

University of Tartu
Department of Semiotics

Tatiana Jaramillo Jaramillo

**Magic and Power in Ritualistic *Artivism*:
Symbolic Revolution of Death Worlds**

Master's Thesis

Supervisors:
Ott Puumeister, Ph.D.
Prof. Andreas Ventsel
Andrew Mark Creighton, MA

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Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of interconnectedness and constant flux, the persistence of magic as a dynamic force influencing individual and collective experiences remains an exciting topic. Despite modern advances, the relevance of magic transcends antiquity and continues to shape various aspects of contemporary society; rooted in symbolic meanings, rituals, and belief systems, magic serves as a cornerstone in shaping cultural identities and expressions. However, its importance in the field of semiotics remains largely unexplored, which poses a critical problem. Anthropology and philosophy have traditionally delved into the realm of magic, but its importance in semiotics has been overlooked, resulting in its marginalization as fantastical and irrational.

This neglect disregards the profound impact of magic on human cognition, cultural norms, and social structures, especially in the current context. Failure to recognize the fundamental role of magic in the formation of beliefs perpetuates the misunderstanding of its potency. Magic operates as a complex network of symbols and rituals deeply embedded within societal belief systems. Therefore, it's crucial to address this gap, essential not only for scholarly discussions but also for comprehending the nuanced dynamics of modern culture. By exploring the complex relationship between magic and belief formation, semiotics can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding its profound impact on individual and collective experiences, a new perspective on how magic influences human cognition and reshapes it; considering magic as a potential therapeutic tool for healing.

This thesis is presented as a reinterpretation of the notion of magic in relation to the fields of semiotics and art in contemporary society. The aim is to analyze a corpus of transversal texts that span anthropological and philosophical thought of the last century, trying to demonstrate how they should be reintegrated into the semiotic framework.

The debate on magic and magical processes, however, has ancient origins, and it is for this reason that the first chapter will provide a brief history of magic. Following this historiographical analysis, the purpose is to present a semantic mapping of the notion of magic. To this end, semiotics, as a discipline that models the semantics of terminologies by

seeking to define their meaning on the basis of relations, emerges as a necessary tool for approaching the history of magic through different authors who have sought to define it. As will be demonstrated, magic, in the definitions offered by anthropologists and philosophers, is structured according to three directives that determine its characteristics and conditions of possibility: the magician, the ritual, and the belief. By tracing these dynamics within the first chapter through a narrative typical of semiotics, whose methodological strength allows theorizing an object of analysis along the critical narrative of its history and relationships, a vision of magic will be presented as a process of *belief-making*. This latter notion, which is at the very heart of this thesis, will be delimited throughout the work both directly and indirectly, trying to outline a working hypothesis that will be defined as a meaningful analytical tool to discuss all magical processes.

The second chapter – taking its cue from the fact that magic has been predominantly conceived within the fields of anthropology and philosophy (as described in chapter one) – is structured as a movement to drag magic into the semiotic field. This will be accomplished mainly through the unpublished writings and lectures, appendixes in Lepik's book, of Juri Lotman, whose thoughts on magic demonstrate all the complexity, rigor, and seriousness with which semiotics should address this theme. In fact, contemporary semiotics has hardly dealt with magic, leaving a void of meaning with this notion and the processes underlying magical processes. For this reason, not only will a glimpse be offered into the unpublished writings of the Russian semiotician but also the approach outlined by the German semiotician Winfried Nöth, who addresses the theme of magic linked to the processes of therapy and the unconscious. As argued, Nöth employs terminologies linked to the magical context without delving into this discourse. Thus, the objective of the second chapter will be to attempt to reintegrate a semiotic theoretical perspective on magical processes. This will serve to introduce other topics that, in contemporary times, are linked to some dynamics that, in the first chapter, were determined within the magical context, namely ritual and power. In particular, it will be seen that different social, cultural, and political dynamics are constituted in relation to a semio-magical¹ reinterpretation. It is a matter of reinterpreting sacrifice in contemporary society in relation to ritual and in reference to other notions of

¹ In contemporary language, the designation “semio” as a prefix is presented as the explication of a lens of the semiotic field applied to other domains. In common use are the designations “semio-anthropology”, “semio-aesthetics”, “semio-cognition”, “semio-discourse”, etc. By “semio-magical” its meant the semiotic approach to the magical realm.

contemporary philosophy, proposing a theoretical bridge between sacrifice and forms of power. These forms of power, which are linked to a magical vision of social relations, are structured as expressions of power over life (biopolitics) and death (necropolitics). In this case, what will connect the dynamics over the lives and deaths of people by power will be what Ranciere defines as “the distribution of the sensible”, which refers to the way in which the sensible is made commonly available in a society, of what is visible, speakable, and doable. The sensible will, therefore, be the theoretical-critical approach not only towards political power in general but will also be used to introduce what in this work is presented as the keystone to deactivate these power relations inherent in social dynamics. It will then be a matter of connecting what in power is legitimized through a process of magic and belief-making, while simultaneously introducing activism as a form of disarming the power of life and death as a means of governance and control.

The third chapter will precisely depart from a complexity presented through a semiotic lens that intertwines magic, ritual, and power through art. Particularly, contemporary activism seems to best express the ability to critique dominant power through a process of artistic activism. This emerging field seeks to demonstrate how art can play a role in liberating symbolic expressions from the grip of power, giving rise to critical activism on social issues and the ritualistic processes of power legitimization. This chapter explores the transformative potential of activism, situating it as a catalyst for revolutionary symbolic processes. By integrating a semiotic perspective, the discussion emphasizes the importance of understanding contemporary artistic expression within the framework of a critique of power and symbolic revolution. At the heart of this exploration is the revolution of symbols, which stems from activism’s assertion of power and which inherently challenges established ideologies. This revolution is intimately linked to magical processes, which facilitate the manipulation and re-signification of fundamental phenomena such as life, death, power dynamics, and the human body, along with broader social constructs such as violence and war. Through an interdisciplinary perspective, this chapter explores how art, activism and semiotics intersect to shape contemporary discourse and, as a result, ultimately challenge and reshape entrenched power structures.

The final chapter presents a semiotic analysis and case study of the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, whose artwork represents an expression of contemporary activism. The objective is to present the performance of “Fragmentos” as an explicit example

of how the magician, the ritual, and the power of belief have the capacity to enact a revolution of the symbol revolution. In this case, a semiotic analysis of the performance will be presented, showing how the ritual re-signification of an object representing a power relationship that impacts the lives of women victimized by violence in the Colombian war can lead to a re-signification of trauma. In this sense, activism acts as a magical process, determined by belief-making, whose strength lies in deactivating certain symbols by re-signifying them through precise rituals structured by the artist-magician to redistribute power based on a shared belief. The aim of this final chapter is to empirically demonstrate the theorizations offered throughout the preceding chapters, leading to a reevaluation of magic and art through a semiotic analysis that reveals their symbolic dynamics. In doing so, it will be shown how semiotics serves as an extraordinary tool for reinterpreting magic and contemporary activism forms. The ultimate goal is to reactivate a new form of discursiveness of magic that reinterprets it within contemporary society and culture, within the relationships that constitute the present and determine the force of the art to come.

The present thesis uses a semiotic perspective, the methodology of which is employed not only to analyze texts but also as a critique of ideology. In this sense, it is important to declare that in doing so, an effort will be made to offer a comprehensive perspective regarding magic and its effects on society, alternating between an analytical perspective (on the history and mapping of its definitions) and a more narrative one in which different philosophical-political theories will be addressed and interconnected. Accordingly, an attempt will be made to bring together a semiotic approach that analyzes various discourses - all circumscribed within ritualistic and power forms, culminating in a final empirical analysis that will test the discursiveness of the preceding chapters. This endeavor is aimed at revitalizing what Umberto Eco (1980) argued, namely that where theorization is not possible, narration must suffice. This approach also stems from the cultural relations of the author, whose educational background is rooted in a Colombian context characterized by magical realism, which strongly influences the writing of this thesis. Thus, the aim is to offer an etic perspective on the theme of magic, as semiotic methodology requires, while giving rise to a broader view of the issues addressed, whose perspectives intersect with philosophy and anthropology. In doing so, this thesis seeks to propose reflections on the boundaries and limitations of semiotic analysis, the complexity of which must be expressed

through an interdisciplinary approach that reveals the magical power of semiotics and its future endeavors.

Research Questions

1. How does the interplay between magic, power, and art influence our understanding of belief structures and the transformative potential of symbols in sociocultural contexts?
2. What are the underlying mechanisms through which magic influences belief formation, social structures, and the distribution of the sensible, and how can semiotics contribute to analyzing these processes?
3. In what ways can the study of magic through semiotics provide new insights into its therapeutic potential, particularly in conjunction with artistic expression, and its applicability in processes of re-signification and personal and collective transformation?

Objective

The aim of this thesis is to offer a comprehensive reinterpretation of magic in the field of semiotics and contemporary art, exploring its multifaceted nature and its profound impact on belief structures and socio-cultural dynamics. Through an in-depth analysis of texts spanning anthropology and philosophy, the thesis aims to demonstrate the integration of magical concepts into the semiotic framework. By delving into the historical background of magic and mapping its semantic dimensions, the research aims to elucidate its fundamental guidelines: magician, ritual, and belief, attempting to reintegrate a semiotic perspective on magical processes and drawing on the writings of Juri Lotman and Winfried Nöth. Furthermore, the intention of the research is to explore the transformative potential of contemporary activism in challenging hegemonic power structures and instigating symbolic revolutions, thus shedding light on the dynamic interplay between magic, power and artistic expression in the shaping of socio-cultural landscapes.

