
理论与应用



Semiotics as a Social Science

Antonio Santangelo

Abstract: This article aims to explain why semiotics should be considered a social science. To do so, it tries to find a sort of reading path between the writings of some authors that nowadays conduct their social research with semiotic tools, like Paolo Fabbri, Guido Ferraro and Erik Landowski, and the writings of some linguists, sociologists and anthropologists of the past, like Ferdinand de Saussure, Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Luis Prieto. Using some concepts like the ones of sign, pertinence, mythem, grammar, transformation groups, culture and practice, the focus is on how and why a researcher can be able to find out the socio-cultural meaning of a text, which is the main goal of most typical semiotic analyses.

Key words: Sociosemiotics, cultural models, signs, pertinence, practices, knowledge

作为社会科学的符号学

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摘要: 本文旨在解释,为什么符号学应该被视为一门社会科学。本文尝试在法布里、费拉罗和兰多夫斯卡等人的当代社会符号学研

究, 和索绪尔、涂尔干、列维-斯特劳斯和普瑞托等近代语言学家、社会学家和人类学家的著作之间, 找到某种联接性的阅读路径。本文引入了符号、相关性、神话素、语法、转换群体、文化与时间等概念, 关注的是研究者如何以及为什么能够为一个文本找到社会和文化的意义, 而这种意义寻找是典型的符号学分析的目标。

关键词: 社会符号学, 文化模式, 符号, 相关性, 实践, 知识

Semiotics has always been a social science, so there is no need to distinguish between a part of it that deals with problems and analysis objects which have a sort of social relevance and another that cannot claim to be classified under this label. But in a certain historical period, which can be dated more or less between the eighties and the nineties of the last century, a broad and fertile discussion took place inside the discipline about how and why semiotics relates to the social sciences (Bertetti, 2000). The main point was that other human sciences, like sociology or anthropology, conducted field researches directly dealing with people and the social tissue to look for confirmation of their theories, while semiotics at that time was mainly working on a desk level, dealing with a particular kind of analysis object: the text. So the problem was, first of all, to understand how a text or a corpus of texts arbitrarily chosen can be used to explain something on a social scale. (Fabbri, 1973, pp. 57 - 109) Moreover, the trickiest point was how to sustain that a single researcher or a group of researchers can be able to bypass their subjectivity and find out the objective meaning of a text, the one that every member of a certain social context would recognize in it.

Of course, semiotics has not always been a “desk” discipline, and even between the eighties and the nineties there was some field research (Floch, 1990) that explained how its methods could be applied to the traditional analysis objects of other human sciences (mainly using the metaphor of the “text” to understand people’s practices). In any case, an answer to these questions can be found if we connect to the father of the theories of modern semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, who was far from thinking that his discipline could only explain the meaning of texts. In his perspective, a text—

and the way we interpret it—is just a subset of a more general problem: how we recur to signs in our everyday life.

Signs are our tools to give sense to the world. First of all we need them to classify our experiences and to be able to define what is similar and what is different in the multiplicity of feelings we have to deal with. This is a very important mental operation, as it permits us to make order in our mind; it lets us think that there is something “stable” behind the changeable aspects of reality. (Ferraro, 2004, p. 29)

The simplest example is brought to us by Saussure himself (1916, pp. 143–145)^①. When we read the letter “T” on a sheet of paper it doesn’t matter how it is drawn. There can be as many ways to write it as the calligraphies of people, but still we recognize it is a “T” because it is not an “S” or an “L” or any other letter. What happens is that we classify that ink spot in a stable category, which permits us to think to the same thing every time even if we read it in ten different documents written by ten different hands.

This shows us three characteristics of signs. The first is that they simplify our perception of reality, as they permit us to not think about its aspects which are not pertinent to understanding it (a graphologist may pay attention to the different ways of writing a “T”, while normally we can avoid doing so). The second is that, if signs have nothing to do with our perception of the outer world, they must not be “physical” objects; they are in our minds, of course, working as a sort of a filter between us and the things that surround us. The third, and the most important here, is that everybody will recognize the same letter when reading it on the paper. So our minds are somehow connected through “things” that we all share because they are not individually built but they belong to the social level of culture.

If this is something semiotics has always known, acknowledging the social nature of signs and their importance to build our vision of the world, we must say that sociologists also have a long tradition of studies that focus on this topic. For example, we can quote some affirmations from Berger and

① All the quotes in this article refer to the Italian version of the cited essays.

Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966):

everyday life reality appears to me like an *intersubjective* world, a world that I share with others [...] what's important is that I know there's a continuous correspondence between what I mean and what people mean about this world, that we share a *common sense* of this reality [...] I perceive everyday life as an *ordered* reality. Its phenomena are meant like they were *independent from my perception* of them [...] Everyday life reality appears as it's already objectified, like it's made of ordered objects which were *defined as objects before my appearance* in front of them [...] A special kind of objectification, but yet of the biggest importance, is *signification*, the human production of signs. ^① (pp. 42 -58)

Here we find some keywords that we have already encountered in Saussure's theories; the two sociologists of knowledge say that reality is something independent from our perception, because it is already objectified in the signs we build together and exchange. So we can perceive things in the most different ways but when we classify them into a sign they become objectively "real" because if we talk of them with another person he will classify them with the same sign, a fact which is of the greatest importance as it means that we can speak of an "objective world" only when we have socially constructed our vision of it, through signs that exist before our perception of the world itself.

Of course, this does not mean reality does not exist but in our minds. It is clear that if we crash our car we will get hurt, just as it is clear that the "T" is on the sheet of paper. But what semiotics and sociology can do when studying the way we deal with things is to try to understand their symbolic existence, not their physical one. Because—we could joke—they are more interested in the reason why when we see a wall we avoid crashing into it than in what we feel when actually crashing. But above all—to be serious again—because between perception and conception of things, the first is individual and personal, while the second is possible through signs, which are collective and socially built tools.

^① All the translations from the books quoted in this article are by Antonio Santangelo.

Many examples could be given to support this affirmation. For instance, when we go on a journey into a wild environment, like the Amazon rainforest, the desert or the northern glaciers, we usually prefer being in the company of a guide. It may happen in fact that in front of the same marvellous landscape, being too enthusiastic, we could call “beauty” what for an expert eye is danger. In that case we used to say that we don’t perceive the danger, but that is a strange definition of the problem, as we are in front of the same objects that our guide is perceiving. This is very interesting because the point is that behind this particular usage of the word “perception” there is the idea that perception itself is led by the signs we use to define the world; as individuals the guide and the tourist actually “perceive” different things because they belong to two different classes of people who use different signs to interpret what they are both facing, but what counts is that, as a member of the class of guides, the man who is taking his client into the wild environment should see the same dangers that his colleagues would notice. It is in this sense that we can say conceiving and knowing the outer world is the same and is a problem that can be studied by a social science, as many semioticians have thought from the beginning of the discipline (Saussure), through its developments in the seventies of the last century (Prieto, 1975), until today (Ferraro, 2008).

On this topic Ferraro (2004) writes:

Saussure’s way of thinking can be applied to every case in which we ask ourselves what an object identity is [...] everything is conducted to a classification problem as far as our goal is to associate that object—that at that moment is resisting to our knowledge—to a class of objects, so that we can say, for example: right, it is a bike! [...] and at that time, we can conclude: I have understood. (p. 39)

So following Saussure’s example about the letter “T”, there can be bicycles of many different shapes and materials but every time we perceive one we start wondering how we should classify it, that is to say we start thinking which sign we should use to define it, as the next picture shows.

In *Pertinence et Pratique* (ivi) Prieto says that recognizing that an object belongs to a class means on the one hand to find out that it is different

from other objects, and on the other to acknowledge the features that make it different. So for example, while looking at the bikes in Figure 1, even if we well perceive they are not made the same way, we classify them as “bicycles” because they are not motorbikes.

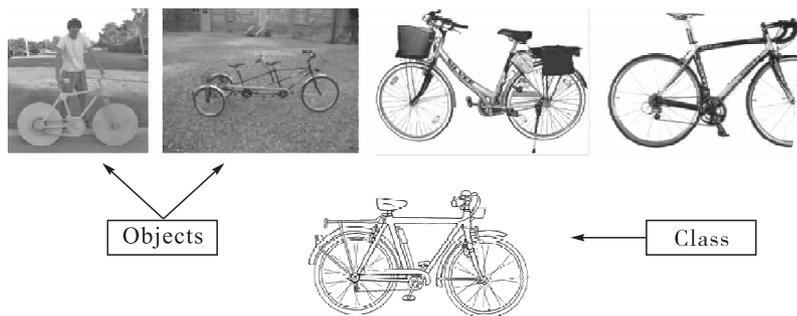


Fig. 1 Bicycles?

