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Accounting semiotically for new forms of textuality and narrativity in digital brand storytelling

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Abstract: The new forms of textuality that have sprung up with the advent of digital technologies and media, spanning various communicative fields and practices, are an intriguing topic for semiotic theory. In recent years, the ubiquitous practice of digital brand storytelling, via the proliferation of digital devices and platforms, and expressive forms such as personal videos, blogs, podcasts, and games, has changed the entire narrative creation process, thus requiring new thinking about semiotic methodology and tools. This chapter provides an overview of the different types of texts that semiotics has scrutinized ever since the 70's, from the first studies about advertising, to the idioms brought about by digital innovations, in an attempt to demonstrate how structuralist and post-structuralist semiotic concepts may account for new and emergent forms of textuality and narrativity in brand storytelling.

Keywords: semiotics, textuality, narrativity, digital storytelling, digital branding

2.1 Introduction

Across its broad thematic scope, *digital brand storytelling* invites us to address crucial theoretical aspects that have long been discussed in the field of semiotic studies on textuality. Semiotics is equipped with specific tools for the empirical analysis of communication and cultural forms, as well as methods

¹ Cinzia Bianchi is the author of sections 2.2 and 2.3; Ruggero Ragonese is the author of sections 2.4 and 2.5.

and theories that render interpretation and analytical practice possible. With the advent of new forms of textuality, practices, and fields of application that are decidedly less consolidated, but which have attracted the attention of the scholarly community, the ongoing semiotic debates on textuality have been seeking to offer an expansive outlook, in an attempt to unhinge the notion from specific textual forms. As Fabbri and Marrone put it:

The notion of text does not only include texts in the strict sense, namely, the written material media dealt with by philologists, nor even the communicative products of any other language (gestural, iconic, musical, etc.), but, more generally, any *portions of signifying reality* that can be studied by semiotic methodology, acquiring those formal traits of closure, coherence, cohesion, narrative articulation, multiplicity of levels, etc. that are more frequently encountered in texts proper (but which, on closer inspection, exceed them). (2000, pp. 8-9, italics added)

The 'portions of signifying reality' that we set out to explore in this chapter concern specifically new forms of textuality that buttress digital brand storytelling.

The end of the so-called Grand Narratives has been coupled with the 'narrative turn' and the proliferation of 'storytelling' approaches. The theoretical implications of the narrative turn are hard to define because they often seem to divide the world of communication into a 'pre' and a 'post', as if narrativity was not central to the former. Clearly, this point is debatable. As Bruner (1990) reminds us, narrativity underlies the very constitution of each individual's identity. However, the concept of narrative turn, taken as a general synthesis, clearly highlights some significant changes related to both new forms of mediality and digital branding.

Transmedia storytelling (cf. Ryan 2004; Scolari 2015) allows for the use of multiple digital platforms for the development and deployment of narratives. Aided by increasingly sophisticated mobile devices, the consumer trades places in the communicative exchange and management of media: the story not only becomes micro and diffuse, multiplying itself in a hypertextual universe (characteristic of web 1.0), but also invites him to become an active player. In addition, social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) have enabled and amplified the possibilities of access to and the bottom-up production of increasingly complex and refined narrative outlets, thus providing boundless co-creative opportunities to brand planners and advertisers.

For semiotics, the use of digital storytelling is a privileged battlefield for studying the organization of interactive textualities that are conducive to enhanced consumer engagement. For this reason, in the following pages, we

will try to lay a theoretical groundwork by investigating the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic assumptions of these new textualities, and the empirical relevance of semiotics.

2.2 Openness of brand textuality

One of the principal fields to which semiotic theory has turned its attention since the 1960s is advertising communication.² By applying its analytical tools (such as the Barthesian approach to the rhetoric of the image), semiotics has displayed a proclivity for descriptive approaches to specific textual forms (cf. Barthes 1964; Eco 1968; Floch 1985), to forms of advertising narration and socio-semiotic phenomena (cf. Landowski 1989; Marrone 2012), to intertextuality (cf., for example, Genette 1982), and to the interconnections between various textual forms and digital tools that characterize much of today's advertising.

