent cell without reproducing its characters of harsh and self-punishing asceticism (137-38). Given this problem, des Esseintes's idea for solving it consists of arranging an effect of sadness/bruteness through a combination of cheerful elements ("Arranger avec de joyeux objets une chose triste," 138). The list of adopted measures is given as follows. Firstly, the walls and floor:

> Pour imiter le badigeon de l'ocre, le jaune administratif et clérical, il fit tendre ses murs en soie safran; pour traduire le soubassement couleur chocolat, habituel à ce genre de pièces, il revêtit les parois de la cloison de lames en bois violet foncé d'amarante. (…) Le plafond fut, à son tour, tapissé de blanc écru, pouvant simuler le plâtre, sans avoir cependant les éclats criards; quant au froid pavage de la cellule, il réussit assez bien à le copier, grâce à un tapis dont le dessin représentait des carreaux rouges (…). (138)

Then, the room furniture:

> Il meubla cette pièce d'un petit lit de fer, un faux lit de cénobite, fabriqué avec d'anciennes ferronneries forgées et polies (…). En guise de table de nuit, il installa un antique prie-Dieu dont l'intérieur pouvait contenir un vase et dont l'extérieur supportait un eucologe; il apposa contre le mur, en face, un banc-d'œuvre, surmonté d'un grand dais à jour garni de miséricordes sculptées en plein bois, et il pourvut ses flambeaux d'église de chandelles en vraie cire qu'il achetait dans une maison spéciale, réservée aux besoins du culte (…). (138-39)

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Chapter IV of *AR*, instead, is about how to decorate the hull of the famous turtle, which des Esseintes had noticed in the aquarium of the Chevet restaurant. Here, again, we have two sections of the same enumerative series – that relate to the precious stones to be set on the hull after having it gilded by a craftsman. The first section elucidates the protagonist's taste in precious: "le choix des pierres l'arrêta" (113). The second illustrates the choices actually made and proceeds as follows. As regards the hull's pattern:

> Il composa ainsi le bouquet de ses fleurs: les feuilles furent serties de pierreries d'un vert accentué et précis: de chrysobéryls vert asperge, de péridots vert poireau, d'olivines vert olive, et elles se détachèrent de branches en almadine et en ouwarovite d'un rouge violacé, jetant des paillettes d'un éclat sec de même que ces micas de tartre qui luisent dans l'intérieur des futailles. Pour les fleurs, isolées de la tige, éloignées du pied de la gerbe, il usa de la cendre bleue; mais il repoussa formellement cette turquoise orientale qui se met en broches et en bagues et qui fait, avec la banale perle et l'odieux corail, les délices du menu peuple; il choisit exclusivement des turquoises de l'Occident (…). (114)

And for the hull's border:

> Celui-ci avait d'abord songé à quelques opales et à quelques hydrophanes; mais ces pierres intéressantes par l'hésitation de leurs couleurs, par le doute de leurs flammes, sont par trop insoumises et infidèles; l'opale a une sensibilité toute rhumatismale; le jeu de ses rayons s'altère suivant l'humidité, la chaleur ou le froid; quant à l'hydrophane elle ne brûle que dans l'eau et ne consent à allumer sa braise grise qu'alors qu'on la mouille. Il se décida enfin pour des minéraux dont les reflets devaient s'alterner: pour l'hyacinthe de Compostelle, rouge acajou; l 'aigue-marine, vert glauque; le rubis-balais, rose vinaigre; le rubis de Sudermanie, ardoise pâle. Leurs faibles chatoiements suffisaient à éclairer les ténèbres de l'écaillé et laissaient sa valeur à la floraison des pierreries qu'ils entouraient d'une mince guirlande de feux vagues. (115)

The turtle affair is well-known. The decorative interventions cause the animal's death, which does not particularly upset des Esseintes (122).

As it appears clear, in both cases (the bedroom set and the turtle's), we are looking at a series of items that unfold neatly, each according to its purpose, until together they form a whole that turns out to be ideally suited to a certain kind of need. The number of items reveals how complex and multifaceted such needs matured in the mind of des Esseintes. But the critical effect that enumeration must achieve we can well see in the turtle set: the breadth of some of its paratactic structures, combined with the over-precise and, at times, obscure terminology employed, gives us the dimension of the chaos from which an order can emerge.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on their side, with great enthusiasm and without much pretension, begin to take care of their estate starting from certain earthworks (Mouchard, 1974). So, they get themselves written guides to follow: “leur décision fut prise. Dès le soir, ils tirèrent de leur bibliothèque les quatre volumes de *La Maison rustique*, se firent expédier le *Cours* de Gasparin, et s'abonnèrent à un journal d'agriculture” (BP: 82).

Coming now to Chapter II of *BP*, and here, as in the case of *AR*, the characters' actions are presented through various series of problems. These series mainly pertain to three macro-areas: field cultivation, greenhouse cultivation, and arboriculture. It is Pécuchet, in the first place, who deals with specific plants and vegetables by building a small greenhouse: “et il passait là des heures délicieuses à éplucher les graines, à écrire des étiquettes, à mettre en ordre ses petits pots” (85). This is where issues begin to arise:

> La couche fourmilla de larves; – et malgré les réchauds de feuilles mortes, sous les châssis peints et sous les cloches barbouillées, il ne poussa que des végétations rachitiques. Les boutures ne reprirent pas; les greffes se décollèrent; la sève des marcottes s’arrêta, les arbres avaient le blanc dans leurs racines; les semis furent une désolation. Le vent s’amusait à jeter bas les rames des haricots. L’abondance de la gadoue nuisit aux fraisiers, le défaut de pinçage aux tomates. Il manqua les brocolis, les aubergines, les navets – et du cresson de fontaine, qu’il avait voulu élever dans un baquet. Après le dégel, tous les artichauts étaient perdus. (85-86)

At least consoled by his cabbages, and by one in particular that (though being inedible) gives him the pride of having cultivated a ‘monster,’ Pécuchet attempts to devote himself to what he calls “le summum de l'art”: that is, the cultivation of *melons* (86-87). Despite the care and precepts followed, the vegetables that reach maturity present a discouraging scene:

> En effet, comme il avait cultivé les unes près des autres des espèces différentes, les sucrins s’étaient confondus avec les maraîchers, le gros Portugal avec le grand Mogol – et le voisinage des pommes d’amour complétant l’anarchie, il en était résulté d’abominables mulets qui avaient le goût de citrouilles. (*ibid.*)

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While examining the final results, along with Bouvard, Pécuchet tries to devise an excuse for each unsuccessful specimen. Still, in the end, he pulls the last one out of the window, admitting that he does not understand anything about it (*ibid.*). Bouvard is no better off with farming the fields, and after a poor first harvest, he tries to modernize his equipment:

> Le colza fut chétif, l'avoine médiocre; et le blé se vendit fort mal, ò cause de son odeur. […] Il crut bon de renouveler son matériel. Il acheta un scarificateur Guillaume, un extirpateur Valcourt, un semoir anglais et la grande araire de Mathieu de Dombasle. Le charretier la dénigra. (89)

None of the farm workers know how to use the tools listed here. Bouvard himself tries but fails amid general derision. The works subsequently undertaken continue to yield poor results, and a fire breaks out among the sheaves of wheat piled by Bouvard, severely damaging the property. Finally, a storm destroys the nursery of fruit-bearing trees. To escape the tyranny of 'Providence' and 'Nature,' the two companions turn to canning and fill a former laundry room with the necessary boxes and jars, believing they can even stop the seasons (111). At this juncture, they also begin to become concerned with fermentation processes, buying the equipment of a failed distiller (112). Overwhelmed by new enthusiasm, they even go so far as to attempt to produce an exceptional *cream*:

> Enfin ils rêvèrent *une crème*, qui devait enfoncer toutes les autres. Ils y mettraient de la coriandre comme dans le kummel, du kirsch comme dans le marasquin, de l'hysope comme dans la chartreuse, de l'ambrette comme dans le vespetro, du calamus aromaticus comme dans le krambambuli; – et elle serait colorée en rouge avec du bois de santal. (113)

This ultimate synthesis of flavors and ingredients will never come to light. As they open the jars of preserves only to find that they have gone wrong, a roar shocks the laboratory: the pot still in which the cream was being prepared has exploded from the force of the steam inside (115). This traumatic event puts an end to the agricultural projects and Chapter II. At this point, the two men wonder if they have not consistently failed because of their ignorance of chemistry – an issue that triggers the start of the subsequent chapter.

3.2. Assimilating values (*intimacy* vs. *extraneity*)

If, as we have said, Huysmanian enumeration proceeds smoothly, both within the different series and in the connection of one series with another, the one employed by Flaubert to describe the progress of the two clerks' exploits advances in jolts. In each series, micro-actions or micro-events break up the lists, showing their precariousness – while in the passage between one to another, setbacks and failures frustrate the two performers.

Bouvard and Pécuchet face a crucial liability: they are not familiar enough with any of the subjects covered in that long encyclopedic journey that will lead them from the earth sciences to the natural sciences, to the historical, and further on.

In the exploration of des Esseintes's personality, many of the frameworks we encounter in our reading exhibit two sides: a flip side with what des Esseintes has left behind, outgrown, and at some point, despised, and a right side with what still interests him, or what at least he tries to browse through from time to time (in the case of books). In this regard, I had hinted, in presenting the *AR*'s text frames related to the 'bedroom' and the 'tortoise,' at some theoretical passages that may precede the description of an actual scene – these testifying the link between des Esseintes' lived experience and his objects. This theoretical 'flip side' of an actualized list can be a list in its own right, as in the case of what precedes the choice of gemstones in Chapter IV of *AR*:

> Le diamant est devenu singulièrement commun depuis que tous les commerçants en portent au petit doigt; les émeraudes et les rubis de l'Orient sont moins avilis, lancent de rutilantes flammes, mais ils rappellent par trop ces yeux verts et rouges de certains omnibus qui arborent des fanaux de ces deux couleurs, le long des tempes; quant aux topazes, brûlées ou crues, ce sont des pierres à bon marché, chères à la petite bourgeoisie qui veut serrer des écrins dans une armoire à glace; d'un autre côté, bien que l'Église ait conservé à l'améthyste un caractère sacerdotal (…) cette pierre s'est, elle aussi, galvaudée aux oreilles sanguines et aux mains tubuleuses des bouchères qui veulent, pour un prix modique, se parer de vrais et pesants bijoux; seul, parmi ces pierres, le saphir a gardé des feux inviolés par la sottise industrielle et pécuniaire. (113)

Thus, we have a list of 'famous,' somewhat 'generic' stones as a prelude to a more detailed set comprising those that suit a particular taste and need (the set we read about in 3.1 above). We may say that these two sets form the *AR* 'gemstones section.' Still, only one tells us about a 'collection' brought together by des Esseintes – and thus enters the character acting horizon. Both, however, compose a coherent piece of the 'inventory' through which Huysmans sets out a whole backstory for his protagonist. Taken together, they manifest what des Esseintes feels he ought to be.

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Such a procedure is repeated in the itinerary through the Latin decadence library, which constitutes the famous Chapter III (Chevallier 2002; Accardi 2014). However, the general list of authors and works is much broader and tighter here. The selection has not been made between items absent and present in the collection but rather between those that remain in the background of the enumerative series and those on which the series itself indulges, transforming them, for a few paragraphs, into subjects of enumeration in their turn. For example, the list of certain stylistic traits and specific contents of Petronius's *Satyricon* covers a vast textual space (*AR*: 98-100) and is hard to summarize here. But what is important to emphasize is the process by which we arrive at the Petronius entry (so to say): a kind of zigzag path among the authors of the first century B.C., from which I extract this passage that mentions some names cherished by the false literati:

> Salluste moins décoloré que les autres pourtant; Tite-Live sentimental et pompeux; Sénèque turgide et blafard; Suétone, lymphatique et larveux; Tacite, le plus nerveux dans sa concision apprêtée (…). En poésie, Juvénal, malgré quelques vers durement bottés; Perse, malgré ses insinuations mystérieuses, le laissaient froid. (AR:97-98)

This series proceeds through other names, lingers for a moment to praise certain traits of Lucan, and finally arrives at the author of the *Satyricon*. This process is repeated, century after century (up to the 9th), as other great names emerge from the lists left in the background. It will be reproduced in the other chapters devoted to the 'modern' sections of the library (Catholic literature and secular literature). The inventorial device whereby a name, within a list of names, opens up beneath it its further list of appreciative traits, however, can be reversed, and these traits can take on the hues of contempt and disregard.

What is essential is the maintenance of a figure-background relationship, in which we have: (1) emergence of a name associated with a list of significant merits; (2) emergence of a name associated with a list of rejections; (3) background of names that give the dimension of time spent reading and assimilating such a hierarchy of values.

Such a temporal dimension, on the other hand, does not exist for Bouvard and Pécuchet: about the two of them, we do not discern a backstory that can in any way be connected to any of the issues they deal with and their estrangement from the various domains of knowledge they deal with, leads to a series of issues with the assimilation of concepts and values, which are reflected in the management of spaces and objects. For instance, coming back to their agricultural enterprises, we find a scene with Bouvard struggling with a stack of manuals for cereal cultivation:

> Bouvard (…) rencontrait des obstacles. Ils se consultaient mutuellement, ouvraient un livre, passaient à un autre, puis ne savaient que résoudre devant la

> divergence des opinions. Ainsi, pour la marne, Puvis la recommande; le manuel Roret la combat. Quant au plâtre, malgré l'exemple de Franklin, Rieffel et M. Rigaud n'en paraissent pas enthousiasmés. Les jachères, selon Bouvard, étaient un préjugé gothique. Cependant, Leclerc note les cas où elles sont presque indispensables. Gasparin cite un Lyonnais qui pendant un demi-siècle a cultivé des céréales sur le même champ: cela renverse la théorie des assolements. Tull exalte les labours au préjudice des engrais; et voilà le major Beatson qui supprime les engrais, avec les labours! (*BP*: 87-88)

A similar palimpsest of contradictions will present itself to the two *bonshommes* as they decide to comprehend aesthetics and the various theories of beauty – an enterprise that should serve them to orient themselves in their journey through literary genres that had begun in *BP* V. Here, Bouvard reads to his friend a summary note he transcribed, which challenges the established literary canon:

> Bouhours accuse Tacite de n'avoir pas la simplicité que réclame l'histoire. M. Droz, un professeur, blâme Shakespeare pour son mélange du sérieux et du bouffon. Nisard, autre professeur, trouve qu'André Chénier est comme poète au-dessous du XVII e siècle. Blair, Anglais, déplore dans Virgile le tableau des harpies. Marmontel gémit sur les licences d'Homère; La Motte n'admet point l'immoralité de ses héros; Vida s'indigne de ses comparaisons. (221)

As we can see, being 'new to everything' for the two companions is an obstacle to any hierarchical stratification of personal preferences or beliefs. Their *readable* identity (Cohan 1983) depends on the repetition of 'interferences' between the terms of the lists they face rather than on a repetition of the size ratios between figures and backgrounds, as happens for des Esseintes.

3.3. Results: *distillation* vs. *cluttering*

As we have come to understand by now, from the lists defining the life and personality of des Esseintes, certain products arise which we might call 'refined' and which are set against the background of the 'raw' materials offered by various fields of knowledge and technology. The path that proceeds from the raw to the refined draws the boundaries of the overall inventory of what a particular man can be. We are dealing, to be exact, with a method of *extracting essences* based on a certain kind of element fermentation: we could consider it as a veritable process of *distillation* – that same process at which we saw Bouvard and Pécuchet poorly fail with the explosion of their pot still.

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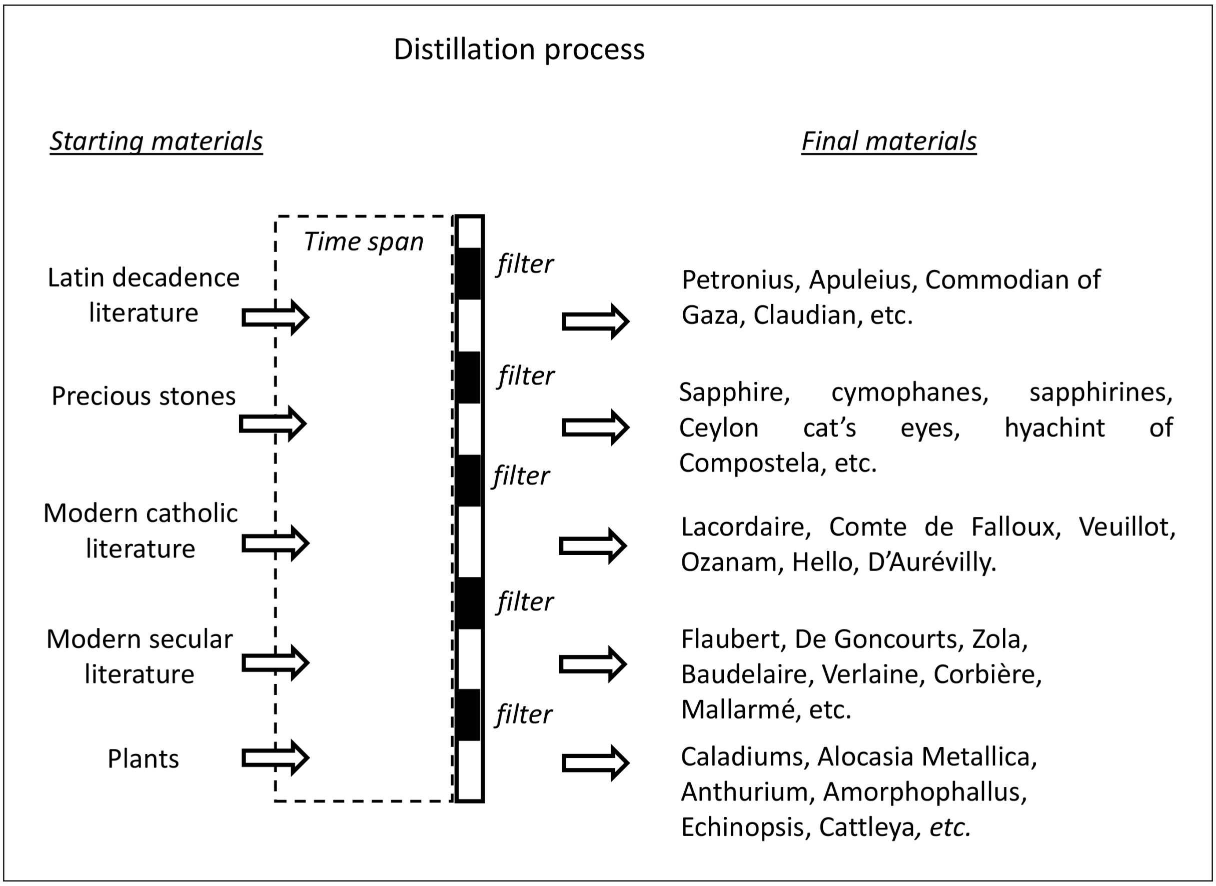
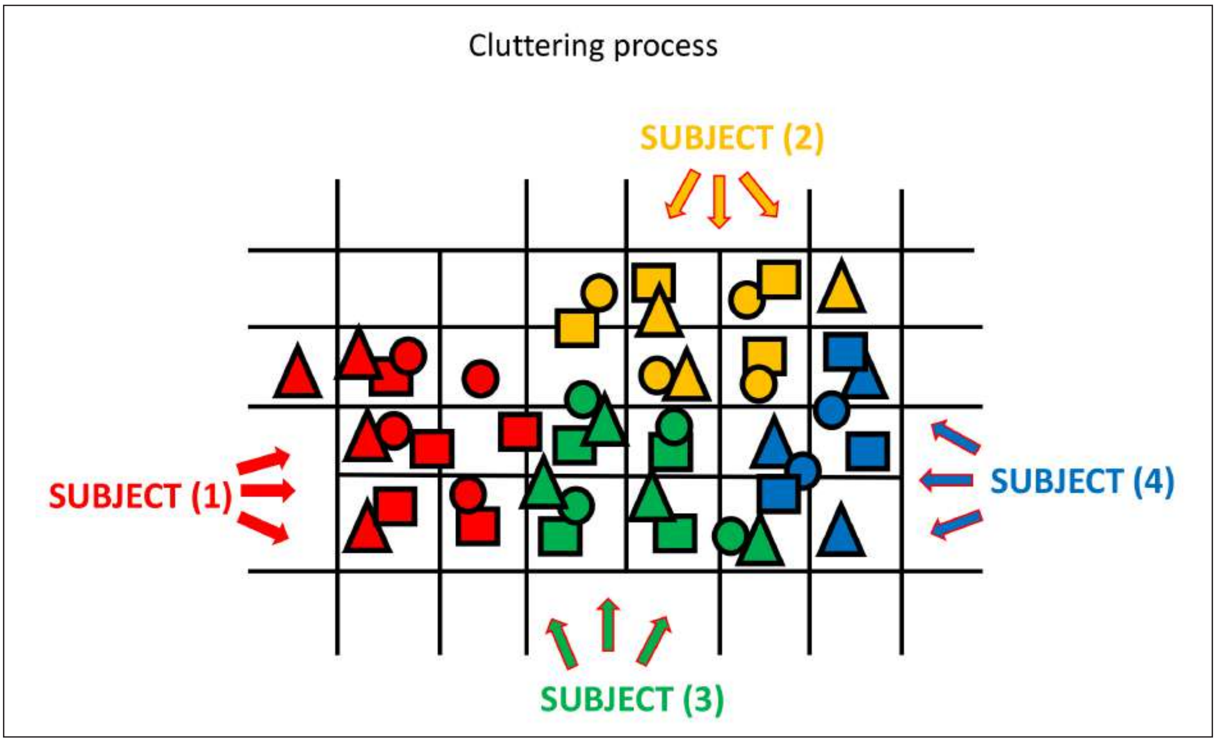
The whole extent of des Esseintes' domestic existence is organized around this process. According to one's aesthetic degree and mood state, one can distill spaces: the essence of a monastery cell into a bedroom (as we have seen) or the essence of a ship's cabin into a dining room (*AR*: 86-89). One can distill objects, finding one's gemstones – those suitable to embody one's specific gemstone desire. And, of course, the readings, drawing from each literary century, are the most meaningful examples. Also responding to this process is the enumeration style, where each insertion goes to form a well-crafted interlock. There is thus an internal organization of enumerative series, which we might describe with an image like this:



On the opposite side, we have Bouvard and Pécuchet. Why are they such bad distillers? The trouble that adds to their inability to sort through the confusion of opinions and knowledge is their wanting to establish such an order *in the present*, in a continuous doing devoid of lived depth. Essentially, they want to put everything into the pot before they have had time to figure out what can fit together and what cannot and how the tool is used. Des Esseintes' distillation becomes, here, an encumberment, which we might represent with this other figure:



Moreover, in both novels, several passages explicitly thematize the two processes. For example, the scene of Bouvard's reading of his notes on the scholars' aesthetic judgments ends with Pécuchet scrambling for a final composition of the picture:

> Il aurait voulu faire s'accorder les doctrines avec les œuvres, les critiques et les poètes, saisir l'essence du beau; – et ces questions le travaillèrent tellement que sa bile en fut remuée. Il y gagna une jaunisse. (*BP*: 221)

The flaw in this attempt lies in wanting to combine the two mentioned methods, to grasp (saisir) an essence by the agreement (*accord*) of the elements. This way, the extraction does not work, leading to the side effects of body disease. It does not go any better for des Esseintes when it comes to enjoying his collections. Around the middle of Chapter IV of *AR*, we see him contemplating with satisfaction the result of the turtle hull interventions in one of the rare moments of mental and physical well-being in his home life. But for most of his time at Fontaney, des Esseintes suffers in body and mind, and his fine collections can only help and ease his woes *to a certain extent*.

Regarding books, for example, we get the backstory of what he owns and prefers (along with what criteria have shaped those preferences). Still, on the front of the practical relationship between the actant character and such objects, in the space of the story, des Esseintes's attempts to escape boredom by reading do not go well. The reason why is illustrated by Huysmans as follows:

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> A force de les avoir passées, dans son cerveau, comme on passe des bandes de métal dans une filière d'acier d'où elles sortent ténues, légères, presque réduites en d'imperceptibles fils, il avait fini par ne plus posséder de livres qui résistassent à un tel traitement et fussent assez solidement trempés pour supporter le nouveau laminoir d'une lecture; à avoir ainsi voulu raffiner, il avait restreint et presque stérilisé toute jouissance. (…) Il était arrivé maintenant à ce résultat, qu'il ne pouvait plus découvrir un écrit qui contentât ses secrets désirs; et même son admiration se détachait des volumes qui avaient certainement contribué à lui aiguiser l'esprit, à le rendre aussi soupçonneux et aussi subtil. (265)

Conclusion

We now begin to understand how the two paths can come to a breaking point. For des Esseintes, the distillation process involves a dangerous pleasure, that sickens the mind and fuels isolation, deleterious to thought, ultimately resolving itself in 'no more joy at all.' The depth of his identity lists gives us the idea of a consciousness hypertrophy in which one risks sinking. As des Esseintes sinks, his doctor pulls him out of the Fontenay estate to bring him back to city social life. Yet, losing the whole of his man-things, little will remain of him.

