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## Analyzing technology in fiction and factual texts: Toward an applied sociosemiotic methodology

[Kurmaca ve olgusal metinlerde teknolojiyi analiz etmek: Uygulamalı bir sosyosemiyotik metodolojiye doğru]

[Analyser la technologie dans les textes fictionnels et factuels: Vers une méthodologie sociosémiotique appliquée]

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### Abstract

This article demonstrates the application of contemporary sociosemiotics to text analysis, illustrating how individual discourses manifest collective cultural models. Grounded in the theoretical systematization developed at the University of Turin, this essay shows how texts constitute manifestations of recurring discursive configurations that reflect shared ways of interpreting reality.

The sociosemiotic perspective conceives texts as cultural artifacts embedded within cultural networks of meaning. Individual discourses thus express recurring cultural models because authors and interpreters both inhabit shared cultural spaces characterized by common languages, practices, and experiences. Through textual analysis, researchers can translate localized discourses into broader considerations regarding how cultures conceive specific topics.

Drawing upon Greimas's Generative Path of Meaning and Lévi-Strauss's research on mythical narratives, the methodology examines how narrative elements—characters, objects, environments—function as signs representing systems of values and worldviews. This sociosemiotic analytical framework focuses on identifying relationships between Perspective principles (subjective values and motivations) and Destination principles (collective values and order), thereby revealing underlying value systems through the concepts of topic (general theme) and focus (value positions adopted regarding that theme).

The essay demonstrates this methodology through analysis of both fictional texts and factual texts, addressing technology and its societal implications. Through comparative analysis, the study identifies some recurring cultural models, concerning how contemporary society conceptualizes technology, particularly regarding tensions between capitalist logics and human values. The analyses reveal how technology is framed as either alienating or empowering depending upon the value systems underlying its implementation, thereby demonstrating sociosemiotics' utility for reflections on socially relevant themes.

**Keywords:** Sociosemiotics, cultural models, semiotic analysis, applied semiotics, culture

### Özet

Bu makale, çağdaş sosyosemiyotiğin metin analizine uygulanışını göstermekte ve bireysel söylemlerin kolektif kültürel modelleri nasıl ortaya koyduğunu açıklamaktadır. Torino Üniversitesi'nde geliştirilen teorik sistematığe dayanan bu çalışma, metinlerin gerçekliği yorumlamanın paylaşılan yollarını yansıtan tekrarlayan söylemsel yapılandırmaların tezahürleri olduğunu göstermektedir.

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Sosyosemiyotik perspektif, metinleri izole nesneler olarak değil, karmaşık kültürel anlam ağları içine gömülü kültürel yapıtlar olarak ele almaktadır. Bireysel söylemler, tekrarlayan kültürel modelleri ifade etmektedir çünkü hem yazarlar hem de yorumcular ortak diller, pratikler ve deneyimlerle karakterize edilen paylaşılan kültürel alanlarda bulunmaktadırlar. Metinsel analiz yoluyla araştırmacılar, yerelleştirilmiş söylemleri kültürlerin belirli konuları nasıl tasavvur ettiğine dair daha geniş değerlendirmelere çevirebilmektedirler.

Greimas'ın Anlamın Üretken Yolu ve Lévi-Strauss'un mitik anlatılar üzerine araştırmalarından yola çıkan metodoloji, anlatı unsurlarının -karakterler, nesneler, çevreler- soyut değer sistemlerini ve dünya görüşlerini temsil eden göstergeler olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü incelemektedir. Bu sosyosemiyotik analitik çerçeve, Perspektif ilkeleri (öznel değerler ve motivasyonlar) ile Varış Noktası ilkeleri (kolektif değerler ve düzen) arasındaki ilişkileri belirlemeye odaklanmakta ve böylece konu (genel tema) ve odak (bu tema ile ilgili benimsenen değer pozisyonları) kavramları aracılığıyla altta yatan değer sistemlerini ortaya çıkarmaktadır.

Çalışma, bu metodolojiyi hem kurmaca metinlerin hem de olgusal metinlerin analizi yoluyla göstermekte ve teknoloji ile toplumsal etkilerini ele almaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı analiz yoluyla çalışma, çağdaş toplumun teknolojiyi nasıl kavramsallaştırdığına dair, özellikle kapitalist mantıklar ile insani değerler arasındaki gerilimlerle ilgili bazı tekrarlayan kültürel modelleri belirlemektedir. Analizler, teknolojinin uygulanmasının temelindeki değer sistemlerine bağlı olarak yabancılaştırıcı ya da özgürleştirici olarak nasıl çeşitli şekillerde çerçevelendiğini ortaya koymakta ve böylece sosyosemiyotiğin toplumsal açıdan önemli temalar üzerine düşünceler için yararlılığını göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sosyosemiyotik, kültürel modeller, semiyotik analiz, uygulamalı semiyotik, kültür

## Résumé

Cet article illustre l'application de la sociosémiotique contemporaine à l'analyse textuelle, démontrant comment les discours individuels manifestent des modèles culturels collectifs. Fondé sur la systématisation théorique de l'Université de Turin, cet essai montre comment les textes constituent des manifestations de configurations discursives récurrentes reflétant des manières partagées d'interpréter la réalité.