Over the last two decades, our media landscape has radically changed. Along with traditional media, digital devices that afford both the production and reception of highly multimodal texts have entered forcefully into the daily practice of communication. Traditional semiotic approaches that had studied semiotic systems and texts, and how they are produced and used socially, are faced with digital technologies, including social media, which can no longer be treated simply as 'media' or as technological 'vectors', but as social and semiotic artifacts in themselves. In this context, the coherence and cohesion necessary to define some textual form have been replaced by continuous and variable decomposition and recomposition, both intertextual and transmedial. The progressive weakening of the textual boundaries of individual media leading to a kind of 'media pulverization' (cf. Eugeni 2015), compounded by a transmedia production trend, is in essence the response to increasingly fragmented and erratic consumption practices, between web platforms and idiosyncratic consumption patterns. Every single audiovisual product (advertisement, film, promo video, and so on) is potentially a mass product. In this sense, digital technologies, including social media, can be actually treated not merely as 'media' or as technological 'carriers' of semiotic displays, but as cultural and semiotic artifacts in themselves.³

There are two aspects, therefore, that need to be rethought and revised from a semiotic point of view: 1) the new function of 'media' within communication and signification practices; 2) texts that are increasingly open and 'in

² For an extensive compendium on semiotic approaches to advertising, cf. Bianchi 2011.

³ There is a very extensive bibliography on this subject. At this point, we could mention, for example, the work of Henry Jenkins (2006, Jenkins et al. 2013) on 'transmedia storytelling' phenomena and Derek Johnson (2016) on 'media franchise' processes.

progress,' implying difficulties in typification, particularly so on a discursive level (Who is the author? Who is the reader or user?). The challenge of semiotics, in terms of analytical effectiveness and methodological soundness, lies precisely in its ability to widen its gaze to understand the transformations taking place. This challenge presupposes a broader reflection on theoretical assumptions, objectives, and criteria for relevance. Our first question is, therefore, essentially epistemological. What is the object that semiotics must address in the analysis of new forms of textuality?

2.3 Criteria of pertinence between semantics and pragmatics

Digital storytelling takes advantage of digital tools to create narratives whose main elements are photographs, video footage, music, and people's voices, in such a way that it generates a strong emotional impact (Lambert 2013). It is precisely the digital tools, with their effects and consequences, that characterize and distinguish digital storytelling from 'traditional' storytelling. Indeed, the internet allows stories to circulate much more quickly; at the same time, users can abandon their passive role and make, edit and share their own stories. The first step for semiotics in analyzing these new narrative forms consists in asking: what is the object of my analysis?

We want to begin with the notion of *pertinence*, both because it constitutes one of the fundamental principles of semiotic analysis - as expounded by Floch (1990) in terms of *greater intelligibility, pertinence and differentiation*⁴ - but also because it is a criterion of applicability and a basic methodological requirement of semiotic theory, both from structuralist and interpretivist points of view (according to Greimas & Courtés 1979, and Eco 2007, among others). To put it another way, pertinence is a fundamental criterion for identifying and hierarchizing comparable levels of description, and for identifying semantic variants and invariants present within a text or a corpus of analysis through the test of commutation (Hjelmslev 1943); but it also has a purely pragmatic value, allowing, for example, the selection of the conceptual

⁴ According to Floch (1990), the marketing researcher can derive a threefold gain from semiotic theory: 1) *greater intelligibility*, by discovering the underlying 'nebulae of meaning' on which many advertising campaigns are based, through the exercise of conceptual precision; 2) *greater pertinence*, since semiotics makes it possible to distinguish and hierarchize expressive elements according to homogeneous levels of description, by identifying semantic variants and invariants that are produced in various stages of Greimas' Generative Trajectory of Meaning; 3) *greater differentiation*, so that the various elements identified are not considered in isolation but can be related to each other, following the rules of interdefinition peculiar to the semiotic square: contrariety, contradiction and implication.

constructs that are needed for describing and analyzing textual forms, more or less consolidated in a specific communicative context.

