

Chapter 3.7

Semiotic Analysis of Environmental Communication Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a specific version of semiotics and its application to the analysis of environmental communication campaigns of environmentalist non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Semiotics is the science of signs and meaning production. It can be a useful approach to the analysis of environmental communication and to the interpretation of complex messages that combine text, images, symbols and other semiotic systems (multimodality). This chapter introduces some theoretical elements of a particular school of semiotics, related to the contribution of Algirdas J. Greimas. Some important aspects of this semiotic analytical “toolbox” are presented. Then, examples of semiotic analysis are developed. Particular attention is paid to the hybridization of semiotics with other approaches, such as the contribution of Michel Foucault and rhetorical analysis. It presents a specific version of semiotics and its application to the analysis of environmental communication campaigns of NGOs. After the presentation of some definitions, the chapter introduces a certain method of analyzing multimodal communication materials that combine text, images, and other forms of signs from a semiotic point of view. A peculiar attention will be paid to the hybridization of semiotics with other approaches like rhetoric and Michel Foucault’s writings. Some examples of applications will also be briefly developed.

Introduction

Environmental communication studies are a wide research field, analyzed thoroughly from many different points of view (see for example Hansen & Machin, 2013; Evans, Comfort & Park 2018; Pezzullo & Cox, 2018; Catellani et al., 2019; Catellani et al in Takahashi et al., 2022).

Environmental communication is defined by the International Environmental Communication Association (IECA) as “communication about environmental affairs. This includes all of the diverse forms of interpersonal, group, public, organizational, and mediated communication that make up the social debate about environmental issues and problems, and our relationship to the rest of nature”¹. Environmental communication “is also an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the role, techniques, and influence of communication in environmental affairs”

¹ <https://theieca.org/resources/environmental-communication-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters>, retrieved on April 16, 2021.

(ibidem). We focus here on a specific part of this wide area, the one concerning NGOs' communication, and one specific approach: semiotics.

The methodology that is presented in this chapter is adapted to the analysis of all types of NGO communication activities (and all other types of organizations), and not only “campaigns”². Environmentalist NGOs like Greenpeace have been developing strategic communications for a long time. Strategic communications is defined in this chapter, following Hallahan et al. (2007), as: “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”, given that people develop “deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements” (pp. 3–4). Oliveira, Melo & Goncalves (2019) tend to enrich this definition, which is based on a functionalist approach, by integrating different other approaches to the analysis of strategic communications in what they call “nonprofit communications” (including organizations like churches, unions, foundations, etc.). They also identify “environmental communications” as a specific sub-field of study of nonprofit communications, although this does not mean that businesses and governments are not also actors of environmental communications in the larger sense we identified above.

One of the approaches that Oliveira, Melo & Goncalves (2019) cite is linked to the focus on the “performativity and emerging dimension of the language” (ibid., p. 4), linked to the work of Karl Weick. This attention to language is important, but it is also necessary to remember the role of other systems of signs, like the visual ones, in interaction with verbal texts (and a chapter of the book edited by Oliveira, Melo & Goncalves precisely analyzes examples of audiovisual narratives in NGO communications). From this point of view, approaches of meaning construction and production like semiotics have a real role to play concerning the analysis of nonprofit communications in general, and NGO communications in particular: they can indeed help in deepening the symbolic dimension of communication.

Consequently, this chapter aims at answering the following question: how has strategic environmentalist communication been studied, and where is the place for semiotics? Hansen (2011, p. 7), talking about research on environmental communications in general, identifies “three major foci of communications research on media and environmental issues: the production/construction of media messages and public communications; the content/messages of media communication; and the impact of media and public communication on public/political understanding and action with regard to the environment”. Semiotic approaches, like other similar ones (rhetorical, discursive, pragmatic, multimodal, etc.) apply mainly to the analysis of content, even if concrete analysis can also include production and “impact”³. So, it is time now to introduce this research area and its main features.