For the two former clerks, however, the physical and mental space to cram objects and concepts will ultimately break down (like the pot still). It will then be necessary to gather what remains and start again, this time with no other space than the automatic recording of one entry after another. The Bouvard and Pécuchet we have come to know will flatten out more and more until they dissolve on the surface of collective knowledge – this being the start of the so-called *dictionary of clichés*.

These two paths might ultimately represent two ways of exorcising two different forms of accumulation fear. The fear of sinking under the weight of continuous refinement and getting lost in the seas of the collectible or inventoriable.

We may also notice how these two fears participate in a broader cultural paradigm in which positive sciences and, more generally, a secular approach to human knowledge have changed forever the very purpose of listing and collecting practices. In their study on pre- and post-Enlightenment catalogues of Catholic Saints, Jenny Ponzo and Gabriele Marino (2021) point out how a 'modern' encyclopedic technique could have informed the ancient practice of Saints' lives catalogue drafting by the introduction of non-hierarchical and impartial listing principles – alongside with the alphabetical order form.

This study is particularly relevant for the issue we are concerned with, i.e., the late eighteenth-century French literary atmosphere. For the 1870s or 1880s savant, the cultural process by which modern life experience had come from Enlightenment rationality to industrialized and bureaucratized society was not perceived as linear or continuous, as it may seem to us in retrospect. Novelists like Huysmans and the late Flaubert had to deal with the burden of the romantic generation's artistic and philosophical experiences – and especially with their actual or presumed failures in finding some anti-Enlightenment organization principles for knowledge, along with a new religious and Christian-like feeling. Interestingly, some Romanticism-related writers had tried to bring back a perspective of human history around the mid-eighteenth century that could be organized around a list of *representative lives*. These are Emerson's 'representative men' (1850), Carlyle's 'heroes' (1841), Hugo's 'genies' (1864), and Nerval's '*illuminés*' (1852).

Urging the readers' encyclopedic curiosity has nothing to do with such enterprises, inspired as they are by a genuinely anti-encyclopedic purpose. To draft a short, partial, and personal-biased selection of a few elect, entrusted with the goal of giving answers, directions, and moral rules to humanity – not so differently from the ancient *martyrologies*.[14] This being said, a few decades before these great essays, someone else had started to write his catalogue of human types: that was Balzac, and in doing such, he was keeping in mind a peculiar belief that a post-Napoleonic world would have shown us a model of history and society that had less and less to do with *destiny*, *glory*, or *heroism*; a society where representativity relations would simply connect a cultural token, to a civil register-like categorization.[15] Therefore, such a framework would pass a contradictory legacy to fin-de-siècle authors, with Flaubert and Huysmans both leaning towards Balzac's viewpoint and setting, each in his way, a fictional scene in which the meaning of organizing knowledge units, as well as value-bearer objects, would submit itself to such the question: *to what end?* This ultimately resulted in the main characters' inability to coexist peacefully and their respective and opposite way of searching for an answer.

[14] I have not included among the above-mentioned works, a case such as early Eighteenth-century Chateaubriand's book, *Les Martyrs* (1809), since it lacks of that dossier-shaped structure which could serve the purpose of a tokens/paradigm textual organization. This latter would, instead, result in Emerson's forms of *irradiating greatness*, Carlyle's forms of *historical heroism*, Hugo's forms of *human spiritual genius*, and Nerval's forms of *cognitive eccentricity*.

[15] Also see, on this subject, Peter Brooks' Balzac's lives (2020).

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‘Having everything, possessing nothing’: Archives and archiving in the digital era

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ABSTRACT

The article explores meaning-making by investigating the subject-object relation and human-machine intra-action within the context of archive and archiving practices. It discusses changing relations between humans, machines, and objects in changing technological environments. Entering the digital archive’s cosmos, the subject-object relation transfers the focus on human-machine intra-action. The article examines the thingness of digital objects and the role of search engines in generating data collections as prerequisites for the intelligibility of the entangled parts. In digital flowness, search engines provoke a stasis in the constant movement of information, creating ephemeral collections. Thus, meaning emerges as a temporal pause within the ongoing continuum. The article argues that in the processual continuum of movement-stasis, meaning is a process – always a momentum, always stillborn, thus, intelligible to both the human and the machine. Conceiving meaning as a process within the condition of digital flowness signifies the transcendence of content in favor of processual entanglements between the human and the machine.

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Introduction: The infinite and the collected

In his essay *On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture*, Georg Simmel uses the saying “omnia habentes, nihil possidentes”[1] to describe

[1] Simmel overturns the saying “nihil habentes, omnia possidentes,” a typical motto of the Franciscan monks. The saying aims to stress the liberation of the human from material things in favor of spiritual wealth (The Statutes 2001).

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> the sensation of being surrounded by an infinity of cultural elements, which are not insignificant, but fundamentally not significant either, which, as a mass, have something suffocating, because man cannot assimilate in his interiority every single content, nor can he limit himself to refusing it, since it potentially belongs to the sphere of his cultural development. (Simmel 1997 [1911], 73)

Observing the world exhibitions of the early 20th century, Simmel interprets the multitude of artifacts or else cultural elements as a burden for the modern subject. The superabundance of the cultural production of modernity is such (*omnia habentes*) that it exceeds the human capability to signify the surrounding culture of his time (*nihil possidentes*). Simmel's analysis addresses fundamental issues regarding subject-object relation, the production of meaning as an outcome of this relation, and, more importantly, the potentiality of meaning due to boundlessness.

Some decades later, in 1931, unpacking his library, Walter Benjamin narrates his experience as a book collector in an autobiographical dive into the collector's mindset (Benjamin 1931). In Benjamin's retrospective reflection, the relation between the collector and his 'possessions' is the base for understanding the praxis of collecting. In his thinking, collecting is a connotation of possessing, while possessing is a connotation of remembering. "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (Benjamin 1931: 62). In this brief but dense description, Benjamin sets some core features of collecting, indicating subject-object relation: the sensorial excess ('passion') interconnecting with the longing for memories; the expression of that longing through material acquisitions; ordering as an outcome of the desire for borders; the urge for accumulation signifying objects as an act of becoming. In this context, collecting is a signifying process for the becoming of the modern subject, augmenting the time of his existence extending one's lifetime: the real collector lives in the objects of his collection (Benjamin 1931: 69).

Simmel and Benjamin reflect on the subject-object relation, posing it in different temporalities. Simmel's account is about synchronicity, the here-and-now of subject-object relation. At the same time, Benjamin places that relation into a broader time span, inserting 'memories' as one of its constituent elements. In the here-and-now temporality, the infinity of objects – an infinity with no borders – surrounding human beings makes meaning-making difficult, leaving the subject at a loss or unsettled in the sphere of possibility. On the other hand, a collection as an intentional accumulation of objects creates borders on the chaotic *cosmos* of memories, i.e., in the past-and-present temporality, which is always active in the present time. In that context, the collection, as the outcome of the signifying process of collecting, enables the subject to "live in [objects]" or produce meaning through a meaningfully selected set of objects. In that sense, "ownership" as "the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects" (Benjamin 1931: 69) can be seen as an intentional act of meaning-making through selecting, curating, and ordering a set of things. Thus, in Simmel's statement, "having everything, possessing nothing," Benjamin's conception of collecting as possessing selected objects proposes a meaning-making process.

Bringing the two accounts of late modernity into a dialogue is our point of entry into reflecting on meaning-making through subject-object relation within the context of collection and collecting practices. There is a vast amount of literature on collections and collecting investigating aspects mainly related to museum studies and art history. Within this abundance of studies, I will highlight some of the epistemological issues that arise and examine them, focusing on the analog and digital archives as specific collection forms.

Collecting is mainly investigated "as a means of constructing the way in which we relate to the material world" (Pearce 1999: 4). This perception stresses subject-object relation as a formative way of creating connections between the subject and the culturally constructed world. In academic discourse, collecting includes both sensory and mental processes, as it is described as 'passion,' 'urge,' 'drive,' or 'impulse,' and simultaneously as a deliberate act of classification and categorization. Thus, 'our' relation to the 'material' world, or the world 'we' have constructed, or else cultural artifacts, is governed by the passion of "gathering or accumulating material things" (Macdonald 2006: 81). In that sense, collecting includes explorations and encounters, both in synchronicity (e.g., travels and voyages of discovery that reveal unknown and peculiar objects, 'curiosities') and in a continuous time of past-and-present (e.g., authentic objects of the past with some cultural and aesthetic value). The passion of accumulation or bringing together objects of various origins and different kinds, goes hand in hand with the passion of organization. Taxonomy, or the science of classification, is inextricably linked to collecting as a means of organization through categorization in terms of similarity, relevance, resemblance, or even difference and juxtaposition.

As an outcome of collecting, a collection is defined as a "set of objects that forms some kind of meaningful though not necessarily (yet) complete "whole" (Macdonald 2006: 82). The formation of a collection is a praxis of selection, a deliberate act of inclusion and exclusion, "indentif[ying] the significant and meaningful amidst the excess of both things and information" (Macdonald 2006: 87). The selection process goes along with the detachment of objects from their original setting and their arrangement in a non-contextual space, i.e., a museum, a gallery, a library. A collection supposes the recontextualization of objects through technologies of signification that impose the ordering and classification of objects in ways that become socially meaningful. The creation of a collection as a meaningful entity is an act of constructing self-awareness in a process that extends from discovering

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the unfamiliar (e.g., curiosities and peculiarities) to incorporating the unfamiliar into 'our' world and establishing connections to the world and meaning through the set-up of some organizing principles by which objects were brought together.

Within this article, a collection, as an indicator of meaning-making through subject-object relation, is perceived as the intentional possession of material objects detached from their original context and grouped in meaningful sets via selection and categorization practices that define inclusions and exclusions. Within this conceptualization of collection, archive, in its material and spatial connotations, is the case study that the article investigates to examine selection, classification, and meaning-making processes in the digital condition. Ubiquitous as a conceptual construction and a dominant classification structure in both the analog and digital era, the archive is a *par excellence* area to explore processes of (re)semanticization and transformations in meaning-making.

The Order of the potential-all: Institutional archive

If the literature on collection and collecting is abundant, the literature on archive and archiving is even more so, given the fact that an 'archival impulse' is driving many disciplines, including arts. The archive concept has taken on different meanings over time (Chabin 2021) and has been studied in diverse and often contradictory ways; nevertheless, all of these interpretations can come into dialogue with each other.

Schematically speaking, historians and archivists discuss the experience –even the bodily experience– of working in the archive ["historians read for what is not there: the silences and the absences of the documents always speak to us" (Steedman 2001: 1177)] and its status as a national institution that contributes to the formation of national identity and the establishment of national narrative (Steedman 2002: vii; Berger 2013). Critical theorists place the archive "in the system of discursivity," conceiving it as "the law of what can be said" (Foucault 1972: 129) and connect it with political power ("there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory") while emphasizing the contingent nature of the archive as it "produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida 1995: 4, 17). Even in art, throughout the 20th century, "archival art" seeks not only "to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" but at the same time, also draws in informal archives or even produces them, e.g., the personal archive of an artist (Foster 2004: 4-5). In that context, terms such as "archive fever," "the archival turn," "archive as metaphor," and "archival impulse" indicate the return of the archive both in contemporary critical theory and in research and artistic practices. Furthermore, the archive's return has so powerfully exploded with the tremendous development of digital technology that "archive has become a universal metaphor for all conceivable forms of storage and memory" (Ernst 2004: 46), as I will later argue in this article.

However, the generalized invocation of “the archive” – indicating amplifying concerns on issues such as memory, truth, reality, nostalgia, and so many others related to different readings of the archive – is inconsistent with a specific interest in adhering to the strict order and the rigidity of classification of the formal archival practices. Hence, as my intention here is to examine classification as a critical feature of the collection, I will only focus my analysis on institutional archives and archivists’ practices. Following archival terminology, I will examine archival order and its classification reasoning within two broad categories, materiality, and spatiality, i.e., content (archival material) and space (public institution), as ‘archive’ derives from their entanglement.

Regarding materiality, the archive has the aura of authenticity that derives from its quality as a non-contextual space for preserving original (and tangible) testimonies of reality. Authenticity is also an undisputable quality of a collection of objects that

> […] lies not in the properties of the object itself but in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both individual and collective memories. (Phillips and Steiner 1999: 19)

The authenticity of archival materials signifying “the *having-been-there* of things” (Barthes 1968: 147) is about their physical materiality and content. Both the physical materials and their content add authenticity as a critical element of the archive.

Regarding spatiality, the archive is a quite literal and concrete space, a repository where archival documents are kept, preserved, and restored to be accessible for research (Manoff 2004). Organizing the archive through classification systems is the key practice for achieving accessibility both to archivists and researchers. The classification process to constitute an archive is based on the principles of ‘provenance’ and ‘original order’ and not on subjects as in library collections. The principle of provenance, or the “respect des fonds,” “dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context.” At the same time, the original order means “the organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records” (SAA Dictionary).

Taxonomy practices, including catalogues, finding aids, guides, indexes, and bibliographic records, as well as the spatial arrangement in folders, boxes, shelves, and rooms, create the archival order. This order is based on structural hierarchal trees allegedly “respecting” the original order in perceiving classification “as an organizational structure imposed upon a body of knowledge to facilitate access within a universal and frequently static framework” (Albrechtsen and Jacob 1998: 293).

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In that context, the archive as a collection of authentic relics of the past has the "respect" for the allegedly original order of its content as a principle of its organizational reasoning. Stressing the respect to the original order as a central principle, archives "hold the promise of retaining a trace of the real" (Baron 2012: 474). This promise indicates that the archive is responsible for keeping all the relics of the past without engaging in practices of inclusion and exclusion that are crucial for collection formation.

If selection is a *sine qua non* condition for creating a collection, in archiving reasoning and practices, the selection is a process leading to the preservation, disposal, or destruction of records. It is an internal responsibility of the archival service and a stage of the appraisal process during which the archivist "determin[es] whether records and other materials have permanent (archival) value." Thus, selection as a "process of identifying which records to retain because of their enduring value" decides the acquisitions of an Archive (SAA Dictionary). In archival language, archival value has mainly legal connotations; records of value are those "that documented the responsibilities and the actions of the creator, usually a governmental official" (Boles 2005: 25). Even if critical readings of the archive stress "the law of what can be said" defining it as a technology of power that controls the limits of enunciability (Foucault 1972: 129), in archival practices selection is still conceived as the administrative task of an archivist, as just a phase of the service archiving procedure based on seemingly management judgments.[2]

In a broader perception of the collection, selection is the primary technology that creates coherent ensembles by setting boundaries to the abundance of possibilities, while categorization follows selection. In the case of the institutional archive, classification is the principal practice to constitute fonds, i.e., archival collections, while selection remains in obscurity. The acceptance of selection in forming a collection denotes the acknowledgment of the invented character of the collection. On the other hand, the constitution of the archive, according to the principle of the original order, indicates the invocation of the archive as a neutral storehouse. While a collection connotes the delimited, an archive connotes the 'potential-all.' While the collection is accepted as a selective accumulation, the archive is perceived as an ordered and classified abundance. The order of the archive is almost identical to the archive *per se*.

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[2] Critical theory and postmodernism have influenced archival institutions and archivists who are now eager to recognize that their role in selection and acquisition does shape the archival record (Jimerson 2011: 373). Thus, in archival literature, the conception of the archive as just a repository and of the archivist as just a "neutral custodian" has been challenged by studies that connect archival appraisal to selection, even discrimination, refusing the "status of archive" to documents appraised as "unarchivable" (Mbembe 2002: 20; Ketelaar 2001). Moreover, archivists and theorists reflect on the implications of archival classificatory methods and systems that "determine how meaning is imbued" in classificatory practices (Yakel 2003: 3). However, this criticism has influenced neither the dominant archival discourse nor appraisal processes.

The archive of everything: Digital archive

In conjunction with the institutional archive, an alternative vision has persistently sought to create a space capable of encompassing the entirety of world knowledge. By excluding Antiquity from our purview, we can discern three distinct historical moments extending from modernity to the present day, where visions to create an archive of everything were intensifying. The initial moment occurred in the Age of the Enlightenment, characterized by the passion for knowledge and the desire to preserve it, epitomized by Diderot's and D'Alembert's Encyclopedia; the second moment emerged in the first half of the 20th century, envisioning repositories of universal knowledge to foster world peace. The third moment was launched with the digital era, where the post-war vision has become a ubiquitous environment we all inhabit. Furthermore, while the institutional archive is typically intended for the few, the envisioned all-encompassing archive is designed for the many. In addition to accumulation and preservation, the envisioned archive of everything aims to disseminate its contents to the public.

The technologies envisioned for this objective were differentiated according to the respective periods. The Enlightenment's Encyclopedia was a collection of entries organized in alphabetical order, displayed on the surface of a book page without a hierarchical system. Following the Enlightenment's urge for classification, coherence, and order, the Encyclopedia was criticized for lacking the coherence promised (Broberg 1990: 48). In the famous *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, D' Alembert responded to that criticism:

> It is impossible to improve the arbitrariness of this great original profusion. The universe presents us only with individual things, infinite in number and with almost no fixed and determined division [among them]; none of them can be called the first or the last; everything is connected to everything else by insensible gradations.

Additionally, in his *Oeuvres completes*, in the article "Encyclopédie," D' Alembert compares "encyclopedic order with a machine, the parts of which fit together, but which can also be assembled in a completely new way" (Broberg 1990: 49). D'Alembert's conceptual model, which portrayed an infinite number of objects capable of being arranged in various configurations, engages in a dialogue with the digital archive of everything, as elaborated below.

In the first half of the 20th century, the second moment attempts to create an all-encompassing archive previewing some of the features of future computing technologies. Therefore, they can be seen as precursors to digitality. To create an all-encompassing archive, Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine founded Mundaneum, an

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institution established in Belgium in 1910, aiming "at gathering, indexing and sharing the universal knowledge" (Mundaneum website).[3] The founders of the Mundaneum collected this vast "knowledge" in the form of 12 million inand dex cards, which were then categorized and preserved as an archive. They developed a classification system called the Universal Decimal Classification, which enabled the organization of diverse media types, including documents, books, audiovisual media, and even museum objects. In 1914, Otlet described the envisioned archive of everything in the following manner:

> These collections are conceived as parts of one universal body of documentation, as an encyclopaedic survey of human knowledge, as an enormous intellectual warehouse of books, documents, catalogues, and scientific objects. Established according to standardized methods, they are formed by assembling cooperatively everything that the participating associations may gather or classify. (Union of International Associations 1914: 116, from Rayward 1994: 240)

Described as "an important chapter in the history of hypertext and information science" (Rayward 1994: 235), the Mundaneum can be seen as a hybrid of an Enlightenment-era encyclopedia and a classification system that would later evolve into computer-based classification systems.

In 1945, many years after the Mundaneum's existence, Vannevar Bush conceptualized the MEMEX, a computational device that would enable an individual to "store *all* his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility" (Bush, 1945, emphasis mine). Bush's detailed description of the device reveals his vision: a memory and indexing apparatus that will function as an extension of human biological memory and, at the same time, as an index of stored data.[4] What Bush described is a computational 'archive-of-everything' that meets the needs of managing a vast amount of information by searching mechanisms and combining all the related information.

Finally, the vision to establish a space capable of encompassing the entire world knowledge – the 'having everything' that disturbed Simmel in the early 20th century – was materialized in the digital condition. From the simplest digital apparatus – the personal computer – to the most complex system of interconnected computer networks

[3] As Otlet dreamed that someday people would access the archive from their homes, Mundaneum is considered a forerunner of the Internet. Today, Mundaneum is an exhibition space in Mons, Belgium, organizing exhibitions and displaying items from the vast archival collection formed by its founders.

[4] Bush did not mention the origin of the name MEMEX. It could be MEMory + indEX or MEMory+Extender.

– the Internet – digital space functions as an archive of everything: a repository of all existing information, an environment to store, preserve, process, search, and retrieve the desired information. Thus, I use the term ‘digital archive’ not to refer to specific personal, museums, archives, or libraries’ digital spaces made for managing and displaying particular collections. All of these can be seen as parts of a unified system, a network of networks, i.e., the Internet, because the Internet was the technological development that made possible such endeavors. The Internet permitted the creation of a “software universe” consisting of all the various software such as platforms, search engines, etc., mediating “people’s interactions with media and other people” (Manovich 2013: 7, 29).

The digital archive reveals the “importance of the analog to conceptualizing the digital,” exposing how “the digital emerged as a clean, precise logic through an analogy to an analogy” (Chun 2011: 10). In terms of materiality, digital archive materializes the long-standing vision of the analog realm to create a space capable of encompassing the entirety of world knowledge. That vision, as the Mundaneum and Memex cases have shown, was the intended prerequisite for the conceptualization of an almighty machine that could augment analog capabilities in terms of both materiality (the management of ‘Big Data’ as the notion of ‘world knowledge’ could be translated) and spatiality (the digital sphere as an infinite storehouse).

In this conceptualization, the consideration of selection, encompassing dilemmas of inclusion and exclusion, is categorically dismissed. In the analog realm, selection as technology-defining inclusions and exclusions is a prerequisite of collection formation, while in the case of archives, selection, despite the critical theory’s criticism, was supposed to be a necessity imposed by space limitations. The rapid development of information technology in terms of hardware and software overcame the selection dilemma. Computing was conceptualized as a means to surpass selection, conceived as a ‘limitation.’ Thus, exceeding both the practical limitations of space and memory that made selection a necessity and the conceptual aspect of selection, which is a ‘fault’ from the point of view of technology, the digital archive was both *conceived* and *developed* to “have everything.”

In addition to the issue of materiality, i.e., the content of the digital archive, digital computing is conceived as an archive in terms of classification and categorization. Leaving aside hardware and software classification and focusing solely on data classification, computing involves grouping and organizing data into meaningful categories to facilitate data retrieval and management. Additionally, computer classification involves using hierarchical structures to organize and describe data, which follow archive classification and terminology: collection, including folders, folders including files, and files including items. This emergence of digital computing as an analogy to the analog archive is also revealed in the vocabulary of software engineering. Archive File, Source Code Archive, Version Control Archive, Archive

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and Restore, Software Archive Repository, Codebase Archive, Data Archive, Archive Format, Archive Management, Archive Compression: these terms stay as a reminder of the intellectual origin of computing as well as its intention to be an omnipotent technology of storing, managing, and preserving all of the world knowledge.

The appropriation of the archive by digital computing reasoning has challenged traditional notions of archives and archiving. The digital archive has been studied from many perspectives. Archival studies explore the transformation of analog archives through digitization (Manoff 2004), seeking ways to "address the digital challenge" (Thibodeau 2022). Media archaeology views the digital archive as a technological apparatus that leads to epistemological changes (Ernst 2013), while a semiotic perspective explores the production of meaning in various manifestations of the archive (Dondero et al. 2021). In this article, I use the term 'digital archive' to encompass both digital computing as a data processing technology and the Internet as a space for communication among networks and devices where computation outcomes are displayed. Combining digital computing and the Internet in the "digital archive" concept may seem excessive. Can an all-inclusive term be helpful as an analytical tool? I argue that the entanglement of computing machinery and the Internet, where the human-machine relation is performed, is so strong that it would be fallacious to differentiate between them. Thus, the digital archive is perceived as a system of both programming and networks where human-machine relations are performed by mediating computing processes (Pentazou 2021). This systemic perception of the digital archive helps us recognize the radical transformations of subject-object relation and, consequently, meaning-making in the digital condition.

In the analog world, forming a collection or an archive was the outcome of a subject-object relation, as I have argued thus far. However, in the digital condition, the human-machine relation is performed while intra-acting within the digital archive of everything that matters. This statement needs further clarification.

In computing terminology, 'interaction' is the dominant term to denote the human-machine relation, focusing on transforming the digital environment by the human but not vice versa, thus presupposing relations between autonomous and pre-established entities. The field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) indicates this one-way relationship by focusing on the relations between 'users' and 'computers' and defined as "a discipline that is concerned with the design, evaluation, and implementation of interactive computing systems for human use" (Hewett et al. 1992: 5). Conversely, perceiving the human-machine relation as an 'intra-action' emphasizes the impossibility of an absolute separation between human and machine. Intra-action, defined by Karen Barad as the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad 2007: 33), signifies the materialization of the entities as autonomous agents through the performances established between them.

While intra-acting within the digital archive, the human and the machine are in constant entanglements. These entanglements presuppose that the human “becomes differentially intelligible to” the machine, and the machine “becomes differentially intelligible to” the human (Barad 2007: 379). Asserting that the human is interested in the archive’s content whereas the machine is indifferent to the content and focuses solely on data processing (Ernst 2013: 84-86), intelligibility depends on human-machine intra-actions. To explore meaning-making through human-machine intra-actions, our investigation will focus on the prerequisites for the emergence of intelligibility: the becoming of digital objects as things and the role of search engines in generating collections.