La perspective sociosémiotique conçoit les textes comme artefacts culturels insérés dans des réseaux complexes de signification. Les discours individuels expriment des modèles récurrents parce que auteurs et interprètes habitent des espaces culturels partagés caractérisés par langages, pratiques et expériences communes. L'analyse textuelle permet de traduire les discours localisés en considérations sur la manière dont les cultures conçoivent des sujets spécifiques.

S'appuyant sur le Parcours génératif de Greimas et les recherches de Lévi-Strauss, la méthodologie examine comment les éléments narratifs—personnages, objets, environnements—fonctionnent comme signes représentant des systèmes de valeurs et visions du monde. Ce cadre analytique identifie les relations entre principes de Perspective (valeurs subjectives) et principes de Destination (valeurs collectives), révélant les systèmes sous-jacents à travers thème et focus.

L'essai démontre cette méthodologie par l'analyse de textes fictionnels et factuels abordant la technologie et ses implications sociétales. L'analyse comparative identifie des modèles culturels récurrents sur la manière dont la société contemporaine conceptualise la technologie, particulièrement les tensions entre logiques capitalistes et valeurs humaines. Les analyses révèlent comment la technologie est présentée comme aliénante ou émancipatrice selon les systèmes de valeurs sous-tendant son implémentation, démontrant l'utilité sociosémiotique pour réfléchir sur des thèmes pertinents.

**Mots-clés :** Sociosémiotique, modèles culturels, analyse sémiotique, sémiotique appliquée, culture

## 1. Introduction

This article describes the tools of sociosemiotics as they have been developed in the theoretical systematization carried out in recent years at the University of Turin (Ferraro, 2012; Ferraro, 2015; Santangelo, 2013; Santangelo, 2018). Then, these tools are used for the analysis of various texts. It is therefore important to understand why text analysis is relevant for serious reflection on a certain subject.

From a sociosemiotic perspective, a text is the local and contingent manifestation of shared cultural models. For the semiotician, the text is not an object isolated from the world, but an artifact embedded in the complex network of culture: it manifests certain perspectives on the world and it generates others.

For this reason, a semiotic analysis is able to “*translate*” these local discourses into broader considerations. This is possible because both the author of the text and its interpreter inhabit a cultural space in which they share languages, practices, and experiences. *Individual* discourses thus constitute expressions of recurring *cultural* models. In this perspective, a text is a discourse from which it is possible to observe typical conceptualizations of a certain culture, on a certain topic. More precisely, it is possible to observe these cultural models because the individuals who produce texts are social subjects of a cultural space, within which they share—and absorb—socially shared ways of making sense of the world and things. Sociosemiotics, therefore, sees in individual discourse the expression of recurring discursive configurations and consequently conceives every subjectivity as, at least in part, culturally influenced and collectively

instituted. This spontaneous and inevitable influence—of the collectivity on the individual—is what allows us to find general cultural models within individual discourses.

The various forms of textuality can therefore be defined as discourses carried out by individuals on certain topics. Analyzing them means observing the ways in which certain worldviews are explored, argued, and understood by certain individuals in a certain culture. In practice, analyzing films, books, or other texts allows us to reflect on how certain topics are conceived in a certain culture. These general reflections cannot, however, be reached from *one* simple analysis. They emerge from the analysis and comparison of *multiple* texts. This comparison allows us to discern similarities and differences in the ways in which different works—and therefore different authors (social subjects)—treat a certain theme, revealing similar narrative structures that allow us to observe recurring cultural models. For this reason, this essay is also based on the analysis and comparison of various texts. These premises lead to a fundamental assumption: texts that circulate in a certain culture are not closed and self-referential artifacts. They are the concrete manifestation of cultural models that circulate in the culture itself. Analyzing a film, for example, allows us to realize how the culture that produced that film conceives the themes treated in the film itself.

The assumptions described rest on the recent theoretical systematization of Lévi-Strauss's research on mythical narratives, reconsidered from a perspective that explains the functioning of narrative texts and their placement in the cultural context in which they circulate. Lévi-Strauss believed that stories create meaning *not only* with their internal structures, but above all because they *reproduced cultural models* of general scope, which underlie the structure of many other stories (Santangelo, 2018).