² According to Werder “A strategic communication campaign is a set of deliberate and purposive communication activities enacted by a communication agent in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach established goals that are informed by multiple perspectives” (2015, p. 81).

³ The term “impact” can have a strong positivistic and ballistic connotation. From a semiotic point of view, we would use (also) terms like “interpretation” or “sense making”, to underline the fact that the impacts of communication are not only direct and irreflexive but include a wide range of more or less conscious cognitive, emotional and sense making actions.

Semiotics and the use of semiotic categories to analyze purposeful communication

Semiotics is not a unified research field, and different traditions exist, which refer to different “founding fathers” (unfortunately, not “mothers”, even if authors like Julia Kristeva have played an important role here): Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure in particular, and more recently Roland Barthes, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Umberto Eco, Thomas Sebeok, etc.⁴.

Semiotics can be defined as the science of signs and of the construction of meaning that is linked to the production and circulation of signs. Signs are all types of entities that have or can have meaning for someone. Signs can be produced and spread voluntarily, as in the case of words, images, gestures, etc., or non-voluntarily, including elements of the natural world that are interpreted by someone as meaningful (for example, smoke can be a sign of fire, a panorama can evoke certain meanings and emotions and be considered a sign, the whole world can be a sign of God the creator, etc.).

It is not possible here to introduce semiotics in a complete way. Interesting introductions or reference books are available in different languages: in English, for example, Chandler (2017), Hebert (2019) and Cobley (2010); in French, Bertrand (2000), Verhaegen (2010), Groupe MU (2015), Perusset (2020).

In this chapter we make reference to the school derived from the works of Algirdas J. Greimas and his disciples, like Jean-Marie Floch (2001) (see Greimas & Courtès, 1982; Berthelot-Guiet & Boutaud, 2015; Catellani, 2011a, b, 2012a, b, 2015, 2018; Fontanille 2006). It is the so-called “Paris school”, that provides a structured list of analytical tools. These researchers’ aim is a *modelling* of the meaning that is probably linked (at least in a certain cultural and historical context, that can be more or less specified in the analysis) to the text(s) under analysis. The notion of “text” is very wide here: it covers language but also images and any “portion of reality that is supposed to be meaningful for someone (an “interpreter”), and that can be isolated and observed” (Catellani, 2018, p. 162). As Catellani wrote in 2018 (pp.161-162), in a quite radical way:

“Semiotics cannot discover the real effects of texts on real social actors. It can only propose hypotheses on the most probable interpretations and results, basing this on the analysis of the internal configuration of texts. Semiotic analysis of multimodal texts can help in answering questions about the contribution of specific texts to a specific communication activity, like Greenpeace’s campaigns”.

But semiotics as the identification of probable meaning, can be combined with specific strategies aimed at discovering the *real* meaning production of real people, like interviews, questionnaires, experiments, observations, etc. As we wrote in a previous paper, “The semiotic approach of this paper [focused on classical text analysis] is a form of “epochè”, a selective attention to texts that temporarily does not take into consideration the context and the social situation in which texts

⁴ Social semiotics, an important international semiotic tradition, based mostly on another important linguist of the 20th century, M. A. K. Halliday (see Van Leeuwen 2005, 2010).

appear, are produced and interpreted” (Catellani 2018, p. 162). But this temporary “epochè” is not the final stage of analysis: it is more a way of taking seriously the internal construction of texts, and it can be accompanied by other analytical phases in which the social and cultural context is explicitly considered. Texts are always a part of the global “fabric” of the culture and society in which they are produced and interpreted: they are the incarnation of cultural systems and habits, and they are inherently intertextual (each text is in dialogue and interaction with others). Semiotics can work on intertextuality (relations between different texts), on reactions and interpretations by real interpreters of texts, and on the relation between text and context, as is done in approaches like “socio-semiotics”, the semiotics of culture, and cognitive semiotics. Comparing texts with comments or reactions to these texts is a way of doing this.