The thingness of digital objects: Database records

In the digital space, the archive comprises a continuous flow of digitally produced or digitized data. As the purpose of the article is to investigate the reconceptualization of collection in the digital condition, the digitized objects and their resemantization through the digitalization process will be the focus of the investigation in this section.

Different kinds of material were preserved in distinct collecting institutions in the analog realm: archives collected mainly documents, libraries books, museums, and gallery objects. In the digital realm, all kinds of material, texts, images, sounds, and videos of different origins and eras constitute the pulsating content of a unified collecting space that is both structured and perceived as an archive (Ernst 2013). Computing technology manages these different materialities in an undifferentiated way: for it, they are numerical symbols – bits – which it has been trained to *translate* into image, text, sound, and video. The digitalization process of converting documents, books, and art objects into digital form can be seen as a translation between analog and digital languages where the analog is converted into the digital, and then the digital is reconverted into the analog to be accessible to the human senses.

Through the digitalization process, the distinctions between physical materialities are blurred (Manoff 2004). Documents, books, paintings, everyday objects, sounds, and videos are first digitized – converted into a suitable digital format (txt, jpeg, mp3, mp4) – losing the original characteristics of their physical materiality. Relocating an object from an archive’s box, a library’s shelf, or a museum’s display case to the digital sphere, it transforms into a digital format, a fragment. It is no longer an object since it is deprived of all its characteristics and does not serve its intended function anymore (Heidegger 1971 [1950]). To become a digital object, that fragment must re-acquire the characteristics that connected it with the original object and must be re-positioned in the digital space so that it can be stored, preserved, and accessed. While digitization is a concrete stage of converting analog objects into digital formats, we should understand

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digitalization as the technology's "capacity to process data" by developing adequate information systems. The development of the relational database in the 1980s, based on the appropriation of the mathematical relational calculus, is the *par excellence* data processing mechanism of the algorithmic realm (Hui 2016: 25, 137). As the outcome of the digitization process, a digital fragment is inserted into the relational database structure, becoming a 'field' in a database record.

From that time on, a new and autonomous entity is created: the database record named by an invented 'title' that correlates the two materialities – the analog and the digital – consisting of 'segments,' or else 'fields'/'attributes'/'metadata,' defined for it (Celko 2013). The database record as the 'smallest entity of a data set' is for the machine a collection of segmented information about a specific category, e.g., 'books,' 'fonds,' 'art objects,' etc., within which an analog object is classified.

Hence, the creation of a digital object involves a programming process consisting of distinct stages:

- the digitalization of the analog object – where the object becomes a digital format, a fragment,
- the selection of the appropriate database for the analog object – where the object is classified in a 'category,'
- the insertion of the digital format into a database record – where a new object is born still naked from all its previous features,
- the filling of record fields – where the new object (a) contains all the attributes of the digital matter – time, place, size, material, producer, etc. – as descriptive metadata, and (b) becomes accessible through keywords ('labels' or 'tags' – a form of descriptive metadata).

After this procedure, the new object assumes the form of a database record entered in a taxonomy, consisting of descriptive metadata, and thus becomes a comprehensive digital entity. Because of this process, the digital object as a database record is no longer the 'object' it used to be; it can no longer serve its intended function. Reflecting on the correlation between objects and their conversion into database records opens the discussion about object and thing and, therefore, about the thing theory formulated by Bill Brown. As Brown argues,

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us […]. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001: 4)

Conceiving an object inserted in a database record as a 'thing' denotes the deprivation of the object of its uses, context, owner, and associations. As a database record, the thing that stands for an object acquires "attributes" as additional layers of information. In relational databases, we define attributes (or attribute fields, or simply fields) as the characteristics that collectively describe an entity's properties (Rigdon 2016: 106). These descriptive properties are "identifiers that uniquely identify the object" (Zhang 2009). While attributes identify the properties of an entity, metadata, defined as "information about the properties or structure of data," operates as informative labels of the entity (Rigdon 2016: 769). With metadata, a digital object acquires two levels of signification. On the first level of signification, metadata uniquely identifies the digital object. On the second level, metadata creates mental connections between different digital objects.

To understand the particularity of the thingness of a digital object, it is helpful to compare it with the thingness of a collection object. Relocating into a meaningful set of objects as part of a collection, the intended function of an object changes. In its new status as a thing, its significance is derived from its position in the specific and *only* set of things indicating the relation between the collection and the collector (either person or institution). As a thing of a collection, its meaning is derived from the correlation between human-object in terms of "circulations, sequences, transfers, translation, displacements, crystallization" (Latour 2000: 10). Thus, the thingness of a collection object is limited within the boundaries of the collection.

On the other hand, the thingness of an object inserted into a relational database also indicates a changing relation between the human – the human-facing-the-screen – and the digital object. But this time, the relation is not restricted within the boundaries of a collection. The digital object, composed of data and metadata that describe the object as prosthetic layers of signification, can be inserted into multiple sets of objects due to the relational calculus, i.e., the language that translates metadata into relations between digital objects. In the digital archive of everything, "machines understand the semantic meaning of objects via the structures given to the metadata" (Hui 2016: 52). Thus, metadata make digital objects meaningful to both machines and humans, while relational calculus processing metadata opens up endless possibilities for connections permitting the insertion of a digital object into multiple webs of relations (Hui 2016: 141-2). Thus, the thingness of a digital object lies on its ability to be hinged not on a unique data set (i.e., a collection) but on endless possible webs of relations (from the machine's viewpoint) or webs of meaning (from the human's viewpoint). These webs of relations/meaning are generated as results delivered by the search mechanism, which initiates the process of information retrieval.

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Ephemeral collections: Search mechanism

Typing a few words into a search box is our point of entry into the digital archive of everything, taking for granted the availability of a search bar, mediating our finding needs. Developments in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) were extraordinarily rapid and revolutionary in their intellectual outcomes.

A few decades ago, when confronted with empty search boxes, the human-facing-the-screen had to complete words or phrases trying to guess the keywords others had inserted into the database records as metadata. Since 2009, intelligent search algorithms have mediated our search (Mahnke and Uprichard 2014: 260). When we type a word, the machine suggests specific phrase extensions based on search history, i.e., what the user or other people have already searched. The autocomplete function that "enables users to quickly find and select from a pre-populated list of values as they type, leveraging searching and filtering" (jQuery UI) is now a standard tool in existing applications. The autocomplete mechanism is a technology of prediction based on people's search behaviors, a mechanism of foreseeing "what users want to know before they actually formulate their queries" (König and Rasch 2013: 11). It directs search behavior, transforming the unlimited universe of possibilities into a "limited number of possibilities" (Bankov 2017).

In the algorithmic search, re-search becomes both a practice and a tool. But it is something more than that: it determines the regime of visibility. Without search engines, information stays invisible in the deep levels of a database. Visibility is based on two conditions: the insertion of metadata into the raw data already discussed and the search mechanism based on metadata. In the digital archive, visibility remains in flux. The search mechanism determines the potentiality of digital objects to be inserted into various webs of relations/meaning according to the query that brings the invisible into the status of visibility. Different queries lead to the emergence of different constellations of objects, increasing their connectability and thus expanding their potential to hinge on multiple networks (Massumi 2002: 94).

In machine language, a 'query' is a request for information, the equivalent of a human 'question.' But while a 'question' in the search box invites propositions, a query performs specific tasks by initiating a programming procedure. The differential intelligibility between the entangled parts permits the performance of a process whereby the human asks a question, and the machine translates it into a query that accomplishes the task of finding data, responding to the initial question by returning a sequence of structured information models as derived from a complex algorithmic data machine process.

This process, which remains invisible to us, makes the 'results' of the query visible on the screen as a list of fragments. It is the list, as a display mode of data generated by the search engine, that is visible and accessible on the screen

(Manovich 2013: 209). As the dominant mode of displaying results, the list is a vital visual element of the digital archive, indicating a non-hierarchical assemblage, non-linked but still related information.

Within the digital archive, human-machine intra-action, mediated by the search engine, provokes a stasis in the constant movement of information. The search engine suspends the flow by gathering sets of data related by metadata relevant to the question/query that has generated them. In that sense, it is the search engine that forms collections, bringing together data of various forms, origins, and kinds selected in terms of *relative* pertinence. As the outcome of human-machine entanglement, these collections are meaningful both to the human and the machine. The human’s intention and the machine’s algorithmic reasoning select the relevant data set to generate meaningful collections concerning the question/query posed. In every such intra-action, collections provoke temporal pauses in information flow. The generation of a collection is followed up by the generation of another one in the continuous human-machine entanglement. These are ephemeral collections in a sequel of movement-stasis performance (Massumi 2016). They are ephemeral in many ways.

In the digital archive, information flow assures that everything is always on disposition while in a state of invisibility beneath the screen surface. The condition of flowness does not characterize only the state of information; it also characterizes human-machine intra-action as performed by an unstoppable sequel of questions/queries followed by other questions/queries. Thus, ephemeral collections can be perceived as the outcome of a processual unity between movement (information flow) and stasis (question/query). Intra-acting within the digital archive, meaning derives as a stasis in the processual continuum triggered by the search engine. But stasis is just momentum, meaning is generated as a temporal pause in the continuum. The collections resulting from the processual unity of movement-stasis are always ephemeral, both in terms of temporality – a stillborn momentum followed by another stillborn momentum – and in terms of potentiality – possible gatherings of relevant digital objects capable of connecting into different webs of relations/meaning in the subsequent stasis in the continuum.

Thus, in the condition of digital flowness, ephemeral collections mark the momentum of their generation as a temporal sign in the digital space. But this momentum leads to a new movement: the question/query process is open to new possibilities. If in the digital archive of everything, ‘everything’ denotes possibilities, ephemeral collections break up on the screen as lists of emergent possibilities. Ephemeral collections, as possible webs of relations, signify the potentiality of meaning: the emergence of meaning as a possibility, constantly in flux (Massumi 2016: 137). More importantly, ephemeral collections also signify the potentialization of meaning, i.e., the emergence of meaning as a process depending on the differential intelligibility of the entangled human and machine.

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Thus, in the processual continuum of movement-stasis, the differential intelligibility of the entangled parts, generated ephemeral collections, reveals meaning as a process – always a flow, always stillborn, thus, intelligible to both the human and the machine. Conceiving meaning as a process within the condition of digital flowness signifies the transcendence of content. What matters are not objects, collections, data, or data sets; what matters is the processual search for the data. Meaning-making does not derive from the ephemeral collections displayed by the search engine. Meaning-making is the process of intra-acting, while meaning is a processual continuum, always elusive in terms of content.

However, this elusiveness of content, or meaning as a possibility, does not leave humans (or, better, the entangled human-machine) at a loss. Because they are entangled in the continuum of movement-stasis, and it is this continuum that matters. In the digital archive of everything, possession as the temporal grasp of meaning is not what matters. What matters is intra-acting within the processual continuum. In the digital condition, the saying "having everything, possessing nothing" signifies a state where everything is on disposition and, thus, possession is indifferent, content is indifferent, and temporality is indifferent: meaning lies in the process of intra-acting. Through intra-action, the archive of everything inflates, becoming an almighty structure for the boundlessness. But this boundlessness is no longer a chaotic cosmos: subject-object relation no longer signifies meaning-making. The 'subject-object relation' passes the baton to 'human-machine intra-action,' signifying the omnipotence of the movement-stasis processual continuum. Within this continuum, the intelligibility between humans and machines is strengthening. Meaning is the process in the continuum movement-stasis that signifies the increasing intelligibility of the entangled agents.

Concluding remarks: On the eve of a new era

The article has aimed to explore meaning-making by delving into subject-object relation and human-machine intra-action in the realm of collection and collecting. Ubiquitous as a conceptual framework and a prevailing organizational structure in both the analog and the digital sphere, the archive stands out as a *par excellence* domain for investigating evolving dynamics among humans, objects, and machines within shifting technological landscapes.

Simmel's and Benjamin's reflections on the infinite and the finite, or else the abundant and the collected, reveal collection as a deliberate act of possessing selected materialities to tame the superabundance of surrounding objects. While a collection echoes boundaries, the archive, as a form of collecting authentic past materials, resonates with boundless potential. Collection, nodding to the finite, embraces selective objects, while the archive, nodding to order, unfolds as a mosaic of classified abundance.

The archive, as the order of the potential-all, aligns with the vision of creating a space capable of encompassing the entirety of world knowledge. The digital space is built upon this vision: to function as an archive-of-everything – a space designed for the storage, preservation, processing, search, and retrieval of desired information.

Within this archive-of-everything, the distinctions between physical materialities – documents, books, paintings, everyday objects, sounds, videos – are blurred. Physical objects are converted into digital entities through digitization processes and upon insertion into a database structure. As a database record, the new digital materiality is augmented, compared to its analog counterpart, by adding metadata. While the analog object is confined within a collection, metadata, as prosthetic layers of signification, allows the digital object to be included in multiple collections. In the digital archive of everything, a digital object, in the form of a database record, becomes intelligible to both humans and machines.

Intelligibility between the entangled agents – human and machine – is also manifested in the search engines that process data to determine the visibility of digital objects, creating endless possible collections of results in response to different queries/questions. These collections are always ephemeral since they are generated as temporal and potential moments in the condition of digital flowness. In the digital archive of everything, ephemeral collections signify the potentialization of meaning determined by the continuous human-machine entanglement.

Thus, in the digital condition, meaning-making is no longer derived from contextualizing digital objects in collections but from the constant entanglement between humans and machines. This entanglement has the differential intelligibility between the two agents as a prerequisite.

The article has discussed the conversion of analog materialities into database records to be intelligible to search engines. Moreover, it has revealed a seemingly contradictory side effect: the transcendence of content in favor of human-machine intra-action. These insights underline the importance of the intelligibility between humans and machines in meaning-making. On the eve of a new era, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence demonstrates the significance of the increasing intelligibility of the entangled human-machine agency.

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Collecting objects, becoming human subjects: The fetishism of collection in modern myths and narratives

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BY: **Francesco Piluso**

ABSTRACT

Despite sharing some structural analogy with the processes of technical reproduction and commodities consumption, implying the passive cult of the serial objects and their fetishized value, the practice of collecting fosters the active role of the collector in restoring the historical and cultural meaning of material things. The simple syntactic logic of collection is enriched by accumulating new elements but mainly through their constant reassembling in original dispositions. The practice of collecting in modern mythology and narratives attests to human fascination and a fatal attraction to specific sets of objects. This is the case of some Disney and Disney-Pixar animated movies such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Wall-E* (2008), where collecting is a fundamental factor in the process of humanization of the main characters, who undergo a physical and existential transformation through the subjective consumption and resemantization of material remains. A blinding light emanates from the familiar relics collected by Jonathan in the movie *Everything is Illuminated* (2005). The memory of the past and the beginning of a new story transcend the limits of the collection and require the subject to break free from the objects' enchantment.

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1. The myth of collection: reconstructing the subject-object relationship

A collection represents an ambivalent relationship between a human subject and material objects, which are, in turn, related to each other. Both subjects and their object(s) do not have a fixed role preceding the collection. Instead, they are defined as reciprocal terms of the relationship established by collecting. In

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this article, I will analyze narratives in which the subject collector undergoes an existential transformation and, in some cases, even a process of humanization through their interaction with the collectible objects. Far from having a mere instrumental role, the collectibles assume a crucial value in the mythological arch of the story. As a whole, the collection is the main object of desire that drives the narration and the same process of subjectivation undertaken by the collector. To understand the mythological meaning of these stories, we must give credit to material objects beyond the realm of narration by recognizing their agency not as a mere fictional trick but as an *actual fetishist* aspect derived from being assembled in a collection. To this end, in this first section, I will focus on the semiotic logic sustaining human fascination and fatal attraction to specific sets of objects.

1.1. Commodity fetishism

Collecting reveals the multifaceted *nature* of material objects as they are not single-purpose and discrete units but complexes of multiple features. For example, functionality is only one among the plural dimensions of material things: a denotative meaning whose apparent naturality is never independent of a specific social discourse and common code of valorization – that is, as we will see later, the actual source of the objects' fetishization. However, the Western epistemological framework or, more simply, common sense itself dictates functionality as the material object's fundamental value, with no purpose other than serving the individual subject.

In this regard, Marx denounced the fetishist aspect assumed by consumer goods in capitalist modes of production: commodities are charged and animated by a relational value, the exchange value, that seems inherent to each of them, while their original *use-value* as single products of human labor is mystified. Over the years, numerous semiotic studies have attempted to deconstruct the fetishist aspect of material objects, particularly consumer goods, in our consumer society. In this regard, a very compelling analysis was conducted by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1991), in which the author sheds light on the advertising discourse promoting products by attributing to them extraordinary powers and ideological values – such as beauty, prestige, social and individual distinction – to increase their appeal in the eyes of the fascinated consumer. Although this type of commercial discourse aims to imbue consumer goods with connotative meanings superimposed on their basic functionality, objects are still conceived as mere attributes of the subject, tools in the hands of the human actor (or passive consumer) – an epistemological framework shared by the same critique to consumer society, which denounces the ideological nature of the commercial value/semiotic meaning assumed by the object, without questioning its presumed role as a mean for subjecthood.

Drawing on Marx's notion of fetishism and reframing it in the context of advanced consumer culture as critiqued by Barthes, Jean Baudrillard (1981) adopts a semiotic perspective to individuate objects' fetishism not in their *ideological content* but as strictly linked to their *commodity form*. In this regard, the French author talks about a "fetishism of the signifier," characterizing commodities for being conceived and shaped in autonomous series: a specific semiotic form that breaks both their natural (denotative use-value) and ideological (connotative meaning) link to the subject, providing them with a pure differential, relational *exchange-value*. According to Baudrillard (1981: 118), "Object Fetishism never supports [economic] exchange [value] in its principle, but the social principle of exchange supports the fetishized value of the object." The merit of this subversion is to individuate the relational, semiotic, and consequently, fetishistic aspect in the structure of the objects themselves as their principle and not as the result of the false consciousness of an alienated subject, whether they be a worker or consumer. In other words, fetishism is the fascination with the socially codified character of the object: a relational value that does not substitute or mystify its subjective origin and end but reflects on its artificial[1] mechanism of production, consumption, and signification (*sign-exchange value*).[2]

What Baudrillard and later Latour (1991) emphasize is how fetishism is implicit in modern epistemology, *despite*, or rather, *through* its efforts to avoid fetishistic tendencies by reducing the object to a mere reflection and passive *intermediary* of the subject. In this way, Western metaphysics fails to recognize the active role of *mediators* that material things play, both in their mutual relations and interactions with human beings, in the constitution and structuring of the *social fabric*. Here, the 'social' is understood not as a superstructural domain but in the more relational sense of 'association' (see Latour 2005). In attempting to defend its metaphysical status by denying the actual fetishist power of the object-*factish* (Latour 2010), the human subject finds itself excluded from this network of *hybrid* (human and non-human) actors, from this *collective* (Latour 1991; 2005) in which it is physically immersed but fetishistically experienced as something distinct from itself.

[1] The etymological meaning of 'fetish,' derived from the Portuguese *feitico* derived from the Latin *facticius*, means 'artificially made.' According to Baudrillard (1981), the *fictional* aspect generally associated with the fetish is due to a linguistic distortion of the term, which turns out to be the main reason for the mystification of the object as a product of human physical and linguistic labor, and so the main factor of its fetishization. In other words, the (con)fusion between 'artificiality' and 'falseness' registered in the notion of 'fetish' implies that the same aspect of artificiality is firstly criticized to be then affirmed as the true original essence of the object.

[2] Drawing again from Baudrillard's theory (1981:113-114): "[p]olitical economy is this immense transmutation of all values (labor, knowledge, social relations, culture, nature) into economic exchange value. Everything is abstracted and reabsorbed into a world market and in the preeminent role of money as a general equivalent […] The equally essential, equally generalized process has been largely neglected — a process that is neither the inverse nor the residue nor the relay of production: that immense process of the transmutation of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. This is the process of consumption considered as a system of sign exchange value: not consumption as traditional political economy defines it (reconversion of economic exchange value into use value, as a moment of the production cycle), but consumption considered as the conversion of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. At this point, the field of political economy, articulated only through exchange value and use value, explodes and must be entirely reanalyzed as generalized political economy, which implies the production of sign exchange value in the same way and the same movement as the production of material goods and of economic exchange value. The analysis of the production of signs and culture thus does not impose itself as exterior, ulterior, and 'superstructural' in relation to that of material production; it imposes itself as a revolution of political economy itself, generalized by the theoretical and practical irruption of the political economy of the sign."

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1.2. Losing control

Baudrillard's and Latour's perspectives are extremely useful because, by focusing on the serial aspect of commodities and, more generally, on the collective order of material things, they point out some structural analogies with the collection form, opening up alternative trajectories in the relationship between material objects and human subjects. To this end, Bianchi (1997) defines collecting as a specific "paradigm of consumption," emphasizing the relational value of the object underlying any subsequent fetishist valorization. The author identifies seriality as the essential feature of a collection, meaning that material objects are organized in an ordered set of connections recognizable as a whole – i.e., the collection. The first act of collecting is to define such a collection set, to delimit its boundaries by "narrowing down the field" (Bianchi 1997: 276) of the immense amount of commodities and material things that populate the world to create a more manageable, subjected-oriented world of objects.

The exotic, natural, artificial, or even 'supernatural' objects characterizing many collections from the Renaissance until the eighteenth century were similarly chosen and ordered in the bourgeois *intérieur* to create a miniature replication of the outside world in its extraordinary variety. This way, the collection acquires a physical dimension in the so-called *Wunderkammern* – a room of wonders functioning as a "mirror of the world with all its mirabilia" (Bianchi 1997: 276). The over-detailed catalogs, classification norms, and rules of visual arrangement accompanying the collections are part of this process of 'familiarization' with the object, contributing to the collectors' socialization. They arrange the objects in their private spaces as a game field for expert players, capable of sharing, understanding, and appreciating the choices of the subject collector rather than the value of the single object. These social ceremonials, determined by the sharing of common codes and prescriptions, often assume the form of religious rituals, in which the object of cult increases its mysterious and sacred allure, its fetishized value.[3] A first attempt to detach the object from its 'primitive' and 'savage' environment and make it more familiar within the domestic, both subjective and

[3] The ritual exposure of the collection, and the sharing of its internal logic is analogous to the rituality characterizing the auctions of artworks – probably, the objects of collection par excellence. To this end, Baudrillard illustrates how the participants in the auctions manipulate the value of the artworks by burning and transforming their exchange-value into pure and fetishized "sign exchange-value." This operation is aimed at the creation of an exclusive and elitist community of experts, sharing a common code of valorization: "Behind the purchase (or individual reappropriation of use value) there always remains the moment of expenditure, which even in its banality presupposes something of a competition, a wager, a challenge, a sacrifice and thus a potential community of peers and an aristocratic measure of value […] In fact, what is called the 'psychology' of the art lover is also in its entirety a reduction from the system of exchange. The singularity that he asserts – that fetishist passion for the object lived as an elective affinity – is established on his recognition as a peer, by virtue of a competitive act, in a community of the privileged. He is the equal of the canvas itself, whose unique value resides in the relation of parity, of statutory privilege, which, as a sign, it maintains with the other terms of the limited corpus of paintings. Hence, the 'elitist' affinity between the amateur and the canvas that psychologically connotes the very sort of value, of exchange and of aristocratic social relation that is instituted by the auction."

social, space is suddenly disowned by the enigmatic expression of the same object that cannot refer to anything else than its material presence as a pure object. Then, the ritualistic game of collection can be understood not as a comprehension or interpretation of the world but as a (failed) test of its interpretability (Grazioli 2013).

This universe of objects in reduced scale maintains the endogamic structure of the world of commodities, intensifying its fundamental character of non-relationship and incommunicability. The collectors strive in vain to reconstitute a discourse about the object they could control and comprehend, a discourse whose referent par excellence is them. Baudrillard underscores this when he wonders "whether objects can indeed ever come to constitute any other language than this: can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?" (1996: 108). Subsequently, the collectors are doomed to failure: they are simply transforming an open-ended objective discontinuity into a closed subjective one through a language that has already lost any general, socially shared validity or significance, and its link with its lonely speakers is thinning out.

Consequently, the collectors endeavor to possess an increasing number of objects. In doing so, they are not driven by the capitalist greed to accumulate exchange-value but by the fetishist need to find themselves, their subjecthood, as the ultimate and chimeral final object.[4] However, due to the fetishist structure of the collection, this desire is condemned to remain unsatisfied. As highlighted by Diazzi[5] (2013: 360), "the word 'collection' seems to be connoted by a sort of 'evil infinity' [...] every collection is destined by its nature to the same incompleteness and inexhaustibility that characterizes the unappeasable tension from which the desire takes origins." According to her, the serial structure of the collection exemplifies the metonymical chain of desire as theorized by Lacan, in which the existence of an empty slot constantly enhances the desire despite acquiring a new partial object.

