



From a Biological Entity to a Social Monster. A Semiotic Construction of the Coronavirus During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Sebastián Moreno Barreneche^a

(a) Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Universidad ORT Uruguay, Montevideo, Uruguay
mail morenobarreneche@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT

From a Biological Entity To A Social Monster. A Semiotic Construction of the Coronavirus During the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the first half of 2020, the novel coronavirus – a biological entity invisible to the human eye – was represented in multiple images, audiovisual products, descriptions, narratives and other modes of visual and verbal articulation. Many of these were developed by international organizations, governments and media outlets, amongst other social actors, with the aim of rendering the threat posed by the virus more tangible. At the same time, these representations also helped shape how people made sense of it in cognitive and emotional terms. Assuming that social reality is constructed in multiple and dynamic processes and interactions that imply the production, distribution and consumption of meaning at various levels, this article examines from a semiotic perspective one of the modes of representations of the coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic: the one grounded on the overarching narrative that depicted the virus as an evil enemy that poses a threat to humanity and that, consequently, needs to be fought. The article organizes the study of a number of representations of the coronavirus in three levels – the iconic, the axiological and the narrative – and discusses how the discursive construction of an enemy involves a series of mechanisms of semiotic nature that, besides somehow representing it, also shape its social construction.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus,
COVID-19,
Semiotics,
Representation,
Constructivism

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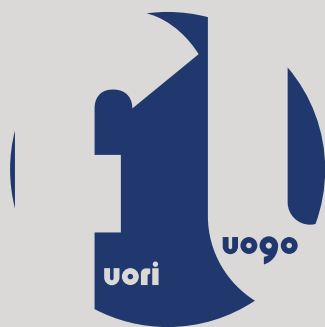
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From a Biological Entity to a Social Monster. A Semiotic Construction of the Coronavirus during the Covid-19 Pandemic¹

Sebastián Moreno Barreneche²

1. Introduction

In the first half of 2020, the uncontrolled spread of the so-called 'novel coronavirus' had a strong impact on the sanitary, economic and political domains of several countries around the world. At the same time, it was also the source of a series of interesting discursive phenomena, such as the emergence of specific narratives to make sense of the sanitary crisis, the lockdown measures and the "new normality", the construction of collective social actors such as "the healthcare workers" and "the most vulnerable" (edt. Time, 2020), the proliferation of positive slogans such as "*andrà tutto bene*", the articulation of specific dynamics of blame attribution structured in the form of causal stories (Moreno Barreneche, 2020a), and the establishment of symbolic practices, such as the daily rounds of applause to recognize the efforts made by "the healthcare workers". Due to their discursive nature, these phenomena constitute a pertinent object for semiotics, the discipline that studies meaning and signification. Particularly, they are relevant to social semiotics, the branch of the general discipline whose aim is to grasp "meaning in action", i.e., to understand the processes and dynamics by means of which the social realm is constructed, maintained and transformed (Verón, 1988; Landowski, 2014; van Leeuwen, 2005).

For researchers working in the field of social semiotics, phenomena such as the dynamics of identity construction that took place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are of utmost interest, as these constitute a way of accessing the complex ensemble of beliefs, imaginaries and discourses that are dominant in a given society, including the global society. For example, throughout the narratives that emerged worldwide to make sense of the pandemic, the collective actor of "the healthcare workers" played a key role: its members were depicted as "heroes" that "fought" and "risked their lives" by being "at the frontline" to protect mankind from the virus. Moreover, the collective actors of "the most vulnerable" and "the irresponsible" – i.e., those who did not respect the lockdown measures because they did not believe either in the existence of the virus or in its hazardous effects on human health (edt. The Guardian, 2020) – also played a central role in the discursive articulations triggered by the pandemic. Last but not least, collective actors linked to specific nationalities, such as "the Chinese", were frequently used as scapegoats to be blamed for the global catastrophe. Clearly, these are oversimplifying discursive constructions that do not reflect the heterogeneity and diversity that can be found within a given society or group – in each of these cases – a series of imagined collective groups of people were placed as unitary actors assuming specific roles in a narrative articulation in order to make sense of the pandemic.

In addition to the construction of collective actors of human nature that was mentioned above, the Covid-19 pandemic also led to the discursive construction of the coronavirus itself. If one accepts the analytical distinction between the domains of "nature" and "culture" (Descola, 2005; Koschorke, 2009), it is clear that, besides the acts of human identification ("there is a distinct virus with such and such properties and effects on human health") and naming ("that virus will be called X"), viruses, bacteria and other microorganisms belong to the former, i.e., a realm that exists and functions independently from any human intervention. In spite of this non-cultural nature, a series of procedures of semiotic nature helped to "culturalize" the coronavirus during the pandemic, shaping the modes in which individual and collective actors perceived and made sense of this biological entity. As a result, in the multiple narratives that circulated during the first half of 2020, the virus was constantly "brought to life" as a central actor with playing a key role in allowing a causal explanation of the "new" situation caused by the pandemic.