Semiotic tools can be applied also to the analysis of open-ended answers to interviews, or reports of observations, as in the case of stakeholders’ meetings (Catellani 2019). As an example, Floch (2001) proposes a typology of different kinds of users’ behaviors inside Paris metro stations that can lead to a survey aimed at quantifying these into different categories (the “sleepwalkers”, the “surveyors”, etc.). Meaning structures identified using the approach of Greimas (presented in the following pages) are a hypothesis on meaning that can be enriched, modified, and tested with different methodologies, including intertextual comparison, surveys, interviews, observations, etc.

The “generative model” as a source of inspiration

The methodology drawn from Greimas' semiotics is articulated in different levels of “structures”, from the most sensible and specific to the most abstract and general; these series of levels form a “generative pathway” or “generative model” (Greimas & Courtes, 1982, pp. 157-160). Presented here is a simplified and slightly modified version of their original model. What the interpreter perceives is the sensible appearance of texts: written or spoken words, images, etc. In the case of visual images, this includes the “plastic” aspects like colors, types of forms, disposition and topology, effects of texture, specific techniques (drawing, painting or infographics), types of framing, etc. All these aspects are signifiers of some “signified” or meanings that can be analyzed at the different levels of the generative model. For example, green can be a signifier of the abstract notion of environmental quality of a product, but it can also simply be the color of the socks of a character that has a certain narrative role in a story.

The first level of Greimas’ original model is the one of “discursive structures”, that include all aspects linked to the “*mise en discours*”, the fact that meaning comes to discourse: in particular, the presence of abstract themes (like nature, or freedom) on one side, and of concrete “figures” (like people, objects, animals, buildings, etc.) on the other side. Concerning images, figures are represented inside the message (icons like the polar bear, or melting glaciers, are examples); as for verbal language, these figures are expressed through words. It also includes specific ways of enunciating, i.e. of creating a discursive world with actors, spaces and times inside it. When

someone says “yesterday I went to Brussels to meet Jean” she is creating a discursive world that includes specific themes, figures, places, times and actors, and she creates a connection between her and this discursive universe (a form of direct implication). Rhetorical analysis of figures and tropes can be placed here, at this level.

The second level of the Greimas model includes the “semio-narrative structures”: this is the most abstract level, the one of narrative forms and of basic “values” as they are present in texts. The focus here is on narration as a basic form of meaning, that goes beyond the distinction of concrete forms of texts (narrative, argumentative, descriptive, etc.). The “deepest” level concerns values that are incarnated into the text. Greimas proposed the (quite famous) “semiotic square”, which visualizes the logical structure concerning a specific value by articulating it with its complementary, contrary, and contradictory positions, as in this example:

INSERT FIGURE ABOUT HERE

Figure 3.7.1: example of a semiotic square

Life and death, but also not-life and not-death, are in a relationship of contrariety;
Life and not-death, but also death and not-life, are in a relationship of complementarity;
Life and not-life, but also death and not-death, are in a relationship of contradiction.

This square can be used to articulate the relationships that underpin the meaning of texts, and to synthesize the basic textual dynamics. For example, a tale in the Bible can narrate the passage from the death of Christ (based on a previous negation of life, Passion and Crucifixion), via the negation of death (the Resurrection), to life (eternal life). Likewise, an environmentalist website can show that nature is in danger (negation of life, and death as possible result), and that the NGO is fighting against pollution (negation of death) to restore or preserve nature (life, again). Pro-nuclear discourses (see Catellani, 2012b) could try to put together values like the protection of the climate (nuclear power as a low carbon energy), national energy independence and low economic costs. On the other hand, anti-nuclear rhetoric can show that nuclear energy threatens essential goods and/or values, such as life and security.