1.3. House arrest

The perpetual character of desire and collection often results in new accumulation. *Wunderkammern* become crowded with more and more objects defying any attempt at classification and systematization. The space of the collection exceeds its original room, spreading throughout the bourgeois house. This is a typical aspect of domestic

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[4] This dynamic has been analyzed by different disciplines according to different theoretical and epistemological perspectives, from Charles Sanders Peirce's *chain of interpretants* and dialectic between *Immediate and Dynamic Object* to Jacques Lacan's *chain of signifiers*. To this end, it is also useful to consider the notion of 'interpassivity' as theorized by Robert Pfaller (2014, 2017) and extensively investigated by Stacey Thompson (2020) concerning the issue of collecting.

[5] In reference to Eco (2009).

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spaces in the Victorian age and the main symptom of a widespread obsession with objects at the time. As Mullins (2014) notes, Victorians often imagined how even the most mundane objects create meaning in consequential and circuitous ways. Charles Dickens was an acute observer and precious witness of such a collecting attitude. In *Sketches by 'Boz,' Illustrative of Every-Day Life, and Every-Day People*, he detailed a "little front parlor" in London, where attention is focused on quotidian objects, whose ordinary and silent presence is covered and, at the same time, marked by their physical contiguity with other material objects:

> [T]he carpets covered with brown Holland, the glass and picture frames are carefully enveloped in yellow muslin; the table-covers are never taken off, except when the leaves are turpentined and bees' – waxed, an operation which is regularly commenced every other morning at half-past nine o'clock – and the little nicknacks [sic] are always arranged in precisely the same manner (1836:87).

This redundancy prompts us to refrain from reducing material goods to mere functional aims or representational mechanisms; instead, it urges us to confront the utterly multivalent and ambiguous presence of everyday things that routinely pass by without conscious reflection. Dickens's detailed sketch complicates materiality by pushing us to see things as 'recursive' in their capacity to weave the social fabric. This vision of materiality aspires to grant things genuine and autonomous agency (Mullins 2014). Everyday life and materiality pose significant challenges to traditional interpretative frameworks because their unexpressed nature, transience, and ordinariness resist coherent narratives and attribution of meanings: if ordinary objects often reveal ideological homogenization, it is for the same reason that they retreat from critical apprehension (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1987, 1991; Mullins 2014).[6] Collecting ordinary things is a way to recognize, control, and somehow reduce such a fetish aspect of material things inhabiting the world; yet, the indiscriminate hoarding of everyday objects risks tightening the stitches of their silent plot and concentrating their power in the narrow space of the house without any possibility of a meaningful and ordered distribution (Borland and Siddons 2013).

The practice of collecting constantly oscillates between the attempt at subjective control over the objects and the frustration for their overwhelming and enigmatic presence, too objectified to be subjected. This mirrors the movement characterizing objects'

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[6] To this end, Mullins (2014: 49) argues that "such objects will not necessarily reflect who we are in some historically accurate or 'objective' form, and theories of the everyday always caution against such essentialism; instead, those material things illuminate the critical dimensions of our lives that we are unable to articulate, consigning them to the status of ordinary and submerging them within monotonous repetition."

fetishism: from the fascination with the artificiality of its codified meaning, implying a voyeuristic gaze toward the enclosed order and autonomous mechanism of seriality, to the total fusion and confusion[7] with the entire space of collection, which eludes any comprehension while comprehending the subject, until its complete absorption. The *Wunderkammern*, the bourgeois *intérieur*, and the Victorian house gradually transform into prisons for the collector, who finds escape impossible from the sacred temple of a fetishist cult (Rizzi 2002).

1.4. Ruining the collection and collecting from the ruins

Walter Benjamin's extensive work on the collection (1969, 1969a, 1985, 1999) offers the collector a captivating escape from the enchantment of objects. The author delves deeply into the act of collecting, considering it a fundamental task in the work of the historian. Benjamin constructs the model of "the good collector" around the peculiar figure of the child, keen on collecting the scraps of the adults' activities on material things to develop a subjective relation and narration with these residual elements. Free from any functional, ideological, or traditional historical value, these remaining materials can reveal their authentic face to the child, who, in turn, is eager to establish intimate and immediate physical contact with them. Benjamin is undoubtedly aware of the fetishist relapse of such a fusional relation: children risk being bewitched by the *mermaid* call of the objects and absorbed within the material world surrounding them. Nevertheless, through their ludic and destructive activity (Thompson 1979), children are capable of desecrating the material idol (the fetish), breaking it into multiple fragments for new playful elaboration and narrative connections.[8]

Similarly, adult collectors should avoid projecting and alienating themselves into the collectibles or the whole collection. Instead, they should strive to rework the collected material, constantly creating new meaningful reconfigurations. Each element of the collection constitutes a potential and asymptotic totality by its partiality, and the collector is tasked with catching and echoing such a metonymical rhyme. The apparent casualness

[7] This physical connection can be approached from the viewpoint of Donald Winnicott's (1971) notion of the 'transitional object' in his study of the child's development. The transitional object – can be a doll, a blanket, a book, etc. - is a material thing to which the child is particularly attached – also in a physical sense – and upon which they project a strong affective value since it functions as a sort of cushion in the child's phase of detachment from the symbiotic relationship with the mother. The transitional object covers what Winnicott defines as the "third area," the intermediate space between a condition of total fusion with the object, as a fetish of the mother, and the subjective relation with the same object perceived as an "otherness." Later in this paper (§ 1.4) will be provided evidence of the analogy between children and collectors in their fetishist relationship with the objects.

[8] Benjamin (2006, 2006a) offers brilliant and suggestive images of the destructive power of children concerning material objects; for example, while playing hide-and-seek in the house, children first try to blend with the domestic furniture. Still, they usually do not wait to be found by their parents before reemerging with a scream of relief. Similarly, children are fascinated by the soap bubbles while eager to break their enchantment and make them explode.

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of the encounter between subject and object, often seen as a mere coincidence or the fulfillment of a subjective destiny, is defined by Breton (1976) as an "objective chance." In this scenario, some peculiar details of the object draw attention and capture the gaze of a subject capable of identifying minor differences or similarities with other elements of the collection, thereby sanctioning the object as a new collectible.[9]

In this regard, revisiting Bianchi's work (1997) proves especially useful. According to her, while the primary feature of the collection is seriality – what aligns the act of collecting objects with the consumption of commodities – what is less visible is that seriality implies an active and exploratory process. Indeed, identifying a set, imposing a pattern, and establishing recurrences and differences are not already given or immediately manifested but require constant research and discovery. As part of a collection, an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and re-framed into new ones. So, the fascination with "completing" a set goes together with the necessity to modify it to give rise to new cycles of explorable links. This results in variety and novelty, serving as expressions of the infinite potentialities within the collection. This unrelenting aspect of collecting, wherein the set appears never to close, is often seen as a perverse attitude leading to the collector's alienation; at the same time, the openness of the collection provides the collector with spaces of agency and subjectivation - an invitation to illuminate and actualize the potential relational meanings of material objects. Bianchi argues that "collecting exploits this multidimensionality of goods, decomposes its internal elements and recomposes them in innovative ways, establishing new relations both within a particular class of goods and with other goods" (1997: 275).

2. Stories of collections: subjecthood beyond the objects' enchantment

The last paragraph of the previous section opens with the hypothesis that to overcome the object's fetishism, subjects should avoid projecting themselves on the object(s) to reflect their image and find their identity. Instead, they must become a medium of expression for the object or, better, for the relations between the objects, that is, of the collection. In this way, material things emerge as protagonists in a narrative that diverges from official historical reconstruction. This is the thesis championed by Walter Benjamin, urging historians to collect residual materials from the ruins of History to

[9] According to Eco (1984) this ability is what defines the "critical spectator," who recognizes and enjoys in a (TV) series the strategy of its variations, that is how the same scheme is constantly declined to appear different. For these reasons, the figure of Don Giovanni could be defined as a "critical collector" since, in his serial conquests, he is guided by a hyper-sensitive gaze on a precise detail, a "marginal difference," or a *punctum* that emerges from the indistinct multitude by an objective chance (see Ginzburg 1986 and Diazzi 2013). The recognition of similarities in the differences, which appears to be crucial in collecting, has been investigated by Natalia Taccetta (2019) concerning Giorgio Agamben's notion of signature (2008) and Walter Benjamin's idea of *dialectical images*.

forge new connections, new stories from a past that is never crystallized in the objects but always potentially and alternatively present through them. For these reasons, the purpose of this study is not strictly historiographical but based on stories that place objects – especially collections of objects – as the driving force in the narrative program of a human co-protagonist. The choice of two films, The *Little Mermaid* (2.1) and *Wall-E* (2.2), is motivated by the intention to highlight, thanks to the possibilities offered by animation and *fiction*, the true fetishistic power of collected objects in the process of subjectification (and humanization) of the collector, as well as in the story of this same process. On the other hand, the film *Everything Is Illuminated* (2.3) enables us to discover the more proper historical value of objects, once again, not as passive witnesses of an objective past but as actual protagonists in many possible subjective stories.

2.1. *The Little Mermaid*: the destruction of a collection

The Little Mermaid is a Walt Disney animated classic directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, released in 1989. The movie is loosely based on the 1837 Danish fairy tale of the same name by Hans Christian Andersen. The story is set in the underwater kingdom of Atlantica; Ariel, a 16-year-old princess mermaid, is dissatisfied with her life under the sea and dreams of living in the human world. Ignoring the warnings of her father, King Triton, Ariel collects human artifacts, including a statue of her love, Prince Eric, found during her furtive explorations over the sea and ashore. She often visits her seagull friend Scuttle to learn about humans and their artifacts, whose use she misconceives in amusing ways. Oblivious of their original meaning and function, she places these objects in a secret grotto – a sort of *Wunderkammern* (Bianchi 1997) – where Ariel reconstructs a miniature version of the human world and its treasures (Fig. 1). The collection of material objects serves as medium, through which the young mermaid covertly lives as a human being, under the sea.

Figure 1. Ariel's secret grotto

Nevertheless, the collected objects do not completely respond to Ariel's dream of living as a human being, and the young mermaid is caught in an obsessive acquisition and accumulation of material artifacts (see Borland and Siddons 2013). As in the myth

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of Narcissus (see McLuhan 1964), the mermaid can no longer find the reflection of her desired image in these artifacts, now constantly refracted along the infinite and sealed chain of collectibles (see Diazzi 2013; Eco 2009). These artifacts cease to constitute a psychological and physical *prosthesis* for Ariel's human transition and subjecthood, and she falls victim to her enchantment, becoming a beautiful object amongst the others, crowding the grotto. This space for human discovery and self-exploration suddenly becomes a sacred place for a fetishist cult (see Rizzi 2012) and, eventually, a sort of prison for Ariel (Fig. 2). The sequence is thematized and figurativized in a famous scene of the movie, in which the mermaid sings about her dream to escape the simulacrum of the mainland and be *part of that world*:

Figure 2. Ariel dreams to escape her grotto and be part of the human world

Look at this stuff
Isn't it neat?
Wouldn't you think my collection is complete?
[…]
Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you'd think
Sure, she's got everything
I've got gadgets and gizmos and plenty
[…]
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more!
I wanna be where the people are
[…]
When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love
Love to explore the shore up above?
Out of the sea
Wish I could be
Part of that world

Figure 3. Fragment from Prince Eric's statue

Everything takes a dramatic turn as an outraged Triton discovers Ariel's secret grotto and her love for (human) Prince Eric, destroying her collection in a misguided effort to protect her. As in Benjamin's accounts of children's playful activity and modality of collecting (2006, 2006a), the collection's destruction represents a turning point in the little mermaid's tale as it triggers an escape from her confined sanctuary and a new possibility to realize her dream finally. The human artifacts collected by Ariel had suddenly turned into sharpened objects with a static and neat configuration, in which the mermaid's *utopian* desire for transformation had been crystallized. Only by preserving or restoring, through *ludic* or destructive activity (see Thompson 1979), the collectibles' *original* materiality will Ariel be able to achieve her goal of a new identity. It is not coincidental that just after the destruction of her collection, the mermaid collects a piece from the ruins of Prince Eric's statue: a meaningful fragment from which she can start rebuilding her story (Fig. 3).

2.2. *Wall-E*: from the ruins of our consumer culture

The 2008 Disney-Pixar movie *Wall-E* is one of the most brilliant examples of the myth of material and consumer culture. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic future and an uninhabited planet Earth due to the ecological disaster caused by extreme forms of consumerism and the wild accumulation of waste. For these reasons, *Wall-E* has been acclaimed by audiences and critics as an exemplary environmentalist manifesto capable of denouncing the risks of our harmful consumption patterns. Yet, a series of meaningful elements at narrative and discursive levels seem to invalidate its ecological message. Despite its apocalyptic impact, consumption remains the only means to stay (and become) humans and overcome a deeper cultural catastrophe.

This is the case of the protagonist of the movie, Wall-E, a unit of a larger group of robots designed to collect and dispose of the overwhelming mass of waste covering the entire surface of our planet. While its companions progressively are subjected to technical breakdown, becoming waste material indistinguishable from heaps of garbage, Wall-E overcomes its programmed obsolescence thanks to its peculiar relationship with the collected objects. What is enacted by the robot is not a presumed original and natural use-value of consumer goods, implying a mere physical consumption and leading to acritical accumulation; similarly to Ariel's case, Wall-E misinterprets or, better, reinterprets the function of the objects critically, pointing out their primary cultural

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value and, at the same, their deep subjective meaning. In this interaction, Wall-E develops a sort of human sentience and intelligence transcending its mechanical nature and functionality. As if by magic, we assist in a miraculous transformation. Enchanted by the collected objects, Wall-E breaks its technical programming (and narrative program) to eventually become a human subject in what essentially constitutes a "paradoxical celebration of consumer goods within a narrative that ostensibly condemns consumerism" (Anderson 2012: 269).

Figure 4. Trash skyscrapers

This ambiguity reflects an ambivalence on the plane of the expression. The initial establishing shots, depicting gigantic skyscrapers of indistinct garbage surrounded by a toxic cloud of pollution, convey a spectacular image of the ecological disaster (Fig. 4); then, the camera offers the viewer a series of close-up views of singular objects of consumption, whose discrete borders are defined by a neater aura. Suddenly, the attention is diverted from the environmental catastrophe to a more intimate gaze toward the objects collected by Wall-E (Fig. 5). As highlighted by Anderson (2012: 270-71), "The foreboding towers of waste thus fade into the background when Wall-E's collection of familiar, cheery, nostalgia-infused objects takes center stage […] they would not have the same poignancy if the early portions of the film were set in a sleek utopian future."[10]

The syntagmatic succession from the large panorama to the smaller-scale images is emblematic of the passage from the disorderly accumulation of goods in the commodities' system to the ordered pattern of a personal collection. Here, the uniqueness of each object asserts itself, forming a personal connection with the collector. Also, in this case, the attempt is to restore a subjective control over a dystopic world through its reconfiguration in the smaller and human-oriented dimension of the collection (see Bianchi 1997) – particularly the museum space in which Wall-E places the objects he collects.

This museum space is the expression of an alternative story or, more precisely, two other stories about the consumer goods and their relationship with the human actor: (1) the story of the museal *énoncé*, narrated by the objects within the museum about

[10] This syntagmatic succession represents a typical figure in the construction of contemporary mythologies: what Roland Barthes defines as a sort of vaccine or inoculation, aimed "To instill into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks [...] take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes" (1991: 40). As a result, "One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil" (ibid. 151).

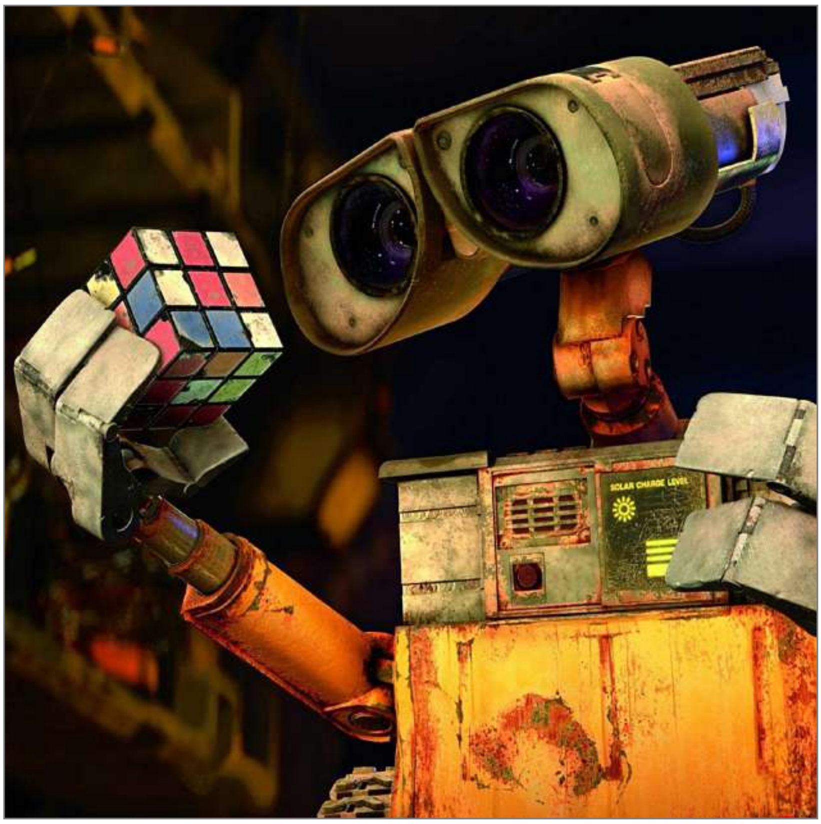

Figure 5. Close-up on Rubik's cube

themselves; (2) the story of the museal *enunciation*, narrating the modal transformations experienced by the robot, as a subject-visitor, in the fatal encounter with the exposed objects (see Violi 2014). This second story is the one that *gazes back* at the viewers through the eyes of Wall-E. In front of the future apocalypse, the viewer's nostalgic gaze does not turn to a primitive and past state of nature, purged from cultural and material contamination; quite the opposite, it fixates on our present culture of consumption, particularly our consumer goods imbued with nostalgic value. This valorization is nurtured by an extensive use of intertextuality, a hallmark of Pixar's productions. The movie constantly displays familiar consumer goods (including Pixar's products),[11] which the audience can relate to as anchors amid the apocalyptic devastation. The intertextual link can be understood as a collection form, bestowing a relational and fetishist value upon the cultural products shown onscreen. By acknowledging these material objects as elements related to a broader culture of consumption, viewers recognize themselves as part of that same culture and experience their social and personal identity as shaped by it.

[11] Likely missed by many spectators but spotted by sharp-eyed, critical or fanatic watchers, many merchandising products from previous Pixar's movies like *Cars*, *Toy Story*, *Up*, and even a lamp resembling *Luxo Junior* - the animated Pixar's logo - appears mixed in with the garbage and among the objects collected by Wall-E.

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In this sense, the collection serves as an extraordinary semiotic operator, a *dispositif* establishing spatial, temporal, and actorial connections across different dimensions. This gives rise a peculiar *chronotope*: conceived simultaneously as a narrative, a movie, a cultural product and a collection of cultural products in itself, *Wall-E* captivates our gaze of critical viewers (and consumers) by highlighting the wonders of consumer culture from the blinding background of mass consumerism:

> The Disney/Pixar animated feature film *Wall-E* (2008), one of the most celebrated recent examples of a popular anti-consumerism that now appears all but obligatory, is an instructive example of their ideological instrumentality. Implicitly endorsing the 'individualizing' practices of distinctive consumption, the film constructs a mass society critique that nonetheless validates the basic imperatives of consumer capitalism. (McNaughtan 2012: 753)

2.3. **Blinding lights in *Everything is Illuminated***

Everything is Illuminated is a 2005 film directed by Liev Schreiber, an adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's autobiographical novel. Jonathan, a young American Jew who collects objects associated with his relatives in small plastic bags to build and preserve a personal memory of his family (Fig. 6). The story unfolds when Jonathan's grandmother, just before her death, gives him another object for his collection: a picture of his young grandfather with an unknown woman named Augustine (as indicated on the back of the photograph), taken in Ukraine, where Jonathan's grandfather escaped before the Nazi invasion (Fig. 7). The image immediately appears to be illuminated by a special aura. By a sort of objective chance (Breton 1976), Jonathan notices that Augustine's pendant corresponds to the grasshopper preserved in amber that Jonatan himself, as a child, took from his grandfather's deathbed, marking the inception of his collection (Fig. 8). All the while this correspondence justifies the pertinence of the picture in the collection, it introduces an element of novelty and prompts a total reconfiguration of Jonathan's research strategy and conservation model (see Bianchi 1997).

Intrigued by the mysterious woman in the picture and driven to seek new answers to his quest for the past, Jonathan embarks on a trip to Ukraine. Accompanying him are a cranky, seemingly antisemitic older man and Alex, his enthusiastic grandson. Initially, all three travelers are affected by a kind of blindness. Jonathan's large glasses, the only element distinguishing him from his grandfather's specular figure in the picture, are like opaque screens that distance him from his past; Alex's peculiar and eccentric passion for American contemporary pop culture and music is an attempt to leave his Ukrainian roots behind, as he believes "the past is past, and like all that is not now it should remain buried along the side of our memories"; Alex's grandfather

Figure 6. Jonathan's collection

Figure 7. Augustine's picture

Figure 8. Grasshopper in amber

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pretends to be blind, but, similarly to Jonathan's experience, the old man is profoundly moved by the picture, as its figures seem to evoke long-dismissed memories.

At the end of their journey, the three men arrive at an old house surrounded by a vast field of tall sunflowers and inhabited by an elderly lady. She exists in a realm of memories, crystallized in an infinite quantity of objects collected in boxes that cover every inch of the house. This collection, resembling a wild hoard (see Broland and Siddons 2006), is the sole remnant of the little town of Trachimbrod and its people, exterminated by the Nazis during the second world war. Jonathan's and Alex's grandfathers, along with the lady of the house, revealed to be Augustine's sister, were the only survivors of that massacre, now symbolically reunited in their motherland. The photograph brought by Jonathan represents a residual scrap from the ruins of History and the missing piece of a common story, liberated from the rigid framework of the collection and its fetishized objects. Drawing on Benjamin's insights (2006, 2006a), everything can forge new interconnections and be "illuminated by the light from the past" long confined within plastic bags and dusty boxes.

In a oneiric scene preceding the final epiphany, Jonathan envisions his young grandfather on the opposite side of a small river that crosses the old village of Trachimbrod. Subsequently, we witness the young man collecting a small clump of earth by the same river and placing it in another of his plastic bags. Upon returning to the States, he releases the collected earth onto his grandfather's grave: a symbolic act to close the circle of the past, from which Jonathan can undertake a new path and continue his story.

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The 'dizziness' of accumulation: How digital collecting is undermining the very meaning of collection

BY: **Gabriella Rava**

ABSTRACT

Much of the previous research on collecting focuses on the resemantization of the object/item when inserted into a series that 'releases' it from its functionality and makes it an extension of the subject (Baudrillard 1968; Leone 2015). Digital collecting, however, essentially undermines the relationship between the collector and their collection, especially with the potentially endless accumulation allowed by the digital medium and the possibility it provides to gather items without actually owning them. The criterion of scarcity/rarity that used to prevail in traditional collecting is now replaced by a principle of abundance (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), potentially opening new forms of ephemerality and meaninglessness. More specifically, these latter arise in connection to feelings of *dispossession* and *uncontrollability* that many collectors experience concerning their digital possessions, especially when stored online (Odom et al. 2012). And yet, new collecting practices can emerge, driven by the desire to share the content and with greater attention to its curation. Reframing these practices within a culture characterized by *hyper-archivability* (Brown and Hoskins 2010) and the fluid time of *micro-archives* (Pogačar 2016), the present contribution tries to shed some light on (some of) the contemporary trends in collecting, revealing all their ambiguity and the eventual return of the specter of illegality.

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1. Introduction. When collections *fail*

Collections are usually linked to permanence and ownership, yet this is only part of the truth. In considering collecting, two episodes come to my mind, and both are linked to feelings of loss and dispossession. My most recent memory concerns the disappearance, for copyright reasons, of a *city pop* playlist I saved on YouTube;[1] that playlist contained a song I particularly liked, but I could not remember its title in Japanese. It took me weeks to finally retrieve it – and save its title for every eventuality. The second memory concerns retrieving a VHS tape, one of the few 'survivors' from my family's collection, consisting of original and recordable VHS cassettes. More precisely, that moment of re-discovery was when I started conceiving of those long-forgotten VHS tapes as a *collection*. And yet, even that experience of re-appropriation was intensely charged with a feeling of loss- since I can no longer play any of those VHS tapes, towards which I have developed an unexpectedly strong attachment.