This process, which took place by means of several representations of discursive, narrative and (audio)visual nature, posed a challenge from the point of view of enunciation. Due to their physiological constitution, viruses and similar biological entities are invisible to the human eye, making it hard for individuals to come up with a clear idea what these entities look like and hence what they are. Given that viruses cannot be perceived – seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted – by humans in a direct manner, how can individuals gain access to this portion of reality in order to make sense of it? This article aims to analyze from a semiotic perspective how the novel coronavirus was represented and "brought to life" throughout several articulations that involved the manipulation of semiotic resources, framing it as something that is dangerous for humans. By looking at three different levels of discursive construction of the coronavirus – the iconic, the axiological and the narrative level –, the article traces how the virus was represented by means of metaphors, frames and connotations that are culturally valued in a negative manner, such as being dangerous, evil, ugly, an enemy, a threat, a monster and something humanity is at war with. The hypothesis is that there was a mode of representation anchored on this specific frame.

The premise of what follows is grounded on, on the one hand, social constructivism, i.e., the account within the social sciences that poses that reality is to a great extent socially constructed by means of intersubjective processes of interpretation and negotiation of meaning (Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Onuf, 1989; Searle, 1995; Verón, 1981), and, on the other hand, semiotics, i.e., the discipline interested in studying meaning and signification. The combination of these two theoretical accounts, which are deeply intertwined in the theoretical project of social semiotics, will be the starting point

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² Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Universidad ORT Uruguay, Montevideo, Uruguay. (morenobarreneche@gmail.com)

of the discussion of how the coronavirus has been represented – or better, socially constructed – during the pandemic as an enemy, together with a more general analysis of how the category of “the enemy” seems to require a tangible existence in order to be properly feared; therefore, this enemy is represented by means of specific images, descriptions, and other semiotic devices that reflect a clear axiology. As a result, besides somehow referring to an objective reality – a virus that is hazardous to human health –, these representations also construct the virus as an enemy.

2. Semiotics and the social construction of reality

The purpose of this section is to introduce semiotics in a general manner to a readership that might not be familiar with its more recent developments. Specifically, it will present the constructivist account embraced by researchers interested in the study of the social realm, together with one of the main hypothesis of cognitive semiotics – namely the one that suggests that human perception – and therefore also cognition – is articulated in narrative terms (Paolucci, 2012). In brief, for semioticians, social reality results from complex and heterogeneous processes of meaning-making and signification that are intersubjective, i.e., they imply exchanges, agreements and a negotiation of meaning between social actors, both individual and collective.

The status of semiotics as a relatively autonomous discipline is the product of a series of theoretical developments of the Twentieth century. In 2020, consensus still has not been achieved among its practitioners regarding the scope, purpose and method of semiotic research; while some argue that it should be a descriptive discipline with a scientific character, others support its critical and deconstructive aim (Bitonte, 2008; Demaria, 2019; Landowski, 2019); while some believe that its focus should be set in sign systems and structures, others argue in favor of a more dynamic analysis of the processes of meaning-making (Landowski, 2014, *op. cit.*; Verón, 1988, *op. cit.*; van Leeuwen, 2005, *op. cit.*). It goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss the nature of semiotics as a theoretical project, as well as mapping the various traditions and schools that nowadays coexist within the field (Traini, 2006; Violi, 2017). To encompass them in a fair manner, semiotics could be generally defined as the discipline or outlook within the social sciences interested in meaning-making and signification, a task that is certainly not limited to the study of signs and sign systems, as it is usually characterized (Eco, 1976; Fabbri, 1998; Henáult, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2005, *op. cit.*).

Within this general definition, social semiotics could be conceived as focusing on the production, circulation and consumption of meaning within the social realm. Therefore, it is empirically anchored and possesses an interdisciplinary scope – as van Leeuwen (2005, p. 1, *op. cit.*) argues, its practice «requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other field». That is why its research interests and objects are usually close to those of anthropology (Landowski, 2016a; Geertz, 1973) and social theory (van Leeuwen, 2005, *op. cit.*). This is the case because its scope is set on artifacts of tangible nature, such as cultural products and objects, but also on phenomena of a more intangible nature, such as practices (Fontanille, 2008; Demuru, 2017), interactions (Landowski, 1997; 2014, *op. cit.*; 2016b) and “forms of life” (Fontanille, 2015a; 2015b).

Social semiotics is then the branch of semiotics interested in grasping meaning in action, situated, in vivo, i.e., located in the interactions and practices that constitute the social realm (Landowski, 1997, *op. cit.*; 2014, *op. cit.*), such as the representations and social imaginaries linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. These, while referring to a phenomenon that is natural, at the same time were significant for the construction of the pandemic as a situation that is meaningful. The general idea behind a semiotic form of enquiry is that, by studying specific cultural products (images, texts, objects, practices, interactions, etc.), one can have access to the productive processes and ideologies that make them possible (Verón, 1988). In other words, by examining the dimension of the expression – texts, figurative articulations, semiotic objects, etc., – the researcher can access the dimension of the content, in which the deep structures that make signification possible can be found. That is why, as a project interested in the study of social reality, social semiotics relies on a constructivist premise which suggests that reality is not anything given or pre-social, but constructed in the many interactions that take place in multiple contexts, as well as by the media (Landowski, 2014, *op. cit.*; Verón, 1981).