To fully understand the theoretical scope of this assumption, it is worth briefly following the reasoning of Prieto (1975). He points out that every object in the world, in itself plurivocal, assumes a meaning and an identity, starting from the *point of view* of a subject whenever that subject recognizes one or more of its pertinences. According to Prieto, the identity-based recognition of the signifying object can take place in a communicative sphere and through various inferential processes of the subject, who is inevitably part of a defined community and sociocultural group. However, his fundamental cognitive practice remains delimited by the object itself, which continues to impose its 'objectivity'. There is, so to speak, a double determination of object identity, since it is a set of characteristics inherent to the object that can, however, only be taken into account from the point of view and cognitive practice of a subject as a social being.

This double determination is precisely where the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the theory converge: *the object provides us with possible reading and interpretation profiles* (semantic aspect), *and the subject decides*, based on his specific skills, abilities, and predispositions, *which profiles to activate and which to ignore* (pragmatic aspect). In Prieto's theory, a substantial balance is always presupposed between the semantic and the pragmatic aspects, between the objective and the subjective, without ever exalting either the features of reality or the interpretative possibilities of the subject; it is not possible to understand and interpret the world in its plurivocity without the point of view of a subject, but at the same time not all the interpretative paths followed by the latter are supported by the object itself; in fact, many of them lead to a dead-end.

By adopting Prieto's concept of pertinence, we are summoned to take into account the materiality of substance, admitting that even though granting that the process presupposes the system, the process shapes the system by means of actual practices. It can help us, first of all, to state the general criteria that we want to adopt, including the role digital technologies perform in semiotic analyses of new forms of textuality.

Floatability and textual openness can subsequently be considered through optimization strategies that enhance the relationship between medium and textuality (cf. Zinna 2004). In this context, digital branding is part of an already dense and multiform textual landscape that is, as Isabella Pezzini points out, "difficult to dissect and decipher according to unitary reading strategies" (Pezzini 2002, p. 7):

On the one hand, textual landscapes seem to respond to a logic of infinite germination: of media, of languages, of forms. On the other hand, communication technologies tend to produce hypermedia capable of digitizing and re-transmitting, and therefore in some way re-enundering everything, remodeling it, and then languages and forms tend to merge, contaminate and hybridize each other. (Pezzini 2002, p. 7)

What emerges from the work of semiotic *strategists* in the so-called 'marketing on life' (cf. Laurita 2020) is a further accentuation of the hypertextual process indicated by Pezzini in this passage. To preserve their identity, brands need to monitor the 'on life', in which everything consistently migrates in a very short time from one medium to another, from one platform to another, and the analyst has to pursue the various forms of textuality, disentangling himself among the huge amount of data derived from the traces that users leave in their virtual interactions.

The methodological problems arise from the limits of the textual corpora to be analyzed, but above all from their nature: since we are no longer dealing with static and closed objects of analysis that can be identified as definable sets of meaning, their dynamism and changeability over a short period of time make it difficult to carry out any segmentation which, as often reiterated (cf. Zinna 2002), is the first essential step for any subsequent analytical and descriptive process.

If this is true for all forms of interactive textuality, it becomes even more complex for social media which have rapidly assumed a central role in the communication mix of brands: the *reputation* of a brand seems, in fact, to be increasingly influenced by what happens in virtual communities. Places where users meet and share messages, photos, videos, and social media are the sphere of intervention of *strategists*, who must monitor, analyze almost in real time, and intervene on the spur of the moment to consolidate and defend brand identity. It is essentially a question of optimizing the communication of the identity of individual brands, a task that is defined above all as a strategic orchestration and conscious coordination, in order to analyze the differences in meaning that tend to arise between the various texts connected to the brand. Far-reaching differences at the value level, as well as at the narrative and discursive levels, can suddenly emerge and highlight the communicative distance between, for example, an advertising message, the post of an *influencer* or *blogger*, and the comment of an individual user.

This is a task that entails delving into the logic of recognizing textual value *a posteriori*, depending on the social and communicative significance of each interactive exchange and virtual reaction. Appreciation (the infamous *likes* for a post), sharing, emotional participation (through *emojicons*), or comments

to news, images, and videos, are public attestations of meaning that direct the choice of the focus of analysis.