These two episodes reveal some obvious points related to collections: the nostalgia that arises from items of yesteryear, their personal and subjective meaning, or their ability to evoke memories, as in the second episode. However, as with the first example in particular, some more neglected aspects emerge, too: first of all, the meaning of 'collection' in the digital age seems to be less stable than in the past. Secondly, and partially related to it, collections often *fail*, leading to a feeling of uncertainty and, eventually, of meaninglessness. Finally, collections are becoming less and less personal because their content is increasingly shared with others, and, more significantly, they often originate from items not owned by the collector (as with YouTube playlists) or whose possession is perceived as potentially compromised. These are the aspects the present article deals with, particularly the changes introduced by digital collections compared to the previous collecting practices. It also explores how these changes relate to the culture of hyper-archivability (Brown and Hoskins 2010; Pogačar 2016, 2017) that characterizes our present time. Reframing collecting into this broader context, which includes a series of cultural and economic transformations, is essential for understanding the social aspects of this practice, too often overshadowed by a subject-centered perspective.

[1] *City pop* is a very broad genre of Western-influenced music that emerged in Japan in the 1970s.

2. Collecting without owning? How the digital medium is challenging our understanding of collections

Returning to the two episodes that open this article, it may be argued that a playlist saved on YouTube and a series of VHS tapes do not constitute examples of collections properly. Following Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015: 3423), ‘genuine’ collections should be defined as “groups of acquired possessions with distinct characteristics, including clearly identified boundaries, selectiveness, and perceived unity.” According to the authors, however, the notion of ‘collection’ tends to be far more generic in the case of digital content, often encompassing a variety of items that an individual simply accumulates. Indeed, a playlist on YouTube comprises tracks not owned by the user, so the aforementioned criterion of ownership/possession is not met. Yet, people commonly talk about ‘collections’ (or even ‘archives’) of online playlists or personal photos, even if they meet none or barely any of the distinct characteristics listed by the authors above.

On the other hand, the aforementioned VHS tapes are actually owned, acquired over the years. However, they are not the result of a selective acquisition process, do not claim to form a unity, and do not exhibit distinct boundaries, belonging to very different genres, times, and styles. In addition, as already outlined, they are regarded as a collection only in retrospect, when their belonging to a former age and technology makes them objects of desire. The encounter between a lost technology, which makes the VHS tapes ‘inaccessible’ in their content, and the memories that they nonetheless evoke triggers a different perception of them in the present, determining the passage from accumulated to collected objects.[2]

To sum up, and for reasons that we will clarify throughout the article, the criteria that Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley listed for defining a collection seem somewhat problematic, particularly regarding digital collecting, which introduces a series of issues and concerns previously peripheral or absent from traditional collections. It should be said, however, that these latter have usually proved challenging to define since, despite the general agreement on the importance of selecting the items to be collected, this process may be driven by a certain unawareness (Pearce 1994). According to Pearce, a collection may be recognized as such only later, but, more importantly, “a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms” (ibid.: 158). Such clarification is particularly interesting for a semiotic understanding of collecting and evokes Eco’s definition of traces as signs only after they have been recognized as such by someone (Eco 1975).

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[2] The belonging of an object/item to the past is obviously not a necessary condition for it to be regarded as a collectible; there is, however, no doubt that goods evocative of former times are especially treasured by collectors, and that they tend to see their value multiply over time.

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The importance of the recognition process in determining what we can define as a collection, as well as its *displacement* over time, problematizes the principle of selection upon which the difference between accumulating and collecting is usually based. As Pearce (1994) highlighted, the boundaries between these two practices are often blurred since they depend on individual interpretations that vary over time. In addition, the distinction has become ever more complex within the digital realm, where the potentially endless accumulation of items can easily lead to an overabundance of elements, threatening the integrity of the collection (its aforementioned 'distinct boundaries'). The principle of abundance has emerged in some analyses (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012; Odom et al. 2012 in relation to collecting digital possessions). Abundance tends to replace the previously dominant principle of *scarcity/rarity* that prompted pre-digital collections since items generally accumulate at a greater speed and quantity (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012: 85).

For Mardon and Belk (2018), the criterion of scarcity, redefined in terms of *elusiveness*, is threatened in digital collecting: items become "abundant, ubiquitous and infinitely replicable" (548), forcing some companies to design and market them as collectibles and, eventually, as limited editions to restore their desirability (and, it may be added, their significance). According to the authors, the item/object's elusiveness is linked to both the 'thrill of the hunt' and the 'thrill of the find,' with the first referring to the active search for an item while the second to its unexpected discovery. In short, these two modes of collecting are governed by what is here defined as predetermination, if not actual desire, and randomness, respectively. However, are these modes likely to be encountered only in traditional collecting? Whereas Mardon and Belk raise some doubts about the effectiveness of companies' strategies to induce similar feelings in digital collecting, it is possible to affirm that predetermination and randomness do not disappear with digital abundance. Indeed, the elusiveness of an item may be just as easily induced (more than 'real') in the case of non-digital collections, and it largely depends on the emotional investment that we usually attach to the materiality of an object (and its perceived perishability). Moreover, since it is possible to collect material items on the Internet with varying degrees of rarity, the 'thrill of the hunt' can also reemerge in the digital space; surfing websites simply replace the previous practices of wandering around flea markets or vintage shops. As summarized by Roy (2015: 168-169):

> Digital collecting does not necessarily eradicate more traditional collecting practice. Indeed, the internet might even paradoxically reinforce object-based collecting practices. On the one hand, it enables the digitization of pre-existing material music objects. On the other hand, it enables the circulation and re-dissemination of the material culture of music, notably through online second-hand markets. It can thus reinforce place-based and object-centred collecting practices […]. As such, digitization does not suspend the circulation of material objects in the world.

Predetermination and desire, therefore, also rule in collecting on the Internet, with no less skill and knowledge required than for acquiring material items in 'physical spaces.' In both cases, the collector must move quicker than others to appropriate items before anyone else or before they run out. But desire may also reemerge from the experience of loss, which is far from impossible even in the realm of digital abundance and ubiquity, as already anticipated above. Finding out that a cherished song recklessly saved to a playlist on YouTube is lost or deleted because of copyright issues engenders a renewed desire: I know I can find it again, and yet if its title or some of the song's words have been forgotten, retrieving it may prove to be a long process, filled with failed attempts. Some of the people interviewed by Bergman, Whittaker, and Tish (2022) about their music consumption in streaming applications report that they often forget the titles of songs they listened to, resulting in 'music loss' over time. The different accessibility allowed by streaming services and the possibility of constantly searching for a song again affect how we consume music. This implies that users, even those who describe themselves as music enthusiasts, often choose not to collect. According to the authors, many listeners usually neglect what they temporarily save to playlists, this being one of the possible consequences of music streaming.

On the other hand, the experience of randomness, or the 'thrill of the find' in Mardon and Belk (2018), is not precluded by digital abundance and pre-set contents. For example, with music streaming, it emerges that, contrary to "the (digital) ownership model, when consumers purchase and download specific music titles," and "an additional variety is costly" (Datta, Knox, and Bronnenberg 2017: 5-6), in the streaming model, variety is either free or included in the subscription paid to the service – as in the case of Spotify, for example. The increased variety of music users have access to allows for "the discovery of new favorites or upward selection" (17), meaning that the same value of discovery simultaneously increases. In this sense, it is evident that the experience of finding new music is not predetermined and that there is always some space for randomness and the excitement it produces in the listeners. Nevertheless, feelings of dissatisfaction may always arise, mainly because users are aware that algorithms determine their future explorations of music:

> These algorithms can be referred to as "social machines" as their preference recommendations include collaborative filtering. There is a great deal of recent societal concern that news and social media algorithms induce "filter bubbles" where people are constantly exposed to a narrow set of views that reflect their own perspectives. In addition, artists can attempt to influence the algorithm to expose their songs to more listeners by reducing the royalty fees. (Bergman, Whittaker and Tish 2022: 124-125)

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Such feelings of dispossession may easily lead to what the authors define as the *loss of collector's joy*, which depends on several factors, including the abundance mentioned above that makes everything immediately and effortlessly available and the loss of information about the music accessed, as the streaming service does not always provide this. To sum up, the 'thrill of the find' may not disappear when it comes to digital content, but it is indeed threatened by the perception that total randomness, which made the experience of collecting so exciting, cannot be fully achieved.

The case of music streaming highlights some of the dynamics and changes introduced by digital collecting while simultaneously undermining the criteria identified by Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) presented at the beginning of the paper. As we demonstrated, collections can exist without being owned/acquired by the collector; they may arise beyond or outside a selective process and be barely perceived as a unified whole. Finally, they may also lack any identifiable boundaries: in particular, music collections created within streaming applications show how the lines between what is internal and what is external to a collection are blurred (Bergman, Whittaker, and Tish 2022).[3] Personalized playlists consolidate both the music dispersion that asserts itself in the contemporary age and what Carlos Scolari defines as snack culture (see Fernández 2022: 17), i.e., a culture characterized by increasing fragmentation and brevity. In this context, the previously valued principles of scarcity/rarity and exclusive ownership of an item tend to decay. However, individuals who used to (or still do) have collections of material items are more likely to hold on to those principles. Collecting digital music (like MP3 files) entails a shift from an object fetishized in its uniqueness and rarity (as in the case of vinyl records) to what Roy (2015: 168) calls the "fetishization of speed," which privileges flux and accumulation over ownership. This process is central in music streaming, where we create and preserve playlists subject to our willingness to care for them over time, choosing among different practices between the two extremes of static and dynamic approaches (Hagen 2015).

The central aspect that music streaming brings out is that the digital format allows for collecting without owning, to the point that collectors may eventually be 'erased' from their selections, as Roy (2015), developing Fletcher's observations, suggests. But flux and accumulation tend to replace not only the principle of ownership or the uniqueness/rarity of the item but also another criterion that was central in the creation and understanding of collections: the *ordering* of the items that constitute them, whether driven by the internal coherence of the selection or more intimate reasons like the collector's personal history. The first aspect is usually what a semiotic analysis of collecting

[3] Among the criteria listed by Watkins, Sellen and Lindley, it is possible to add also the principle of uniqueness, meaning both that collections tend to avoid any duplicates (each item only occurs once) and that authenticity (the unique/original item or first release) is especially valued by collectors, even if consumer goods and replicas often turn into collectibles. This aspect will be analyzed more in detail below.

is concerned with since it implies the resemantization of the items collected, as they lose their use value in favor of an aesthetic one. The aesthetic character of the item, and more generally of the practice of collecting, stems precisely from its move away from social functioning to having a different meaning attributed to it (Leone 2015: 676). However, this process of resemantization is usually connected to the second aspect mentioned above, i.e., the biographical dimension acquired by the collection. As already noted by Baudrillard (1968), while entering into a relationship through which they (re)define themselves, collected items refer to the subject to the point that their resemantization through ordering and classification appears to be inseparable from the collector’s desire, or passion, identified by Baudrillard as the predominant feeling in collecting.

Nevertheless, both ordering (and the internal coherence deriving from it) and the possibility for the subjects to identify themselves in the collection tend to erode in the digital realm. This is not only due to the aforementioned possibility of not owning the items collected but also to the difficulty in managing increasingly large volumes of data, as well as the feeling of uncertainty regarding their actual lifespan and control. On the one hand, the almost indiscriminate accumulation of digital items allowed by storage devices, including online services like Cloud, ensures a safer preservation of these ‘intangible’ collections; on the other hand, a different understanding of ownership develops when users entrust their collections to these storage devices (Odom et al. 2012). The authors seem to confirm the observations made by van Dijck (2007) on how, especially for younger generations, preserve/archive and share (online) tend to overlap, a trend confirmed by their “less developed practices for organizing files locally” (Odom et al. 2012: 5). This may suggest that, for younger users, digital content is generally perceived as more fluid and, as a consequence, that collecting does not necessarily rely on a strong sense of ownership or, eventually, of stability.[4]

The difficulty in curating digital possessions and how online sharing or storage changed the understanding of ownership have introduced some concerns, like the actual control of the content, that were probably unknown in traditional collecting. Feelings of uncertainty, if not actual *dispossession*, have emerged, along with a revived perception of ephemerality that no longer derives from the object’s aging or decay. Whereas deterioration affects analog media and their video/sound quality, digital media do not properly age: they are unaffected by the progressive degeneration through which vinyl records or VHS tapes ‘reveal the memory’ of their use since files are simply accessible or inaccessible, readable or unreadable. A few years ago, a great debate around the lifespan of digital formats and storage media arose, focusing, among other things, on the issue of their future preservation. The readability

[4] For Baudrillard (1968: 135), collections attempt to transcend ‘real’ time into a systematic dimension (une dimension systématique); it may be possible to affirm that digital collecting tends in turn to transcend the systematic dimension towards a fluid time, especially in the case of collections created in streaming applications.

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of these technologies in the time to come is anything but guaranteed so that the old problem of ephemerality arises again in similar yet unprecedented ways.

Despite the availability of more recent devices and services to preserve digital data, we can only avoid ephemerality partially. As Sterne (2009: 58) underlines, "[sound] recording is an extension of ephemerality, not its undoing." These concerns are not alien to the practice of digital collecting, which involves the issue of how to efficiently preserve the items saved in personal storage devices or online. Not only can data become inaccessible, unreadable, or even lost, but they are also perceived mainly as placeless and beyond users' exclusive control (Odom et al. 2012), all aspects that could be understood as different expressions of ephemerality. Ephemerality acquires here a meaning that is close to the concept of *imperfection* as employed by Greimas (2004), indicating the occurrence of something that is cognitively elusive, the residue of hope for a "complete fusion of the subject with the object" (56; my translation). In a sense, the online preservation of collections results in the growing dispersion of users' possessions, which is also reflected in the perception of not properly owning them. More specifically, "participants simultaneously had deep convictions that their online content belongs to them while feeling ambivalent over whether access to them would continue to persist" (7). These feelings, interpreted by the authors in terms of a *loss of control*, and the specific ephemerality that derives from it, distinguish in a significant way the practice of digital collecting from material collections. On the contrary, the latter depend on the principle of ownership/acquisition, require some physical space chosen and curated by the collector, and, if not stolen or badly damaged, always ensure access to the items.

The question remains whether the subjective identity of collectors may be equally reflected in their digital possessions, especially when they are stored online. As seen above, the idea that subjects can be identified with their collection(s) has been central for previous analyses focusing on the meaning of collecting. And yet, it appears seriously jeopardized by the series of issues emerging with managing and preserving digital items. Whereas further research is necessary to understand the different ways the subjective identity is shaped in digital collecting, the following paragraphs will turn toward the social aspects of this practice. Next to the notions of accumulation and abundance, we introduce *meaninglessness*, opening up a reflection on our contemporary culture of *hyper-archivability* in which the boundaries between collecting and archiving become increasingly blurred.

3. The archival collection

In considering the preservation issue within so-called 'collector cultures,' Sterne (2009: 62) observes that "there's too much to collect and not enough of a sense of, or agreement about, what should be collected." Although the scholar refers mainly to the role played by institutions in the selection and preservation of cultures, his reflections are equally valid in the case of personal or amateur collections. The digital medium's potential for unlimited accumulation and abundance of material can quickly become an obstacle when selecting what to preserve for the future and classifying and curating these resources. While Sterne does not directly mention the question of meaninglessness potentially arising from this massive proliferation, his arguments imply it: the risk seems to be that of accumulating large amounts of data in which the distinction between meaningful and meaningless elements fades away, threatening our ability to interpret the culture(s) we live in.

We should not forget that collections not only look to the past but have increasingly been preserving contemporary culture(s) or that, thanks to the Internet, collections of items from the past contribute to the present-day promotion of earlier lifestyles and cult phenomena. The accumulation of material, data, and cultural artifacts from both the past and present with no clear temporal boundaries is therefore responsible for a different perception of time, which is experienced as becoming increasingly fluid compared to the past, as already anticipated in the previous paragraphs. Unlike material objects, media objects share the same characteristics as *temporal objects* (see Pogačar 2017: 33) as defined by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Such objects are constituted by the flow and passing of time instead of stability. According to Pogačar, media objects are distinguished by transitoriness, impermanence, and fluidity, which affect the perception of both the past and the future.

The feeling of uncertainty arising from the different temporalities of the digital can then be responsible for the difficulty in interpreting the world we inhabit, and it may underlie contemporary practices like collecting or archiving. Following Pogačar (ibid.), "the urge to make sense of things through objects (as the connective tissue of memory) explains both the obsession with collecting material and co-creating (digital) media objects." For the author, then, these two practices can be considered in relation to each other, an idea that seems to emerge also in Odom et al. (2012), who, as seen above, do not always distinguish digital collecting from the creation and preservation of (digital) personal archives. If they underline the perceived loss of control and ownership as the main aspects defining digital collections stored online, Pogačar is concerned with how the practices of collecting and creating (or archiving) media objects may involve a potential *loss of meaning*. Collecting and archiving can then be rethought in a contemporary culture marked by the impermanence and fluidity of digital temporalities and the subsequent inability to fully make sense of our present condition.[5]

[5] To highlight the way in which (digital) media affect the human perception of time, Ernst (2013, 2017) talks about *tempor(e)alities*, which differ "significantly from the traditional cultural time and social memory that relies on discursive and institutional tradition in-between human generations" (Ernst 2017: 144).

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The ease with which digital items (or material objects through the Internet) can be accumulated, if not simply amassed, overlapping and eventually 'erasing' temporalities and spaces, engenders a potential feeling of meaninglessness that affects the practice of collecting. The loss of meaning, already implicit in the decrease of desire caused by abundance (the easy availability of items), manifests as an *excess of accumulation*, i.e., the 'logical' consequence of a system in which selectiveness is increasingly superseded by the same (over)abundance. It is precisely this principle, along with the aforementioned fluidity of media objects and their ambiguous status, suspended between possession and accessibility, that undermines the consistency of digital collections and favors their assimilation to less defined assemblages like amateur archives.

The same issues of abundance and accumulation are indeed at the basis of the creation and maintenance of individual archives. As noted by Gillis (quoted in Haskins 2007: 407), there is a growing uncertainty about what to preserve from our personal and collective past, and, with this doubt, there is a tendency to save practically everything. Echoing Pogačar's reflections on the ambiguous temporalities generated by digital culture, Gillis observes how collecting (which he equates to preserving and archiving) tends to increase in inverse proportion to the human perception of temporal distance; both practices of collecting and archiving, then, originate also from a past that is becoming 'absorbed' into the present, to the point of threatening the individual ability to remember. The empowerment of individual archiving allowed by digital technologies (Cox 2009) comes from anxiousness to save any fragments of our existence, reviving the old dream of preserving our memories, which was already at the basis of Vannevar Bush's *Memex*, conceived by the scientist since the 1930s. Turning towards the individual, archiving and private collecting increasingly blur, opening the space for that ambiguous figure Cox defines as the "citizen archivist."

And yet, the boundaries between individual and collective archiving are not always clearly defined. When introducing the concept of *micro-archives*, Pogačar (2016) draws attention to how cultures of the past are (re)mediated and resurrected by these amateur practices so that the preservation of the past passes (also) through singular acts of remembrance. For the author, micro-archives involve collecting and archiving fragments of audio-visual material circulated online on social media like YouTube or Facebook. Private memories then become publicly available and contribute to the 're-presencing' of a collective past or former lifestyles in the present. As such, these practices are part of a contemporary culture that Brown and Hoskins (2010) define as *hyper-archiva*l, meaning the potentially unlimited storage capacity allowed by digital technologies.

Nevertheless, the retrieval of the past, especially to preserve cultural expressions threatened with disappearance, was already one reason for archiving and collecting well before the advent of the digital medium. The first record collectors, for example, were often driven by the aim of preserving musical cultures that were likely to be lost (Shuker 2010), and their collections came to constitute future music archives, proving once again how these two practices tend to overlap. The encounter between the personal and social history of the item collected is summarized in the concept of 'curatorial consumption' (McCracken in Geraghty 2014: 110), in which the preservation of the object supersedes its immediate use, thus reversing the consumerist injunction. In this sense, the past is revived as a form of nostalgia, differently from how this feeling is implied in Pogačar's micro-archives. Whereas these latter are involved in a process in which the 'retrieval' of the past threatens the ability to imagine alternative futures, curatorial consumption and its associated nostalgia, on the contrary, encourage "a sense of control over one's past and the media texts still consumed and valued" (Geraghty 2014: 114).

Referring to collecting childhood toys, Geraghty notes how the nostalgia they evoke may lead to an active engagement in the present, overcoming the feelings of loss or lack with which it is generally associated. Thanks to the Internet and its limitless possibilities of re-presencing (to use Pogačar's notion) former cultures, collecting may find a new dimension, integrating with other forms of expression like blogs, fandom communities, or, as repeatedly stated, archives. Thus, it becomes clear how, through these modes of engagement, collecting tends to move away from that exclusive subject-centered practice described by previous research, increasingly favoring social interaction and sharing over the pleasure of personal possession. The transformation of collecting into a less individualistic practice thanks to the digital may represent the most effective response to the perceived loss of meaning generated by the accumulation, abundance, and infinite reproducibility of digital content. If it is true that the traditional understanding of ownership and control over the items is jeopardized in the case of digital collections, especially when stored online, new networks of signification can arise through their being shared, both in the direction of spreading the practice of collecting and in that of preserving former cultural expressions.

These emerging aspects mark the difference between (certain forms of) digital collections and material ones. Examining the still overlooked practices of collecting digital artifacts of participation in the videogame world, Winget (2011: 65) emphasizes the social nature of these forms of collection:

> Because their materials […] are freely available or easily obtained, instead of focusing on acquisition, new media collectors focus their energies on organization and sharing. Because there are few if any physical limitations to storage and display, these collectors are much more concerned with providing access to as many people as possible. […] Because the collectors essentially collect in order to share, the collections are often highly organized, if not contextualized for the general public.

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These observations are equally valid for many digital collections primarily concerned with preserving their content and often assuming the form of archives, mainly because of the curatorial practices they require. An example of how collecting, sharing, and archiving may overlap is given by the *Kayo Kyoku Plus* blog, created and maintained by J-Canuck.[6] He describes himself as a fan of Japanese pop music (mainly produced in the 1970s and 1980s) and, above all, as a collector of related material. J-Canuck created the blog to share his knowledge and passion for this music and link up with other interested people who can contribute (write posts) or comment on the texts uploaded. Moreover, the blog is an excellent example of how owned material, in the form of pictures displayed and publicly accessible content, may coexist since the music videos of the songs introduced and described by J-Canuck and the other contributors are actually from other sources, particularly YouTube.

All this translates into the collection's unstable and ultimately ephemeral character: the uploaded videos often become unavailable over time, leaving empty black boxes instead of the expected displayed content. Even if this latter can usually be played by linking to the website where the videos were initially uploaded (YouTube), the 'feeling of loss' perceived by the user persists. To put it differently, we experience that the collection somehow *fails*, a sensation already described above concerning the disappearance/unavailability that characterizes digital material. In addition, the presence of hypertext links to other websites (YouTube or J-Wiki) contributes to the opening out and fluidity of the collection, which is ultimately perceived as *diffused* (in the sense of 'scattered'), thus undermining the internal integrity/unity that appeared as a distinctive feature of material collections.

These specific expressions of ephemerality and fragmentation that distinguish some digital collections from physical ones, due also to the fact that most of the content is not owned by the collector, can, however, be compensated by the increased visibility, shareability, and curatorial aspects allowed by the digital medium. Whereas Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) comment on the difficulties people often face in organizing their digital collections in ways that may reflect their individuality, *Kayo Kyoku Plus* shows how the archiving, classification, and display of content may become a primary aspect of collecting. Through the exhibition of image and video material, J-Canuck and the other contributors can still "serve the same self-reflective and self-presentational purpose" (3430) that the authors recognize as central to material collections. Not only do the bloggers share with others their knowledge and passion for Japanese popular music, eventually enhancing their experience of collecting artifacts, but they also often connect elements of

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[6] *Kayo Kyoku* (properly *Kayōkyoku*) is the broad and highly heterogeneous Japanese pop music born from the assimilation of Western musical styles in the 1920s. Nowadays, the term has been largely replaced by the more common J-pop, which entered the Japanese music scene in the 1990s. Kayo Kyoku Plus can be accessed at the following link: http://kayokyokuplus.blogspot.com/.

their memories to these (mostly not owned) materials, proving that self-reflection, preservation of cultural expressions and social interactions may perfectly coexist in digital collections. Moreover, the lack of social visibility claimed by Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) as a problematic aspect of digital collecting, along with the lack of curation, can be overcome when emphasis is put on the sharing of the content instead of its possession, and when the promotion of cultural identities is favored over self-reflexivity.

The example of *Kayo Kyoku Plus* proves that new forms of significance and personal investment can also arise from collecting items not owned by the collector(s), especially when they require essential curatorial practices that bring them closer to archives. The organization of collections has traditionally been regarded as a fundamental aspect in transforming the accumulation of items into “meaningful possessions” (Denegri-Knott, Watkins, and Wood 2012). Moreover, their display in the digital space is no less important for attributing to them a real significance, as evidenced by research on improving the digital visibility of items (Harrison et al. 2017). The time and physical investment in curatorial practices characterizing archival collections like *Kayo Kyoku Plus* goes in the same direction, encouraging a different understanding of collecting, in which personal interests and memories find a collective dimension. If, on the individual level, the digital (over)abundance and replicability of the items are often responsible for that feeling of meaninglessness described above, on a social level, these aspects can find alternative forms of significance, leading to a re-evaluation of the contemporary culture of accessibility and sharing.