Research Object and Methodology

The methodology employed in this thesis integrates semiotics with anthropology, philosophy, and other relevant fields to comprehensively explore magic and its transformative potential. Central to this approach are the theoretical frameworks of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, serving as foundational pillars for the analysis. The effectiveness of activist artwork in challenging dominant power structures and enacting symbolic revolutions will be assessed through qualitative and interpretive methods. Specifically, a case study analysis of Doris Salcedo's "Fragmentos" will be conducted, employing the methodologies of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss to explore its symbolic acts of resignification and healing. An interview with the manager of the counter-monument will complement this analysis, offering valuable insights into the artwork's contextual significance and therapeutic potential. This provides an additional value to the methodology, which is expressed through a sociosemiotic approach that is structured through field research. In this sense, the interview constitutes a corpus of analysis thanks to which the thesis can develop from a qualitative view of Salcedo's artistic work. Through textual, comparative, and case study analysis, this methodology aims to provide a nuanced understanding of magic, power, and activism within sociocultural contexts while also suggesting new avenues for future research in semiotics, art theory, and cultural studies.

By focusing on the process of belief-making, this thesis aims to shed light on the symbolic processes inherent in magic and its intersections with power dynamics and artistic expression. Using an interdisciplinary approach, it aims to demonstrate how magic can be understood methodologically through semiotics, offering insights into its underlying mechanisms and functions within sociocultural contexts. The chosen research methodology encompasses qualitative and interpretive methods, including textual, comparative, and case study analysis. These methods will be employed to examine a diverse range of materials, including academic texts, scholarly articles, philosophical treatises, and primary sources related to specific artworks and performances. The insights gathered through these analyses will be thoroughly examined and interpreted to construct a coherent narrative that addresses the research question and meets the objectives of the thesis while identifying theoretical implications and proposing new paths for future research in this field.

1. Contextualizing the Notions of Magic: a Brief History and Semantic Mapping

The concept of *magic* has extremely versatile, ambivalent, and diverse semantics, conceptual heterogeneity, and ethnocentric bias that refers to various phenomena; it has also been a matter of speculation, distinguishing things, practices, or ways of thinking from others, including religion, rationality, technology, and science. It is of natural or supernatural origin, from positive or negative to dominant or empowering, and it extends across a spectrum of beliefs and practices that defy conventional explanation. The complexity of this semantic field lies in the overlap between the ambiguity of scholarly discourses and their ideological implications, alongside the comprehension of magic. This understanding often diverges along separate paths pursued by anthropologists, historians, semioticians, and socio-cultural intellectuals, making this abstract category difficult to define.

The conceptual analysis of magic comprises a vast literature on the subject, concerning European and non-European phenomena and cultural constructs by anthropologists, ethnographers, historians of science, occultists and historians of ideas. As Gabriela D. Horvat (2017) argues in her book *Theatre, Magic, and Philosophy*, it is precisely the interpretation² of magical practices and the variety of their narratives that make it difficult to develop a theory of magic, despite the remarkable contributions of E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer, B. Malinowski, M. Mauss, and S.J. Tambiah.

However, in order to address this complex phenomenon that intersects social practices, cultural beliefs, and forms of expression derived from a certain sphere of human history and briefly introduce a history of the notion of magic, the present chapter is not so

² The notion of interpretation, with respect to the question of the semantic openness of the concept of magic, is of fundamental importance since there is no unified view of the meaning of magic. As demonstrated by the anthropology of the last century, as well as ancient philosophy that dealt with magical phenomena, there is no agreement on the meaning of this notion. For this reason, the magical phenomenon, as it will develop, makes open interpretation its strength. Moreover, Umberto Eco (1990) has proposed, within semiotics, the limits of interpretation. Seeking certain parameters (power, art, belief) through which to interpret magic is in fact the aim of this thesis. It is, therefore, to use the notion of interpretation as a kind of boundary zone, beyond which misinterpretations of magical phenomena lie.

much to retrace its entire timeline but to identify the points at which this concept has had relevant effects in cultural history and in the interpretation of the relationship between humans and their environment. In particular, this is an attempt to introduce a kind of evolution of philosophical and anthropological thought with regard to magical phenomena. This reconstructive perspective will lead successively to the translation of the phenomenon of magic through a semiotic analysis and the application of the methodologies that will enable us to detect a renewed interest in how to tackle conflicts and societal damage through contemporary artistic practices.

The first notions of the concept of *magic* belong to the legacy of fifth-century Greece (BCE) (Otto, Stausberg 2014); etymologically, the term refers to the Iranian appellative *maguš*, apparently derived from contact with their main political enemy of that period, the Persians; although the specific etymology of the word is not clear, the Greeks attribute different functions to the Iranian *mágoi*; besides being in charge of all types of rites performed by private ritual entrepreneurs outside institutionalized cults, such as sacrifices and the interpretation of dreams, the *mágoi* served as functionaries at the Persian court, and advisers to the King. On the other hand, to the Romans, *magic* signified a “fraudulent ritual art that pervades a multiplicity of (foreign) cultures and goes back to a distant past” (*Ibid*, 16-17). The Greek adaptation of the concept implied some fundamental semantic transformations, which may alter the meaning of magic and question its negative stereotypes predominant in Western discourse. Nevertheless, its history reveals certain facts that magic has ever since been recognized as a supernatural phenomenon, where potentially powerful things are done by others.

In the case of Greek and Roman culture, however, it is precisely at the linguistic level that the greatest risk lies: given the Greco-Roman origin of the modern term “magic” (*mageia* in Greek, *magia* in Latin) (*Ibid*, 23), one could, in fact, be led to attribute, even if unconsciously, to ancient words a modern meaning, foreign to their cultural horizon. The study of magic in Greece from a cultural history perspective not only avoids this kind of confusion but opens up new and fruitful perspectives.

Rather than considering magic as a universal category applicable to phenomena found in any era and in any human society, it is preferable to analyze it precisely as a Greek invention. It was, in fact, in Greece where this word was coined, as it has been observed, from an Iranian root *mag-*, which gives rise to the terms *magos* ‘magician’, *mageuein* ‘to act

like a magician’, *mageuma* ‘magician's action’. The Greeks, therefore, did not discover magic, as if the concept already existed and was just waiting to be labeled. By abandoning the modern notion of ‘magic’, with all its ambiguities and the polemical charge it implies, we have a free field to appreciate the peculiarity and complexity of the Greek notions (Carastro 2014).

As is argued in the chapter ‘The Invention of Magic in Greece’ by Marcello Carastro, in the book *La storia della civiltà Europea* (The History of European Civilization) edited by Umberto Eco, a first gap between the ‘magic’ of the moderns and that of the ancients that deserve to be emphasized is related to the polytheistic, civic and ritualistic nature of religion. In Greece, as in Rome, religion is not based on revelations, doctrinal knowledge, and dogmas transmitted by sacred books and a central religious institution. The Greeks did not believe in gods; they honored them. That is to say, the religiosity of the Greeks is expressed not in terms of inner faith but cultic practice. Emphasis is placed on gestures that are codified and articulated in a precise ritual context, allowing one to establish and cultivate a relationship with the invisible world of divine powers.

From this perspective, magic in antiquity is not conceived as a doctrinal corpus but rather as a set of ritual practices that can be considered both effective and condemnable. The focus on practices implies an interest in the actors of *mageia*: the *magoi*.

Scholars like Plotinus (b.205 CE; d 270 CE), considered the founder of Neoplatonism, the philosophical school of interpretation of the Platonic tradition, developed one of the first theories of magic (Otto, Stausberg 2014: 28). In his treatise *Ennead*, Plotinus wrote a section claiming that magic has some unique features, that compared to other ancient sources, instead of referring to transcendent beings, ‘cosmic sympathy’ underlies the works of magic. For Plotinus, ‘sympathy’ (originally *sympatheia*) signifies an omnipresent force that ties all existing things together. Consequently, magic works by ritually controlling and activating sympathy. At the same time, he also proposes that ‘magic’ is responsible for all cosmic processes of attraction and repulsion. This idea would influence more modern concepts such as *Magia Naturalis* by Italian humanists Marsilio Ficino (b. 1433; d. 1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (b. 1453; d. 1494), impacting fifteenth and sixteenth-century scholars, as the rank of a new philosophical discipline that ought to systematically investigate this natural force (*Ibid*, 17).

Plotinus's concept of *sympatheia* influenced the theory of Edward Burnett Tylor (1871-1917) on 'sympathetic magic', referring to those magical rites that follow the so-called laws of sympathy, afterwards reinterpreted as the 'law of similarity' by James George Frazer (Nöth 1990: 189). In his book and most important work, *The Golden Bough* (1890), Frazer defines magic from two principles, the already mentioned 'Law of Similarity' and 'Law of Contagion', coming from the superordinate concept of 'Sympathetic Magic'. Regarding the law of similarity, he describes that the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires by imitating it. From the law of contagion, he proposes that anything he does to a material object would equally affect the person with whom the object has at least once been in contact (Otto, Stausberg 2014: 81).

Frazer also drew a comparison between magic as science and magic as art, comparing theoretical magic with pseudoscience and practical magic with pseudo-art, especially in the context of the scientific advances of the 19th century. Pseudoart extended to practices such as 'positive magic' or witchcraft and 'negative magic' or taboos. Frazer exhaustively documented a wide range of rituals and magical practices covering various aspects of life, such as agriculture, fishing, hunting, healing, warfare, love, weather control, and divination. However, he assumed that anthropologists could understand and dissect magical actions only through speculative analysis within the confines of libraries. This perspective diverges significantly from that of Plotinus, who emphasized a more metaphysical understanding of magic. Unlike Frazer's empirical approach, Plotinus delved into the metaphysical foundations and implications of magic, seeing it as a transformative and transcendent practice aimed at elevating the soul rather than merely manipulating mundane phenomena (*Ibid*, 29).