As can be guessed, the concept of *cultural model* is very important and it is therefore worth exploring. To be precise, it refers to “*recurring discursive configurations, governed by precise narrative structures*” (Santangelo, 2013, p. 120), that is, recurring ways of assigning meaning to the reality we experience, framing it in certain ways and with certain perspectives, which we find argued and articulated in various texts. In practice, cultural models are recurring ways in which, in a certain culture, things in the world are interpreted. Cultural models are observed in different types of texts, both fiction and factual: even essays where one reflects on a certain topic tell a *narrative* where that topic is *structured in a certain vision*. Similarly, fiction texts are anchored in logical principles that give rise to narratives with which reality is interpreted and reflected upon.

But how is all this reflected at the practical level of analysis? These theories translate into the possibility of observing similar logics and structures in texts, which emerge from the comparison of various texts. Hence the necessity of comparing analyses with each other, in order to bring out common cultural models. These models are a starting point that then allows us to arrive at broader reflections. This premise on cultural models spontaneously leads to a question: how can we observe these models of a general nature, starting from a text we have before us?

## 2. Exploring a text

Simplifying, we can say that sociosemiotics deploys a series of interpretive tools based on Greimas's theories and his *Generative Path of Meaning* (Greimas, 1970), also in this case taken in its recent theoretical formalization cited at the beginning of the paper (Ferraro, 2012; Ferraro, 2015; Santangelo, 2013; Santangelo, 2018).

To be precise, this theoretical formalization of the *Generative Path of Meaning* incorporates the most important concepts introduced by Greimas, combining them with new analytical tools that partially modify the general theoretical structure. The model presented here therefore adopts many of the concepts defined by the semiologist which, although cast in a new light, are nonetheless rooted in the foundational work begun with *Du Sens* (1970). It was Greimas—in a sense continuing Propp's work on Russian folktales (Propp, 1928)—who demonstrated how it is possible to explain the logical presuppositions underlying the production of meaning in a text. From his work derives a fundamental theoretical assumption that remains at the foundation of everything that follows in this paper: every text is composed of *signs*, whose meaning is connected to the *values* that the text expresses, which are represented at the discursive level by different *figures*.

Moreover, many of the theoretical tools for text analysis introduced in the coming paragraphs will remind the expert semiotician of concepts already encountered elsewhere. In a sense, however, this is precisely the point of *neoclassical semiotics* (Ferraro, 2012): to recover the discipline's fundamental theoretical heritage and systematize it into a new coherent structure. Greimas's theoretical contribution is therefore evident in many of the notions composing the methodology presented here. In particular, the concepts of value system, thematization, oppositions, and actants deserve mention.

This systematization, however, presents important differences from Greimas's work. First, the concepts of *topic and focus* are introduced to describe the meaning of a text under examination in a clear and specific way. Also, the concept of focus is connected to that of *value system*, since it presupposes the text's “taking a position” on a *theme*. A novelty of this model lies in the centrality of the *relationship between the Destination Principle and the Perspective Principle*. It is precisely this relationship that connects the various signs composing the text (Santangelo, 2018). Other concepts from

Greimasian theory have been reworked, such as the notion of values, which is replaced by that of *value system* (or even systems). The difference between these concepts is subtle but fundamental: value systems should be understood as a complex conceptualization of a given theme, where various values coexist within a particular worldview. Narratives do not simply present positive values opposed to negative ones, but often articulate complex perspectives for observing the world (Ferraro, 2012; Ferraro, 2015; Santangelo, 2013; Santangelo, 2018).

After this brief theoretical premise, we can now examine more thoroughly the various analytical tools that compose the method. To begin with, according to these theories, the various “visible” elements of a text correspond to different abstract meanings. Texts can therefore be understood as constructed of signs: we find superficial elements that refer to meanings of some kind. This concept is well understood by observing fairy tales, where the characters, very evidently, stand for certain abstract meanings. Reasoning about the story of the fox and the grapes, for example, one easily intuitively how the animal and the fruit correspond to more general meanings. Similarly, the relationship that occurs between them in the course of the story becomes a logical argumentation of these meanings. In this respect, the fox can be understood as a sign inserted in a system, since it is an element that refers to an abstract meaning. These signs relate to each other in the course of the narrative, thereby arguing perspectives on the world and considerations on a certain theme. In other words, characters, objects, environments, and figures that fight, ally, and move show corresponding conflicts and associations between values. This happens both for fairy tales and for more complex narrative texts, but also with factual texts. Even when a text seems to be “just a story”, it can actually be analyzed with the logics just described. This is because, as we have said, its author is always a cultural subject.