Finally, on the semiotic level, the case of *Kayo Kyoku Plus* clearly shows how *amateur* enunciators, and no longer just institutional ones, are able not only to (re)create and foster the circulation of popular culture(s) within a hypermediatized society but also to originate collectives (Carlón 2020). The notion of *collective*, which comes from the works of Eliseo Verón, is different from that of communities or fans; it tends to be more ‘elitist’ compared to them and is defined as an ensemble of social actors that emerges within media communication, to be understood in a broad sense as a set of various practices that exceeds the discursive level. The curatorial and participatory approach encouraged by online spaces such as *Kayo Kyoku Plus* favors the formation of collectives more than simple communities, actively involved in the (re)production of communication/culture in ways and proportions that were impossible in the previous media and mediatized societies (see also Carlón 2019).

4. The ‘immoral’ collector

Along with dismissing the criteria of ownership and scarcity, the examples of collecting in the context of music streaming and archival collections like *Kayo Kyoku Plus* abolish another principle that has long been regarded as highly significant: the cult of authenticity.

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From a semiotic perspective, we view something as authentic as long as it 'negates' the fact of being (culturally) (re)produced, an aspect that is defined as the *paradox of authenticity* (Sedda 2015). This relates mainly to the materiality of collections, not only because of the value placed on the original (or first release) but also in those cases in which the object possesses an "auratic indexicality" (Mardon and Belk 2018: 555), meaning a close connection to a particular place, time or person.[7] Authenticity, however, is seriously threatened by digital items, primarily because of their unlimited replicability, which is at the origin of the already discussed (over)abundance of digital material and its collecting. The desire tends to shift from the previously valued material form of the object collected to the information it contains (Reas 2019), leading to that culture of sharing mentioned above and existing on the border between legality and illegality.

In reality, however, the dismissal of authenticity and the related emergence of a culture of reproducibility began well before the advent of the digital medium. The collection of copies, made possible by technological innovations like photography and electrotyping, meant the 'complex fusing of the object as image' (Geismar 2018: 50) or, vice versa, the increasing understanding of the image as an object. In this changed context, it is the same paradigm of collecting that changes, replacing the value of authenticity with those of replicability and accessibility that would later become central to the digital. Geismar's observations highlight the role played by socioeconomic and technological transformations in (re)defining collecting over time, an aspect often overshadowed by persistent preconceived ideas. If the contemporary culture of hyper-archivability illustrated above contributes to the change in collecting, the unlimited reproducibility of digital material, the prevalence of accessibility over ownership, and, ultimately, the possibility to illegally acquire items on the Internet plays no less significant role.

Although dependent on the economic system and mass production, collecting has, over time, developed some forms of 'internal subversion.' As Roy (2016: 105) remarks, past or obsolete objects may "enter new life-cycles, through marginal and sometimes informal networks of distribution (a form of shadow capitalism, realized in second-hand markets or the economy of giving or swapping)." Despite the market's ability to develop new strategies for capitalizing on the nostalgia revival that underlies these forms of micro or alternative economy, there is always the possibility to renew them, including illegal practices such as downloading copyrighted material without permission. This alternative, in particular, affects collecting significantly (at least potentially) and is yet to be extensively addressed by research. As an undesired outcome of digital reproducibility/replicability, illegal online purchase represents a further step in collecting material not owned by their collectors, jeopardizing their sense of identification with such 'possessions.'

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[7] Mardon and Belk include in the concept of 'authenticity' also those objects whose value is rooted in what they define as 'iconic cues,' i.e., the various degrees of resemblance of the object to the original/indexical exemplar (as in the case of replicas).

The association between collecting and illegality, however, is nothing new. As already noted by de Kosnik (2012), collectors have occasionally been depicted as thieves, as in stories recounting how their passion for collecting originated in the act of stealing (or vice versa), but collectors have even at times been connected to immorality. Before the Internet, videotape collecting often involved making illegal copies of friends’ tapes (526), with consequent copyright infringement. But even previously, the practice of collecting was not alien to immoral actions: referring to European aristocratic collections of the past, Francis (2023: 71-72) recalls how they mainly originated in imperial hoarding, meaning the expropriation of objects from territories under colonial rule. Many later came to constitute the collections we find nowadays in Western museums, “legitimizing” de facto their misappropriation in the past. This illegal aspect of collecting seems to resurface symbolically in what Stewart (1993: 135) calls ‘the romance of contraband,’ i.e., the scandal originating from the removal of the souvenir/collectible “from its ‘natural’ location.’ In this long history of illegality and transgression, in the end, Internet piracy merely casts yet another shadow over ambiguity in the act of collecting.

5. Conclusion. The unpredictable future of collecting

The present article opened with two personal experiences of loss and dispossession about collecting. These feelings have become significant in an age when this long-established practice is redefining itself beyond materiality and the traditional understanding of ownership. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, from the threat of subject-collectors becoming progressively ‘effaced’ from what they accumulate, alternative forms of collecting are affirmed, shifting towards the value of sharing and the sense of being part of a community that both promotes and preserves the cultures on which it is founded. More than of communities, it is appropriate to speak of collectives (Carlón 2020), as seen above, which are created by a growing number of amateurs who invest time and resources in curating digital collections that appear more and more like archives.

From a semiotic perspective, the study of these curatorial practices becomes indispensable for understanding how the cultural production of the past and present is put (back) into circulation, making it even more complex and unpredictable the future of collecting within the digital realm. The overlapping of archives and collections described in this paper can be put concerning those processes of *networked co-curation* that characterize Net Art (Dekker 2021) and (re)introduce some uncertainty in the same curatorial practice. Moreover, the high fragmentation and heterogeneity of the practices of digital collecting, in which items can be either acquired or simply accessed, if not eventually illegally downloaded, undermine the feelings of self-identification with one’s collection in a significant way, challenging the traditional theory centered on personal experiences of possession.

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On the other hand, as seen throughout this article, uncertainty and unpredictability do not necessarily lead to the perception of digital collecting as insignificant. As Niemeyer and Keightley (2020: 1643) highlight regarding online communities that arise from the commodification of nostalgia on the web, new forms of textual instability, as well as networked sense-making practices and potential multiplicity of interpretations may be generated even where the longing for the past is induced 'from above.' The curatorial processes described in this paper go precisely in this direction, shifting the focus from the subject-collector to a new kind of participatory practice that reshapes the very meaning of collection in unpredictable ways.

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Socio-semiotic considerations about playlists

BY: **Emiliano Vargas**

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the notion of playlists as a socio-semiotic category in the context of the mediatization of contemporary popular music by studying its uses in virtual and non-virtual communities. We propose that the digital mediatization of playlists affects contemporary cultural forms, shaping social modes of conceiving music as they enable new forms of interaction in the present moment. Our investigation focuses on different ways digital mediatization of playlists contributes to creating virtual communities and transforming performative practices in non-virtual communities of musicians. In our analysis, we consider the playlist as a format, a category of action that encodes cultures in different social groups in a diachronic trajectory. It may involve the evolutionary development of musical genres or practices of production and recognition, in which the use of playlists and their interactive possibilities as repertoire affect how the digital memory of the semiosphere is encoded.

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1. Introduction

Mediatization affects the ways of conceiving culture, from its conditions and methods of production to habits and valuations arising from its recognition conditions. If mediatization is considered a long-term process, it is possible to observe how specific formats endure over time, even when the media and technologies that gave rise to them have disappeared. Some structures, therefore, acquire relative rigidity over the years.

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Among them are enunciative formats with actantial capacity that encode and transmit the cultural memory of a semiosphere. These are axiologically differentiated from the notion of genre, although the margins between them may sometimes be fuzzy (Migliore and Colas-Blaise 2022; Martinelli 2020).

Playlists are a media format of mass consumption with heterogeneous cultural implications and a growing scholarly interest (Dias, Gonçalves, and Fonseca 2017; Eriksson and Johansson 2019). They integrate functional affordances to the experience offered by a platform, adapting their interactive features to the functioning of specific social groups. We consider two examples of group uses in physical and virtual environments to account for these processes. These belong to phenomena that we consider interstitial or lateral, that is, mediatizations that, due to features we will explain below, are not part of the media mainstream but instead of what is considered alternative media that can be framed within the studies on mediatizations below the radar (Martinelli 2020; Boccia Artieri, Brilli, and Zurovac 2021).

First, we study the case of Radiooooo, to account for the design of an interstitial platform based on an innovative interactive system of playlists. At the same time, its name alludes to an iconic signifier of pre-digital media culture. The second case focuses on the mediatization of playlists in Spotify, focusing on alternative uses, that is, uses for which their mediatization was not initially envisaged. To do so, we look at Spotify playlists in the context of a specific circuit of jam sessions belonging to Buenos Aires city.

2. From list and repertoire to playlists

Playlists have become a primary format for discovering, ordering, and sharing music in contemporary culture, occupying a central role in the strategy of platforms such as Spotify to attract advertisers (Eriksson and Johansson 2019). The concept of a playlist has been defined as a "sequence of songs meant to be listened to as a group" (Dias, Gonçalves, and Fonseca 2017: 5). However, different authors have dealt with playlists and their actantial capacity inside and outside musical life. Among others, as a means to communicate political opinions and self-presentation (Siles et al. 2019).

Playlisting, the practice of collecting music files inside the playlist format, is one of the main features of streaming platforms. It has multiple uses and has varying degrees of importance to playlist curators (Sesigür 2021). Regarding the morphological attributes of its evolution, the playlist inherits traits from both the list and the repertoire. These notions are related and extensively studied in the social sciences.

2.1. List

The study of the *list* as a semiotic phenomenon acquires importance insofar as it is a cultural practice that fulfills different functions, both in the ordering and systematization of textual corpus and the mutation of cultures in their points of explosion. Umberto Eco (2009) deals with the morphological multiplicity of the list as part of the modes of artistic and everyday representation. In this sense, the *list* is a semiotic device that gives order to a specific accumulation process. That is when one does not know precisely how many elements comprise a macrocosm or when it is complex to encompass. Also, when we are not "able to offer a definition based on essential features, one goes on to enumerate its properties in order to translate it into something intelligible" (Eco 2009: 15). Eco distinguishes between practical or 'pragmatic' lists and 'poetic' lists.

> The practical list can be exemplified by the shopping list, the guest list for a party, the catalog of a library, the inventory of objects in any place (such as an office, an archive, or a museum), the list of goods in a will, the invoice for a commodity that requires payment, the menu of a restaurant or the list of places to see in a tourist guide. (Eco 2009: 113)

Following Eco, pragmatic lists have some specific properties. They have an exclusively referential function; that is, they refer to objects or concepts and have the practical purpose of nomination and enumeration; secondly, they are finite; and thirdly, they cannot be altered. From this perspective, practical lists confer unity to a set of objects that, however different they may be from each other, fulfill a contextual requirement, i.e., they are related by their immanent features, by being grouped in the same place or by constituting the objective of a specific project, as we will see below. Poetic lists, however, deal with any artistic purpose they are made for and any art form that employs that format to express it.

2.2. Repertoire

Far from the cumulative nature of Eco's view of lists, the notion of repertoire is associated with the idea of collection. Namely, it has a more active meaning than the practice of accumulation. The notion of repertoire refers to the use of language for operational purposes, specifically communication, and is generally associated with collaborative interaction practices (Rymes 2022). Unlike the list, the repertoire serves the constant creation of performative competencies. This is described by Diana Tylor, who also recalls that the notion of repertoire is intrinsically linked to the idea of the archive (2015).

Tylor attributes unalterable features to the archive, be they documents, maps, books, extension books, written texts, objects, or any type of instrument supposedly

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resistant to transformation. Instead, the repertoire requires the presence of actants who participate in situ in a specific type of production. In other words, "contrary to the supposedly stable objects of the archive, the actions that make up the repertoire do not remain unalterable" (Tylor 2015: 16).

The notion of playlists brings together in its etymology aspects immanent to both definitions -list and repertoire-. While the prefix *play* reminds us of the actantial weight of its meaning, the suffix *list* synthesizes the subjectivized form in which a playlist is cognitively presented. In general, playlists comprise an extensive range of interactive modalities and, thus, ways of generating transference and enunciation.

3. Cultural media co-evolution

The mediatization of everyday life forms (Fontanille 2015), particularly in music, encompasses practices that exemplify its subtle but penetrating influences on global culture, as well as its variable assimilation across the planet. In the digital age, the relationship between arts and media has been co-determined more intensely than ever before. Analyzing some of the features of this co-evolutionary process enables us to order and classify the novelties, permanences, or mutations that occur in current, technology-related social practices and uses through the socio-semiotic and, therefore, cultural processes taking place in the textual, metatextual and transpositional discursive levels.

One of the interesting aspects of the semiotic study of formats is that, perceived from a meta-level, they operate as affordances in different spheres of everyday life. Thus, playlists integrate specifically media affordances aimed at shaping the conditions of music listening and enjoyment, but also musical affordances, affecting the interaction between musicians and shaping aspects of the performative. This double-edged character of playlists is echoed in our epistemological framework, i.e., understanding mediatization from a socio-semiotic perspective that comprises both *mediatic affordances* (explored in studies on mediatization and media ecology) and *musical affordances* (explored in popular music studies, semiotics, and musicology). The socio-semiotics of mediatization uses the concept of affordances to explain how the material aspects of media can influence and co-structure symbolic representation and social interaction (Scolari, Fernández, and Rodríguez-Amát 2021; Boccia Artieri, Brilli and Zurovac 2021). On the other hand, the fields of musicology and popular music studies employ the notion of musical affordances to mean sound production actions and their effects (Prieto 1976; Lopez Cano 2006; Reybrouck 2012).[1]

[1] James Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances originated in the field of perceptual psychology, while Norman (1988) and Hutchby (2001) later introduced it into technology and media studies. Subsequently, the concept was incorporated into mediatization theory, musicology, ethnomusicology and semiotics.

In other words, our epistemological framework allows us to conceive affordances as an operational tool that encompasses the full range of potential uses facilitating, limiting, and structuring mediated communication and interaction in specific contexts. As cultural configurations, they possess a diachronic character, with each stage in their evolution crystallizing in particular discursive systems. Regarding the present conjuncture, for example, we may think of the semiosphere of black music and contemporary formations of the macrostructure, such as trap, reggaeton, hip hop, or neo-soul.

One of the fundamental concerns of mediatization studies, whatever their geographical perspective, is their concern to understand contemporary and future culture, i.e., mediatization studies produce knowledge by constructing qualitative, quantitative, or quali-quantitative descriptions of the particularities that characterize the synchronic stage of cultural-media processes. This involves building metatextualities that explain or can establish dialogues with similar processes in other areas of the semiosphere on a micro, meso, or macro scale (Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2020). An innovative viewpoint in mediatization theories is to examine daily media life not only from the listener's perspective but also from the perspective of the actors who produce transpositions in the musical universe.

3.1. List and repertoire through mass media

During the second half of the twentieth century, the role of the list and repertoire formats became evident in radio or television formats structured on the basis of song lists or video clips. For example, television programs such as MTV's T*he 10 most requested or El mundial del video* broadcast by Much Music Argentina. The role of the ranking program's format in music mediatization and configuring a discursive genre must be acknowledged. The same is true for television and radio station programming schedules or record labels and distribution companies' catalogs, which played a central role in the second half of the twentieth century. Considering such precedents, we can perceive playlists as the evolutionary result of other intangible media formats long present in the mass media.

3.2. Meta musical affordances

Let's take jazz as an example of the popular music of the twentieth century. We find that its repertoire has been canonized, at least partly, thanks to fake books and Real Books. This repertoire of archives in scriptural format, crystallized from scores, played a crucial role in the canonization of jazz and the consolidation and evolution of the semiosphere of black music during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jazz became popular between 1900 and 1950 due to the enormous amount of music published at the

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time by the American industry. Toby Wren (2022) asserts that the distinctive features of jazz, as a musical genre, are intrinsic to the repertoire of standards, and even the very practice of musical improvisation in the genre is structured by that repertoire.

The specialized literature considers it essential to analyze the diachronic adaptive capacity of global jazz practices and how racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are expressed through music to recognize how different cultures assimilate the same cultural code (Floyd, Zeck, and Ramsey 2017; Johnson and Havas 2022). Hence, Wren concludes that a jazz standard has no precise definition. "Debates over which pieces can be considered standards are contentious, in part because the criteria for a jazz standard change over time and geographies" (Wren 2022: 1). Wren refers to those melodies and harmonic structures that are considered common knowledge among jazz musicians and appear in the pages of the various Real Books and Fake Books. This is the raw material, the Saussurean langue, from which musicians engage in parole on any given stage.

In 1975, students at Berklee College of Music in Boston compiled the best versions of the standards being played at the time. They added new compositions, listed and published in a single edition, resulting in The New Real Book. This book failed to be legalized due to the difficulty of obtaining copyrights for all the pieces. Also noteworthy is the case of the Great American Songbook, comprising popular songs written for Broadway and Hollywood musicals and Tin Pan Alley. Another relevant precedent is when the Hal Leonard Corporation publishing house was in charge of compiling the copyrights of almost all the songs that appear in the original *The Real Book* of 1975, surprising the jazz guild with the release of the first legal version in September 2004, with similar features to the original version in terms of typography and organization (Faulkner and Becker 2011).

Real Books were consolidated in the semiosphere as a series of handwritten scores, alphabetically ordered, in which the melody of each standard is found in different keys, accompanied by its harmonic nomenclature. Their fame is partly due to the many versions of standards transposed to different instruments. This aspect facilitated their performance since it allowed musicians to have a repertoire to read in ubiquitous mode.

The specialized literature defines these musical forms as pieces of distinctive songs of American culture, combining African-American influences (including blues, ragtime, and other vernacular song influences) and European conventions. What is interesting about the jazz standard, and thus Real Books, is that they were usually situated and defined in both the academy and the musical realm as repertoire for improvisation.

Samuel Floyd asserts that jazz is more about improvising new 'texts'; it is a communal and cooperative process (Floyd, Zeck, and Ramsey 2017). As a cultural format, the standards were also referred to as a symbolic resource by Damond Phillips (2011), as they function as the glue that connects the different styles within jazz. Individually, standard tunes have distinctive characters that performers try to highlight in their interpretations, including their improvisations. Paul Berliner, for example, describes in detail how musicians have varied chord progressions and improvised on standard repertoire.

Although Berliner's book expresses multiple viewpoints, the general characterization of the repertoire conforms to European notions of working in music: the standard is pre-existing, and the musicians offer an interpretation and use it as a basis for improvisations. At present, both popular music and semiotic studies point out that, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the score is no longer used as a language for archiving musical texts. This began with analogical mediation and deepened with digital technology (Marino 2020; Valle 2021).

4. Playlists in Radiooooo

Radiooooo is a French platform born in 2014, based on collaborative playlisting. It is a project in which each user can contribute files with sound text and a visual cover. Each ‘contribution’ or ‘discovery’ implies an act of selection and inclusion in at least one of the playlists offered by the platform.

Depending on the decade to which each song belongs, the number of contributions of each user, and the level of acceptance of each contribution – counted in likes – each community member accumulates points that position in a general ranking.

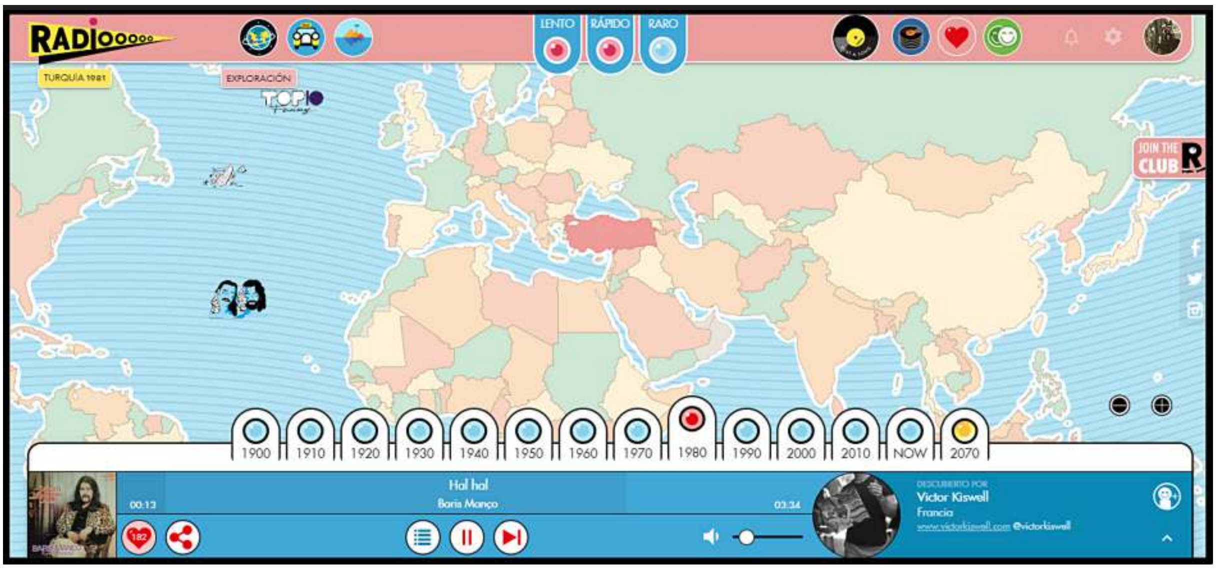

Figure 1. Radiooooo user interface in the year 2023. Retrieved from https://radiooooo.com/

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Figure 2. Radiooooo user interface year 2018.

Radiooooo allows a previously non-existent experience of musical fruition, in which the user can choose any country from the world map that occupies the central place of the interface, then select a decade within a timeline that goes from the early twentieth century to the present, and even making future representations from current songs. Once we choose geography and a decade, the platform plays a list of songs automatically generated from the collaborative contributions of the users. In other words, mediatization is based on a wiki-type of interaction, where the files are organized in playlists according to the geographical and temporal characteristics of each piece and their stylistic attributes.

In addition to spatio-temporal coordinates, other technical devices function as vectors that individualize the user experience. The 'shuffle mode,' for example, offers a more unrestricted experience in terms of space-time, as the option dispenses with user interaction by choosing geographic and temporal locations for music listening. Next, it allows the choice of a stylistic range of the music among three main vectors: slow, fast, or weird. In semiotic terms, these vectors are inadequate to define the criteria underlying list-making. In contrast, the first two effectively allude to the musical pieces' *tempo* or BPMs. On the other hand, given the temporo-spatial variety, the concept of 'rarity' does not seem to offer more than opacity.

Another essential feature of Radiooooo is that, unlike platforms like Spotify, there is no manual generation of playlists. The process is automatic or assisted and based on the intrinsic characteristics of the texts each user contributes. Figure 2 is a screenshot of the user interface of Radiooooo in 2018 and aims to show some visual and vector features that have remained or disappeared in its evolution. At the time, for example, there was an option called Taxi, which metaphorically alluded to the experience of moving through different landscapes while tuned to a city radio; in effect, taking a ride in the sound landscape of some other country and decade. The platform also has a ‘shuffle mode’ (Figure 3), moving randomly between countries and decades, making the sound experience even more unpredictable.

Following Eco, the generation of playlists by the application occurs pragmatically. A priori is about users scattered around the globe who, motivated by their love for music and perhaps for the pleasure of appearing in the site's ranking, collaborate with sound fragments collected in a digital space. If one considers the aesthetic dimension of the playlists, especially the most recent ones, it is possible to recognize the enunciative role of the platform through the playlists insofar as there are certain stylistic attributes shared among the selected files. A clear example is the representation of future sound landscapes from a selection of past or current texts to risk an aesthetic conception of the year 2070 in different parts of the globe, as shown in the picture below.

This actantial feature of playlists endows the platform with an enunciative identity. Given its interactive properties, the platform’s identity is always shaped by its community of users, which generates narrative processes and aesthetic identification. We need to underline that the Radiooooo experience offers a type of musical fruition based on interactions resulting from the practice of playlisting. Interactional attributes are unthinkable outside the spatial-temporal malleability provided by digital technology. In sum, Radiooooo's description highlights some aspects that show how a virtual community establishes its ties based on the encoding and decoding processes of global music, where the playlist format is the platform’s practical and enunciative proposal.

Figure 3. Radiooooo interface in Shuffle mode, 2023.

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5. Spotify playlists as repertoire in Black music jam sessions

Our research framework includes ethnographic work and, more specifically, participant observation in contemporary circuits of jam sessions across different geographical latitudes. These circuits are characterized by exceeding the jazz sphere in the interpretative field, embracing a broad spectrum of the black music semiosphere. Given these peculiarities, we have called this type of jam sessions JBMs (Jams Sessions of Black Music). Jam sessions are forms of cultural life that originate in the field of jazz. Given the practices that characterize them – with musical improvisation as one of their distinctive aspects – we can say that they represent instances where the *langue* becomes *parole*; where the repertoire is placed at the service of the improvisational and transformative action of a text initially archived in a repertoire, the Real Books.