Particularly interesting is that Edward Tylor was one of the first anthropologists to analyze magic, and focused more on cataloging and analyzing observable magical practices within cultural contexts. He dealt with the subject especially in the fourth chapter of his study *Primitive cultures*, in the context of the theory of survivals - i.e. those customs and traits considered to be remnants of an earlier evolutionary stage. In *Primitive cultures*, Tylor set out to study and compare different cultures in order to identify the laws of human thought and behavior that are at work in the evolution of civilization. These laws, in his view, were similarly distributed in various parts of the world (Tylor 1958 [1871]). Far from treating the religions of the "savage tribes" with contempt, Tylor argued that the principles on which

they are based are essentially rational, albeit applied under conditions of ignorance. He called magic “one of the most pernicious errors that have afflicted mankind” (*Ibid*, 112). Tylor considered magic to be a pseudoscience that becomes obsolete as real science develops, which is why magic is not treated in the same context as religion in *Primitive cultures*. However, in his opinion, at the origin of magic, there is a faculty that constitutes the very foundation of human reason but also of human irrationality: it is the association of ideas. Things that are associated with reality are associated in the mind; for Tylor, the error of magical thinking lies in reversing this process and assuming that things associated with thought can also be associated with reality. The magical arts are a misapplication of the principle of association: an example of this is the attempt to harm a person from a distance by manipulating clothing or nail fragments. This means believing that a mental connection can act as a real connection. Frazer extensively developed this concept of the association of ideas. In his analysis of magic, Tylor was primarily interested in identifying its underlying logical principles and survivals, privileging its intellectual rather than its social dimension, unlike Frazer and Mauss.

One of the most important views of the concept of magic is offered by Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), one of the leading figures of the French school of sociology and nephew of pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim (Fournier 2006). Marcel Mauss dedicated a comprehensive work, *A General Theory of Magic* (2001 [1902]), to the exploration of magic as a distinct social phenomenon. Within this framework, he proposed a separation between magic and religion, which he considered a conceptual tension. Mauss suggested that by distinguishing between magic and sympathetic magic, their respective functions could be better understood. Just as the author proposes this distinction, we can read it in his words: “Thus the definitions of the anthropological school tend to confuse 'magic' with sympathetic magic; [...] Sympathy is a sufficient and inevitable feature of magic; all magical rites are sympathetic, and all sympathetic ritual is magical” (Mauss 2001: 15-16). However, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987: 34) criticized Mauss’s perspective, arguing that it oversimplified the relationship between magic and religion. Stressing that both (magic and religion) are complex social phenomena that are intertwined within cultural systems and that any strict division fails to recognize the dynamic interactions and structural similarities between them in various societies.

The idea of *sympathetic* can be represented as a phenomenon interpreted under some laws of nature. The authors seen in this historiographic section developed the idea of the sympathetic under a philosophical, dogmatic (related to an idea of religion), anthropological, and naturalistic perspective. Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), in “The Sorcerer and His Magic” (1963), analyzes the psycho-physiological mechanism of magic by understanding the reactions of a *belief-making*³ process on the sympathetic nervous system, as well as its connections with social structures and power dynamics. This power is not only found in the social system in which we live but also extends to the processes and phenomena found in nature. In that sense, it refers to a force expressed under physical, social, and transcendental phenomena when discussing magic and phenomena like the sympathetic. Magical rites follow the so-called laws of sympathy. In the reading of this phenomenon, it is important to refer to Marcel Mauss’s thoughts on this type of phenomenon or sign. He theorized an epistemological and ontological turn of magical phenomena and acknowledged magic as the ‘art of transformation’, achieved socially through processes of differentiation that endow specialized agents and their symbolic acts with an ambiguous and unstable potential to do the extraordinary.

Mauss considered the contemporary definition and application of magic to be inadequate to the depth and complexity required by the field of anthropology during his time. From this perspective, it is interesting how the insufficiency of a concrete definition of magic leads Mauss to create his own theory, which can be used as a methodology in constructing an interpretation of the magical phenomenon. He elaborates on its definition based on magic performativity, its rites, the officer or magician who performs the magical actions, the ideas and beliefs that correspond to those actions, and the circumstances in which these rites occur as a way of understanding this phenomenon. His search for the definition of magic suggests that it has been provisionally distinguished in different societies from other systems of social facts (Mauss 2001: 23).

The French anthropologist, together with Henri Hubert (1872-1927), attempted to demonstrate that magic, previously understood as private, secret, and individualistic, is a social phenomenon created and qualified by the collective. They proposed two bases to understand the social nature of magic: the first maintains that all its elements derive from a collective, whether religious or scientific tradition. The second deals precisely with the belief

³ This concept is in the core of the thesis and it will be developed throughout the text.

in magic, following Levi-Strauss's thoughts; for him, the efficacy of magic implies a belief in magic from all the participants of the magical rite. From the sorcerer's, or as it can be called in contemporary and modern terms, the magician's belief in the effectiveness of his own power and technique, as well as that of a group that also builds and maintains which acts as a gravitational field. This belief is absolutely necessary as a precondition to a social phenomenon, an argument grounded in his constructivist understanding of social beliefs (Levi-Strauss 2001: 19-23).

In anthropology, the analysis of magic was for a long time linked to the problem of the development of knowledge and thought in different societies and was based on the idea of a series of stages in the evolution of the intellect, in which there is a progressive separation of magic from religion and science. Subsequently, the study of the logic of magical thinking led to a focus on ways of thinking, the nature of belief, and the psychology of superstition; the problem of whether those who practice magic believe in its real efficacy or whether rituals and magical practices have a purely symbolic, metaphorical value was posed; finally, the cultural relativity of the notions of the true and the possible was highlighted. The exploration of magical practices in diverse societies prompted an investigation into the mechanisms governing the dissemination of magical knowledge, alongside an examination of the political and social dimensions of these belief systems. Within contemporary anthropology⁴ there is a tendency to consider many of these practices and beliefs as part of the study of ritual and to insert them in the context of magic.

1.1. The Three Main Elements of Magic

Understanding ritual as a magical act requires concentrating on three methodological aspects that Marcel Mauss, and particularly Levi-Strauss, constructed to comprehend this complex social phenomenon: the magician, the ritual, and the belief. Although these three aspects have in themselves several ramifications, they will be specifically situated in this thesis to analyze the conceptual framework of magic and its functions in contemporary society.

To confront the concepts that surround the notion of magical rituals. Mauss (2001: 23-24) states: "Ritual acts are essentially thought to be able to produce much more than a

⁴ Contemporary anthropology differs from the anthropology of the last century in the debate starting with the "ontological turn". For more on the differences see (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007).

contract: rites are eminently effective; they are creative; they *do* things”. This conception of “doing” is directly related to the human capacity for creativity and the actions of craftsmen, which are known to be effective. For this reason, Mauss infers that “the traditional character of magic is found to be built up with the arts and crafts” (*Ibid*). The successive actions of an artisan may be as uniformly regulated as those of a magician. Although art and magic seem to be two different fields that are structured on different natures, they can be related through certain aspects. One of these aspects that places art and magic in a communicative relationship is precisely the role of the artist and the magician. These two characters, in fact, give rise through their form of expression to a construction and manipulation of reality through methodologies that appear non-communicating but show similarities.

1.1.1. The Magician as an Artist

In every act the magician's breath is regarded as the medium by which the magical force is carried. The voice-and let us remember it must be the voice of the accredited and fully instructed magician, and that his voice must correctly utter the words of an absolutely authentic spell "generates" the power of the magic. (Malinowski 1935: 216)

Marcel Mauss and Bronisław Malinowski refer to *him* as a ‘magician’, Claude Lévi-Strauss as a ‘sorcerer’, and when placed in an indigenous context, as a ‘shaman’. Depending on the historical context, as mentioned above, this subject fulfills one of the most important functions in the magical act, the ritual (further in the § 1.1.2). These characters serve as a guide, a translator, a headman, a wise man who knows the steps of the magical ritual, the appropriate words, or spells, and the objects that are used in it. Mauss highlights that the magician is often a specialist or expert who possesses knowledge of magical techniques and rituals. This knowledge is typically passed down through generations or acquired through initiation and training, playing a significant role in mediating between the human and supernatural realms. Through their mastery of magical practices, magicians are believed to have the power to influence natural and supernatural forces, cure illnesses, protect against harm, and bring about desired outcomes (Mauss 2001: 31-37).

Is the exceptional status and position of authority that makes this subject a magician, supported by the belief of the participants, not only in the magical phenomenon itself and its capacity of transformation but in the socially constructed and supported qualities of power of the magician. This belief is extremely important since, without the magician, the magical

act would have no value or effect, and this is stated by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. “It is public *opinion* (ref. belief) which makes the magician and creates the power he wields” (Mauss 2001: 50). Likewise, Lévi-Strauss makes reference to the effectiveness of magic based on “the sorcerer’s belief in the effectiveness of his techniques” and “the patient’s or victim’s (ref. Individuals that participate in the ritual) belief in the sorcerer’s power”, without leaving aside that there is a third complementary aspect related to belief and that is “the faith and expectations of the group” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 168).

Within this social context there are two positions that are fundamental to highlight. The political aspect of the magician and its quality as an ‘artist’. Although they appear to be far apart, their hierarchical position in the context of the magic act is of utmost importance to understand why they have a special faculty and additionally manage to maintain the effectiveness of this phenomenon. Aware of the fact that the question of what one can define as art and who can be identified as an artist is still open, this analogy allows an innovative view of the relationship between humans and the phenomena of creation and modification of social reality. From this perspective, the idea is to show how certain subjects can manipulate the perception and phenomenal structure of reality through creativity, together with a force provided by the social substratum. The imagination typical of artistic processes (and not only) can give rise to a modification of social reality on the basis of a collective recognition based on belief. This is meant to argue that a certain type of artist, as well as a certain type of art, comes from belief-forming processes that construct, through performance, a reality that is identified with the imaginary. In this sense, the audience shapes the belief that enacts the performativity of the artistic act. When social reality is identified with the imaginary, in this creative process offered by the figure of the artist as well as the magician, the dynamics of the power of belief clearly emerge. The “power of belief” refers to the creative process that enacts a reality derived from an imaginary, whose power of creation and action on reality is based on a collective structure founded on belief. In the process of creation and collective belief, one can discern the political power dynamics that justify the identification of the artist with the magician. “Magicians may possess political authority of the first order. They can be highly influential, often important personages. Thus the social status predestines certain individuals to the exercise of magical power and vice versa the practice of magic ordains their social status” (Mauss 2001: 37)

For the development of the analysis of this thesis it is considered essential to bring the perspective of the *magician* as an *artist*, as their creative, imaginative, and leadership qualities help to understand their capabilities and shared roles within society. Starting from the differentiated capacity over other individuals, to guide, lead and have particular knowledge about magic and rituals as transformation processes, his imaginative and creative capacity gives a magician the status of artist. In fact, according to the theory of art and the concept of creative imagination by the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), studied by professor Harry C. West, the artist can be located in the same hierarchy as the magician. In his writing *Hawthorne's Magic Circle: The Artist as Magician* (1974), West refers to the novelist's comparisons on certain abilities that these two subjects share. Among them, imagination and creativity are the most important. The ability to create and imagine future scenarios 'a vision of poetic truth', and the projection as a basic mechanism where the meaning is found in the object and in the operation, referring to the magical act and the work of art (West 1974: 315-318).