Values and oppositions can be expressed not only by narratives (with heroes and opponents), but also by simple discursive figures (like logos and iconic animals – the panda for WWF – which represent basic values), or even at the “plastic” level, with colors (green), or light effects (light vs. darkness). To illustrate, the opposition between the green of Greenpeace and the black and yellow of the symbol of nuclear power is probably linked to an opposition between positive and negative values (environment and life vs. danger and death).

INSERT FIGURE 2 about here

Fig. 3.7.2: screenshot from the website of Greenpeace

The superficial level of semio-narrative structures concerns narrative pathways and roles (or actants) in which value dynamics “incarnate”. Greimas and his school identify here the basic articulation of “objects of values” and “actants” that look for, exchange, produce, give, etc. these

valuable objects. For example, “the planet” or nature, or a specific forest, or an animal species, can be seen as a valuable object that Greenpeace or the WWF tries to preserve; and the public is called to help this effort with its gifts and signatures.

Here is the origin of the quite famous “actantial model” of Greimas (at least, its original version), that identifies different abstract “roles” for the actors of texts: the valuable object, the subject (the hero/es that acts to get the object, or to take it to a receiver in need), the helper/“adjuvant” and the opponent (sometimes a real “anti-subject”), the sender (the actor/s that attributes the task to the subject) and the receiver (the actor that receives the task to be accomplished by the sender, or the recipient of the object itself). Values are incarnated in the valuable objects; the narrative subjects can be described as more or less “able” for their quests (more or less gifted in terms of knowledge, power, will and duty).

Actions can be described at this level also, from the point of view of their logical development, following the “canonical narrative scheme” of Greimas. An action logically implies different phases:

“... competence, which includes the conditions that are necessary in order to accomplish the action (wanting-to-do, having-to-do, knowing-how-to-do, and being-able-to-do) and (3) performance, the actual accomplishment of the action, made possible by the acquisition of competence. (4) Manipulation is the component that deals specifically with wanting-to-do and having-to-do. (5) The last component, sanction, has to do with evaluating whether the action was in fact accomplished, and the corresponding retribution (reward or punishment) that the performing subject has incurred.” (Hebert 2019, p. 68).

Action and interaction always need these four different steps (competence, performance, manipulation, and sanction), even if the concrete texts can have complex discursive configurations and, for example, highlight one phase in relation to the others. This is the case for the “victories” that Greenpeace exhibits in its communication, in which the “sanction” (a positive one) is in evidence⁵. These analytical categories improve the narratological toolkit, which also includes models like the traditional “quinary model” of initial situation, complication, action, resolution and final situation (Adam 1997).

⁵ See for example the page “our history and successes” on the international website of Greenpeace, available at <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/> and accessed on January 21, 2022.

		Semantic aspect	Syntactic aspect (relations)	
The signified (meaning)	Deep semio-narrative structures	Basic values (life, death; nature, culture; etc.)	Logical relations inside the semiotic square (opposition, contradiction, complementarity)	More abstract and general
	Superficial semio-narrative structures	Basic values are seen as valuable objects in relation with other actants (subjects, etc.).	Logical relations are seen as relations between “actants” in a narrative program (subject, object, sender, receiver, adjuvant and opponent.)	
	Discursive structures	Themes/topics that incarnate semio-narrative structures Concrete figures (visual, verbal, etc.) recognizable in texts	Projection of actors, spaces, times that incarnate semio-narrative structures; specific enunciation strategies	
The signifier	The perceptible textual object	Incarnation of meaning (signified) into a concrete textual object (signifier): image, verbal text, video, object, tool, part of the world, etc.		More concrete and specific

Table 1: A visualization of the different layers of the generative scheme of meaning (based on Greimas & Courtes 1982).

The “structures” presented here (that are only a part of the whole analytical toolkit of the Paris school’s model) are useful for making hypotheses on how meaning will probably appear in the concrete minds of the interpreters: they do not propose “the” meaning of a specific text. In a similar way as social semiotics, the approach presented here can be seen as focused on the analysis of the “semiotic potential” of “semiotic resources” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 4). Authors like Paul Ricoeur have critiqued the formal nature of structural semiotics, but it keeps its usefulness as a structured toolkit, useful for modelling probable shared meaning⁶.