In this process, quantitative components coexist, detectable through *big data* which can help to "delimit the context of the research and build a set of hypotheses", alongside qualitative components. In other words, the data must be associated with an in-depth analysis in order to arrive at a detailed mapping of the types of posts on social media and a more accurate representation of the 'perceptual landscapes', understood as the "set of images that recount the different phases of the consumption experience and that over time become part of the collective memory" (Boero 2017, p. 131). The reactions and comments of the users become part of the overall textuality, creating narrative thickenings that are composed of different substances of expression and different forms.

All this reminds us that, the more a text becomes complex, the more complex the relationship between expression and content gets. There may be simple expression units that convey content-*nebulae* (see for instance many cases of programmed stimulation); expression-clusters that convey a precise content unit (a triumphal arch can be a very elaborate architectural text, and nevertheless convey a strictly conventional abstraction such as 'victory'); precise grammatical expressions, composed of replicable combinational units, such as the phrase *I love you* that in certain circumstances convey dramatically a content-*nebula*; and so on. (Eco 1976, p. 260)

By assuming as our analytical groundwork Eco's concept of 'nebula', it is possible to delve into the local frames of digital stories, trying to analyze and describe the signs that are included within them, according to their complexity, their conventionality, the link that unites type and occurrence, and their intentionality. In general, it could be discovered how, through processes of recognition, visualization, replication, and invention, digital storytelling is grounded in local systems that require the application of both post-structuralist and interpretivist semiotic tools.

To carry out its task of analysis and design, semiotics requires a dialogue with other disciplines - both in the humanities and the social sciences - that are devoting themselves to understanding web-specific phenomena: certainly with sociology, which has long been probing and reflecting on digital media, on new forms of articulation of social interactions and on methods of analysis (cf., for example, Rogers 2013; Lupton 2015); but also with other disciplines that are dedicated to the direct observation of the practices of everyday life, such as ethnography, that continue the work that ethno-semiotics has already

dedicated to the texts and practices of cultural communities (see especially Marsciani 2007) in a web terrain.

2.4 Re-starting from the beginning: for a syntax of digital storytelling

The concept of digital storytelling presents itself as a new and complex challenge for semiotics. New because, although many studies have been published on storytelling, or, rather, on narration and narrativity (see Ruiz Collantes & Oliva, this volume) in the last century, the advent of digital media does not allow us to apply them slavishly to the new textuality. In fact, we are confronted with a new challenge capable of undermining many of the previous certainties. Complex because digital narration is embedded in a framework of continuous technological evolution that makes a general theoretical context difficult to uphold. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) have already spoken of a multimodal representation capable of being 'globally' narrative, in other words, involving increasingly general and real aspects of discourse, and interacting directly with mental spaces and conceptual integration (Fauconnier & Turner 2002; Dancygier 2008).

After a centuries-old tradition of travelogues and fairy tales, the concept of storytelling began to intertwine with various disciplines, from psychology to education, from the social to political sciences, and so on. A dual interpretation was gradually created, starting from the first founding texts on narratology, which here we can only mention in passing. On the one hand, there have been studies on narratives, understood precisely as research on the structures of the story within the text, and on the other hand, studies on narrativity (only a few in reality) that tackle forms of narrative 'production', external to the text, but somehow immanent to it (in this sense, ploughing an epistemological furrow very similar to textual semiotics).⁵

In semiotic storytelling analysis, narrative has at least a temporal pre-eminence over discursivization. This does not mean that a fairy tale and a novel are superimposable and that, in the end, we can approach *The Brothers Karamazov* as we would approach an advertising copy. On the contrary: it means forging a narrative account that demarcates processes of discursivization, extended and complex but, in any case, culminating in the concept of 'authorship'. Therefore, the presence of an author (narrator, Model Author:

Eco 1979) who is capable of organizing not so many types of voice as modes of vision (Genette 1972) can be recognized.