Therefore the social imaginaries, hegemonic discourses, emerging narratives and forms of representation that have been used during the Covid-19 pandemic to make sense of the coronavirus, and the changes in the domain of everyday life that took place since February 2020 constitute an interesting object of study for social semiotics. In light of the object of study of this article, by examining specific representations of the coronavirus, one could have access to the underlying discursive and imaginary forces, i.e., those that make the representations not only possible, but also meaningful. As van Leeuwen (2005, *op. cit.*, p. 26) argues, «studying how things came into being is a key to understanding why they are the way they are». In this sense, even if the coronavirus is an entity with an existence that is independent of human action, what societies understand from coronavirus as well as how they make sense of this segmented portion of reality, is heavily loaded with discourses, representations and connotations resulting from contingent historical events and cultural settings. As mentioned above, all these have a strong impact on the cognitive and affective dimensions, both at the individual and the collective level. In brief, this demonstrates clearly that the cognition and perception of the natural realm is strongly mediated – and therefore shaped – by cultural elements that are of a discursive nature. In the age of social media, this principle seems to be extreme: the beliefs regarding the virus, the pandemic and how to behave are strongly mediated and shaped by images, descriptions, narratives, frames and other representations that flow in these digital platforms without any type of control.

The idea that perception is mediated by cultural codes is particularly interesting for cognitive semiotics, the branch of the discipline dealing with meaning-making in cognitive terms (Paolucci, 2012; 2020, *op. cit.*). A central tenet of this field of research is an assumed “principle of narrativity”, conceived as «a deep structure that can be found in every di-

scourse» (Paolucci, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 299) and that has a significant influence in how thought is structured. According to this hypothesis, it is only through a narrative configuration of events that thought can become meaningful. Based on some well-known principles of narrative studies, the idea implies that the identification of distinct actors that are imagined as being involved in a given plot becomes crucial in order for meaning to emerge. At the same time, this narrative mediation of perception constructs the social reality that is being perceived as something meaningful. With regards to the object of study of this article, i.e. the representation of the coronavirus as an evil monster that is an enemy to humanity, the focus lies on how the virus was represented: not as an invisible biological entity, but as a specific character with a specific role that is embedded in a specific story.

3. From a biological entity to an evil monster: bringing the coronavirus to life

Having set the scope of this article, it is now time to track the semiotic mechanisms and resources by means of which the coronavirus has been brought to life as an evil character during the pandemic. The corpus employed for the subsequent analysis is constituted by the many textual creations that during the first half of 2020 circulated in the media landscapes – most notably, albeit not limited to, social media– and offline, which were the product of active processes of enunciation by governmental institutions, international organizations, scientific institutions and individual users such as graphic designers and influencers. All these representations were created by someone (which can be an individual or collective enunciator) following specific codes, which granted that the semiotic products could be interpreted as referring to the coronavirus.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is wise to think how a virus could be represented in the context of a global pandemic. One of the answers to the question regarding how humans could have cognitive access to a virus – a portion of the world that is not directly perceivable– is based on the use of technologies such as the microscope. This tool improves the reach of human perception by surpassing its natural limits and by allowing observers to see the virus directly, even if this is only achieved by using a device. The images that result from this procedure constitute a first set of representations of the virus that somehow bring it to life by rendering it visible to the human eye. Another way of making sense of what a virus is and what dangers it represents by using descriptions regarding its genetic constitution, its reproductive dynamics or its effects on human health, the sanitary system or a country's economy. These two modes of representation – the former visual, the latter narrative – are of scientific nature, i.e., they are based on the assumption that there is such thing as a “reality” external and independent of language that can be objectively represented by means of the use of visual and linguistic resources that can describe it as faithfully as possible, following a code of correspondence in which an image or description of the virus reflects reality. Given that this type of representation is a standard of science communication, it was one of the most common ways in which the coronavirus was represented, as will be argued when discussing the level of the iconic representations.

Nevertheless, as will be argued below, during the first half of 2020, the coronavirus was also brought to life by means of representations that were beyond the scientific domain: multiple images, descriptions, narratives, and other articulations were developed by multiple enunciators to help people visualize the threat of the coronavirus. During the Covid-19 pandemic, then, besides the necessary modes of scientific representation, there were also modes of social construction that, despite their non-scientific character, still had a significant impact in shaping how the coronavirus has been (and still is) perceived, both on an individual and a collective level: individually, because these representations have a cognitive and affective impact on how people make sense of it; collectively, because these representations were the basis for the narrative justification of the political measures taken by governments to deal with the pandemic.

To conduct the analysis of how the virus has been brought to life as an enemy in an ordered manner, the study will be structured around three levels: (1) the iconic dimension, dealing with how specific scientific images of the virus were created, (2) the axiological dimension, consisting of normative and value-loaded representations, mainly by using metaphors and connotations that are culturally valued in a negative manner, and (3) the narrative dimension, focusing on the discursive articulations used to make sense of the virus as a threat to humanity by using stories and frames.