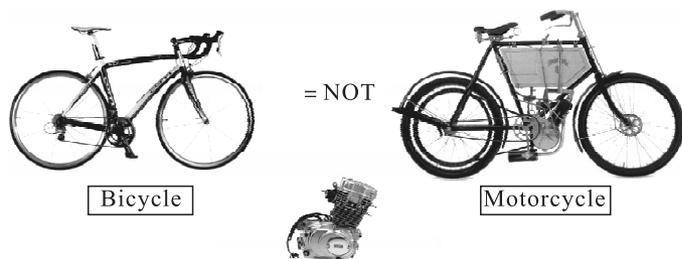


Fig. 2 Bikes vs Motorbikes

This is what Prieto calls “pertinence”. Differences between things exist objectively in things themselves: one has pedals, another has an engine. But it is up to us to decide whether to make them pertinent or not, so that we can use them to distinguish two classes of objects. The decision to build two different classes is a subjective act even if we are used to forgetting it, thinking that bicycles and motorcycles are “objectively” different. Quoting Prieto (*ibid.*), we can say that:

every knowledge is an interpretation action, which connects subjective categories of thought to objectively evaluable characteristics of material reality [...] As far as the pertinence of the characteristics that determine the identity of an object never comes out of the object itself, it’s always the point of view of the subject on the object that explains it. (pp. 121—137)

All these arguments lead us to a conclusion: if semiotics wants to study the way we give a meaning to our experience of things, it must become a science of subjectivity. But as the word “subjectivity” often makes us think of something individual, something that is different from one person to another, then we have to specify that what we are talking about is a particular usage of this term. To explain it, Prieto (*ibid.*) writes that the subject is always a social subject, and all knowledge of material is, for this reason, social. On this topic, Ferraro (*ivi*) adds:

as all the processes of cognition have a subjective nature, depending on the point of view people decide to adopt about the objects that have to be known, then semiotics—as every human science—is a science of subjectivity. It doesn't study things, but the way human beings, as members of a community, see, think and call things. (p. 41)

The two semioticians, acknowledging Saussure's positions, start giving an answer to the questions we have posed above about the doubts on the social nature of semiotic studies. First of all, they say that a human science which tries to understand the way we give sense to the world cannot focus on the world itself, but on people. So in this field “objective” is not the direct description of reality—as in physics, for example—but the description of the way people subjectively see it. Then they sustain that people's subjective point of view on anything is directly social because the signs we use to interpret things are not individually built but derive from the culture we belong to.

From this perspective, semiotics must be seen as a sort of a psychology, as it explains the mental operations we activate when knowing things. But as Ferraro (2008, p. 80) says, it is a social psychology, something which is clear if we think that we mostly use signs to communicate. Signs give us the possibility of sharing ideas, feelings, perceptions and all our inner and personal world, knowing that, more or less, we will be understood, even if other people cannot be in our mind and may have had different experiences of what we are talking about. This is another clue to the social nature of signs, which are a sort of bridge between us and others, and always pose us the

problem of confronting our individuality on the community level.

But if it is clear that semiotics, as a social science, has to study the signs we collectively create to know the world and give sense to it, the question now becomes how signs have to be studied. A first answer, in this sense, is given by Greimas who, in his essay *Sémiotique et Sciences Sociales* (1976, pp. 6–12), talks about their “taxonomical” nature, with a terminology that directly recalls the problems raised by Berger and Luckman. As the two sociologists write, a very interesting aspect of the interaction between our minds and signs is that through them reality looks ordered. Greimas knows it well, and while reflecting on our way of giving sense to the space of towns (ivi, pp. 125–154), he reminds us that the difference between perception and conception is the same as the one between continuity and discontinuity. Using Prieto’s terms, we could say that while perceiving things we receive many pieces of information about the outer world which are all “present” at the same time. Then we have to distinguish the ones that are pertinent from the ones we can ignore. In other words, we have to create a sort of a discontinuity which takes to the same classification operation we have already described while talking about bikes and motorbikes: dividing things into different categories means creating a cultural order.