At this juncture, it seems clear that the Greimasian semio-narrative level needs to be reconceptualized so as to accommodate the authorial aspects of the person initiating a narrative. Digital tracking methods that allow for the identification of the profile of a narrative initiator are partial solutions to the issue of integration. Additionally, it merits focusing both on the process of narrative construction and on the analysis of a story's recursiveness.

Active user presence (Ryan 2011) reveals the presence of different layers: on the one hand, the text preserves a unit of form and content at an interface level, often thanks to a combination of fragmented stories; on the other hand, interactivity affects the narrative discourse, creating variations in the predefined story. The user forms part of the world of the story and provides freedom of action. This proves that post-structuralist and interpretative semiotics can work together. Eco's concept of 'possible worlds' is applicable here: in digital storytelling, people build from the story, as part of interactive systems, but at the same time, systems still resist implying predefined roles. According to the founding work of Bruner (1990), the narrative background as roles or functions, scaffolds, and sometimes even constitutes our narrative identity.

What changes is that this narrative is no longer tightly bound to a pre-existing authorial positioning. The new forms of textuality imply a collapse of enunciative positioning where the distance between reader/user and author is remediated in a new condition of co-presence and of virtual immediacy. In this sense, semiotics of digital communication and storytelling allows us to study the further evolution of the communication systems that have emerged, showing that these systems are flexibly adapted by users to accommodate new semiotic forms (Hasson et al. 2006).⁶

As we know from Greimas and Courtés (1979), textualization is a kind of derivation from the process of discursivization, and, thus, a constrained semiotic chain. This limitation can be marked (the editorial paratext, cf. Genette 1987) or open and fluid. "The text, therefore, consists only of the semiotic elements that conform to the theoretical project of description" (Greimas & Courtés 1979, p. 390), and this would allow us to bypass the more classical problems. For example, the lack of defined boundaries in digital hypertextuality

⁶ This point was already clear from the first pioneering studies on hypertextuality. Landow (1992) reminds us: "hypertextual environments, while not quite embodying McLuhan's message, have at least some tendencies that stem from specific features of software. The ability to control the size and position of multiple windows encourages collage-style writing that uses these features. Similarly, the presence of one-to-many links and link menus that have a preview function encourage certain forms of branching".

⁵ For an in-depth look at the relationship - obviously very broad and complex - between narrativity, narrative, and semiotics, we refer to Ferraro (2015) and Bernardelli (2018). For a general reflection on the history and definitions of the two terms narrative and narrativity, we refer to Igl and Zeman (2016).

or the overlapping and interconnection of different texts. However, it would be an excessively convenient solution, although not one to be dismissed out of hand. Is the operation of textualization, therefore, also possible in cases of digital storytelling? If by operation of textualization we mean ex-post construction, this is applicable to any portion of meaning that the analyst decides to observe.

At this point, the problem that emerges concerns how to trace these operations in a 'set' of discourses that often intersect among each other based on the user's choices that require complex intermediate paths. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that the very production of a digital story in which a variety of modes (written, oral, images, sounds) have been integrated, and semiotic layers within each mode (size, color, lines in the image mode) have been manipulated, organizes a discernible semantic space. We are not dealing with a non-text, but with a hypertext. Not a reduction, but on the contrary a multiplication. The text would therefore appear to be the syntactic whole of its operations and its proposals to the consumer/producer. The question to be asked, then, is where does one find the semantic consistency that guarantees discursivization and therefore, finally, an 'expanded' but coherent textualization? The answer may lie in the relationship between production processes and the subjects of enunciation.

2.5 Text, discourse, interaction: a mobile semantics

Digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio, and video. Just about all digital stories bring together some mixture of digital graphics, text, recorded audio narration, video, and music to present information on a specific topic (Donovan & Pascale 2004).

As Donovan and Pascale suggest, we are faced with a broad field built on the use of digital tools to tell stories. However, it would be reductive to think that, to quote McLuhan, 'the medium is the message,' and to limit innovation to the syntactic proliferation and interchangeability of the positions involved.