The 'inner idea' is then the source, and the creative process, according to West, consists of infusing the ideas from the artist's imagination with vitality so that they resonate in the mind of the reader. This act, similar to that of a magician conjuring from the depths of his subconscious, brings the ideas to life and transforms them into tangible creations, eliminating any negative influences they may contain (*Ibid*, 321-322).

In the contemporary artistic landscape, the notion of the artist as a magician extends beyond mere rhetorical figures, resonating deeply with the power of creative expression and cultural transformation. For this reason, the isotopic⁵ identification of the artist with the magician needs to be analyzed through the tools of semiotics. In this perspective, semiotics offer an innovative vision that can connect the dynamics of power, creation, and belief through sign systems processes. The use of signs as they are used by the figure of the artist, as well as by the magician, and the manipulation of natural phenomena in relation to the use of signs can give rise to a modification of the collective imagination and the structure of society. Just as traditional magicians used rituals and spells to enact change, contemporary artists employ their imagination and creativity to challenge perceptions and evoke emotions.

⁵ In semiotics, the concept of isotopy refers to the semantic coherence within a text or discourse. This term, introduced by the semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, denotes the repetition of semantic categories that enable the reader or listener to recognize a continuity of meaning in the text. Isotopy helps create the semantic unity of a text through the reiteration of themes, concepts, or semantic fields.

The artist's role as a magician lies not only in their ability to craft tangible works of art but also in their capacity to touch feelings, provoke thought, and inspire change. Just as belief in the magician's power gives weight to his rituals, so does the belief in the artist's vision, imagination, and creativity, emerging as an affirmation that gives meaning to his creations. Nathaniel Hawthorne's (*Ibid*, 323) theories further underline the artist's capacity as a world-builder, akin to a magician casting spells from the depths of his subconscious.

Examining art through this framework reveals that the artistic process is a kind of ritual, a magical act in itself. Just as a magician meticulously crafts his sorcery, an artist meticulously crafts his work, infusing it with meaning and vitality. This discussion opens up a captivating exploration of the ritual aspects of artistic creation, where each individual brushstroke or gesture becomes a symbolic act filled with power and meaning.

1.1.2. The Ritual and its Magical Virtue

At the root of many of the actions performed within a culture and society, it is possible to recognize a precise idea or intention. In this sense, ritual behaviors seen in their context appear to respond to a precise logic. However, the performance of many of the acts, when considered as acts in themselves, does not provide us with any certain information about the motives, personal convictions, beliefs, or sincerity of the performer. An individual behaves according to traditional norms, which are culturally contextualized rules or principles governing behavior in specific social contexts. These norms rely on collective representations to guide acceptable conduct and behavior. From this perspective, a semiotic analysis could offer an effective way to rethink ritual practices based on the embodiment of a value or belief determined by a social, cultural, or individual code. Since Frazer's time, the problem of the relationship between collective representations and individual belief has been investigated in much greater depth (Xygalatas 2022). The notion of collective representation has prompted later scholars to analyze the structure and logical processes of ritual actions as if it were a text that can provide insight into the characteristics and ways of thinking proper to a culture, not the psychological processes of individuals.

According to Victor Turner, "rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and

obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed” (1977: 6). In fact, the ritual process is a sedimentation of values and social impulses of cultural mixtures under anthropological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives, which gives rise to an accepted and translated expression interpreted by the majority of a group. As social phenomena are at the base of magic, it is impossible to understand it without considering the social groups. On the other hand, we can understand how the group resolves itself into individuals therefore; a small group of public and collective needs may give way to very general individual needs. From a cultural semiotic⁶ perspective, we can say that each social relationship is based on a ritual sedimented in a repetition of acts and knowledge that seems to have been passed from individual to individual, just as in the teaching of science and techniques that give value to its phenomena. This viewpoint is based on semiotic analysis, which has shown that every cultural phenomenon, whether from the field of science or the humanities, is nothing other than a negotiation of meaning (Fabbri 1998). With this, it is essential to emphasize the profound analysis concerning scientific discoveries and the communication of these discoveries in the social sphere carried out by Françoise Bastide (1985) in the second half of the last century. In fact, following her analysis (conducted successively with Italian semiologist Paolo Fabbri and the French philosopher Bruno Latour), it is possible to show that every kind of scientific result and every technological discovery comes from a repetition of acts that are negotiated, accepted and over time stratified and spread in society as a given phenomenon. This process, in my view, is presented as a phenomenon ritualized by society with effects that retroactively modify and condition it. In the case of magic, the means of transmitting its rites are instructive at its core, belonging to those traditions that collectives must recognize through a symbolic interpretation and a common belief. According to Mauss (2001: 23), “Magical rites are traditional facts. Actions which after never repeated cannot be called magical; if the whole community does not believe in the efficacy of a group of actions, they cannot be magical”.

⁶ By the notion of cultural semiotics, I mean the “general semiotics” (Fabbri 1998) that encompasses semiotics that has dealt with culture since the 1960s. In this sense, this clarification should be made in order to distinguish different visions and interpretations of culture, such as that offered by contemporary biosemiotics and ecosemiotics, from a line of thought ranging from Saussure, Greimas, Eco, Barthes, Lotman, etc. As pointed out by Ugo Volli (2021), for Eco, general semiotics, i.e., research into the functioning of signs, was a fundamental part of understanding cultural phenomena because knowledge of objects and the formulation of ideas that characterize them occurs by means of signs.

The creative aspect of the ritual brings its means of creating things, which is eminently effective under the social phenomenon of magic. The concept of ritual as a magical act must be developed in contemporary times; it should, therefore, be assumed that ritual is an iteration of an act that maintains and simultaneously can change each social value in expression depending on the context in which it emerges. Now, in semiotics, ritual can be related to a communicative process that disposes individuals to integrate an intersemiotic translation, i.e., any form of translation that involves at least two different semiotic codes. The intersemiotic process is precisely the construction of a signifier that can be interpreted from different perspectives through a collective value. “All types of communication in culture could be presented as a process of translation of texts (or fragments) into other texts” (Torop 2000: 72), and artistic expressions are perhaps the most notable interpretative translations interweaving in culture. As we understand artistic expression in this semiotic framework, we can affirm, following Georges Bataille’s (1980, 1988) reconstruction of art history, that it presents itself as the most profound form of translation between the human and the world surrounding him (as we shall also see, magic comes from the same movement of interaction between man and nature around him). In fact, according to Bataille, art and language seem to emerge along the same process⁷. When humans began to express themselves with rudimentary prehistoric art, they began, according to the French philosopher, to distinguish the entities of the world as separate objects from an undifferentiated landscape. In this sense, we understand that art can be read as one of the most profound processes of translation and interpretation that has taken place in our species.

Even the date of the Lascaux paintings cannot be reckoned unless one is willing to be content with estimates allowing a leeway, this way or that, of a good ten thousand years. We can recognize almost every animal depicted; magic, we usually suppose, motivated the painters’ efforts. But we have no way of knowing the exact place these figures held in the beliefs and the rites of those persons who lived many thousand years before recorded history began. (Bataille 1980: 13)

Ritual is linked to many forms of human practice in society, such as productive but also creative works. The modality with which a craftsman shapes matter can be deeply linked to the magician’s act of giving another shape to things. However, arts and crafts have been

⁷ Although we know that Bataille's text has been analyzed and criticized by some contemporary authors, in this context we use his analysis as a theoretical bridge that allows us to move from art to magic through ritual acts. The theoretical discursiveness given by Bataille's hypotheses serve us to account for a deep connection between art, language, ritual, and the evolution of our culture.

universally distinguished from magic, evidencing an intangible difference in method between the two activities. As far as techniques are concerned, the effects are considered to be produced through a person's skill. It is possible to infer that the results are achieved directly through the coordination of action, tools, and physical agents. The craftsman, the skilled person, is situated as *the magician*, and under Mauss' perspective (2001: 33), magical rites are defined as only the acts guided and performed by and with the magician that correspond to the complete concept of ritual. As argued in chapter 1.1.1 there are differences between these characters that, reinterpreted in the light of an analogy with respect to the effects of their creative activity, can be identified within the same process of reality creation and belief-making.

By using different examples of rituals, Mauss elaborates on the fundamental importance of space setting, the symbolic elements of initiation, and sacred *sacrifices* are evidenced; a concept that will be developed later in this work. As for the symbolic elements, he described them as materials and tools that are employed, which are not just everyday things. "Their choice and preparation are made ritually and they are themselves also subject to special conditions of time and place" (*Ibid*, 58). At the same time, the conditions and characteristics surrounding a ritual go beyond the mere activity of gathering individuals and performing actions. They include factors such as the choice of location (whether in forests or enclosed spaces), the timing of the ritual (specific times or days) and other related details. These aspects serve to distinguish between the qualities of religious and magical rituals. However, it is not particularly fruitful to compare them directly, as religious rituals take place in a distinctly different context. This context encompasses various aspects, such as the way in which rituals are performed, their symbolic meaning and their perceived effects. Therefore, although both types of rituals involve collective participation and symbolic actions, they should be understood within their respective frameworks rather than compared directly.