3.1 The iconic dimension

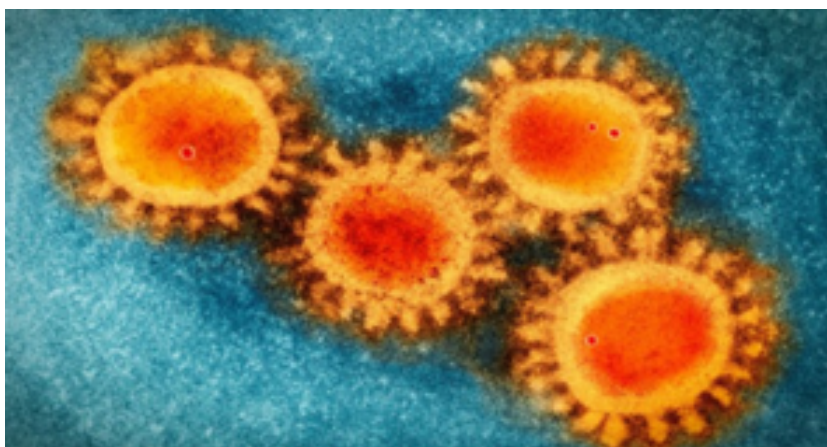
“Figurativization” is a technical term of the toolbox of semiotics used to refer to the operation that consists of rendering discourse concrete, tangible and recognizable by the readers based on their encyclopedic competences. An image that is considered as figurative is opposed to the abstract. The central point of Greimas and Courtès (1979) definition of figurativization in their well-known *Dictionnaire* is that the defining feature of figurativization consists of an articulation of the dimension of expression that the reader can recognize as a specific figure. This recognition is grounded on an interpretation, which is culturally shaped.

In this conceptualization, Peirce's distinction between icons, indexes and symbols as three different types of signs plays a significant role. These categories refer to different ways in which a sign relates to what it represents. In the case of scientific representations of the natural world, of specific relevance are icons, i.e., signs that have some kind of resemblance with what they are representing. In other words, this means that the signifier «looks in some respect or to some degree like the signified, in the way that a picture of a tree looks like a tree» (van Leeuwen, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 49). Similarly, Greimas (1989, p. 631) says of iconic systems of representation that they are usually described as «different from others because the recognizable relation they establish between the two modes of ‘reality’ is not arbitrary but ‘motivated’, because they presuppose a certain identity, total or partial, between the features and figures of the represented and

the representing». Within semiotic theory, the idea of iconism has been extensively criticized, most notably by Umberto Eco (1976, *op. cit.*). In order to avoid the complex discussion regarding the specific mode of sign production involved in iconism, the term is used here to refer to a mode of representation in which there is some kind of recognizable link between the content and the expression, as it usually happens in representations aiming to produce some objective knowledge of the natural world.

How was the coronavirus represented by means of visual imagery of iconic nature? What were the steps of this semiotic operation? The first step consists of an identification and segmentation of reality according to some arbitrary parameters. The scientific community identified a virus with specific properties that made it a good candidate for a specific name that could allow its distinction from other viruses, most notable, other types of coronavirus. Then, to help the general public become aware of the specificity of this particular strand of the coronavirus and its dangers, communication and outreach materials such as images, brochures and audiovisual animations were developed. In this general communications system, the fact that the coronavirus is an entity invisible to the human eye posed a major challenge. Hence, the first necessary step consisted of giving it some kind of material anchorage or configuration (Bitonte, 2008, *op. cit.*), i.e., to make it somehow visible and recognizable. The starting point in order to achieve this goal consisted of examining the virus through the microscope (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Microscopic image of the coronavirus
(Source: <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/magazine/coronavirus-what-s-beyond-science-frontier>)



Images like Figure 1 constitute a first visual representation of the coronavirus as a distinct entity. While these images might differ in size, color and definition, what remains unchanged is the shape of the cells that are represented. This is precisely where the name of the type of virus comes from: the use of the prefix “corona-” is the result of a translation into the linguistic domain – a word – of a property that belongs to the topological domain – a shape –. If there is something that immediately helps an observer to make sense of an image as being a representation of the coronavirus, that is precisely its shape. This principle is the one underlying also the visual creations shown in Figures 2, 3 and 4. In these, by an anchorage on this topological aspect that gives a differential identity to the virus, the mode of representing the coronavirus consists of a circle with spikes around it.

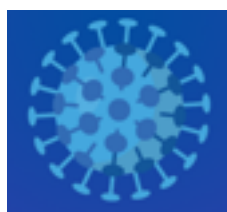


Figure 2 - Iconic representation of the virus used by the European Commission on its website
(Source: europa.eu)



Figure 3 - Logo created by Uruguay's Ministry of Public Health to identify its national plan against the spread of the coronavirus
(Source: <https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-salud-publica/coronavirus>)

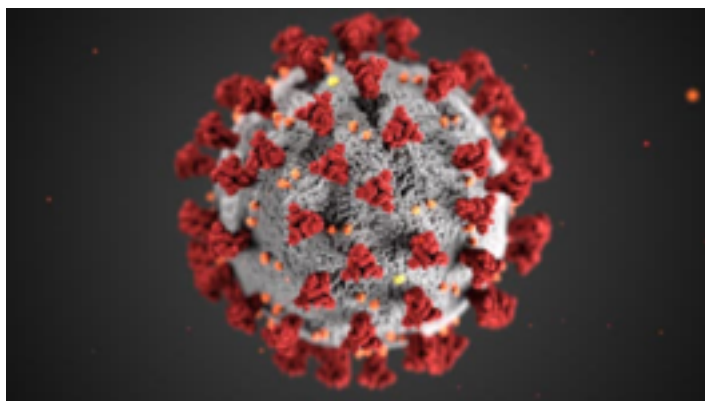


Figure 4 - Logo created by the United Nations to identify the global response to Covid-19
(Source: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus>)