This semiotic approach is, globally, a contribution to multimodal analysis (Kress, 2010), and it can also contribute to the identification of the ideological semiotic support of injustice and domination. There is a critical aspect with the semiotic tradition that creates a bridge, with approaches like the critical rhetorical analysis of public relations (Ihlen, 2016). In some articles, a semio-rhetorical approach was developed, by focusing on the persuasive dimension of communication (Catellani 2011a, b; 2012a, b). This illustrates the fact that it is possible to create

⁶ As was suggested in Catellani 2018 (p. 162), “there is a possible reconciliation between post-structuralism, based on the notions of enunciation and subjective experience, and the semiotics inspired by Charles S. Peirce, based on notions like the “interpretant, semiosis and abduction”. In a similar way, contemporary narratologists like Baroni (2007) reinterpret the “quinary model” of Adam (1997) and other authors from the interpreter’s point of view, as a source of narrative tension and suspense.

hybrid analytical approaches and devices based on this tradition, which is still evolving (see Perusset, 2020). It is particularly clear in the case of rhetoric: if semiotics has developed much later than rhetoric, this latter discipline can be considered a sub-genre of semiotics, focused on persuasive and argumentative texts, mostly verbal (even if semioticians like Roland Barthes have started studies of “visual rhetoric”).

Applications: the construction of the environmental culprit

This second section presents some more examples of applications of the Greimas model of semiotics and of its hybridization with categories from other traditions, like discourse analysis and rhetoric, to the analysis of environmentalist communication campaigns.

“L’emprise total” (the hold of Total, but also total grip) is a recent campaign by Greenpeace France, commenting on the hold of the French petrochemical company Total on French society and culture. It is a good example of the rich and diversified way in which strategic communication is used by environmentalist NGOs, and in particular of a strategy that can be called “the construction of the culprit” (Catellani, 2011b)⁷. From a semio-narrative point of view, Greenpeace is a subject (hero) that has the aim (the valuable object) of discovering truth and denouncing strategies used by Total in order to protect its image and its social acceptability; and its basic values are freedom and the protection of the environment. The “narrative program” of the hero is based on the analysis and criticism of the narrative journey of another actant, Total, which is depicted as an anti-hero, by accumulating examples, testimonies from authorities and experts, and judgements on the coherence between communication content and reality. It’s a form of “epideictic rhetoric” (Catellani 2011a), based on blame.

“For Total, preserving its image is a strategic and priority issue [...] Except that the voices denouncing Total’s cynicism and the impact of its industrial activity on the planet are increasingly numerous. To protect its image and maintain its power of influence, the oil and gas group no longer has a choice: it has to twist reality, skew perceptions, and to do this, be present everywhere”⁸.

In relation to the narrative path of Total, Greenpeace takes the position of the “sender-judge”: the NGO accumulates evidence of guilt, to consolidate a negative sanction on the performance of Total. It is an example of strategic narrative framing.

⁷ Main website of the campaign: <https://www.greenpeace.fr/emprise-total>. The campaign’s most prominent materials are Youtube videos. It is clear that the analysis of the influence of the format and device of specific media, like digital social media, is a crucial issue. NGO’s communications adapt to different supports and devices, and it is important to take their influence into consideration. However, we will not develop this particular aspect in this paper.

⁸ <https://www.greenpeace.fr/emprise-total>, retrieved on January 7, 2022.