Given these premises, it follows that the elements of a text and its structure manifest cultural models of a general nature. Every worldview, in fact, must necessarily be embodied in visible and concrete texts that *express* it, otherwise it would remain a simple individual thought. One must ask, in other words, *why* the author chose to arrange the various signs of the text in certain ways: the conflicts between characters show conflicts between value systems. The characteristics of characters are often *indices* of these values. What *characterizes and differentiates* the parties involved, the environments they inhabit, and the conflicts they carry out are elements that help understand what the text seeks to communicate. They help us understand, in a word, the *themes* of the text.

Another concept must be introduced: every text revolves around a few main ideas that it seeks to express in various ways. The beginning of a text, in particular, puts something into question. The development of the text is instead the way in which this theme is explored and argued through different value positions. The end of the text instead affirms a certain position on the topics treated. *What is put at stake* or problematized in these changes allows us to understand the central themes of the text: one or more specific ideas that recur throughout the narrative through somehow varied repetitions. The main meaning of a text, however, is understood by observing the way in which it works on the ideas it puts into play. Understanding one of the central themes of the text is in fact only the first step toward a reflection that must become more specific. The central theme of a text, in fact, is usually explored through an (implicit) question that concerns it. The unfolding of events instead allows us to observe the logic with which the author attempts to answer this question.

The theoretical assumptions just described are summarized in the concepts of *topic and focus*. The first is definable as the *general theme of a narrative*, which becomes the starting point for reflections on the focus. The latter instead corresponds to *the value positions and logics that are assumed on the theme itself*. Even an apparently banal film like *Shrek*, for example, poses a question about how one should relate to other people and to society in general (topic) and then answers that being sincere with oneself and with others, living authentic relationships is the only way to be truly satisfied (focus) (Santangelo, 2018).

We now begin to glimpse an even more precise notion, that of *value system*, which makes our analytical methodology more defined: the meaning of a narrative resides in the way and the reasons why different values are held together in a worldview (roughly we can say the focus), opposed to one or more visions that are somehow different. To be delineated and made comprehensible, value systems must be argued logically. These logical argumentations are the ways in which, in a story, they are opposed or connected following *certain relational logics*.

The concepts of *Perspective principle* (subjective values and motivations) and *Destination principle* (collective values and order) therefore come into play, which define the relationship between a subject and a collectivity. In this case too, the reasons why these principles—and the value systems they represent—are opposed or similar to each other allow us to understand the *topic/focus* pair. But where do we see, faced with a concrete narrative, these principles that are so abstract?

At a lower level of abstraction, these Perspective and Destination principle manifest themselves in *actants*, that is, narrative roles that then are embodied in characters. An example of actantial roles are the concepts of *Destinant and Anti-destinant*, which introduce into the story values that then form the worldviews respectively indicated as positive and negative in the course of the text (Santangelo, 2018). Thus, this theoretical circle closes: characters, as mentioned, stand for certain meanings. The relationships between them, however, also contribute to communicating these meanings. Similarly, what is put at stake in their conflicts contributes to explaining the general meaning of the text itself. To give a classic example: the hero who saves the princess at the king's request becomes, as a consequence of his deeds, a prince.

The *euphoric relationship* between hero and king shows a logical structure where it is explained that only within collectively instituted values is it possible to become complete subjects. A hero unhappy to serve the king, instead, would show how collective values are not able to satisfy individuals. What these collective values are is important and must be observed in individual texts.

In summary, we can say that a narrative presents and argues a certain worldview, supported by different value systems. A cultural model. This way of conceiving the world is delineated in the course of a text through the relationship between a principle of perspectivity and a principle of destination. In turn, these two narrative forces are anchored in abstract roles, defined as actants. What happens in a narrative must therefore be seen as a logical structure that puts into play conflicts of values and worldviews. The design of relationships that emerges must be understood as a signifying structure that stands for certain meanings. These meanings are understood, more specifically, as ways of encoding and conceiving reality, often recurring in various texts of a culture as cultural models. Although these concepts refer mainly to the analysis of stories, some theoretical assumptions are generalizable. To be precise, cultural models and the ways in which discourses on a certain topic are structured are recurring in all types of texts. In fact, the narrativization of experience is one of the ways in which, as human beings, we assign meaning to what happens to us (Ferraro, 2012). A discourse on the capitalist use of technology can be manifested through different textualities: a photograph, a video game like *Stray*, or an essay where certain positions are argued.

It is now clear that in a sociosemiotic perspective, analyzing and comparing different texts allows us to grasp cultural models of a general nature, with which a certain topic is usually conceived. After describing these theoretical premises, they must now be put into practice, in order to demonstrate their applicability. In this case, we have chosen to analyze texts where technology and its use are discussed, in order to show how a relevant topic today can be approached through semiotic methodologies.