Figure 2 is an image of a clear iconic nature used by the European Commission on its website. Figure 3 is the logo created by Uruguay's Ministry of Public Health to identify the National Plan to deal with the pandemic. In it, the reference to the virus is done by employing a trace that mimics its shape as seen through the microscope. Figure 4 is the logo created by the United Nations to identify its global response to the pandemic, a scope that might have triggered the inclusion of a map of the world in the center of the circle. Even though each of these images has a specific identity that differentiates it from other representations, they are all grounded on a principle of resemblance between the visual designs and the actual shape of the virus according to what can be seen through the microscope. It is here where the iconic mode of representation can be clearly identified: there are culturally shaped mental images regarding what the coronavirus looks like, and these serve as the reference for the creation of graphic design items such as logos.

Within the realm of iconic representations of scientific nature, if there has been a representation of the virus that, to a big extent due to its vast circulation on social media, has become an icon of the pandemic, it is the one created in January 2020 by Allisa Eckert, a medical illustrator at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – U.S. CDC's visual representation of the coronavirus
(Source: Giaimo, 2020)



Following the request to come up with "an identity" for the virus, Eckert and her team designed the well-known 3D image (Giaimo, 2020; Talbot, 2020), which constitutes a typical example of what is called "science visualizations" (Homer and Plass, 2009), i.e., visual representations that have a scientific value and that, as such, need to "reflect" reality as faithfully as possible, given that the communicative purpose of the semiotic creation is to convey a type of scientific meaning. When dealing with this type of representation of viruses, technical designers can proceed in different ways: while one option would be to focus on their vectors – as Eckert's team did when asked to bring the Zika virus to life (the focus was set on the mosquito) –, another could be to focus on the symptoms of the disease, as the CDC did when representing the Ebola. This shows how viruses and other biological entities can be "brought to life" in different manners, even within the domain of scientific types of representation.

Of special interest for social semiotics are the mechanisms by means of which the coronavirus has been represented and hence constructed as a distinct object having a name and being (or ideally be) somehow meaningful to people. In this process, the mechanisms attributed to iconic representation are clearly visible, as the shape that anyone would come up with nowadays when asked to draw the coronavirus – in a game such as *Pictionary*, for example – would have a clearly visible natural resemblance with the virus itself – at least seen through the lenses of a microscope. That specific type of image, of pure scientific nature and value, has become the basis for other modes of representation and has led to different ways of providing the virus with a shape and thus a delimited identity. The idea of "physical resemblance" that is at the core of the iconic mode of representation, seems to be central in this particular case.

3.2 The axiological dimension

The hypothesis of this article is that one mode of representing the coronavirus depicted it as an evil monster. These, which lie beyond scientific representations and have a clear axiologization, contributed to the general perception of the virus as an enemy and, hence, as a threat. In semiotics, axiologization is defined as a process in which a specific value, which can be positive or negative, is attributed to a portion of discourse (Hénault, 2012, *op. cit.*; Greimas and Courtès, 1979, *op. cit.*). In fictional stories, characters are not only described objectively, but are also marked with adjectives, descriptions of evaluative nature and other connotative marks, which help the reader to place them in an axis that oscillates between the categories of "good" and "evil". It is not by chance that witches are usually represented as wearing old clothes and having physical features that are culturally linked with ugliness. The coronavirus was no exception in this semiotic mechanism: it has been invested with a clear negative value derived from its harmful effects on human health. While the virus could have perfectly been represented, for example, as a "nice" and "cute" entity that is somehow lost in "the world of humans", nevertheless, such a representation would have not contributed to the general communicative aim of the public health information strategy, i.e., creating a social imaginary regarding the dangers of the virus. Such an objective clearly requires people to be scared by the consequences of the virus, and hence by the virus itself. This means that, from a semiotic point of view, a negative axiology needs to be employed in the representations.

This negative axiologization can be clearly seen in the many representations such as drawings, animations, cartoons and comic stripes in which the virus has been depicted with human traits, like for example, a face (Figures 6, 7 and 8).