The JBMs are usually open to languages with a higher degree of minimalism and economy of technical means than the language of jazz. This makes them attractive to many musicians, but it is also relevant to understanding the proliferation of JBMs in different countries despite the nuances they acquire in each case. One of the JBM circuits studied is located in the city of Buenos Aires and presents noteworthy mediatic issues in the shaping of its repertoire. Unlike in jazz jam sessions, where, as we have seen, the repertoire is dictated by the Real Books, the JBMs studied interact with repertoires through the use of playlists within the Spotify platform.[2] But, what are the implications of such a media substitution?

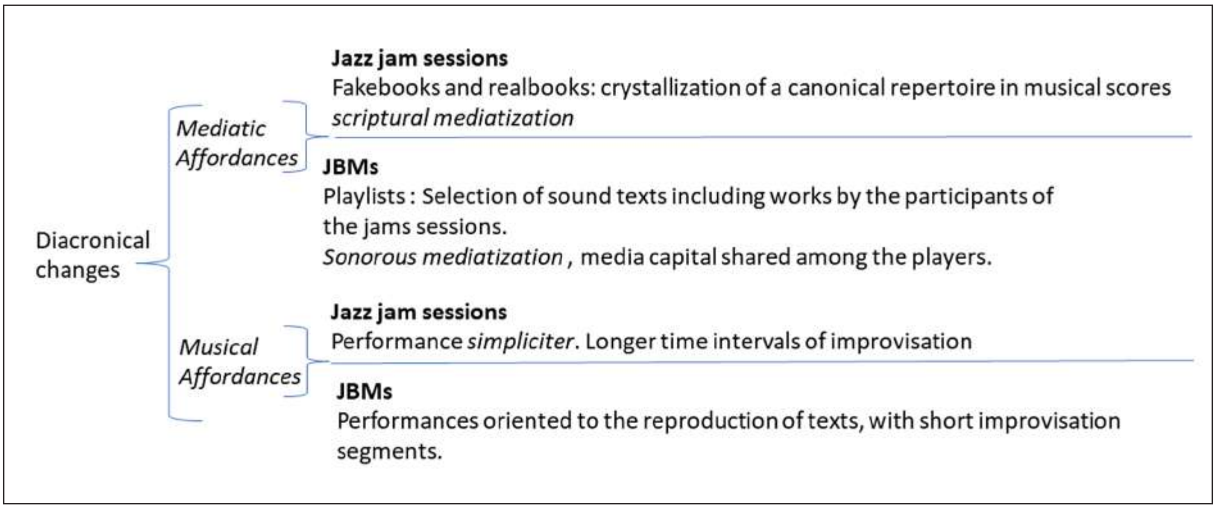

Figure 4. Diachronic changes and format substitution.

[2] SWe refer specifically to circuits circumscribed to Buenos Aires, Argentina, which have also begun to be mapped and studied in Europe as part of the broader research that includes this work.

A priori, the replacement of the book format by Spotify playlists allows an individualized creation of repertoires composed of sound files, selected and ordered through their user profiles, which can be official or belonging to the profiles of actants in the role of curatorship of the JBMs. The replacement of formats has wide-ranging implications. JBMs encompass a spectrum of musical genres beyond jazz, reaching all genres and styles contained in the semiosphere of black music. They encode both the type of performance and the interactions between the participants from the affordances that each media moment imprints from the use of Spotify Playlists, influencing both the configuration of the repertoires and the performative practices that characterize the type of performance in each historical period. The substitution of one format for another has also implied the disappearance of *solfège*[3] as a recurrent practice to use the repertoire, encouraging the learning and interpretation of the pieces through listening. In other words, there are cognitive implications resulting from the media substitution that regulate the ways of learning and interaction among the players.

The following images (Figures 5 & 6) belong to the playlists of two JBMS with different degrees of development. The image on the right belongs to the playlists of a JBM called Skill Session, which is generated from the personal profile of one of its curators. Its content prioritizes local artists, some regular musicians within the circuit, over black music from international and consecrated worldwide artists. The image on the left shows a segment of the Afromama[4] playlist, a Spotify jam session that interacts with musicians and followers through its verified artist profile. Its official profile curates a playlist that integrates Black Music classics with pieces by local artists and regular participants in their live performances.

The comparative relationship between both playlists allows us to describe how the individual styles of the repertoires are built according to particular features in each case. For example, the difference in the degree of presence of established black music artists in each repertoire, or the nature of the profile from which the playlists are created and mediatized, as well as how each repertoire includes texts by the musicians who participate in the circuit. While in the first case, the sound files are selected and ordered from individual user profiles, the second case takes advantage of the virtues of a verified artist account to focus on the production, edition, and circulation of sound texts belonging to musicians of the circuit.

Afromama's verified artist profile shows in its playlist phonograms belonging to musicians who are part of its staff and regularly participate in live performances. In addition, each phonogram produced and edited by Afromama has a cover image that

[3] Technique of reading and giving the appropriate value to musical signs of a score.
[4] Afromama is one of the JBMs with the highest level of development in the urban circuit of the city of Buenos Aires. The following link corresponds to their profile on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/afromamajams/?hl=es

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contains the same identification logo with minimal variations between each file, distinguishing them from those files that the user profile did not produce but have only been selected for the repertoire.

The background colors on each cover change from dark burgundy to purple. The inscription below the logo allows reading the name of the phonogram and, below it, the name of the JBM, together with the name of the work's author. The uniformity of aesthetic features in the covers, together with the visualization of the works in list format offered by the playlist, generate an effect of homogenization among the phonograms, giving them a sense of identification with the profile of the user that contains them.

Playlists in the context of JBMs have a triple function: (i) the fruition of listening in a ubiquitous context; (ii) they function as the repertoire for the musicians participating in the performance; (iii) the edition and circulation of new phonographic texts produced by the artists participating in the live performances, thanks to the facilities offered by the platform and the digital technology of music production.

Creating repertoires in jam sessions through playlists implies a more dynamic interaction flow than the Real Books in the jazz sphere. The playlists offer the possibility of putting into play a type of media capital not available to the participants in previous media moments. That is to say, the possibility that the jam sessions put into circulation

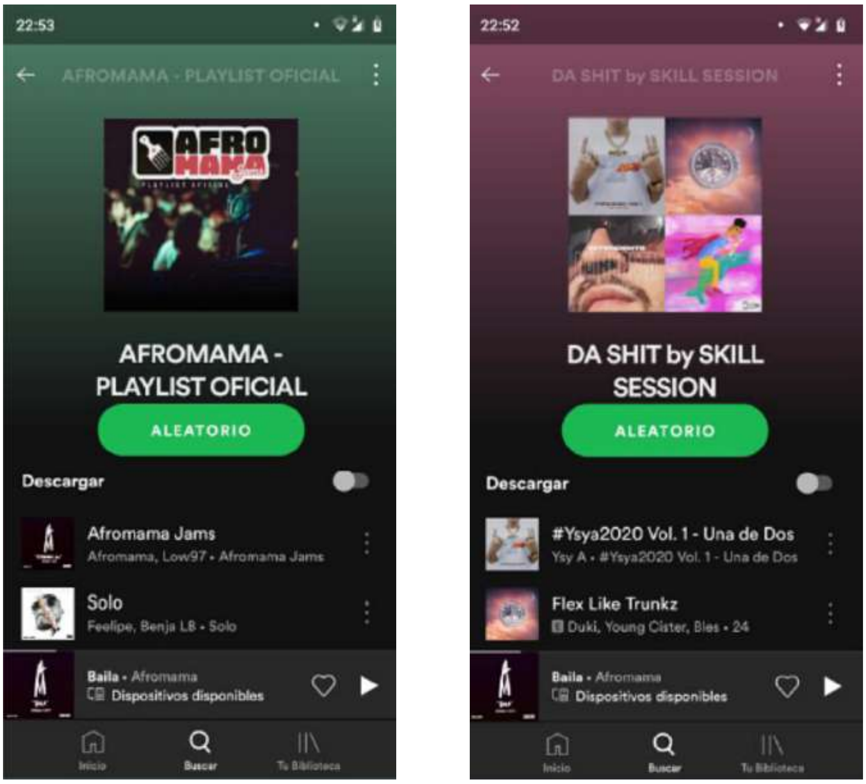

Figure 5-6. Visualization of studied playlists.
Retrieved from the Spotify platform.

discographic material of the participating musicians, when in jazz jam, the actantial potential of the musician passes through the capacity to modify a canonized work at the moment of the performance, but the archives are not modified and remain crystallized as part of a canon. This means that the change in media format is also related to the type of performances each type of jam session offers. In the case of jazz, it is a type of performance where each execution of a sound piece has an aesthetic value, regardless of the work's identity in the repertoire. In musicology, this type of performance is called *simpliciter* (López Cano 2018: 64).

On the other hand, in the JBMs, the interpretations tend to reproduce the texts in their original form or with previously rehearsed variations, restricting the moments of improvisation to minor lapses, and where the artists seek to make their repertoire known and stimulate the circulation of its contents in platforms. In the JBMs, the enunciative character of the repertoires does not depend on the type of interpretation made of the sonorous texts. Instead, the enunciative and actantial value resides in the fact that the jam session participants can include their songs within a repertoire that includes established artists in the semiosphere. The possibilities of editing and circulating sonorous files offered by the JBMs are practices that, in other media, belonged exclusively to production companies and record labels.

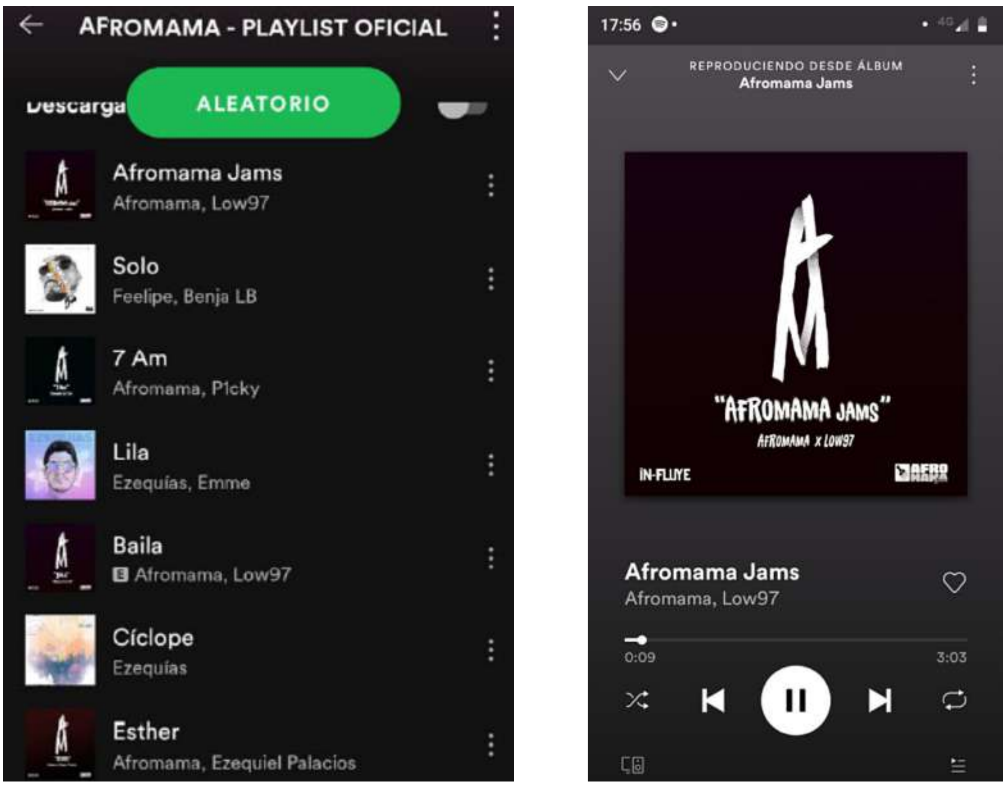

Figure 7-8. Visualization of studied playlists.
Retrieved from the Spotify platform.

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6. Final considerations

This paper has described aspects inherent to the formation and maintenance of virtual and non-virtual communities based on the use of different types of playlists, which, in a temporal trajectory, crystallize in discursive styles belonging to the contemporary synchronic plane of the semiosphere.

The description of the Radiooooo platform allows us to account for the formation of a virtual community based on an interactional flow guaranteed by the platform's playlists. Radiooooo bases its media proposal on collaborative playlisting. In this way, it is possible to distinguish a musical experience aimed at showing exotic artists and songs from the desire to explore music in different geographies and periods. It is a non-algorithmic way of getting to know new artists and musical styles based on user collaboration. The platform organizes the operation of various playlist types, with files automatically ordered by default but generated by each user's contribution, opening playlists in countries and eras previously blocked on the platform due to lack of files. Radiooooo also shows the enunciative capacity of the playlist as it guarantees (thanks to the users' taste) stylistic attributes that generate a collective identity. In this context, the playlist's actantial potential is seen both in the collecting impetus of its users and in the search for unknown moments and strange places for the listener.

As for the alternative uses of playlists in Spotify, we refer to implementing the playlist to guarantee the repertoire and its individual enunciative features in a circuit of black music jam sessions. The playlists work by codifying the aesthetics of black music in individual styles offered by each jam session, that is, by attending to individual enunciative modalities adopted by each space. The playlists as a repertoire of the JBMs influence cognitive aspects linked to the learning of the musical pieces and the interaction between the musicians for their interpretation. An example of this is the elimination of *solfège* as a necessary practice to access the repertoire. This aspect modifies the musical competencies put into play among the circuit musicians.

All these highlight the emergence of a mediatic capital previously non-existent in these contexts. The possibility of including sonorous texts and putting them into circulation within a broad user community through the playlists of the JBMs prioritizes exposure and reproduction over the *extempore* modification of the archive at the moment of the performance. It is noteworthy, finally, that the mediatization of the playlist format in the cases analyzed reinforces the song format as a type of textual organization as opposed to other ways of conceiving musical pieces.

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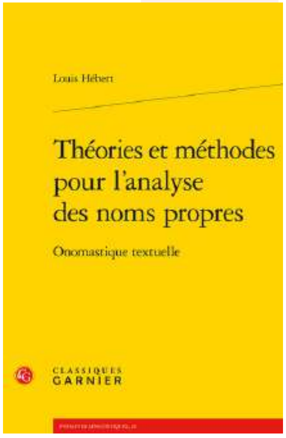
Des noms propres pourvus de sens

BY: **Sémir Badir**



Louis Hébert

Théories et méthodes pour l'analyse des noms propres. Onomastique textuelle.

Préface de François Rastier. Paris, Classiques Garnier, «Domaines linguistique, 21», 2022, 354 p. ISBN 978-2-406-14099-3.

Louis Hébert, professeur à l'Université du Québec à Rimouski, est l'auteur de nombreux ouvrages de référence sur la sémiotique et la méthodologie du commentaire littéraire. Mentionnons, parmi les plus récents, *Cours de sémiotique* (2020) et I*ntroduction to Literary Analysis* (2022). *Théories et méthodes pour l'analyse des noms propres* investit un champ de recherches dans lequel on ne l'attendait pas nécessairement. Or, s'il est bien question dans ce livre, selon ce qu'annonce le titre, de théories et de méthodes pour l'analyse des noms propres, chaque théorie abordée n'est pas pour autant appareillée à une méthode. Le titre est donc un peu déroutant. Le sous-titre est plus explicite quant à sa visée; le livre s'occupe avant tout d'onomastique *textuelle*, ce qui permet de rectifier l'interprétation à donner au titre: l'ouvrage ne prétend pas aborder l'ensemble des théories linguistiques du nom propre, ni tous les aspects de ces théories, mais seulement ceux qui ont une incidence sur l'analyse des noms propres dans *les textes*. Par là-même, on comprend mieux comment le sujet de cet ouvrage se raccorde aux recherches antérieures de l'auteur.

Le livre s'ouvre sur un chapitre dédié à l'onomastique en général («L'onomastique en bref»), présentant, sans entrer dans aucune discussion théorique, les principaux sujets abordés dans ce domaine, ainsi que les principaux positionnements

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théoriques qu'ils suscitent. Un second chapitre offre une présentation générale des concepts méthodologiques de la sémantique interprétative. Ce chapitre sert de préambule au troisième, le plus ample, dans lequel Hébert fait appel à la sémantique interprétative pour apporter des réponses aux problèmes que le nom propre pose quant à son sens. Un quatrième chapitre («Questions d'onomastique») livre une série de discussions autour du nom propre sur des questions relevant de la linguistique générale, notamment sur l'homonymie, la synonymie, l'autonymie, la motivation ou la connotation. Chacun des trois derniers chapitres est intitulé «Application» (I, II et III). L'auteur y applique la méthode de la sémantique interprétative à l'analyse de deux textes littéraires – dont l'un contient un lot «normal» de noms propres (le poème pastoral «Je m'ennuie de la terre» de Georges Bouchard) tandis que l'autre en foisonne (le roman *Prochain épisode* d'Hebert Aquin) – et, pour finir, à l'analyse du logo d'Amazon. L'ouvrage ne comporte pas de conclusions.

Le livre donne l'impression d'avoir été composé après coup, en réunissant des études d'abord conçues de manière autonome, rédigées apparemment à des époques différentes (si l'on se fie aux références qu'elles allèguent, notamment à propos de différents états de la théorie de la sémantique référentielle de Georges Kleiber), sur des sujets corrélés quoique distincts: les théories du nom propre, d'une part (chapitres 1, 3 et 4); les analyses de noms propres dans les textes, avec l'exposition de leur méthode (chapitres 2, 5, 6 et 7), d'autre part. Ces sujets sont *corrélés* puisque le positionnement de l'auteur dans les questions théoriques justifie l'usage d'une méthode particulière (celle de la sémantique interprétative) dans l'analyse textuelle; mais tout de même *distincts*, car il n'y a pas de confrontations entre différentes méthodes d'analyse. En somme, quoiqu'une série de théories soient convoquées sur différents questions relatives à l'analyse linguistique des noms propres, la sémantique interprétative initiée par François Rastier trouve chaque fois à avoir le dernier mot. Le livre se présente ainsi comme une petite machine de guerre épistémologique bien rodée. La manœuvre consiste à renvoyer chaque assertion théorique relative aux noms propres à des réquisits généraux dont le caractère optionnel est capable d'invalider cette assertion même, dès lors qu'elle n'est plus la seule concevable. De fait, la sémantique interprétative, par son absence de visée normative, est apte à ouvrir le champ des interprétations possibles, même dans le domaine de la théorie.

Pour le lecteur, ou la lectrice, l'efficace d'une telle argumentation dépendra de sa propension à se laisser gagner par la sémantique interprétative. S'il y est déjà acquis, comme c'est mon cas, le livre est parfaitement concluant. On notera à cet égard que Louis Hébert prévient d'emblée qu'en matière de théorie linguistique «la sémantique interprétative seule [est] notre langue maternelle» (p. 18). La formulation est audacieuse mais elle rend bien compte du pouvoir de cette théorie: celle-ci garantit, de manière très étendue et sans besoin d'ajustements circonstanciés, l'intercompréhension entre ceux qui la maîtrisent – c'est là quelque chose que je ne dirais pas volontiers de toute théorie linguistique, ni même de la plupart. Les lecteurs qui défendent des positions théoriques sur le nom propre risquent en revanche d'être déçus par le peu d'intérêt que le livre prête aux problèmes ordinairement attachés à leur conception référentielle. Tout de même ils gagneraient à se montrer sensibles à l'insistance avec laquelle l'auteur montre que les principaux problèmes théoriques des noms propres sont tributaires de préconceptions sémantiques générales.

C'est sur ce point, à mon sens, que l'argumentation se montre la plus incisive. Elle est contenue dans le chapitre 3, sous-intitulé «D'une approche référentielle à une approche différentielle». Il s'agit pour l'auteur de se *débarrasser* de faux problèmes théoriques, dus à des parti-pris référentialistes (selon lesquels, dans leur version la plus extrême, c'est-à-dire logiciste, les mots servent d'étiquettes et renvoient à des objets du monde et des concepts) afin d'arriver à bon port. Les trois carrefours qui relatent ces problèmes sont donc moins des lieux de convergence que des occasions de prendre des voies diamétralement divergentes, l'une d'entre elle menant à la destination voulue (les mots «carrefour» et «destination» forment les titres de section de ce chapitre).

Le premier motif de divergence concerne le sens à accorder au mot *sens*, sachant que dans la ligne dure les référentialistes (parmi lesquels se comptent les logiciens mais aussi des linguistes comme John Lyons, Pierre Lerat et Marc Wilmet) considèrent que les noms propres sont dépourvus de sens. À quoi correspond le sens? Hébert envisage six définitions possibles: (i) au signifié, (ii) à la relation signifiant – signifié, (iii) à la relation signifié – signifié, (iv) à la relation signifié – référent, (v) à la référenciation (laquelle se distingue de l'acception précédente, semble-il, par son caractère fonctionnel: du signifié ou du concept vers le référent), (vi) à la sémantisation (du signifiant vers le signifié).

Le second motif de divergence concerne le statut des unités sémantiques. Relèvent-elles de la langue (elles correspondent alors à des types) ou de la parole (en tant qu'occurrences textuelles)? La plupart des linguistes qui ont étudié les noms propres leur confèrent un statut linguistique et entendent par conséquent se pencher sur leur sens en langue, généralement en déniant qu'ils en ont un, sauf à considérer une fonction générale attribuable à tout nom propre, tel le «prédicat de dénomination» chez Georges Kleiber (et Marie-Noëlle Gary-Prieur à sa suite).

Enfin, troisième motif de divergence, les noms propres ont donné lieu à de multiples classifications (anthroponymes, toponymes, patronymes, prénoms, etc.) sans que les principes de leur classement apparaissent toujours clairement. (Ce point est brièvement évoqué au chapitre 3 et repris plus largement dans le chapitre suivant, aux pages 188-207).

La résolution proposée par l'auteur en fonction de la sémantique interprétative est de tenir les noms propres pour des noms comme les autres. Ils ne forment donc pas une classe à part, en tout cas du point de vue de leur analyse sémantique, et sont

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justiciables d’une analyse qui les diversifie autant que les noms communs. Cette diversification donne alors lieu à différents types, entre trois et six suivant le degré d’analyse retenu. Deux types de noms propres ont un sens en langue: (i) les noms célèbres (exemple: Lady Gaga) et (ii) les noms spécialisés (exemple: Guy) mais, quant à ces derniers, uniquement en fonction de sèmes macrogénériques (pour l’exemple choisi: /concret/, /animé/, /humain/, /de sexe masculin/). Deux autres types ont un sens lié à leur usage par des groupes socioculturels déterminés: (iii) les noms notables (exemple: de Gaulle, suffisamment célèbre en France pour apparaître seul dans une phrase mais ordinairement entouré de qualificatifs lorsque l’on s’adresse à la population francophone du Québec) et (iv) les noms en voie de spécialisation (dont les sèmes macrogénériques dépendent d’afférence socioculturelle, par exemple les noms donnés aux chevaux). Enfin, deux derniers types prennent sens en contexte: (v) les noms de proximité (par exemple, le surnom donné à quelqu’un dans un groupe) et (vi) les néologismes.

Sur cette base typologique, bon nombre de questions fréquemment abordées dans le cadre de la théorisation des noms propres trouvent un nouvel éclairage. Trois d’entre elles seront succinctement rapportées ici. La première concerne les «lexies complexes» telles que la *tour Eiffel* ou *le lac Léman*. En tant que noms célèbres, ces lexies sont décomposables en lexies simples (par exemple, *tour* et *Eiffel*), chacune justiciable d’une analyse sémantique en langue. Au sémème «Eiffel» sont ainsi assignés des sèmes macrogénériques tels que /inanimé/ et /architecture/. La question qui se pose est de savoir que faire de ces sèmes lorsque, par la lexie simple *Eiffel*, est évoqué l’architecte au lieu de son œuvre. L’hypothèse analytique est d’une neutralisation réciproque, en contexte, des sèmes inhérents contradictoires entre les deux sémèmes. Or ceci revient à dénier, comme l’observe l’auteur (p. 141), la possibilité de définir ces sémèmes en langue, puisque le contexte seul décide alors des sèmes macrogénériques à activer parmi des sèmes contradictoires (par exemple, /animé/ ou /inanimé/). Une autre hypothèse pourrait être avancée, à mon avis: le sème macrogénérique /inanimé/ n’est pas inhérent à «Eiffel», quoique le couple de lexies *tour* et *Eiffel* produise effectivement une lexie complexe (c’est-à-dire un groupe lexical consacré en langue); il est uniquement inhérent à «tour» tandis que /animé/ est neutralisé dans «Eiffel» lorsque ce sémème est intégré dans la lexie complexe. Cette hypothèse est conforme à d’autres analyses sémantiques, par exemple celle du groupe nominal *neige noire*: où /blanc/ est neutralisé dans le sémème «neige» et ne reçoit le sème /noir/ que par prescription textuelle.