### 3. From theory to practice

As mentioned, in this context we have chosen to explore the ways in which today we conceive technology, its use, and the society we are building through it. This particular topic was chosen because of its relevance in the contemporary landscape, which leads many authors to produce various discourses on the matter. Applying analytical tools to a contemporary topic, therefore, becomes a practical way to demonstrate their usefulness. The essay therefore analyzes various texts that describe digital technology today, expressing positions on the matter. Those positions can be associated with value systems. This allows us to observe recurring cultural models with which we assign meaning to technology and to the society we are building through it.

It should be remembered here that analyzing texts means *observing narratives*, that is, logical organized structures of reality, where meanings and values are assigned to things. The term *narrative* therefore refers to the act of ordering and organizing reality within a discourse. Even newspaper articles or academic essays tell a narrative of a certain topic. Analyzing essays with semiotic lenses therefore means attempting to grasp the value systems at their basis, as well as the worldviews they carry forward. To begin with, let us see some examples that analyze fiction texts. By their nature, in fact, these present more marked oppositions, which make the contrasts between different worldviews more evident.

One example is the episode “*Common People*” from *Black Mirror*. The story of the text concerns a woman who, due to an incurable brain tumor, is “merged” with an experimental technological system. This technology is able to make a backup of the woman's brain, and then, after the removal of the cancer, replace it with a device that would rehabilitate the lost brain functions and memories. A literal lifesaver that would allow the woman to live a normal life, as if there had been no invasive intervention in her skull. The only problem: it is necessary to pay a costly monthly subscription to the company that developed the product. This device then needs to be constantly connected to a private internet network to function. This network, however, has a very limited operational area, and leaving this area would cause the woman to lose consciousness. It is possible to increase the area covered by the network, but this would come at the cost of an even higher monthly subscription. And that's not all: the basic subscription that the “ordinary people” of the film can afford forces the protagonist to recite targeted advertisements while living her life normally: her mind temporarily shuts down, and then an advertisement starts with her voice.

This last commercial imposition forces the couple to modify their lifestyle in an attempt to pay for the higher subscription tier, since the advertisements become progressively more invasive. The lifesaving device, in practice, is clearly subordinated to commercial logics, which in fact make it suitable only for very rich people: it would be possible to manage mood and sensations or improve memory, but only by paying higher-cost subscriptions. Ordinary people, instead, are forced to use a basic subscription plan, which in fact makes a normal life impossible. It is precisely these premises that lead to a tragic ending, where the viewer realizes that things could have gone differently. The technology used in the film would *potentially* be able to guarantee the actualization of human values, shown at the beginning: intimate moments, joking dinners, and days spent together. Those who possess it, however, are clearly moved only by private interests: the full use of the product is allowed only with expensive subscriptions, where the lowest tier makes a normal life impossible.

In one scene, it is even shown how, during an intimate moment, the device is collecting data, which then leads the protagonist to pronounce an advertisement regarding male erectile dysfunction products. In practice, a violation of the right to privacy is staged, which some modern essayists also discuss. More generally, the text brings into discourse how the use of a technological artifact can vary enormously based on the value systems that precede it: if the only values at its basis are commercial, then a series of practices are implemented such as data collection, subscriptions divided into tiers, and even the involuntary pronunciation of advertisements. If instead the same artifact actualizes value systems where the human dimension and human rights are fundamental, then these practices would be inconceivable. Black Mirror shows, in a deliberately dystopian and exaggerated way, a concept that many essays already express today: the cultural models with which we *make sense* of the world then become the semiotic basis on which to build the characteristics of the devices we use. In one of the first scenes, in fact, the protagonist's husband asks if the device “*works and has been tested*”, fearing for his wife's life. But the device works perfectly. The problem is the way it is implemented.

The tools introduced in the essay can now be applied in practice. First of all, the *main theme* of the text concerns the use of technologies structured with capitalist logics. But we must be more specific: the text brings into discourse the techno-capitalist privatization of fundamental services such as health. Here is the *topic*. The *focus*, instead, we will understand at the end of the analysis. Its understanding passes through a central pivot in all texts: the relationship between the *Destination principle* and the *Perspective principle*.

To be precise, we see a Perspective principle (the young couple) that finds itself subordinated to a capitalist Destination principle. A first relevant element emerges here: the relationship between the two principles is *dysphoric*. In particular, the text presents a *Manipulating Destinant* that introduces the young couple to the device, presenting it as purely positive and convincing them to use it. This Manipulation, however, is based on two different *Value Objects*: the couple values their daily life, their love, and special moments. The company offering the device instead values control and profit. This generates a *dysphoric relationship* between the Perspective and Destination principles, where the former does not share the values of the latter. This helps clarify the meaning of the text: subjects who enter a profit-oriented system do not live well.