1.1.3. *Magic and its Power: A Belief-Making Process Theory*

As life forces go, *mana* does not animate anthropological debate like it used to. After Lévi-Strauss performed his disappearing-act on the concept, comparing the semantic 'emptiness' of the Polynesian term '*mana*' to that of the French term for 'thing' (and more of this below), few anthropologists have ventured to draw theoretical mileage from it. Of course, if part of

the original attraction of *mana*-terms to anthropologists was their peculiarly double universality – their semantic breadth (*'mana is everywhere'*, said the native) coupled with their geographical diffusion (*'mana-terms are everywhere'*, replied the anthropologist) – it is hardly surprising that these concepts should still feature in diverse ethnographic accounts of indigenous cosmologies (...). *Mana* is ethnographically unavoidable. That this should be embarrassing, as it seems, to theoretical sensibilities today is also unsurprising". (Holbraad 2007: 189)

After having analyzed the concept of magic as a unique cultural-semiotic phenomenon, able to serve as a sign-creating system and communicative act capable of influencing and affecting the unconscious, it is important to elaborate on that extraordinary force and notion of power that Malinowski and Mauss, citing the rites of Melanesia, call *Mana*, but further bring the possibility of understanding this process based on the *belief* and its cognitive force.

Mauss explores two ethnic groups found in Melanesia as an example to elaborate further on this definition. He says *Mana* "is not simply a force, a being, it is also an action, a quality, a state. In other terms, the word is a noun, an adjective, and a verb". According to Mauss, *mana* is employed in many different conjugations; it is possible to say that one "has *mana*" or "gives *mana*," this is why he decides to designate it as a "sorcerer's power," the magical quality of an object or the possessing of magical powers. At the same time, he clarifies the difficulty of defining *mana* due to its abstract and general notion that no logical analysis is accurate for describing the phenomenon (Mauss 2001: 131–134). However, his attempt to bring the milestone virtue of magic and others' definitions could help to clarify at least its notion.

It invades all magical and religious rites, all magical and religious spirits, the totality of persons and things involved in the totality of ritual. It is really *mana* which gives things and people value, not only magical religious values but also social. An individual's social status depends directly on the strength of his *mana*, and this applies particularly to roles in secret societies. The importance and inviolability of property taboos depend on the *mana* of the individual who imposes them. (...) *Mana* is first of all an action of a certain kind, a spiritual action that works at a distance and between sympathetic beings. It is also a kind of ether, imponderable, communicable, which spreads of its own accord. *Mana* is also a milieu, or more exactly, functions as a milieu, which in itself is *mana*. It is a kind of internal, special world where everything happens as if *mana* alone were involved. It is the *mana* of the magician which works through the *mana* of the rite. (*Ibid*, 134–138)

Despite the strength that can be found in the concept of *mana*, it was strongly criticized by Malinowski, calling it just a simple example of an early generalization of a metaphysical concept, opening a problem as to the relation between the concepts of force, the supernatural and the virtue of magic. Instead, he proposes that emotions and strong feelings of passion and obsessive desires are natural responses, a universal psycho-physiological mechanism

born of mental and physiological obsession, and a very fountain of magical belief, which is what drives the ‘power’ of magic (Malinowski 1948: 58–60).

Thus the foundations of magical belief and practice are not taken from the air, but are due to a number of experiences actually lived through, in which man receives the revelation of his power to attain the desired end (...). Thus, magic also coincides with personal success, skill, courage, and mental power. No wonder that it is considered a source of success. This personal renown of the magician and its importance in enhancing the belief about the efficiency of magic are the cause of an interesting phenomenon: what may be called the *current mythology* of magic. (*Ibid*, 62–63)

According to the French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Bruno Latour (2010: 2), *belief* “is not a state of mind but a result of relationships among peoples”. In fact, Latour’s assertion that belief is intimately linked to relationships between individuals underlines the social nature of belief systems. Belief, then, is not merely a product of individual cognition but emerges from collective interactions and shared experiences within a society. A collective memory made up of both individual and communal narratives.

Latour further elaborates on the nature of belief by highlighting its dependence on the distinction between knowledge and illusion: “Belief depends on something completely different: on the distinction between knowledge and illusion, or rather, on the separation between practical - which does not make this distinction- and theoretical life, which maintains it” (*Ibid*, 11–12), arguing that belief thrives in the coaction between practical and theoretical life. This notion suggests that belief is not only based on empirical evidence or rational thought but also occurs in the sphere of perception and interpretation. In practical life, where actions are guided more by necessity and habit, the distinction between what is known and what is perceived can be blurred; however, theoretical life, characterized by reflection and analysis, maintains these distinctions, allowing belief systems to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances while preserving their fundamental principles, shedding light on the complex dynamics that shape beliefs, and highlighting their resistance to changing social and cognitive landscapes.

Following Latour’s interpretations, which are intimately linked to the semiotic approach, belief can not only be regarded as an inferior or basic type of knowledge, but is structured at all levels of discourse. In scientific discourse, as he and other semioticians argue (as discussed in chapter 1.1.2.), belief underlies the negotiation of scientific facts. In other words, the belief process branches out into every form of discourse (textual, visual, but also corporeal i.e. perceptual). The discourse on belief is at the center of numerous semiotic

debates, one need only to think about the analysis offered by Charles Sanders Peirce (1877) regarding the “fixation of belief”. In this sense, belief stands at the basis of any possible cognitive process, since in order to obtain a certain kind of knowledge of any object in the world, one needs to believe that a certain object exists, that the object has some properties, and that what one knows and experiences is true. This is why belief is intimately linked to the notion of reality and truth, both in philosophy and in the field of semiotics⁸. On the other hand, Umberto Eco (1976: 58) himself has defined semiotics as the “theory of lying”, arguing that the analysis of semiotics is based on pointing out and dismantling the lies of power. In this way, belief is proposed as an intrinsically cognitive and at the same time applicative process with regard to reality, truth and power.

This is why magic is not a product of past ages but a living force that continues to constantly produce manifestations of its power, extending its significance beyond mere speculation or symbolic interpretations of natural phenomena and laws. Instead, it represents a narrative rooted in history, recounting events that shaped beliefs and fostered a certain form of magic. It is then appropriate to go back to Lévi-Strauss and his essay ‘Sorcerer and His Magic’, foundational in medical anthropology, which analyzes the role of belief in both healing and harm, today also called the placebo and nocebo effects. He argues that, as was noted before, “the efficacy of magic implies a belief in magic”, this main belief is based on three levels involved in what he calls a ‘shamanistic’ cure, all of them socially constructed and socially maintained. (All his analysis was based on four stories on which he builds his argument – ‘Voodoo-death’ of the Australian aborigines, the incorporation of the sorcerer's experiences into the belief system of the Nambikwara tribe of the Amazonian rainforest, witchcraft among the Zuni, a town in New Mexico and the story of Quesalid, a shaman from the Pacific Northwest). The three levels are the sorcerer’s (magician) belief in the effectiveness of his techniques, the patient’s or participant’s belief in the power of the magician, and finally, the faith and expectations of the complete group.

When viewed through the lens of magic as a form of communication, these levels offer insight into the multidimensional nature of magical practices, not only between the sorcerer and the supernatural realm but also between individuals in the community. The

⁸ Certainly the notion of “reality” as well as that of “truth” are very complex terms to outline, concepts that semiotics is addressing with great result (Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2021; Gramigna 2022). However, it is not intended to explain the difficulties inherent in the use and semantic mapping of these terms. Their value, as used in this work, is used to argue that the notion of belief may underlie a process of world knowledge construction and propositional reference to truth.

rituals of the sorcerer convey messages of healing and transformation, which are received and interpreted by both the patient and the wider group. The patient's belief in the power of the sorcerer and the collective faith of the group amplify the communicative power of magic, creating a shared understanding of the ritual's meaning and reinforcing social cohesion.

The interaction of belief and the use of symbols in a ritual, according to Lévi-Strauss, are of utmost importance in the role of reinforcing the belief of an individual or group. In reference to the difference between performing a ritual in a group or individually, it is worth bringing in the words of Massimo Leone (2011: 5): "One can perform a ritual alone, as one can speak to oneself, yet in both cases the grammar of the ritual has been shaped by a collectivity, given that one of the main purposes of the ritual is to enable a collective experience of meaning as repetition". This perspective highlights the communal aspect of ritual, wherein the repetition of symbolic actions fosters a shared experience of significance among participants.

It is then possible to infer that the great power of magic and the magician as the leader, the guide, and the artist is based on the collective belief and its memory; as Lotman suggests, through the analysis offered by Lepik (2008), it is "a function of the intellect", which gives strength and approval to the belief, which at the same time, intensely and fervently believe in an end and so create it. In this case, Mauss states it clearly:

It is public *opinion* (ref. belief) which makes the magician and creates the power he wields. Thanks to public opinion he knows everything and can do anything. If nature holds no secrets from him, if he draws his powers from the primary sources of light, from the sun, the planets, the rainbow or the depths of all water, it is public opinion which desires that he should. (Mauss 2001: 50)

The narrative form in which the definition of what can be called "belief-making" presented in this thesis as a working hypothesis, can be delineated according to different forms of everyday expressions found in society, giving us the possibility to enunciate how belief-making expresses its capacity in different social phenomena, and this allows some definitions to be presented as a basis for defining the concept. It is possible to say that belief-making is a semiotic process in the deepest level in the semiosphere, so to speak, emerging, in this context, from a purely relational and collective process of interpretation in the light of previous knowledge and experiences stored in the memory of society. At the same time, it can be said that belief-making is a cognitive process that can create empirical effects on

the body and mind, coordinating our behavior in society⁹. A process that can create an identification between imagination and reality, and/or making the reality after imagination.