Une seconde question concerne la différence entre noms à porteur réel et noms à porteur fictif. Cette différence est réglée par le moyen suivant: les lexies à porteur réel comportent un sème spécifique inhérent «réel» tandis que les lexies à porteur fictif comportent un sème spécifique inhérent «fictionnel». Cette résolution dénie purement et simplement tout intérêt à la question, et en cela elle est remarquable. La question est certes valable en logique, où il importe de pouvoir décider de la vérité ou de la fausseté de propositions *logiques* contenant des noms propres. Mais pourquoi devrait-elle avoir quelque portée que ce soit dans une analyse linguistique des noms propres? Les noms propres de personnages fictifs sont tout autant capables de référer que les noms propres de personnes réelles. Dans la phrase *D'Artagnan est un personnage d'un roman d'Alexandre Dumas, la lexie D'Artagnan* a bien un contenu sémantique (par exemple, /humain/, /animé/, /de sexe masculin/, etc.) et elle forme un nom suffisamment célèbre pour que ses sèmes soient définis en langue, hors de tout contexte d'emploi. Qu'il existe *par ailleurs* une personne réelle qui ait porté ce nom ne peut être évoqué que dans certains contextes (notamment, dans des travaux d'histoire de France du XVII^{e} siècle). Il n'est donc pas vrai, dans le cas présent, que la référence de la lexie *D'Artagnan* demande à être sanctionnée par le «monde réel», quoi qu'on veuille entendre par là.

Le «polyglossage», c'est-à-dire la possibilité d'interpréter le sens d'une lexie en fonction de langues différentes, forme une autre question passionnante – la dernière que ce compte rendu évoquera – quoique trop peu abordée jusqu'ici. Elle ne peut en effet qu'embarrasser les approches référentialistes pour lesquelles les noms propres ne sauraient avoir de sèmes renvoyant à plusieurs référents (telle l'/italianité/ que Barthes entend dans la lexie *Panzani*). Dans le cadre de la sémantique interprétative, le polyglossage laisse envisager des réécritures d'une lexie, considérée en fonction de la langue du texte dans lequel elle apparaît, vers son homonyme dans une autre langue, ou même seulement d'une partie de cette lexie. Par exemple, le nom *Godot* dans la pièce de Samuel Beckett peut être partiellement réécrit en un mot anglais (*god*) et enrichir de son sens celui de ce personnage énigmatique. L'analyse des noms de personnages du roman d'Hubert Aquin offre, dans le second chapitre des applications, une riche illustration de la façon dont ces réécritures peuvent intervenir dans le cadre de l'interprétation d'un roman hermétique.

Avec ce livre, Louis Hébert apporte ainsi une contribution originale et éloquente à la théorie linguistique des noms propres. Tout en confrontant des arguments d'approches divergentes, ses propositions théoriques et méthodologiques, dans le sillage des travaux de François Rastier, renforcent entre deux domaines – la théorie linguistique et l'analyse sémantique des textes (en particulier des textes littéraires) – des liens qui, avec le temps, se sont regrettablement effilochés.

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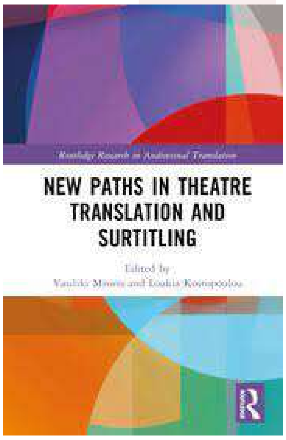
Theories and Practices of Audiovisual Translation in the Theatre

BY: **Dominic Glynn**



Vasiliki Misiou and Loukia Kostopoulou

New Paths in Theatre Translation and Surtitling

New York: Routledge, 2023. 264 pages. eBook ISBN 9781003267874, DOI https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003267874

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Research into theatre translation has gathered steam recently to such an extent that it might be possible to speak of a "translation turn" in theatre studies, just as Susan Bassnett (1998) identified one a few years ago in cultural studies. Within translation studies, theatre has also moved into the spotlight after a period of comparative neglect thanks to high profile publications by Marinetti (2013) and Brodie (2017), among others. Moreover, audiovisual translation (AVT) has emerged as a particularly hot topic with many articles, special issues and edited volumes regularly published in leading journals in the field. A publication that could capitalize on this interest while advancing theoretical understanding of audiovisual translation practices in the theatre was therefore much needed. *New Paths in Theatre Translation and Surtitling* edited by Vasiliki Misiou and Loukia Kostopoulou assembles 11 contributions from academics and academic-practitioners that address this particular gap in the literature.

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The volume is divided into three parts. A brief glimpse at the titles of the different sections suggests that the first is the most theoretically grounded; the second considers case studies, while the third reflects on issues relating to audience reception. In actual fact, the divisions are not so clear cut: there are contributions in parts two and three which engage as much if not more with theory than those in the first. The topics and approaches are diverse, allowing for much ground to be covered, though the link with the central concern of surtitling is at times tenuous.

The articles are all well-researched, starting by the introduction, which sets out the areas of enquiry, highlighting the different aspects under investigation. Surtitling is a type of AVT that bears similarities to film subtitling. Initially developed for operas, it is now used in all manner of theatre productions. Devised primarily as a manner of accessing content, surtitles can provide interlingual or intralingual translation. Most often conceived as not forming part and parcel of the work performed on stage, captioning and surtitling are nevertheless sometimes weaved into the design of the show to create a holistic artistic experience.

Questions of hierarchy between languages and forms of translation run through the volume, beginning with the opening chapter written by Lucile Desblache, which notes how for younger audiences, the use of subtitled (and surtitled) media is not only readily accepted but also expected, belying preconceived ideas of such practices speaking only to audiences with specific needs. This highlights a trend towards greater inclusivity, but also the fact that as a result of the pandemic, there has been a rise in sub/surtitled performances. Such a rise has been accompanied by an increase in visibility, as subtitles have moved from being an unobtrusive feature to a prominent aspect of certain productions, though experimentation is not always well-received (see p. 23). Towards the end, the contribution veers away from theatre and loses focus somewhat to discuss the need for transcriptions to avoid misunderstandings of lyrics in music, however creative "mondegreens" (as they are known) may be.

The second chapter by Sarah Maitland begins with a reminder that there are multiple levels in a surtilted text. The author uses the example of Los Colochos's production of *Mendoza*, an adaptation of *Macbeth* set during the Mexican war of independence, staged in Spanish as part of the CASA Latin American Festival with subtitles based on an English translation that she had produced. She underscores how in this instance, as is often the case, the source text was not the performance, despite the co-existence of the subtitles and this "putative original". Specifically, Maitland dissects the difficulty of translating back into the language of the canonical "Urtext" by Shakespeare, as she did not wish to end up with a pastiche of *Macbeth* that would devalue the Spanish-language play she was actually translating. The insights into the translation process make for the most interesting feature of the chapter.

The third contribution heads in a completely different direction. Angela Tiziana Tarantini adopts a Practice as research angle to consider whether the translation of a written text has an effect on performance. The chapter outlines a workshop led with two groups of actors: one anglophone, the other of Italian heritage. Both groups worked on *Convincing Ground and The Gully* by David Mence, in English and in their Italian translation by Tarantini respectively. In the experiment described in the chapter, a scene from the former play was acted out, in which a character narrates the massacre committed at Convincing Ground. Different configurations were explored with the scene being trialed as a monologue, and with a second character listening on stage. The researcher endeavors to find out whether similar gestures are performed by actors working on the translated text to those acting the original, but the number of variables appear too consequential to be able to formulate much of an opinion, despite the assurances of the researcher. The conclusion that an array of gestures can be predicted by a translator does not seem particularly new, and the justification for moving away from AVT to comment on gesture is insufficiently clear.

The final contribution to the first section by Titika Dimitroulia returns to AVT through the lens of Medea Electronique's production of *Echo and Narcissus*, the libretto of which is a code poem. Dimitroulia draws on Elleström's (2010) conception of media to investigate the coding of the technotext which expresses algorithms. Of all the contributions in the volume, this chapter is the one which does the most to engage with wider issues in theatre and translation studies, delving into definitions of intermediality, and thinking through untranslatability. Indeed, in the digital artwork investigated, the code is produced live using a python that only supports English, meaning that the text is untranslated in the subtitles, which is problematic when performed to non-native English-speaking audiences. Dimitroulia discusses various possibilities of getting round the monolingualism of such pythons, but also ponders how lack of translation might engender a sense of elitism in art.

The second part comprises three contributions, starting with Marta Mateo's chapter on stage and film musicals. Here, Mateo considers how translation differs in this genre in relation to opera, mainly in the fact that dubbing is more common. In the case of filmed musicals, there are various constraints such as the need to hire different actors for the spoken and sung parts that are dubbed, though it is also noted that many films choose to subtitle the sung parts in order to be able to sell the original soundtrack. The main focus of the article is on *Chicago* and its various Spanish versions. In particular, two translations of the musical numbers "All that Jazz" and "Nowadays" produced for Spanish and Argentine audiences respectively are studied, with issues relating to register, as well as rhythm and rhyme analyzed in detail. While making for an interesting read, the question of surtitling goes out of the window, which is somewhat surprising given the section's title.

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It does come back into focus in the other articles of the section. Eva Espasa takes us into the public theatres in Catalonia, where surtitling is predominantly intralingual, though interlingual translations exist also. The chapter touches on a number of prominent issues including the visibility of the surtitles and their acceptability by producers. Her contribution is most useful in that she exchanges with surtitle-makers, charting their workflows and approaches. In addition, she picks up on differences in terms of what information is included in interlingual surtitles and those for the D/deaf and hard of hearing. One key aspect is the degree of precision in appellations and terminology, which varies depending on the relative importance that these issues take on within the overall economy of the plays translated. Similarly, in multilingual productions, languages can be translated or not depending on whether characters are expected to understand them. More generally, the article sheds light on aspects rarely considered at length, making its inclusion highly valuable.

Marisa Trubiano then describes the process of creating English surtitles of Stefano Massini's *The Lehman Trilogy* for its production at the Piccolo Theatre in 2015. She recounts the steps she went through with her co-translator in the two-months they were allocated to prepare the translation. She highlights the need to domesticate references in order to make them intelligible to the audience, but also reflects on the fact that her translation was produced with a global English audience in mind. Certain terms would have changed to reflect greater conscience of Black experience in the United States. Such considerations lead Trubiano to muse about the non-recyclable nature of surtitles, which are created for a specific production. She also comments on the fact that surtitles constitute the most undervalued form of translation before calling for the recognition of the importance of training opportunities offered to students in higher education institutions.

The first contribution of the final section by Louise Ladouceur and Milane Pridmore-Franz considers the politics of translation in Canada, where the co-existence of French and English in surtitled productions of French-speaking minority theatre is subject to discussion. While surtitling increases accessibility, this increase can itself be resisted by those who believe that the best way to defend the francophone minority is to produce shows only in French. Looking at the surtitles provided for L'UniThéâtre in Alberta, the chapter explores the complexities of political divergences in bilingual contexts. It notes how the strategy of translating literally was adopted in order to provide fewer distractions for audiences with knowledge of both languages. The article then discusses models for the reception of surtitles, suggesting a binary that contrasts those with little or no proficiency in the language of the stage performance with those that do boast proficiency. In any case, it is argued that the experience of reading surtitles is usually positively received, political oppositions to the practice excepted.

Estella Oncins's article deals with how technology makes content more accessible. In particular, it outlines how theatres stream more of their events, particularly as a result of the pandemic. Digital access is granted through platforms that are more or less user-friendly, and which present features enabling interaction to a greater or lesser extent. The article briefly exposes the functionalities of Co-Creation Space a H2020-funded project that allows communities and individuals to connect making for multiple co-located stages and experiences. It concludes by highlighting the affordances of technology in contemporary theatre.

The next piece by Pierre-Alexis Mével, Joanna Robinson and Paul Tennent is arguably the most illuminating of the book. The authors describe how Red Earth Theatre Company provides inclusive shows for D/deaf and hard of hearing audiences, using in-show signing and captioning. The authors outline the difficulties of using smart glasses, since they are reportedly uncomfortable to wear and they have limited battery lives. The essay then moves on to discuss the experience of researching and designing an integrated captioning system. Highlighting material and other constraints, the essay follows the development of technology and highlights effective ways in which university researchers and artists can collaborate.

The final contribution is by Antonia Mele Scorcia. It begins by explaining that most surtilting literature deals with its functional aspects. The author then mentions that surtitles can be integrated to be part of the performance, though they are commonly conceived as an additive: they function as an add-on to the performance and cannot exist by themselves. The author then looks at the TV show *Buona La Prima*, which was broadcast live on Italian TV. The show is based on improvisation and makes innovative use of surtitles as a means of pre-empting the action. Unfortunately, the article does not add much to the others, and despite claims that TV and theatre should not be seen in opposition, there is little about theatre here.

To conclude, the book's grand merit is in delivering the first substantial study of surtitling in the theatre. While some contributions veer off-course, the volume remains an essential toolkit for students and researchers wanting to get to grips with an increasingly prevalent and constantly changing practice of translation.

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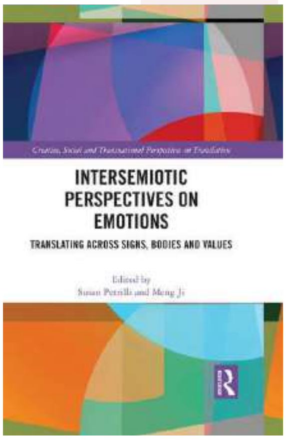
Semioethic translative practices concerning emotions and the challenges of localized identity

BY: Ionut Untea



Susan Petrilli and Meng Ji

Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values

Routledge, London and New York, 2023, 357 pages, hardback , ISBN 9780367521288.

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The seemingly never-ending conflicts, wars, and terrorist attacks that invalidated the post-Cold War promise of an 'end' of History point to the aspect that 'his-story' leads to a turning of emotions 'outside-in.' This again confirms that individual and collective feelings are almost exclusively defined by identities imposed externally, and especially by the geo-political agendas of those in power. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that many, if not all emotions, either "grand" or "private," are "cultured," as Susan Petrilli notes in her "Introduction", basing her insight on Valentin Vološinov's 1973 argument, in the sense of being "conditioned" by "those I live with," by "life experiences distant from my own in time," or by education (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 4). Indeed, emotions "flourish in semiosis" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 4). But how to *translate* emotions, if not by redoubling the 'outside-in,' when one tries to express the content, color or appeal of one's own inner feelings, since the feelings inside have already been deeply affected by outside ambitions and animosities?

This is the phenomenon that is current in the case of contemporary ultranationalist and populist sympathies across the world. Many individuals and collectivities take

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as genuine inner feelings that which has been inculcated through collective ambitions of conquest, glory, or mere collective refusal of responsibility for historical misdeeds. Their capacities for translating genuine emotions have gotten impaired by the externally imposed obsession with the localization of identity, which triggers a potentially antagonistic relation with the 'alien,' the 'outsider,' the 'other.' Hence the aim of Susan Petrilli and Meng Ji's recently edited collection *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values* to offer multiple perspectives on the kind of translation of emotions that is rooted in what Petrilli and Ponzio, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, call "extralocalization" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 26). Also inspired by Levinas' "humanism of alterity," Petrilli understands extralocalization as the valorization of alterity, and the "answerability / responsibility towards the other beyond the limits of short-sighted identity and its alibis" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7).

While acknowledging, through its editor, that emotions "are felt differently" according to the cultural, historical, social, intellectual, psychological, or sociological backgrounds and frameworks of those experiencing them (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 3), the collection of essays takes extralocalization as a central dimension of the translative effort regarding emotions. The semiotic, and, in particular, the semioethic stance, that generally characterizes Petrilli's work, encourages both translators and readers of emotionally infused texts to open themselves and embrace "the dynamics between translatability and untranslatability" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 2), not only at the intellectual level, but also at the level of an "incarnate," and "corporeal interpreted-interpretant" selfhood (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 2). This should be done not only from a privileged vantage point, but also "beyond the rights of the privileged community" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 5), and not only with an attitude of condescendence towards what it is to be translated, but also with "dialogical responsibility" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6). This encouragement is consolidated as extralocalization helps the author, the translator and the reader engage both with their inner manifestations and outer perceptions of textual or embodied emotions, in ways that render the translations of these emotions as both *same* and *other*. This is conceivable because the sign is primarily at the heart of the emotional expression towards the outside and emotional infusion, from the emotional milieu of the semiosic or semiotic entity towards inner translations, in ways that are more fundamental than any cultural, ideological, or disciplinary analysis. In Petrilli's own words "the 'same' sign is always the 'same other,'" and this translative vocation of the sign allows for its "semiotic materiality" to escape the "traps of identity," and therefore allows for the "possibility of its liberation, of communication beyond communication of the same with the same" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7). This argument of the liberation of the sign through the translation that makes it the "same other" and the extralocalization approach are echoed, alluded to, or directly engaged with throughout this collection of essays in multiple ways.

As the core semiotic coordinates of the argument briefly described above have been elaborated, throughout decades of co-authorship between Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, this collection of essays is notable for being dedicated to Ponzio, as "a great master of the sign," on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The way the collection is organized brings forth, right from the start, the suggestion that a semioethics of translation has the vocation to summon the translative potential of semiotic beings worldwide as a way of contributing to the emergence of a transcultural and global semiotic *ethos*. This *ethic* coordinate of semiotics incorporates translation less in its oversimplified understanding of an "imitation, homologation, passive repetition of the same," which, in Petrilli and Ponzio's view, are the attributes of a mere "transcription" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 25), but as a multimodal expressive, and creative sign activity. That is why, Part I therefore deals with the translation of emotions as "sensing," Part II approaches translation under its facet of "negotiating emotions," Part III analyses translative efforts in diverse settings (economic, geographic, and virtual), Part IV deals with translation as "depiction," rather than a simple "representation" of emotions (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6), while Part V invokes the performative aspect of translation as rendered especially in film and music.

Before engaging in a systematic reading of the essays, according to the order of the essays, or according to their own interests or expectations, readers might be interested in first consulting section 10.4 of the essay "Rituals and games in translation: The chiastic relation of duty and delight," authored by Marco Fiola and Jamin Pelkey, as it brings forth a fair synthesis of Susan Petrilli's own conception of translation. This is particularly useful, especially for the reader less familiar with semiotic terms, as it gives a clear idea of the main editor's own approach to translation before engaging with the very diverse, and sometimes puzzling, aspects of translating emotions. For instance, this is where the reader might learn, if they did not already know, that Petrilli sees the activity of translation as "a token of a more general type" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 184), which brings translation closer to other tokens of the general effort towards "nascent communication and interpretation" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185). From this point of view, Petrilli's approach to translation seems to be, at least according to Fiola and Pelkey's interpretation of it, quite similar to the activity of other agents dealing with communication between/within cultures, such as "the interculturalist, the language learner, the negotiator, the newcomer, or the new couple for that matter" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185).

While this may be the case at a first level of interpretation, the authors nonetheless emphasize that what makes Petrilli's argument noteworthy is its emphasis on the translative activity as a way to develop "new situations" of a "relative" alterity out of a "non-relative" alterity (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185). This is directly connected with the conception of the "same other," with the addition that this very "same other" is not only to be thought of in relation to the original "same," but that it is an actual *relative* of the original sign. This is Petrilli's original approach regarding cultural and ethical

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relativism through an initially metaphorical expression (Petrilli 2006: 76) of a wish for making cultures truly *relatives*, in the sense of integrating them coherently as part of a greater family, but soon thereafter as a truly semiotic exchange, and a liberation of the sign from the chains of sameness and closed identity (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 21). That is why giving closer attention to Petrilli's conception of translation might reveal that her conception of "relative" alterity goes beyond the chiastic patterning model that is central to Fiola and Pelkey's argument (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 184-193). This is because the chiasmatic inversion, involving the changing of places between the self and the other seems rather a mechanical "x" inversion that can indeed be found in Shakespeare, Merleau-Ponty, or Lévi-Strauss (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 186). What the *relative alterity* dimension invoked by Petrilli might also bring is an important ingredient: the "dialogical responsibility as inscribed in the sign" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6) responsibility that might help in de-colonizing knowledge about, and give proper deference to, what is considered to be different (Petrilli 2013: 100).

This *deference* to *difference* approach is appropriated by Anne Sophie Voyer, who talks in her essay of "Translating emotions: Articulating affect," as a way to counter "the stigma of difference," since "difference" – in her case, the difference between translation and the source text – "does not necessarily indicate a deficit" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 92). This indicates both the open character of the sign, emotion, or text, in the dialogical relationship that happens across cultural or geographical space and time and its liberation from the constraints of identity. This approach is also present in the essay by Verónica Estay Stange and Audrey Moutat, "Translating the rhythm of emotions," which allows for a similar countering of the impression that difference is a kind of deficit in the communication of emotions and, generally speaking, the reaching of sameness from starting points that seem too "different" from each other. The emphasis here is less on the finite product, but on the rhythm that facilitates relative translations of emotions, and the "incarnation" of this rhythm not in a monolithic, but in a "triple" translation of emotions: expression of "inner movements," their "kinesthetic interpretation by another subject," and a "reenunciation" by means which are "specific to the target language" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 65, 76-77). That is why, commenting on this essay, Petrilli emphasizes that the "emotional sign" always contains a "margin of alterity," which comes to the fore in the reciprocal semiosic activity, once the sign "transitions" from one experience to another (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 8). The outcome of this semiosic activity is thus seen in a positive sense: instead of being pretexts for the creation of either gaps or walls between subjectivities, "shared rhythm in translation" made possible in the "margin of alterity" shows difference as a way to enhance the quality of the experience of intersubjective relationships (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 8).

Shared rhythm is very different from the kind of rhythm that is obsessively restated in the phenomenon of "monologism," which is defined by Petrilli and Ponzio in the essay "Emotions from identity to alterity, and their possible translation" as "subservience of the verbal sign to preestablished meaning," and as "elimination of heterodox meanings" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 38). So, no matter how attractive, genial, or exquisite the interpretant of a sign, emotion, text, or work of art might seem, this very interpretant needs to be protected from falling into the trap of the external identity that the sign might generate around itself, and which may cover the sign as a crust, and trap its interpretant, fossilizing it for generations to come. Hence John Deely's warning, following Peirce, that an interpretant needs to be rediscovered as always a "being *in futuro*" (CP 2.92; Deely 2001: 39). This is echoed in Moira Inghilleri's essay "Migration, materiality, and structures of feeling," when noting that, one morning, Willem De Kooning, the author of the painting *Excavation*, while looking at the surface of his own painting, suddenly found himself humming a tune, which he identified as the Dutch "Klimmen in het wand" (Climbing in the raft) (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 111). In this case, the material crust of the painting did not prevent, but propelled the artist to 'excavate,' that is to look for, through his apparently rhythm-less, static crust formed out of the objects depicted on the canvas, the ingredients of a bridging rhythm with something that was 'other,' in regard to dynamism and liveliness.

This is also a perspective borrowed by Margherita Zanoletti, in her essay "Translating Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *My People*," when talking about the multiple "semiotic rebirths" of the depiction of Oodgeroo's emotions through the multiple translations of her text (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 256). Like a text, even a place, or an object may go through this process of semiotic liberation or rebirth. This is what Luca Tateo and Giuseppina Marsico understand, in their essay "Sensing the city: Affective semiosis and urban border-zones" with their concept of "semiotic *sensescape* of the urban space as a multisensorial fabric of signs disseminated in the environment" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 207). This is also what Pierluigi Basso Fossali and Julien Thiburce refer to, in their essay "Emotions through touristic discourses: Mediation and rendition of an urban experience" when talking about an "emotional climate" and an "atmospheric integration" of the multiple experiences that "can only be tasted on the spot" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 223). The stakes are set even higher by Labao Wang, in the essay "Translating China: A semiotic reading of Linda Jaivin's *The Empress Lover*," when arguing, following Petrilli and Ponzio, that any translation starts with, and it actually is, listening, and that "[w]hen you have become so emotionally involved with another country, writing about it becomes a process of translating yourself and your love for it" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 269).

These are only some of the gems that can be found in this masterfully arranged collective volume, and the reader might wish to excavate more deeply into the texts, and found out more about the meaning of phrases such as "answerability" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7), "extralocalization" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 26), "habitus" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 83), "Umwelt" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 147), "affective revolution" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 174),

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"relative alterity" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 179), "chiastic patterning" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185), "semiotic sensescape" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 207), "homologation" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 263), "tourism of catalysis" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 224), "empathy with the unknown" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 346), and many others. While the content of this collection might somehow seem overly dense, and its message too abstract for the average reader, the reader needs to take it as an opportunity for personal reflection on what a feeling expressed in words such as 'I love you' might mean, or have meant, both for themselves, and for their receivers, at several stages of their own life, from childhood to adulthood and potentially parenthood. Then, they will need to *extralocalize* this feeling and understand that it is not only them, and their 'kind' (i.e., nation, race, ethnic group) who are capable of having such higher feelings and express emotionally infused signs. Or is it?

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