However, another piece must be added: the characteristics of the *Actors* contribute to show the meaning of the text. In this case, the two protagonists are poor people who appreciate simple, everyday moments. They are shown eating at their trusted burger joint and enjoying each other's company. Theirs, moreover, are typical middle-class jobs: teacher and construction worker. On the contrary, the company that produces the lifesaving device seems to present a “high-class” lifestyle, where people can manage their emotions in real time, excel in various fields, and so on. These characteristics allow us to complete the sentence written above: *subjects who enter a profit-oriented system do not live well, unless they are rich*. From this thematization follows a focus: *privatizing essential services such as health leads to devastating consequences*. If the private entity providing these services values its own profits, then there is a detriment of the human dimension. As a consequence, non-wealthy families risk being “cut off” from essential services such as health. The analysis could be even longer, but from these paragraphs it is already possible to see the methodology described in the essay in action. However, an additional piece is missing: the comparison with other texts.

*Wall-E* is an excellent example. The text in fact deals with similar themes and, while appearing very different, actually demonstrates similarities that become evident in a structuralist analysis. In the film, humans have abandoned Earth, now uninhabitable due to excessive quantities of waste. The only form of life remaining is a robot that builds piles of waste over which loom advertisements that no one watches anymore. An apocalyptic representation that immediately shows what the conflict of the text puts at stake. Continuing with the viewing, one notices how this situation came about, when the movie shows atrophied human beings due to excessive use of technology. In the course of the film, in fact, one discovers that humanity left the planet to live on a space ark. In this place, however, people continued to pursue a consumption-oriented lifestyle, making excessive use of technology. In addition to the robots that automate everything, this takes the form of equipped chairs that provide everything needed: the necessity of walking is eliminated and there are various services included. Even food is reduced to a nutritious smoothie. Humans have then forgotten, through various generations, that planet Earth exists, what books are, and have gained weight to the point of no longer being able to walk. Daily decisions are bland (better a red or blue suit?) and free will is replaced by the tranquility of total automation.

This is a representation to be read in a prospective key: this is what will happen by relying excessively on technology. Therefore, a wrong value system is presented, where comfort, consumption, and isolation from reality are preponderant. Similarly, technology also poses as an *Anti-destinant*, as underlined by the seizure of power by Auto, the ark's AI, which in fact embodies more decision-making power than the captain. Yet the two operating subjects of the narrative are two robots. Thanks to their efforts, humanity will return to Earth, living again as a true community. In parallel, the ark in which humanity survived is a useful form of technology that allowed several generations of human beings to survive. The text shows technology valued in two very different ways. So, how should technology be framed?

The answer to this question must be sought in the *relationship* between the elements that make up the narrative: the affirmation of the positive value system of the text—where human self-determination and sense of community are

together—happens only when human beings begin to act as active subjects, together with technology. Similarly, once back on Earth, it is human beings who must *use* computers to access previous knowledge, and then *actively form* a new society. This ending connotes technology as a neutral *tool*. Its use, instead, makes all the difference: it can be an ark toward salvation, but also a chair whose use atrophies the body. This shows a parallel with the Black Mirror episode analyzed. Despite the tones of the two narratives being very different, the structure that both propose shows a similar meaning: *technology is useful when it leaves room for human self-determination. It becomes alienating instead when it is inserted in a totalizing system.*

One notices at this point that the meaning of the two narratives has relevant differences, while being similar. This happens because in a culture *various cultural models circulate*, which are rarely perfectly equivalent to each other. On the contrary, it is precisely the differences between various cultural models that allow us to understand their nuances. These analyses of fictional texts can therefore be concluded by showing some examples of factual texts that deal with the same themes analyzed so far.

### 3.1. From fiction to factual

A decidedly current text is *Contro lo smartphone* (De Martin, 2023). The essay describes the current structure of the smartphone and its consequences: impoverishment of attention and comprehension abilities, apathy and laziness. The author emphasizes how important human capacities are deteriorated: lingering, observing, focusing attention, conceptualizing, and acquiring a personal heritage. Furthermore, smartphone production is driven by polluting practices. Smartphones, while having great collective influence, are managed by few actors who also control apps, data, and content shown on screen, thus acquiring great economic and partly political power. The author contrasts this situation with “Twenty Points for a Better Future”, listing solutions for a more respectful technology of users and collective interests, not managed exclusively by private entities. Notably, the author also describes how the consequences of privatizing an essential technology can be destructive, especially when the private entities in question pursue capitalist interests.