⁹ The idea of belief-making certainly follows other structures of meaning that have been inter-defined within the field of semiotics, such as sense-making and meaning-making. This working hypothesis, whose potential, however, remains to be investigated, traces a path that is presented here as an orientation, a threshold at which semiotics must interrogate itself. Belief, seen as an insufficient process or often rejected altogether by theories of knowledge, must be re-examined in the light of marginal social processes that place it at the centre of the creation of a certain kind of reality.

2. Magic as a Semiotic Therapy

Collective beliefs and rituals mediated by the magician can also serve as mechanisms for coping with or dealing with *collective trauma* by providing a communal framework for processing and healing from shared pain and suffering. Addressing collective trauma is vital in this context as it allows communities to acknowledge and validate their experiences, facilitating the restoration of social cohesion and resilience. According to Italian semiotician Patizia Violi (2017), *trauma* “is no longer an ontological category in itself, nor a universal form of experience, but a culturalized object and as such susceptible of a variety of formulations according to specific sensibilities linked to diverse standpoints” (2017:2). Trauma, whether individual or societal, leaves lasting imprints on memory and shapes belief systems, serving as a means of understanding the past, influencing the present and future. Violi adds that collective trauma events “are also the result of a cultural symbolic process that determines the form of the memory and in certain sense reconstructs the trauma a posteriori, in the way that we are then accustomed to perceive it” (*Ibid*, 3). Another important perspective on collective trauma is the construction of meaning in societies (Hirschberger 2018); victims of collective trauma establish meanings through culturally transmitted teachings and traditions that emphasize group survival, amplifying existential concerns and motivating the embedding of trauma in symbolic meaning systems. This process fosters a transgenerational collective identity, promoting a sense of meaning and alleviating existential threats while enhancing group cohesion and identification. The deep meaning derived from the collective trauma perpetuates its memory and inhibits closure, eventually becoming a central element of the group's identity and shaping its perception of the social environment.

These ideas depict magic not only as a cultural practice rooted in collective meanings, beliefs and rituals but also as a dynamic mechanism for coping with and processing collective trauma. For instance, Malinowski, in his work *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, defines magic as:

The one and only specific power, a force unique of its kind, residing exclusively in man, let loose only by his magical art, gushing out with his voice, conveyed by the casting forth of the rite [...], a practical art consisting of *acts* which are only means to a definite end expected to follow later on, and that subsequently evolved as a substitute action in crisis situations and threat, that lead to anxiety, anger, and distress, suggesting that through these enactments, some katharsis takes place, implying the conviction that the desired end seems nearer satisfaction. (Malinowski 1948: 57-61)

This definition connects with the theory of the German semiotician Winfried Nöth (1994), where he proposes magic as a ‘semiotic therapy’. In his book *Handbook of Semiotics* (1990), where in addition to identifying magic as a form of semiosis with a specific structure, he defines it as an “effective form of communication, according to which it may be seen as a semiotic therapy”. In its explanation, Nöth refers to Malinowski’s interpretation of the magic act as a “semiotic activity with the function of bridging gaps in the pursuit of practical activities in life”, adding that “this view of magic as an escape from an alternative to practical deadlocks leads to more recent psychotherapeutic interpretations of the phenomenon” (*Ibid*, 191). This implies that the sign has an indirect influence on the unconscious of the magic agents¹⁰, and, therefore, the effect of the magic act is a semiotic therapy for the body of the individuals who participate in it. This influence can be related to the special states that Mauss (2001: 61) explained regarding the magical act: “All these practices aim at inducing special states in the applicants and their clients, not only morally and psychologically, but also physically in some cases. These transformations are realized to perfection in shamanistic trances, voluntary and induced states, which also are considered to be part of the ritual”.

At the same time, Nöth places the study of animal behavior as a key concept in understanding the concept of ritual. In a short description, he explains that ritual is an evolutionary modification of a behavior or pattern that serves a communicative function. A natural process that results in improved communication conditions since the behavioral change increases the clarity and distinctiveness of the signal for the receiver. This means that the channeling of emotionally motivated behavior, under a purposefulness and goal-directedness of structures and functions in living organisms (teleonomic), can promote better signal functions (Nöth 1990: 165-166). This brings out the quality and effectiveness of the ritual from an understanding of socio-cultural and biosemiotics perspectives, finding in nature that rituals are also part of the operational world of animals. So, ritual can be understood as an expression of animal life in a continually changing environment. That is,

¹⁰Magic agent is not defined by Nöth, but is interpreted in this context as a subject who performs a ritual through a chain of acts determined by a belief.

in a world of changes, only ritual can give a constant form, under the repetition of a code, to what is always in motion.

Another important reference for understanding the virtues of rituals comes from folklorists and anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957). Van Gennep was a British cultural anthropologist best known for exploring the universality of rituals and rites and the interpretation of their symbols, or what he called “Rites of Passage” (*Les rites de passage* (1909)). His text influenced scholars of different disciplines since the beginning of the 19th century, becoming one of the most important works written around the notion of ritual. Victor Turner (1920-1983), expanded upon van Gennep’s ideas and introduced the concept of ‘liminality’ in greater depth, the idea that the life of individuals consists of a series of transitions structured by the society in which they live and that from there, three moments or states are triggered, such as a ‘past role’, a ‘liminal space’, and the assumption of a new one (role); their exploration of the role of rituals in human experience and the transmission of cultural knowledge emphasized the significance in marking transitions and guiding individuals through various stages of life. Gennep’s concept of ‘rites of passage’ highlights the transformative nature of rituals, then, it is possible to say they serve as a mechanism for processing old and new information and navigating these transitions. At the same time, this mechanism places us on Juri Lotman’s analysis of the dynamics of culture, where his perspective aligns with Gennep and Turner’s exploration of rituals as transformative processes, underscoring how rituals not only mark transitions but also encode and transmit cultural memories and meanings, shaping individual and collective identities. “Ritual itself possesses a unique character. The *organization of memory* plays a fundamental role in ritual, and ritual serves as a mechanism for initiating the individual into group memory” (Lotman 1992: 356).

2.1. Juri Lotman on Magicality

This subchapter aims to summarize Peet Lepik's work on Juri Lotman's concept of 'universals' by incorporating the discourse of magic within the framework of semiotics. Although Lotman did not directly address this topic in his published writings, Lepik explores some of his student’s lecture notes extensively in his book *Universals in the Context of Juri Lotman's Semiotics* (2008). Over the course of eight years, Lepik analyzed Lotman’s efforts

to universalize the theory of cultural semiotics and his discussions on universal signifying processes. In *Universality*, according to Lepik, Lotman sees the fundamental characteristics of culture. These universals or general concepts do not exist as names or signs, they are rather products of the intellect; forms of perception that come before experience. It could be said that they express certain capacities of the human intellect, constituting a definite system of algorithms. In the words of Lepik (2008: 15-16), Lotman understood intellect as the “ability to command language, to store, organize, and mediate signified information”; he saw it as a transformative process that generates new information through algorithms, manifesting in various forms of human communication. In his studies, Lotman identified several cultural universals, such as the structures of cultural texts, the distinction between communication and self-communication, and the concept of the semiosphere. Specifically, he described the characteristics of the intellect as an *a priori* mechanism that stores, organizes, and transmits information. Of these characteristics, the five universal communicative functions of the intellect, also called algorithms, are recognized and textually realized as mythological, magical, religious, antithetic, and metaphorical code signals. Furthermore, the constructive components of these code signals are the phenomenological concept of the intellect, the category of code text, the category of ritual, and treating text as a signal. The phenomenological concept of intellect is described as the ability to command language, store information, organize it, mediate it, transform it, and produce new information. In the second instance, the code text is described as a text type, very characteristic of the Tartu-Moscow School scholars, where the formal characteristics (code) dominate textual semantics, which has the characteristic of formalizing and forming cultural memory. The next constitutive characteristic of the code text is its genetic and structural link with the concept of ritual, described as an integral communication system of codes and functions between two symbolic worlds named “profane and sacral”. For Lotman, the concepts of ritual and rituality are part of the development of the intellect and the cyclical history of the world. Last but not least, within the components of the code signal, there is precisely the treatment of the text as a signal, which, according to Lepik’s analysis, reduces the text to an elementary concept or as a behavioral act that can be interpreted pragmatically, this is directed to a listener that is in the exactly same space. Although the mythological, religious, metaphorical, and antithetic functions are of utmost importance for the conceptualization of this research, the focus on magic and the category of ritual will be of

greater relevance for contextualizing Lotman's semiotics in the understanding of this specific phenomenon that functions as a transformative information source in human culture.

According to Lepik, Lotman tackled the concept of *magic* at two different times, with a difference of 14 years between these two, and with different points of view between them. However, certain elements coincide between these two moments that help to understand how to interpret magic from a semiotic point of view. For instance, magic, religion, science, and art were defined as *social functions* carried out topologically and communicatively. As abstract constructs, these functions have a universal nature that has also generated lasting cultures throughout history. It is very important to recognize that functions are more durable than the texts themselves and can be adapted to any text. This is why Lepik analyzes magical semiosis, where he invites us to treat magic primarily as a language and social cognitive act from which pragmatic characteristics are derived. This way, treating magic as an act of sign creation and an intellectual instrument would be possible: "Magic is constructed here as a sign-creating concept – being thus in accordance with criteria that could also be the foundation of the semiotic interpretation of the other algorithms of the intellect" (*Ibid*, 40). The intention to prove that the five algorithms of the intellect, highlighting magic, as a code signal, are in a sign-creating system, where ritual (and rituality) are the ancient textual equivalent, means that all code signs are explicitly displayed in the ritual and form a system of communicative functions. Like Mauss, Lepik, analyzing Lotman, notes that delving deeper into the ritual structure, in particular, is where the effect of the magical phenomenon can be found and the guarantee that the code signals are the constructive elements of culture and, in a narrower sense, of communication¹¹.