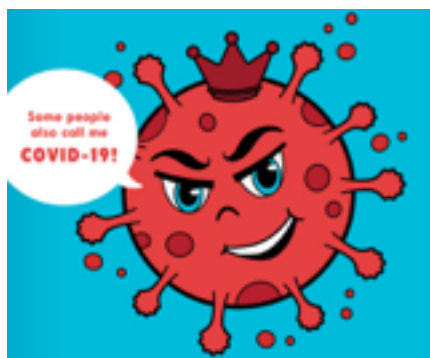


Figure 6 – Representation of the coronavirus
(Source: Foster, 2020)



Figure 7 – Representation of the coronavirus
(Source: <https://tinyurl.com/y4wcxvl4>)



Figure 8 – Representation of the coronavirus
(Source : <https://tinyurl.com/yxjqrnkl>)

In these images – again, the reader might think of many more similar images that are somehow equivalent since they express the same content – there are a number of interesting aspects. Firstly, it is clear that the aim of the semiotic production goes beyond mere scientific representation, as there seems to be a less neutral underlying communicative intention. Secondly, in every single case the virus has kept its shape as a distinctive feature, which is a key element for its recognition and identification by the reader (in Figure 6, it also wears a crown – *corona* –, as an isotopic resource to reinforce its name). Finally, the virus has been represented with visual signs that do not match its nature and that somehow activate the meanings linked to the “evil” side of the moral continuum mentioned before, such as the frowning of the eyebrows – usually employed to represent villains in cartoons and animated movies – and the mouth with a shape that suggests a malicious smile (Figure 6), anger (Figure 7) or a readiness to bite (Figure 8). Signs like these immediately activate an emotional layer of interpretation that goes beyond the mere function of recognition and identification: it invests the coronavirus, a biological entity without neither moral intentions nor emotions, with human features that are easily recognizable by individuals and that help them perceive it in a specific, axiologized way.

Another interesting example of this mode of representation, in this case belonging to the offline world and valuable in showing that the representation of the virus is not a phenomenon only limited to the media landscapes, is the production in Latin America of the traditional *piñatas* (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9 – Example of a coronavirus-themed piñata
(Source: <https://politica.expansion.mx/cdmx/2020/04/03/enfotos-el-coronavirus-se-propaga-en-forma-de-pinata#pid=slide-0>)



Figure 10 - Example of a coronavirus-themed piñata
(Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/646125877778828622/>)



Just like in the case of the cartoons (Figures 6, 7 and 8), the *piñatas* (Figures 9 and 10) have also been designed with unfriendly faces, which were created by the employment of conventional codes that are easily recognizable as opposed to what is “good”, such as an inverted smile, sharp teeth and a position of the eyebrows that convey anger. In all these representations, the logic seems to be the following: given that the coronavirus is harmful to humans, it is evil, and hence it should be represented as an ugly creature. Two operations of semiotic nature are involved here: on the one hand, the creation of representations based on a moral axis that oscillates between “good” and “evil”, placing the coronavirus on the latter; on the other hand, an implicit association between “evilness” and “ugliness”. This second operation relates with Umberto Eco’s reflections regarding the invention of the enemy, where he identifies this association as one of the constitutive mechanisms of this process. According to Eco (2012, p. 5),

«The enemy must be ugly because beauty is identified with good (*kalokagathia*), and one of the fundamental characteristics of beauty has always been what the Middle Ages called *integritas* (in other words, having all that is required to be an average representative of a species; by this standard those humans missing a limb or an eye, or having lower-than-average stature or “inhuman” color were considered ugly)».

This link between the enemy and the ugliness can be clearly seen in the case of the axiologized, non-scientific representations of the coronavirus, which doubtlessly have played a significant role in how the virus has been imagined by individuals and societies. As it can be seen, these representations include creatures that could be identified as monsters, a category of meaning already known by the audiences and that, despite the evident cultural differences between these mental representations and imaginaries, helps them making sense of the new threat. In this sense, the five images discussed in this subsection could, for instance, easily be confused with Pokémon by someone who is not familiar with the characters of the franchise. Representations of the coronavirus as a monster, an alien or another evil, angry, ugly and non-human creature were also used in audiovisual media contexts such as news shows (Andacht, 2020) or the press (edt. The Economist, 2020). But they also can be seen in creative expressions like the one shown in Figure 11. The fact that the drawing was produced by kids somehow seems to confirm the hypothesis of a mediated perception of the unknown reality by means of the categories already known, such as that of “the monster”.



Figure 11 – Drawing of the coronavirus, shared by Sara Roloff
(Source: <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/history-making-documenting-covid?fbclid=IwAR-1mUNyZwB6k0RuKEQn7Q3fRd6-m8k-gXNhNT2aL-bm0uvlw5A4b-4U-9yNI>)

3.3 The narrative dimension

Finally, another way in which the coronavirus has been brought to life in 2020 consisted of the deployment of descriptions and narratives of metaphoric nature in which it fulfilled a specific role. In Figure 11, for example, besides the representation of the coronavirus as a monster, there is also a narrative framing anchored in the idea of a fight, which is a metaphor frequently used in everyday life to describe how an individual deals with a disease. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 211), metaphors are «one of the most basic mechanisms we have for understanding experience», i.e., they have a cognitive value, as they help approaching phenomena through existing knowledge, based on a transfer of meaning.