Zuboff also fits into these discourses. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) begins by describing values at stake such as democracy, human nature, and the possibility of reflection, and then presents contemporary reality as the result of a “pirate mutation” of capitalism, based on secret commercial practices of data collection and behavior modification. Here too it emerges how “surveillance capitalism” cannot exist without a technology that makes it concrete. The author also proposes thinking about Synthetic Declarations, alternative technological modalities of approaching the world. In this case too, Zuboff presents two contrasting value systems: the essay begins by describing values at stake (democracy, freedom, privacy, etc.) and then presents a situation where these are hindered by a system based on dissimilar values (profit, individualistic power, etc.).

Another essayist who criticizes this system is Sadin. In *L'intelligence artificielle ou l'enjeu du siècle: Anatomie d'un antihumanisme radical* (Sadin, 2018), the author describes a substantially dystopian present, stating that today's digital infrastructure is now an obstacle to individual critical thinking and collective development. This happens due to the spread of digital services, now pervasive also because of artificial intelligence software. One of the most common uses of AI is to profile users to personalize what appears on the phone. This creates a mediated individual-world connection, where an algorithm poses as a gatekeeper of information. The individual is therefore exposed to filtered news, which does not make possible—or at least makes improbable—exposure to different positions (ideological, political, or simply to interests). This intellectual closure is then accompanied by a culture that values the external search for services, through the positivist idea that there is technology to solve any type of problem. As Sadin in fact states: “*Technoliberalism attempts to claim the title of understanding and compassionate priest, communicating to us the precepts necessary for the 'good life', eudaimonia, theorized by Aristotle as a happy and fulfilled existence; its holders now present themselves, with faith and enthusiasm, as the 'official suppliers of eudaimonia'*” (Sadin, 2018, p. 69). This passage encapsulates a significant opposition of values. Sadin cites the concept of *eudaimonia*, describing it in the oxymoronic consumerist sense according to which individual fulfillment can arrive through the use of technological services and objects. Originally, instead, the term indicated a fulfilled existence through the internal choice of preferring virtue. A determining assumption of individual responsibility, which culminated in a happiness coming from within. On the contrary, an externally oriented search is one of the cardinal points of capitalist ideology, based on the idea that individuals constantly seek externally the solution to individual and collective problems. A search, this, fostered precisely by AI software, able to offer targeted services and products.

Discourses like these, while being essays, bring into discourse narratives of reality. Technology in general, and AI specifically, are here framed as tools potentially able to alienate human beings. One also notices the recurring description of a true value system, summarizable in terms such as economic growth, use of human beings, efficiency, deresponsibilization. The actors who embody these values are also observable, indicated in the companies and institutions that design and use technological artifacts in these ways.

### 3.2. Value systems in other texts

The abstractions we have begun to delineate by analyzing these texts allow us to move the discourse toward one of broader scope, which speaks of technology in general. The analyses, in fact, make it possible to observe similarities and differences in the ways in which discourse on the main theme is carried forward. It is these comparisons that allow us to delineate what we initially defined as *cultural models*: recurring ways in which in today's society one reflects on technology, endowing it with meaning. Some examples of this methodology have been mentioned even in the analysis itself and, even from those very brief mentions, it is possible to notice how the ways of conceptualizing the topic tend to be somehow similar.

To begin with, both *Wall-E* and *Common People* present a capitalist Destination principle that leads the world toward devastating consequences: in *Wall-E* an apocalypse and in *Common People* toward the unvirtuous use of devices that would potentially save lives. This Destination principle is described in depth also by the essays cited in the course of the work. All the authors in fact describe how capitalist logics are in fact defining the forms of today's technological artifacts.

But there are also other texts that bring into discourse a capitalist Destination principle, describing its consequences: *Stray* and *I Am Mother*, for example, in turn show how a consumption-oriented lifestyle has led the world toward destruction. One notices, in practice, how in contemporary discourses a system excessively based on commercial-type logics is problematized, which for many authors must be questioned. This tendency is clearly visible both in fiction and in factual texts.

But it is interesting to also speak about the *Perspective Principles* of the narratives cited here. *Common People* represents subjects who, in fact, are oppressed by a system from which they cannot exit in any way, when they decide to rely on a totalizing technology. Similarly, in *Wall-E*, human beings are excessively "absorbed" by the technological artifacts around them, to the point of having even forgotten how to read and how to walk. Yet, in both cases, technology can potentially become a Greimasian *helper*. In both cases, in fact, the narratives present a technology that manifests the capitalist *Destination Principle*, in fact subjugating those who use it.