Greimas calls this order “taxonomical” because it derives from some arbitrary definitions based on cultural pertinence principles that generate classifications. But the same verbs we have used to describe this taxonomy—“define” and “generate”—tell us that the way we conceive reality doesn’t directly derive from a given and unchangeable state of the world but it comes from some actions of ours that Prieto calls “practices”, which are the most important connection between semiotics and the other social sciences. Returning to the example of our trips to the exotic lands, we can say that our guide is able to “perceive” dangers we can’t see because he has learned to use some signs which have been produced from a culture that had to solve the problems deriving from those dangers. This is the reason why people of the North have multiple words for the different kinds of snow; because under a marvellous white landscape there could be a very dangerous hidden crevasse, which could be better located due to the colour of the snow itself. As Prieto

writes (*ibid.*), “the pertinence of a knowledge of material reality is always connected to a function, which is to say to a practical goal” (p. 126).

Now the practices of defining things and hence creating a certain taxonomical order between them always have a semiotic structure in the sense that they are always meaningful. Continuing with the example of the tourist and his guide, it may be of the greatest interest for an observer who wants to understand their different cultures to infer from the signs they use to define things the reasons why one of them calls adventure—giving it a positive meaning—what the other one calls danger. Dropping the metaphor this is exactly what happens in every society when different cultural systems that belong to different groups or even to some single (often powerful) person try to affirm their vision of the world. Prieto would say they carry on some practices to set the pertinence principles that define reality and the meaning of those practices—the reasons why they are activated—must be studied from a semiotic point of view to unveil the sense of a certain classification of things instead of another.

In our societies we see the “battle” of practices everywhere. In politics, the same fact can be defined in many different ways depending on the strategic result a party wants to achieve. Newspapers, being closer to one party or to another, try to transmit some precise cultural models to affect our way of thinking. In advertising, every brand tries to construct a certain image of itself and of its products that is more effective than that of its competitors. But even in our families, every day we use what happens to us and around us to build our reciprocal identities, often categorizing our relatives by saying that if they see things in a certain way then it means they are made in a certain way that we can criticize or appreciate.

While talking of practices and of the connections between semiotics and sociology that he finds out from the similarities between the theories of Durkheim, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, Ferraro (*ivi*) writes:

a society is the system that keeps the connections between all the collective representations that belong to a group together [...] a society mustn't be seen as a physical entity—which would mean that it exists, that it's “something” — but as a flow: society, the system, is not something “still”, it “happens” [...]

our social reality is the space where the collective models present themselves as actions (the “practices”); because we understand very well that the system is a process. (p. 80)

So what semiotics has to study are not only the signs we use to define things but also the reasons why we use those signs. Because it is in these reasons, rather than in the way it does it, that we understand how a society deals with the world, constructing its vision of it and—as a consequence—its vision of itself.

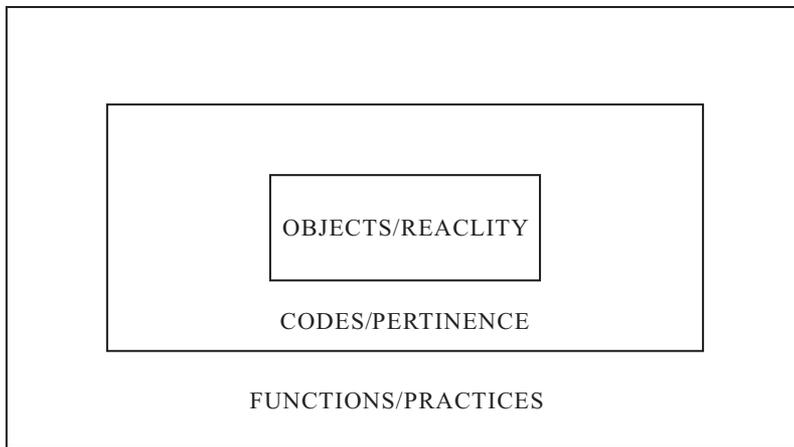


Fig. 3 A Model for a Sociosemiotics

This model can therefore schematize what we have been writing about semiotics as a social science. It underlines how objects and reality, in their physical aspects, must be kept outside of the discipline interests, while the signs we use to define them (Prieto’s “pertinence”) and their functions (Prieto’s “practices”), being the meaning we give to the world and to our way of living inside it, are the main focus of every research a semiotician can conduct.