One of the metaphors that was used to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic was the idea of the virus as an enemy that humanity is at war with (Battistelli, 2020; Cassandro, 2020). As already mentioned, there were no narratives depicting the virus as an innocent or friendly parasite entity fighting for its life that needs the human system to reproduce itself and to achieve a “happily ever after state”. In the hegemonic narrative, it has been represented as a sort of unwanted invader – similarly to the plot of the Ridley Scott’s movie *Alien* (Andacht, 2020, *op. cit.*) – that humanity, depicted as a homogeneous and unified collective actor, needs to fight and defeat. Just to mention an example, the Uruguayan comic book *Coco and Fran against the Coronavirus*, produced by Nicolás Peruzzo and Alejandro Rodríguez Juele³ and targeting children, tells the story of the virus’ attempt of invading the human realm. Metaphors and imagery related to invasions and war lead to the emergence of a set of other related representations, such as the idea of “heroes” that “fight the enemy” at “the front line” (edt. Time, 2020). But this war is not a standard war against other humans – it is against an ugly, evil, monster-like creature.

Some studies show that the use of military metaphors to make sense of diseases might have unwanted effects (Hauser, Schwarz, 2019; Sontag, 1978). In an article that discusses if it is appropriate to use the metaphor of war to make sense of the pandemic, Testa (2020) points out the need to be careful when choosing words to refer to things. For Testa, when U.S. President Donald Trump deliberately chose to use the expression “Chinese virus” instead of “coronavirus”, he made a choice regarding how the virus will be perceived by the audience he was addressing. Semiotic operations of this type have the power of shaping the meaning attributed by observers to things, events and phenomena. As van Leeuwen (2005, *op. cit.*, p. 32) argues, «all metaphors tend to highlight some aspects of their domain of application and obscure others». According to Testa (2020), the use of the metaphor of war has specific connotations linked with specific meanings that are not aligned with those of a pandemic: while the essence of war is structured around the concept of division, that of a pandemic is – or should be – structured around the idea of solidarity. Furthermore, Testa (2020) argues that the Covid-19 pandemic was not a war because there was not an enemy, given that, as a parasite biological entity, «the virus doesn’t hate us. It doesn’t even know that we exist. In fact, it does not know anything neither about us, nor about itself». For the author, the danger of using the metaphor of war is that it might open up the field for authoritarian actions. This precaution seems to have been identified also by Eco (2012, *op. cit.*, p. 18), who wrote that «a government cannot even establish its own sphere of legitimacy without the contrasting presence of war».

Given that the frame of a war requires an enemy, in the hegemonic narrative of the Covid-19 pandemic as a war there has been a process of construction of the coronavirus as the enemy, by identifying it with an “Other”, i.e., a “non-Us”, that is a threat. If identities are relational, i.e., constructed by means of the establishment of boundaries and frontiers between units of meaning that are considered distinct (Arfuch, 2005; Mouffe, 2005), then, in narrative terms, the coronavirus has been brought to life by highlighting the dangers that this entity poses to the wellbeing and normality of human life and, through the mediation of the metaphor of war, represented as an enemy that “We, humans” are fighting.

3 <https://www.comicbacterias.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Coco-y-Fran-contra-el-Coronavirus.pdf>

As already mentioned, the use of this metaphor lead to other roles and images such as “the frontline” and “the heroes”, which can be clearly seen in creations of semiotic nature such as the mural depicted in Figure 12.

Figure 12 – Mural depicting the healthcare workers in Lisbon, Portugal

(Source: <https://www.publico.pt/2020/06/19/p3/noticia/eis-mural-vhils-hospital-sao-joao-profissionais-saude-tambem-precisam-cuidados-1921173>)



4. A semiotic approach to the discursive construction of the enemy

According to some key principles of narrative studies, every story includes a number of standard roles such as “the hero”, “the villain” and “the donor” (Propp, 1968). For semioticians interested in the study of the social realm, the role of “the enemy”, i.e., an “Other” that is represented and depicted as opposed to a “We” and, hence, considered a threat is especially interesting.

In an essay entitled “Inventing the Enemy”, Umberto Eco traces how “the enemy” has been represented in a number of historical cases and points out the importance of the existence of “something” that is perceived as “an enemy” in order to construct the very idea of a “We”. For Eco (2012, *op. cit.*, p. 2), «having an enemy is important not only to define our identity, but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values». That is why the author (*ibidem*, p. 17) believes that «the figure of the enemy cannot be abolished from the processes of civilization». In other words, humans seem to need to recognize themselves as beings that need an enemy in order to define their own collective identity.

Two dimensions are in play in this phenomenon: on the one hand, what Eco calls the identification of an enemy that represents some sort of threat; on the other hand, its discursive construction and “demonization”. Both are processes of an inherent semiotic nature, albeit with differences in their basic mechanisms: while the former is more denotative, i.e., it relates to the identification and segmentation of reality in smaller units by means of an articulation of collective actors anchored on the pronouns “We” and “Them”, the latter is more connotative, that is, it is an active and intentional process of representation and, at the same time, of semiotic construction, more related to values and emotions, as the enemy is not only meant to be identified and recognized, but also to be feared. As shown in the previous section, the social construction of the coronavirus included these two processes.