From the point of view of the public, the valuable object is, of course, the truth about Total's practices: the episodes of the video series "*L'emprise total*" are offered to the public to obtain these values. The public is not *only*, as in traditional NGO communications, the receiver of a task from the NGO-sender (to help and participate in solving problems, in order not to feel guilty or because we are able and strong), but also the recipient of a "gift", in the form of a spectacular, interesting media content, which is put as evidence on the website. The website of the campaign completes this interactive scheme by proposing to the public that they become an adjuvant of the subject in its fight against the anti-subject. "In the near future, we will launch a campaign for the adoption of a European regulation banning partnerships of all European public institutions with the fossil fuel sector. Total's power is enormous. We need all of us to stop them from continuing to destroy the climate. Sign up now for a sneak preview"⁹."

The tale of the villain (Total) creates an absorbing and entraining narrative experience, not far from the fictional ones (Schaeffer 2010); the presence of multiple episodes creates a tension to complete the "trip". This entertaining and immersive experience (not far from what the poet Coleridge called "suspension of disbelief") is useful, to compel the new information to modify the knowledge of the receiver. This can alter or at least confirm and nourish a specific vision of the world (and of an organization in this case), create premises to action, and increase familiarity and loyalty to the source of this cognitive experience, the enunciator.

This campaign, in which Greenpeace becomes a real *media content producer*, is an example of the blurring of boundaries between informative media content and promotion. The NGO can mobilize science, experts, but also media and entertainment formats, like those of a TV-series, journalistic investigation, and documentary, in order to offer cognitive and emotional support for its awareness-raising strategies. From a more anthropological point of view, this semiotic configuration looks like a typical gift/counter-gift scheme: the NGO offers a rich cognitive experience, and asks in return for consideration, involvement, and help.

A specific aspect of this kind of communication (on the level of discursive structures) is intertextuality, and in particular the combination of different *genres* (documentary, journalism, fictional series). Genres are conventions concerning formats of texts, that Fairclough (1995, p. 14) defined as "a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular social practice". Strategic mimetic mixing of genres and the blurring of frontiers between different discursive practices are typical of our time, and of the digital world (see, for example, Markham, 2013), and strategic NGO campaigns are involved in this movement. Other examples of intertextuality are the well-known parodies of Greenpeace (see Catellani, 2012b). Parodies are defined as "an intertextual work, because it modifies a pre-existing textual universe; and it is also a form of attack and criticism" (Catellani, 2018, p. 168). Blame and criticism develop, and are more attractive, via the coherent and strategic deformation of the pre-existing visual and textual world, such as that of the Volkswagen advertisements (based on the Stars Wars movies), or of the Barbie doll.

In both cases (the mimesis of documentaries and series, or parodies), the underpinning semiotic strategy is always the same: to attack a crucial asset of businesses and organizations, to link their narrative world to their public image and reputation, to move the business towards more

⁹ <https://www.greenpeace.fr/emprise-total/total-reseau-d-influence/>, accessed on 21 January 2022.

sustainable choices. See, for example, the campaigns against Mattel (concerning the use of paper from deforestation in Indonesia) and Volkswagen (concerning vehicle carbon emissions). In the case of Total, the goals are to reduce its influence and to pressure the company for a change in its politics, to move it away from fossil fuels (see the campaign website). The discursive narrative world is constructed to impact and change the *real* one.

In a previous article, Catellani (2011b) proposed a list of some strategies that are used to build the image of the culprit, which can be combined in concrete NGO campaigns. *Semantic criticism* is focused on terms and their meaning, as in the case of the use of the adjective “natural” by businesses, which is very vague in its meaning.

Syntagmatic criticism addresses the internal articulation of messages: it “can focus on connotations of visual rhetoric associations of objects (cars and wild nature, for example, or a rural landscape and food)” (ibid., p. 288). This meta-semiotic operation, which reinterprets images and emotional texts like advertisements, can produce “a shift from the utopian and emotional to the rational and discursive” (ibid.).

Referential criticism is aimed at underlining “all the modifications and manipulations that occur between the fictional narrative world built by the firm, on one side, and the (supposed) real world, accessible through numbers and scientific information, on the other” (ibid.). This type of criticism is applied in the case of Total by Greenpeace, and it changes the narrative role of the firm from hero to villain, from subject to anti-subject; and Catellani (2011b) called it “actantial criticism”, a form of accumulation of episodes and examples of negative behaviors.