But discourses on technology are not simply dystopian. The essay by Floridi and Cabitza (2021) describes AI as a potentially useful form of technology, if used optimally. The authors, in fact, do not condemn artificial intelligence per se, but only the use that currently characterizes it. A use that can be different, if based on other values. Similar discourses frame technology as a magic means, or even as a principle of destination (Ferraro, 2012), able to become a governing principle guarantor of collective values. Technology framed in this way would guarantee subjects the possibility of self-affirmation, thus concretizing values such as freedom or individual and collective prosperity. One does not therefore witness a human use of human beings, but a use that emancipates the individual. The same is shown in *Wall-E*, when human beings decide to do their part to return to Earth. Similarly, this perspective appears in De Martin's "*Twenty Points for a Better Future*" or in Zuboff's *Synthetic Declarations*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The comparison between different texts has allowed us to start identifying various cultural models with which technology is conceived today. The analyses, however, could be more in-depth, given that each text often presents various discourses within it.

The analyses can be concluded with a final comparison that allows us to observe the *value systems* at the foundation of the cultural models outlined during the paper in even more general terms. In this case, we can easily identify a contrast between a value system that centers the *human dimension* and one that instead prioritizes an *economic dimension*. It is these values that define the ways in which technology is structured and used today.

Both *Common People* and *Wall-E* present a worldview where the human being is *defined* by their sense of belonging to a community, by the affects that shape their life, and by the active contribution they can make to the contexts they encounter. The human dimension acquires in these texts an entirely *euphoric valorization* and is often framed as a typical Greimasian *object of value*. The essays cited throughout this work outline a similar perspective. Sadin's essay (2018), in particular, focuses almost entirely on the human dimension and on how deeply it is rooted in the uncertainty intrinsic to life, in the necessity of making mistakes and being able to decide autonomously. Zuboff shares this vision, beginning her essay by describing genuinely humanistic values that need to be protected today.

In this worldview, technology must position itself as a *helper* or as a *magical agent*, to use two typically Greimasian terms. A technological artifact that is entirely controlling, that totalizes human life to the point of replacing human decision-making in everyday life, is simply inconceivable. Indeed, De Martin (2023) does not criticize the smartphone itself, but the fact that its current structure deprives users of the necessary moments of pause and individual reflection. Sadin (2018) shares this view, describing how technology today is aimed at constructing a "*hygienist society*"—perfect, without wrinkles, but decidedly inhuman. A society similar to what we see in *Wall-E*. According to this cultural model, we should build our lives by being careful to use technology as a simple tool, privileging a human dimension made up of affections, social contributions, and "small" moments.



This value system, however, is contrasted with a totally different vision of technology that emerges from the texts analyzed here. Those who possess the device in *Common People*, or Auto in *Wall-E*, clearly embody a totalizing vision of technology, framed as the only means for human development. Sadin clearly describes this worldview when he states: “*Technoliberalism attempts to claim the title of understanding and compassionate priest, communicating to us the precepts necessary for the ‘good life’, eudaimonia, theorized by Aristotle as a happy and fulfilled existence; its holders now present themselves, with faith and enthusiasm, as the ‘official suppliers of eudaimonia’*” (Sadin, 2018, p. 69). The “holders” described here are those who possess and distribute the most widely used technologies today and who seek to enrich themselves through them. According to this worldview, individual fulfillment does not come from the human dimension of *eudaimonia*, but from the purchase and use of technological goods. This perspective is also evident in *Common People*, where those who possess the device use it to regulate their emotions artificially.

This worldview, however, is not limited to these texts. It can be found in essays such as *Life 3.0* (Tegmark, 2017) or *The Game* (Baricco, 2018). Both authors describe technology and the digital revolution as a genuine step in human evolution and development.

At this point, in a typical sociosemiotic research, it would be possible to add further texts to analyze, in order to observe other discourses, identify new similarities and differences, and then systematize them into value systems that describe them. In this paper, however, even these preliminary analyses have demonstrated how different texts can be observed with a semiotic gaze to analyze the underlying values and arrive at broader conclusions. The essay shows how it is possible to start from the foundations laid by Greimas, integrating them with more recent theoretical formalizations, to identify cultural models of general interest. As can be seen, the tools described do not abandon the theories defined by Greimas in his works. Concepts such as values, the typical generative path of meaning, and the necessity of paying attention to oppositions in the text all remain (Santangelo, 2018). To these foundations, however, are added the innovations described in the essay, among which the *topic/focus* pair and the relationship between the *Destination Principle* and the *Perspective Principle* stand out (Ferraro, 2012).

The purpose of this essay is to show how useful sociosemiotic methodologies can be in the construction of essays and discourses on the most disparate themes. In particular, these tools can prove useful as a basis for the construction of profound and noteworthy discourses that give luster to the state of the art of the semiotic discipline.

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