A magical effect is a creative act. Any creation at all is in the semiotic meaning a crossing of the border of a certain semiotic field. Crossing the lines means the birth of a new semiotic field and a new language: crossing the line is a translation in the semiotic plane and creates a semantic and topological distance. The translation in this case is done into an unknown language. (Lepik 2008: 60)

It is then possible to say that magic, as a communication algorithm of the intellect, is interpreted by Lotman as a cultural-semiotic phenomenon, purposely systematic, as an *a priori* pre-verbal and sovereign as regards the language; and the magical act, named ritual,

¹¹ The concept of communication, as interpreted by contemporary biosemiotics, is described here as expansive and pervasive in the realm of living organisms. In contrast, language, while significant as a tool, seems to emerge within a broader, interconnected framework of communication. This is evident in semiotics, where verbal and non-verbal communication is recognised, whereas language, specifically anthroposemiosis, is limited only to the human species.

a structural whole, a creative procedure that is significant and has an effect. A semiotic act based on the belief (*resp.* believability) of its procedure and subsequent effect. This unique phenomenon, capable of surviving in different forms, places us in the *collective memory* capable of storing and constantly processing information; in his words “Magic has turned out to be a unique phenomenon in culture because it has strangely managed to survive in varied forms, without it being supported in the modern era by any substantial institutional factor” (*Ibid*, 97).

In considering the fundamental characteristics of culture as universals and pre-experiential forms of perception expressed through the intellect, it is possible to infer that magic and ritual stand out as significant components, serving as transformative sources of information in human culture. Lotman’s interpretation of magic as a semiotic phenomenon highlights its role as a sign-creating concept, with ritual as its ancient textual equivalent. Considering magic as a systematic, pre-verbal communication algorithm of the intellect, capable of creating new semiotic fields and languages, understanding collective memory and collective trauma becomes essential in the process of meaning-making. Magic serves as a powerful medium through which communities cope with and process collective trauma, drawing on shared symbols, rituals, and practices rooted in collective memory to construct narratives that imbue these events with meaning and coherence. Despite the lack of modern-day efforts at fostering social and institutional recognition, magic persists as a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in collective memory, reflecting the continued importance of symbolic communication in the shaping of collective identities and worldviews.

2.2. *Pouvoir and Sacrifice in Death Worlds*

Contextualizing the power of magic and its practices, such as rituals and sacrifice, leads to the discussion of two issues. The first is that throughout these pages, the distinction between ‘white’ and ‘black’ magic has not been addressed. This aspect of the magical phenomenon will not be explored in this work, yet it is undoubtedly important to consider, as discussing this phenomenon often evokes the dichotomy of good and evil. This situates one within the framework of sacred rituals aimed at the common good, for healing, or those associated with sacrifices over life and death.

This consideration of the dichotomy of the ‘types’ of magic addresses a differentiation of *power*, in French, *puissance* and *pouvoir*. De Jouvenel suggests in his work *On Power* that in the context of social institutions, *power* must be countered by ‘makeweights’ (De Jouvenel 1949: 270). This concept refers to certain elements or entities within a society that help balance or counteract the influence and power of dominant institutions. *Puissance*, in fact, refers to a “range of potential capacities for existence, the ability to affect or be affected, and the capacity to multiply connections that may be realized by a given ‘body’ to varying degrees in different situations” (Masumi in Deleuze, Guattari 1987), it represents a broader, more elusive force that transcends individual control, tapping into the inherent energies and mystique. *Pouvoir*, on the other hand, embodies the notion of authority and capacity to control, often linked to human agency and the exercise of will. It refers to the capacity or potential to carry out an action or achieve an outcome. When considering these two forms of power in the context of ritual studies, the original definition of magic (see chapter 1) is derived, which was described as the practice of institutionalized cults, focusing especially on one of its fundamental systems: sacrifice. This not only draws attention to the power of belief and the act of offering to supernatural entities by ancient societies but also underlines the dynamics between these two forms of power.

The sacred is socially constructed, emerging from collective activities influenced by negotiated meanings within historically and culturally situated codes. Sacrifice emerges as one of the most typical religious actions, with its mechanism and multiplicity of functions inherently tied to the true nature of ritual. Its transcultural significance and the logic of its development constitute the foundational concepts of a rite, emphasizing the etic dimension derived from French and Western European academic perspectives. The expression of such concepts must be grounded in specific socially constructed and identified practices.

To understand the mechanism of sacrifice, a logical application of the sacred is necessary, resulting in a series of interpretations of human actions according to specific intentions. Sacred entities typically entail sacrifice (to obtain them, to offer them, to maintain them, to give them, to recall them, to lose them). Thus, sacrifices structure an endless source of power capable of producing infinitely special and varied effects and operate as an effect of such power, prescribing something overdetermined compared to non-sacrificial actions. The practice of sacrifice, based on collective power, was also tackled by Mauss and Hubert in their collaborative work *Sacrifice Its Nature and Function* (1964). The discussion

surrounding sacrifice initially defines it as ‘religious’ (I would add for better understanding: as a social “ritualistic act of *belief*”, since it should not be categorized solely to the concept of religion) which, through the consecration of a victim, which has no purpose except creating forces, and that modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned (Hubert, Mauss 1964: 13).

The first phase of the sacrifice is intended to impart it to the sacrificer and the sacrificer. They are profane, their condition must be changed. To do this, rites are necessary to introduce them into the sacred world and involve them in it, more or less profoundly, according to the importance of the part they have subsequently to play. It is this which constitutes, the entry into the sacrifice. (*Ibid*, 20)

One might believe that sacrifice is what challenges the idea of power over life and death; in fact, the self-sacrificer feels and firmly believes that has power over his life and death. At the same time, he is being subject to an apprehended social structure; according to Berger and Luckmann, in their *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1991 [1966]), they argue that society is shaped by shared common ideas and behaviors, which they call ‘typifications’. These typifications create recurring patterns of interaction that make up the social structure. They suggest that our perception of social reality is based on these typifications, which become more generalized and impersonal over time. This means that the social structure is not only influenced by relationships with people but also by the connections to those who came before (ancestors) and those who will come after (successors), as well as by abstract concepts like gods or authorities. These typifications are essentially generalizations, lacking significant individualized detail. In contrast, typifications of predecessors contain some mythological content. These typifications significantly influence everyday life. For instance, individuals may feel compelled to sacrifice their lives in loyalty to founding figures or for the sake of future generations (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 43-48).

The concept of sacrifice, then, is deeply bound up with the social structure and the legitimization of social norms and values. Berger and Luckmann argued that “sacrifice emerges as the ultimate expression of commitment to a particular aspect of social reality” (*Ibid*, 165). When an individual fully embraces an institution, belief system, or societal role, they may be willing to sacrifice their own interests or dedicate aspects of their life, including their time, energy, and even their own well-being, for the sake of something they deeply believe in or are committed to (*Ibid*, 150-165). In other words, it means that whoever

sacrifices themselves has an irreplaceable power over their existence and, in fact, over their society. In other words, sacrifice is not merely a personal act, but one with profound social implications. An individual who sacrifices themselves for a cause, ideology, or social group demonstrates a commitment and dedication so profound that it impacts their existence and that of society. This act of sacrifice endows the individual with a unique power, as through sacrifice, they show loyalty, fidelity and belief that reinforce and legitimize social structures and collective values. Thus, sacrifice is not only a personal renunciation but a powerful means of constructing and maintaining social norms and values, granting the individual a crucial role in perpetuating and giving meaning to shared social reality.

It could be considered that, within a society, the reinforcement of shared common ideas and behaviors enables a collective process of *belief-making*. This phenomenon exerts a significant influence, leading to the emergence of sacrifice as the “ultimate expression of commitment”, in which death assumes a central role as an object of power. This dynamic is especially prevalent in contexts characterized by authoritarian or political domination, in which individuals or entities exercise control over matters of life and death. In these contexts, power, embodied in the concept of *pouvoir*, signifies the authority to govern and dictate, frequently rooted in the practice of sacrifice. This collective belief formation operates as an exercise of sovereignty, wherein those wielding power manipulate and shape the collective will. Furthermore, by attributing life as the primary manifestation of the sacred, sacrifice emerges as a tool employed by power holders to perpetuate domination and maintain oppressive systems.

2.3. Necropolitics, biopolitics and the sensible

For a deeper understanding of these dynamics, the concept of ‘necropolitics’ examines the mechanisms through which power structures control not only the selective granting of life but also the imposition of death within society, becoming instruments of control, often used by authoritarian regimes or political forces to maintain domination and impose social hierarchies; therefore, sacrifice takes on greater significance as it becomes intertwined with the politics of mortality, where the manipulation of death serves as a means to exercise power and perpetuate oppression. Moreover, in the context of modernization,

instruments of control such as the mass media play a key role in shaping public perceptions and imposing social norms, often influencing narratives around sacrifice and morality. The media, through its pervasive reach and persuasive power, can amplify the discourse on sacrifice, framing it within the moral and ethical frameworks dictated by those in power.

This concept refers to the theory developed by the Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe (2003), who discusses the nature of sovereignty. Accordingly, in the history of philosophy, it is thought that the being has a power to choose who gets to live and who gets to die. So, to be sovereign is to be someone who has this capacity to choose. Throughout the essay, Mbembe refers to a number of thinkers, including Michel Foucault and his theory of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben and the idea of the state of exception, Eyal Weizman and the ‘politics of verticality’ (which refers to the relationship between sovereignty and space), among others. Whereas Foucault views biopolitics as the exercise of a distinct force that does not necessarily entail direct violence or displays of strength, such as through suffering or disciplinary mechanisms aimed at inflicting pain or death, Mbembe suggests that power, in this context, is oriented toward controlling life itself. The former pertains to the governance over life via technologies of domination, such as legislation and public policies aimed at managing human life as a species, ensuring the preservation of the racial status quo within the population and society, encompassing both existential and biological dimensions. The latter concerns the power to inflict death through technologies of exploitation and bodily destruction, encompassing acts such as massacre, femicide, execution, slavery, sex trafficking, and forced disappearance, as well as the legal-administrative mechanisms that organize and systematize the effects or causes of policies resulting in death.