The last type of criticism is *intertextual*: it compares strategic messages and symbols of the organization under attack with other texts, produced by the same organization (like financial reports or internal memos) or by other enunciators (like journalists or researchers). Let’s take an example from the “Total grip” campaign used by Greenpeace:

“On 9 February 2021, Total chose to change its name to TotalEnergies. Behind this maneuver, the oil giant is trying to make people believe that it has the will to leave a model based mainly on fossil fuels. Except that this is not the case: Total expects that in 2030 hydrocarbons will still represent 80% of its investments. This communication sleight of hand shows that the group is still procrastinating when faced with the need to radically change its model and begin its transition”¹⁰.

In this case, criticism is both intertextual (comparison of announcements with reports on investments) and referential (denying the reality of the company's narrative world by comparing it with what is shown as reality).

The videos of the “Total grip” campaign offer also a clear example of some other main rhetorical strategies used by NGOs: data, numbers, and infographics - which create an impression that they are using serious science; humanization through the use of real people and stories; the construction of a polyphonic enunciation with different experts and researchers that confirm the

¹⁰ <https://www.greenpeace.fr/emprise-total/total-l-influence-mise-a-mal/> (accessed on 21 January 2021).

frame and narrative developed by the NGO and who contribute their legitimacy (“ethos”) to the discursive strategy.

Michel Foucault (2001) proposed two quite useful analytical categories that can complement other semiotic tools at the discursive level, originally applied to spiritual exercises and meditation (Catellani, 2016): pedagogy and “psychagogy”. The first is a communication practice focused on data and information, and on instructions for treating these data (like the meta-discourse largely present in the “Total grip” campaign). The second, psychagogy, is focused on “draining” and “pulling” the soul, by proposing an intense experience: reading or watching a video becomes an experience, and images and music have a role to play in this case (for applications to environmental campaigns, see Catellani 2018). Both aspects are present in the “Total grip” campaign. The videos offer information and instruction on how to reframe and criticize the corporate discourse; this aspect is dominant. But music (often in a minor key, typically depicting evil and menace) and other aspects like colors and the construction of an entraining narrative structure that accumulates elements of menace, also offer aspects of psychagogy. The observer is invited to “elaborate” data, but also to feel emotions, to enter an affective state. The video entitled “A vicious circle”, part of the campaign “Save the arctic”¹¹ is an example in which psychagogy is dominant, through music and visual (aesthetically beautiful) images (see Catellani 2018 for more details). The two poles (psychagogy and pedagogy) can alternate or combine in different ways in concrete texts.

Some conclusions: exploring NGO campaigns using semiotic tools

The objective of this chapter was to introduce a specific semiotic approach to the analysis of environmentalist NGO communication campaigns. The aim of semiotics is to go beyond “impressions” and subjectivism concerning meaning production analysis, by structuring it on different layers. The generative scheme of Greimas and his school was presented briefly, and some examples of application and hybridization, specifically on a recent campaign by Greenpeace France against the Total company, were discussed. The examples given here were perhaps too short and sketchy to support claims of rigor and objectivity; indeed, a complete analysis, like that proposed by Floch (2001), would have been better suited for this. Nonetheless, this chapter attempted to show the basics of this approach, and to underline its ability to integrate other contributions, like the categories elaborated by Foucault or other authors. These analytical tools remain useful, even outside their original cultural context (structuralism), and even if they need to be completed and perhaps modified. This tradition can inspire researchers to find new categories and tools, as a response to the needs of new objects (like “forms of life”, see Perusset 2020). Semiotics, as a modeling of probable shared meaning, can contribute to the analysis of

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bL3luiNGshM>

environmental communication campaigns, by adapting its approaches to a changing environment and to the creativity of NGOs.

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