Now there is only one more passage needed to give a complete answer to the doubts about the nature of semiotics as a social science raised at the beginning of the article. There we wrote that it is not so clear how some arbitrarily chosen texts, which nowadays, for some historical reasons we can’t explain here, are the main analysis objects of semioticians, may be used

to explain something on a social scale. Then we added that there are some problems in accepting that the personal analysis of a researcher, conducted on a “desk” level, is able to find out a text’s “social” meaning, which is to say the same meaning it has for everyone or for some particular groups of people. But from what we have seen so far we can say that the theory of the social nature of signs permits us to bypass these objections. First of all, we have to admit that if a text is made of signs that its author has utilized to share some concepts with other people, then it must be seen as the vehicle of a certain vision of things that has a social value, because otherwise it would have never been thought and, what’s more important, it would have never been understood. For example, one can have a very personal and revolutionary idea of love. But to conceive it one first has to compare it to the vision of love that, as a member of his society, he has always had. Then, if he finds out it is different, he has to look for the proper way to express this difference, which means taking the signs everybody would expect him to use to talk about love and denying their utility. This always happens when one becomes aware of what he thinks about a concept and, what’s more important, when he has to communicate it to someone else; it is always a matter of dealing with social and collective tools like signs that permit us, as individuals, to understand the world and to share our visions of it.

From a semiotician’s point of view, this mechanism is very important because it lets him immediately take a text and its contents from an individual level to a social one. But then there is a second passage which consists in separating from the text the cultural models it carries inside, trying to describe their meaning in the broader context of the culture where the text itself assumes its sense. As a matter of fact, while conducting a semiotic textual analysis, the concept of culture is of maximum relevance because it saves the researcher from the impression of carrying on a fragmentary job which is only useful to explain how a particular analysis object works, offering him the space of an ideal systematization of his analytical data. Introducing it, the semiotician starts dealing with a sort of “box”, an entity of a not very clear theoretic nature (there are as many different definitions of culture as disciplines that we call “human sciences”) but which can be either

used as a classification tool for the semiotic facts or to believe there is a connection between them.

We can try to imagine culture and its structure through Claude Lévi-Strauss' metaphors and his analysis methods. In the field of social sciences, the French anthropologist was one of the main people responsible for the idea of culture as a net of texts. In fact, while studying myths, he understood that these kinds of texts never have a meaning which can be found inside of them, but their identity and value is in the relationship they maintain with other texts. So he moved from the level of single texts to working on groups of myths that he called "transformation groups". The idea was that a tale can only exist in the transformation connections that link it to other tales. So narrative texts cannot be seen as combinations of simple units (symbols, characters, actions, functions), but as narrative patterns, already organized, which are used by the new tales to be transformed (thanks to paraphrases, inversions, and hybridizations with other texts).

This is very easy to understand if we reconnect to the previous example of the man desiring to give his particular vision of love. As we have written, to make it pertinent he will have to compare it to the ones that are commonly accepted in his cultural context. Then we can expect that in listening to his considerations we will first hear him talking of some "normal" couples, deviating little by little from their stories until we clearly see the novelty of his point of view. And even if this doesn't happen, his exposition being elliptical of the common visions of love and only concentrating on his new positions, the latter will be meaningful only in comparison with the former.

Lévi-Strauss then reproduces Saussure's notion of sign, replacing it with the one of "mythem" which corresponds to some more complex narrative patterns, made of distinctive traits which are the semiotic characteristics that are pertinent for their meaning. Every other characteristic can vary not being relevant, so that we can recognize the same identity in objects that look very different, as we all notice when we see that tales which are not similar on the surface are based on very deep analogies; what changes, in these cases, is only that they use different variations of the same "mythem".

Starting from these considerations, we can understand why for Claude Lévi-Strauss a myth's meaning is always in its grammar. Yet by grammar he doesn't mean the linguistic rules for composing a tale, but a certain kind of link between different levels of reality that permits people to think and read reality itself as something which is ordered. As he writes (1964), "the myth's meaning is not directly in its contents but in some logical links without a content, or rather in the fact that between elements which belong to different levels of reality some comparable links can be instituted." (p. 316)

This is very different from a linguistic system where, for example, it's not a grammar rule to be meaningful but the sentences it permits to create. This happens because in this case every sentence is a piece of information as it is a choice between all the grammar rules and all the words in the lexicon. But a myth does not choose; it simply reproduces its grammar; it tells it, often describing and analyzing it.