Regarding the first process, the construction of “the Other” as an actor that is different from “Us” requires the establishment of a frontier or boundary that separates these two portions of reality as distinct units of meaning. In the case of national identities, the articulation of discourses around the signifier “We” only makes sense if there are other identities identified, recognized and perceived as different from ours. This reflects a mechanism that has been widely discussed in the political field by Mouffe (2005, *op. cit.*), who argues that (political) identities are always constructed discursively around an axis that opposes an “Us” and a “Them” and that marks the inescapable conflictive and polemic character of the political domain, leading to the creation of imagined collective identities whose discursive articulation is based on a limited set of properties regarded as common to all the individual members of that imagined group. The discursive and imaginary construction of “the Other” is then a process of an inherent semiotic nature, consisting of a segmentation of the perceived world in distinct meaningful units (Hjelmslev, 1943; Eco, 1976, *op. cit.*) which are subsequently “brought to life” through of a set of dynamics, including of semiotic nature, that imply creating texts and discourses based on specific cultural codes, of both ethic and aesthetic nature. In this second phase, there is an attribution of meaning on different levels to the units identified during the first phase, resulting in the establishment of specific connotations, metaphors and other representations, normally structured around an axis that oscillates between “good” and “bad” (Mouffe, 2005, *op. cit.*). As these processes of construction of the enemy are strongly influenced by cultural codes, imaginaries and norms, it seems to be the case that, as Eco (2012, *op. cit.*, p. 3) argues, «rather than a real threat highlighting the ways in which these enemies are different from us, the difference itself becomes a symbol of what we find threatening».

Even if Eco analyzes historical examples in which human beings are imagined and represented as “the enemy” by means of specific descriptions, connotations and associations, his reflections rest on a set of mechanisms of semiotic nature that could also serve to understand the construction of other type of enemies, such as the coronavirus. In his

essay, Eco (*ibidem*, p. 17) writes that, in certain cases, «the image of the enemy is simply shifted from a human object to a natural or social force that in some way threatens us and has to be defeated, whether it be capitalistic exploitation, environmental pollution, or third-world hunger». Processes of construction of non-human enemies take place, for example, when natural catastrophes such as earthquakes or tsunamis impact a specific city, country or region. In these cases, it is not strange to witness the emergence of narratives articulated around the idea of Nature or Mother Earth being angry. As argued in the previous pages, Eco's list could also include viruses and other biological entities having an impact on human health.

From a semiotic perspective, then, once that the role of the enemy has been constructed based on a process of segmentation and differentiation ("the coronavirus is different from other viruses") and placed within a narrative structure ("the coronavirus is a major threat for human health"), it needs to be "brought to life" in discursive, narrative and visual terms through different mechanisms. This happens when creating characters in fictional stories, when dealing with collective identities related to "real" individuals that are perceived as threats – such as "the immigrants" (Moreno Barreneche, 2020b) –, and, as shown in the previous section, when dealing with enemies that belong to the natural realm, such as the coronavirus.

5. Concluding remarks

In his book *Kant and the Platypus*, Umberto Eco (1999, p. 57) writes that «often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact». To illustrate this principle, the Italian semiotician refers to the time when Marco Polo saw a rhinoceros for the first time in Java and made sense of it by thinking it was a unicorn. The specific case of how humanity has made sense of the coronavirus – an invisible biological creature that has been having devastating consequences around the world – does not seem to be the exception: as it was shown here, the already known categories of "monster" and "war" were metaphors used to attribute meaning to something unknown until the moment of appearance of the virus.

The purpose of this paper was to discuss from a semiotic perspective the representations that during the Covid-19 pandemic depicted the coronavirus in a negative manner, and specifically as an enemy of humanity. The underlying premise of this research interest is that representations play a key role in how imaginaries and social perceptions are shaped, a process that takes the form of specific narratives in which actors are created in discourse and specific roles are fulfilled by them. Clearly, the mode of representation studied in these pages reflects a set of strongly axiologized imaginaries and discourses that were quite extended during the pandemic. As such, these allow establishing a distinction between two general modes of representing the natural realm: one more scientific, the other more creative.

More specific representations could be added to the ones that were arbitrarily selected for the analysis conducted in the previous pages. However, given that the scope of semiotic research is interpretative – rather than quantitative – and set on how meaning emerges from specific underlying structures that are expressed by the use of semiotic resources, the representations discussed in these pages seem to be sufficient to postulate a general mode of representation of the coronavirus as an evil monster that is an enemy of humanity. Of course, this constitutes only one mode of representation, together with others that set the focus on different aspects of the pandemic, such as the conspiracy theories that linked it with the development of the 5G technology or to specific political and economic interests and strategies. In other words, it is not taken for granted that the mode of representing and constructing the coronavirus that was discussed in this article is the dominant one – that type of statement would require a different methodological approach; one that is out of the scope and interest of semiotic research.

Further research in this field could deepen the insights gained from this article, for example by conducting a systemic mapping of the different representations of the coronavirus that circulated both online and offline during the first half of 2020 in order to compare and relate them to each other. Moreover, cases of divergent representation could be tracked and analyzed from a semiotic perspective. Some guiding questions could be the following: How has the virus been represented in different countries and by different institutional actors? Can these representations be read in light of the ideological and/or political interests of their enunciators? The aim of semiotics, and particularly of social semiotics, is to somehow render visible what is invisible, i.e., to track the conditions of possibility of signification and meaning-making by analyzing specific products that are somehow meaningful to an individual or a group. This has been the purpose of this article, specifically by examining how the coronavirus was made sense of by using the metaphor of an evil monster that humanity is at war with.

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