Whereas in classical storytelling, the story - also and above all for textual semiotic analysis - was a scalar magnitude with a beginning and an end, digital storytelling introduces us to a different dimension. Its use in the educational and training field is particularly instructive. For example, Mitsikopoulou (2015) mentions the possibility of classifying the main types of digital stories and constructing three basic groups: (1) personal narratives, (2) historical documentaries, and (3) stories designed to inform or instruct viewers about practices and concepts (essentially tutorials). These forms of storytelling are undoubtedly predominant in the construction of stories and often in school classroom instructional projects they may be combined with

each other, so that autobiographical elements can be inserted within ready-made materials and formats. Therefore, digital storytelling is (also) the infinite potential archive of situations, stories, characters, and actions that make up the finished story.

We are dealing with an open device where there are multiple narrative combinations, the choice of which is delegated to a discursive level, which gradually shifts according to the interactive reaction of the speaker. The latter will determine the final configuration, the path that the story takes, and even the semantic implications. Therefore, the subject of enunciation, which is in charge of 'seeing' and 'recounting' the discourse and which is recognizable within the text, emphasizes in digital storytelling its highly pragmatic positional field. It is already a typological, and topological actant; it is at the same time in "another world" (the story) and in "a proper world [*monde propre*]" (Fontanille, 2006, p. 58). We are therefore dealing with a complex relationship between process and system, between possible configurations of reality (which come into play overwhelmingly) and provisional choices. On closer inspection, it is a very interesting landscape for a semiotics that is open to social and cultural discourse, which identifies its bases of analysis as a 'total' act, all parts of which must be retrieved. In this sense, the discourse can only be actualized and reorganized in every use.

It seems, then, that in this sense the challenge of the digital is to bring the user - who loses his initial dynamic of 'otherness' with respect to the enunciator/producer - fully into the space of the subjects of enunciation, but at the same time to lead the discourse to textualize itself in a semiotics of the natural world, which should be understood, however, not as an unorganized set of 'sensitive qualities' (Greimas & Courtés 1979), but rather as:

integral to the experience of a social actor, engaged in intersubjective relations/actions that are constitutively placed under the horizon of signification. Likewise, it must be recognized that the semiotic plane sees the sensitive 'at home' in memory in categorizations, in discourse in produced texts, and above all in action in the realm of signifiers. (Basso 2002, p.49)

Thus, not an abandonment of the concept of textuality, but rather of the concept of text, not a depotentiation of the signifier/sign, but rather the realization that it

simultaneously sits within larger semiotic spaces, more or less coherently and durably hierarchized, that offer another mode of establishing the real, which is produced through the correlation of

multiple sets of relations that offer depth to the semiotic space. (Sedda 2018, p.139)

So it happens, in short, that the blurring of textual contours produces different textualizations based on shifts of viewpoints and enunciative positions. Textualizing means in some way 'producing' in the broadest and most culturalogical sense possible: producing a complex set of discourses, practices, and narrative elements. The construction of the text, therefore, is based on a kind of continuous game, in which the starting codified and codifiable elements are brought into discourse in new ways (gaming, educational and pedagogical interaction) in order, however, to produce a narrative structuring that is actually secondary to the processes that produced it.

2.5.1 Metanarrativity and signification: gaming

Let us take as an example one of the most open digital phenomena in the process of regulation and internal organization of content and syntactic elements: gaming. Here, we are faced with the metanarrative dimension, as a self-referential and self-descriptive circle: "A narrative having (a) narrative as (one of) its topic(s) is (a) metanarrative" (Prince 2003, p. 51) which identifies parts in the story that speak of the story itself. Metanarrative is employed here in the sense of an original operation that serves to "find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience" (Eco 1994, p. 87). In the highly engaging world of gaming, the recursive structures of the story become an element that is present (there is a story, it exists), albeit secondary to the processes of production as narration. In this sense, the game becomes, as already noted in many studies (Yee 2006; Lambert, 2013; Kowert & Quandt 2017), the core of digital storytelling. It serves the purpose of building possible worlds in which gamers can act out. Something already presents itself in fiction and play, as Walton reminds us:

Engaging in make-believe provides practice in roles one might someday assume in real life, that it helps one to understand and sympathize with others, that it enables one to come to grips with one's own feelings, that it broadens one's perspectives. (Walton 1990, p. 12)

However, digital storytelling places the activity of gaming itself at the center of the creative process by effecting a substantial overlap between the subjects of enunciation. The almost absolute convergence between Author and User, an element that more than any other serves to create an 'effect of reality', as already stressed, separates itself from any intention of 'mimesis' in the sense of

reproduction of external reality. The process of creating signification is what makes the reality of gaming immersive and credible.⁷ It is in games in particular and in collective imagination that the narrative structure is revealed. It is by negotiating meanings that a role can be found for each, and an adventure or imaginative experience can be created. Bruner (1990, p. 87) notes how understanding of the everyday, especially in children, "comes first in the form of praxis", and "narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression" (Bruner 1990, p. 77). We are apparently dealing with a kind of semantics of play where the possibilities of meaningful combinations are secondary to the process, but in fact still produce a semantic correlation. In short, digital storytelling can be seen as a device.

We should see digital storytelling not as a category or typology, but as a device: a *device of metanarrativity*⁸ that directly allows the user to produce (or reproduce) the narrative structures of the story. Obviously, given these assumptions, the electronic environment has overcome certain principles and routines that were (and still are) dominant in verbal narrative: first, textuality no longer obeys a linear and unidirectional discursive logic (author/reader); second, authorship is no longer univocal, but instead has been opened up to collaborative composition involving multiple voices; third, the narrative composition is made up not only of words, but also of images, sounds, graphics, etc.; fourth, the text is open to reading trajectories that do not obey a rigid syntax, but construct meanings through interactivity.

If the construction of digital storytelling plays with syntactic and semantic elements, opening and closing them, its subsequent 'interpretation' brings us back to a textualized reality, and therefore one that is readable in its semantic dimension. It is even more the case that semiotics can play a fundamental role in this area. This semio-narratological model puts the emphasis on interpretation and interactivity, giving rise to a syntactic and semantic co-

⁷ Obviously, a discussion of referentialization processes and reality principles would be leading us far afield. We refer here to Walton's (1990) already mentioned theory of *make-believe*: the iconic sign, as opposed to the verbal sign, asks the spectator's imagination to be seen as 'real' even if it is recognized as factitive/fictive. If the spectator *plays along* and agrees to recognize the iconic sign as what it wants to represent, the latter becomes a representation of the represented. Imagination (Walton gives the example of children's games such as dolls or sand shapes) makes it possible to use individual fictitious objects, considered as make-believe within the playful interaction, to produce real scenarios and fictional worlds through certain generative mechanisms.

⁸ Here one cannot escape the reference to Latour's (1997) concept of *dispositive* as a constantly evolving synthesis of knowledge that is built into linguistically performed practices (i.e. thinking, speaking, writing), non-linguistically performed practices ('doing things') and materializations (i.e., natural and produced things).

authorship that pushes to redefine the roles of author and user. The process of creation and multimedia reception requires new linguistic-digital competencies (Albaladejo 2011), by virtue of which the author is obliged to take care of the coherence of the multimedia syntax, from the previous cognitive map of ideas to the internal and external coherence of the elements (Engebretsen 2000).

2.6 Conclusion

Leaving aside the direct reference to semiotic theories, we can conclude by pointing to a broad field for semiotics in the study of digital branding. A field where every digital form of textuality proposes non-fixed actor identities (syntactic dimension) and calls for the co-production of contents that are later analyzed as texts (semantic textualization operation). The co-presence, and therefore the partial co-authorship of reader and author forces the user to assume center-stage with regard to the coherence of multilevel textual syntax and semantics, requiring new linguistic-digital competencies (Albaladejo 2011). The author (and the reader, consequently) is just a provisional or temporary enunciative position, granting each time the effective navigability and readability of the text (Sánchez-García & Salaverría 2019, p.9). Finally, their impact and circulation (pragmatic dimension) define their possibility for overall re-opening, resemantization, and reinterpretation, guaranteeing a viral circularity.

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