The reason why the teachings of Claude Lévi-Strauss seem so interesting for semiotics as a social science is due to the discipline analysis objects. As a matter of fact, if it wants to study semiotic phenomena of big social relevance, one of its favourite fields must be mass media. Now, as every media researcher knows (Greimas, *ivi*, pp. 39 – 54), the meaning of texts which are communicated through mass media is never in how they say what they say but in how they deal with cultural models they strengthen or contradict. Television, newspapers, the Internet, and a certain kind of film seem to work better when their authors remain invisible, giving space to the cultural models they want to transmit. As Ferraro (2004) says, quoting some other Saussurian categories:

a socially relevant semiotic system doesn't properly possess "*parole*", in the sense of an individual use of the possibilities given by a collective grammar (*langue*): a system like this doesn't use its grammar but it reproduces it; or if we want it makes it visible, thanks to its analogical and narrative codes. (p. 82)

Hence as Paolo Fabbri (*ivi*) reminds us, if culture, more than a set of data contained in texts, must be thought of as a hierarchy of general codes

that generate specific discourse rules which generate texts, then these rules must be individuated, described and explained. So what a semiotician has to do while conducting his analyses is, in the words of Eric Landowski (1997):

the sociosemiotics researcher, like an acrobat, works on a slim thread. There's no analysis corpus that's established in advance. So he doesn't have any guarantee in case of errors in the choice of his object. And there's neither a pre-constituted analysis grid to apply to some opportunely chosen pages. The sociosemiotics researcher on the contrary takes whatever is meaningful around him-around us-what people say, common places, trends, scenes that he sees on the streets, love letters, journey tales or newspapers photographs, and then makes an effort to find out some configurations that can be generalized, a grammar. (p. 6)

As the next figure shows, the semiotician can work like this; first he finds a text which in his opinion is representative of a certain relevant cultural model; then he describes this cultural model, treating it like Lévi-Strauss' mythemes, as variations of some patterns of signs whose value can only be understood in comparison with the ones that gave birth to other similar texts, which become his corpus; then he tries to understand if this cultural model can be considered as the grammar that keeps together the visions of the world that circulate in his society, even out of his corpus of texts. If the response is positive he can conclude that the results of his research are of a social relevance.

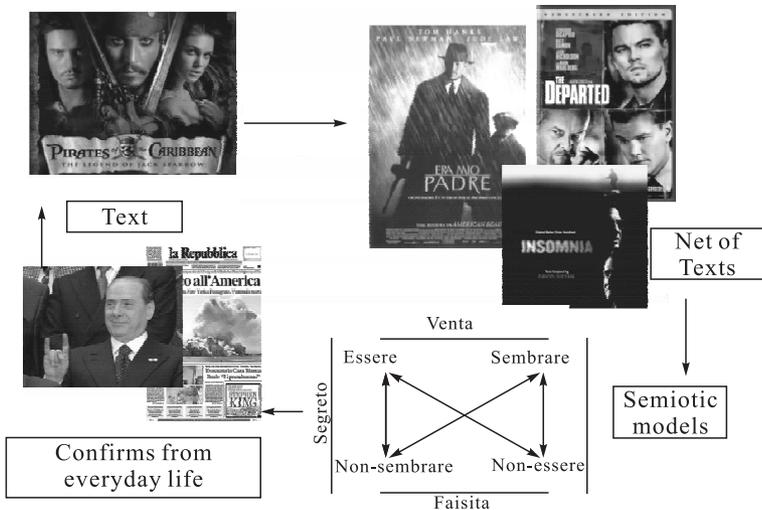


Fig. 4 The Work of a Semiotician

It is in this sense that we can affirm a researcher's desk analysis is able to find out a text's "social" meaning, which is to say the same sense it has for everyone or for some particular groups of people. A text is just a trace of the cultural models a society produces on the subject it talks about. More precisely it's a "practice" to sustain a certain cultural model on that topic. So the semiotician can infer that cultural model from the texts of his corpus, realistically assuming that those texts derive from the same grammars that every person of that society would use to think of that problem. (Ferraro, 1999, pp. 95–106)

Of course, as we have written, a society is the continual activity of the definition of things. So when a semiotician ends his research he can be sure he has given a partial vision of something that is changing every day. For this reason, we can conclude by quoting Landowski's words when he says (ivi):

Nothing in this domain is able to propose a complete model (the same idea of completeness and totalization doesn't have much sense, here) [...] [The grammar of culture] mustn't be conceived as a system that stands alone, which exists behind people who use it, but it is a reality that is every day redefined by our reciprocal negotiations, our way of being together.

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