In his formulation, Foucault acknowledges that there are mechanisms that put people to death; some nations continue to use the death penalty or assassinations through governmental organizations and situations of war. However, Mbembe’s analysis of the capacity to still kill within this so-called biopolitical framework gets eclipsed by the possibility of power being exerted over life, not over death. So, he opens up the discourse into the continued use of power to kill, to choose who can live and who can die. Consequently, killing or allowing someone to live then constitutes the limits of sovereignty and its fundamental attributes. Exercising sovereignty means exercising control over mortality and defining life as the manifestation of power. This concept of sovereignty, which

in theory should consist of society's capacity for self-creation through resources and institutions inspired specifically by social meanings and imaginaries, instrumentalizes human existence and leads to the destruction of bodies and populations. Mbembe (2019: 11–14) argues that these figures of sovereignty, like the killing fields, shape the political space we inhabit.

Foucault delineated three distinct forms of power that emerged within particular historical contexts: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower. These forms of power do not replace each other but rather coexist and intersect. In the European political landscape, these powers have evolved altogether, each complementing the other. Disciplinary power does not usurp sovereign power; instead, it absorbs and enhances it, concentrating on individual bodies as subjects for discipline to ensure compliance and obedience. Bodies undergo discipline for monitoring, training, utilization, and punishment, all aimed at enhancing economic productivity. Foucault referred to the utilization of disciplinary knowledge and institutions as “anatomopolitics”. In contrast, biopower diverges from the sovereign objective of disciplinary power, which is to control life and death. Instead of simply allowing life or causing death, biopower aims to actively foster life while selectively allowing death. It focuses on life-specific processes such as birth, death, reproduction, migration, and illness. Consequently, biopower engenders distinct rationalities, mechanisms, strategies, and forms of resistance.

By arguing contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death, Mbembe recognizes that necropolitics profoundly alters the dynamics between resistance, sacrifice, freedom, and terror. He shows that traditional biopower concepts are inadequate in understanding this modern form of control. Moreover, by introducing the concepts of necropolitics and necropower, the Cameroonian political theorist explains how weapons are used to create what he calls *death worlds*, where entire populations are subjected to conditions akin to being the *living dead*.

Hegel's discussion of the relationship between death and the “becoming subject” is highlighted in the discourse of necropolitics, underlining the voluntary character of human death within his paradigm. Becoming a subject implies facing and embracing death and consciously assuming the risks rather than fearing them. Hegel's perception of the concept of negativity inherent in human beings and the denial of nature as a means of their own survival, which consequently makes death essentially voluntary and a result of the risk

assumed by the fact of being human, is criticized by Georges Bataille (1897–1962). For him, life becomes faulty to the extent that it becomes a prisoner of death. Completely changing the idea of negativity, he argues that death is not reduced to the complete destruction of being; rather, it is self-consciousness.

In his article ‘Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice’, Bataille suggests that through sacrifice, humans reveal and establish their true nature. The act of differentiation between the human and the divine, the two bodies politic, and the power dynamics inherent in deciding who deserves to live or die profoundly shape the notion of sacrifice and its relation to power. This differentiation not only disrupts the self-evidence of the natural order but also demarcates between friend and enemy within the political sphere. Indeed, this demarcation lays the foundation for understanding the complexities of sacrifice. Hegel approaches this question by acknowledging that while death threatens the body in sacrifice, it also gives it a form of existential meaning. Bataille expands on this idea by arguing that the sacrificial act, often represented as a spectacle, endows death with a fundamental expressive quality, a notion echoed throughout the human tradition. This perspective underscores a universal recognition of death as an integral part of the human experience, one that transcends individual philosophers such as Hegel to resonate with humanity at large (Bataille 1990: 20–22).

Mbembe (2003: 15), in fact, agrees with Bataille’s argument that life transcending utility belongs to sovereignty, making death the moment where destruction, suppression, and sacrifice become irreversible and radical expenditures beyond mere negativity. Death thus becomes the principle of excess, an anti-economic force, leading to the metaphor of death as luxury. In addition, the Italian political philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2007) extensively examined the relationship between biopower and necropolitics, agreeing with the notion that “life itself” is at the center of biogenetic capitalism as a site of financial investment and potential profit. In her article ‘Bio-Power and Necro-Politics’ Braidotti argues that life becomes a threatening force, compared to the new epidemics and environmental catastrophes, where the dimensions between natural and cultural are blurred, where the politics of death are the new forms of warfare on an industrial scale, evidencing the privatization of the military and the global reach of conflicts, in particular the case of suicide bombers in the war on terror. Braidotti initiates her inquiry by asserting that biopower and necropolitics are two sides of the same coin, drawing inspiration from the work of the Cameroonian philosopher. Braidotti's argumentative basis begins with a rigorous analysis of

the main criticisms directed at the Foucauldian system of thought. By re-examining and reinterpreting Foucault's term biopolitics, the Italian philosopher becomes an advocate of a vitalist neo-materialism that reconceives life not as an object but as the subject of philosophical inquiry. According to this perspective, it should be rethought in terms of 'life force', with the aim of redefining the relationship between the self and others in order to create a system of affinities and new forms of social and political participation.

The act of differentiation between the human and the divine, the two bodies politic, and the power dynamics inherent in deciding who deserves to live or die profoundly shape the notion of sacrifice and its relation to power. This differentiation not only disrupts the self-evidence of the natural order but also demarcates the notion of redefining the relationship between the self and others to create a system of affinities and new forms of social and political participation. This conception aligns with Rancière's (2009) concept of the 'distribution of the sensible'. He argues that the distribution of the visible and audible in society determines the limits of political participation and shapes social hierarchies. By questioning established distributions and redefining the limits of perception, individuals can alter existing power structures and create new possibilities for democratic participation. This theory of the 'distribution of the sensible' explores the ways in which the dynamics of power are imposed and contested through the allocation of what is seen and heard in society. He argues that the essence of politics lies in the reconfiguration of the perceptible, challenging the established limits of sensory experience and creating new possibilities for engagement. By analyzing these ideas, we can unlock the important implications for a society of the distribution of the sensible in fostering artistic-driven political interventions.

In a context where political and social decisions determine who has access to vital resources and who is excluded or sacrificed, art can play a crucial role as a form of resistance and critique of the power structures that perpetuate necropolitics. Through artistic expression, injustices can be made visible, marginalized people can be given a voice and dominant narratives that legitimize state violence can be challenged. At the same time, it can be a tool for healing, as well as for building identity and cultural resistance, providing a space for processing grief and loss. By using art as a means of translating and exposing the realities of those affected by necropolitics, as it can be seen in the case study (chapter 4), it is possible to foster empathy and solidarity among people by connecting individual

experiences to broader power structures. This demonstrates how art can mobilize action and promote collective solidarity.

It is important to mention that for Rancière, there is a difference between the general conception of art and aesthetics. For him, art often imposes strict boundaries and hierarchies, arguing that it should not be confined to specific forms or genres but should instead be understood as a process of reconfiguration and redistribution of sensible experiences. Aesthetics, on the other hand, “is not art, but it is what constitutes the sensible experience. It is about the experience of a common world. The aesthetic problem is not at all about beauty. It is about the experience of a common world and who is able to share this experience” (Rancière 2019: 10). It is the artistic expression that, with an aesthetic experience, reconfigures the distribution of the sensible.

Art becomes something that disturbs the normal – the hierarchical distribution of spheres of activity and forms of competence – and relates to - human experience in general and a common human capacity. This is why – there could be this strong link between aesthetic revolution and - human revolution, because precisely the aesthetic revolution was the implementation of equal capacity. (*Ibid*, 11)

This interpretation of the attitude of the work of art in the context of altering power structures brings up the contemporary view of the concept of *Artivism*, highlighting the potential for artistic interventions to disrupt and subvert established norms within the public sphere. Art, detached from the idea of the beautiful and appreciable, of being an object to be observed from a distance, and which has been considered exclusive to the high hierarchies, is positioned as a fundamental element to distribute the sensible, reevaluating what is truly sacred, what we consider life and death.

This also allows us to revisit the conception of the magical act, which in the context of this thesis has been presented as an artistic-related performance, a form of semiosis, a communicative act that can highly influence the unconscious, in Nöth’s (1990: 188) words, magic as a “semiotic therapy”. The ritual, as a magic conceiving act, is a space that transforms signs within a group.

Artivism, in its capacity to challenge power structures and promote social justice – when consolidated in a society where collectives participate for a single purpose and common belief – can be given the title of a magical act. Just like in a ritual, artistic expression can be a way to manifest intentions, transform realities, and summon collective power forces to drive change. In a context where political and social decisions determine the value of life

and death, art becomes an act of resistance, where artists act as magicians conjuring collective consciousness and challenging oppression. Artists, by using their creative expression to bring injustices to light and give voice to the marginalized, perform an act of magic by unveiling hidden realities and challenging dominant narratives. In this sense, art functions as a ritual that reveals truth and calls for action. By processing pain and loss through artistic expression, individuals transform their suffering into strength and resilience. This process is akin to a magical act, where art becomes a channel for channeling healing and empowering energies.

3. Artivism as a Catalyst for Society

Not so long ago, the blend of words ‘art’ and ‘activism’—*Artivism*—started to be used. Although it has not been possible to pinpoint the specific origin in contemporary literature that recounts the history of the first use of this portmanteau, today the term artivism is increasingly heard: this neologism is used to describe an artist who attributes a socially explicit meaning to their work. The task of an artivist is, indeed, to bear witness to the traumatic consequences of a phenomenon occurring in the present, and its expressive power is also due to the political character and anonymity of the artists who wish to unveil realities hidden by power. However, more important than its origin is its definition and conceptualization. Activism, as the name suggests, is the activity of challenging and changing power relations. Art, on the other hand, does not have such a clear objective. In fact, it is very difficult to define what art is for or against, as well as to measure its impact due to the possible contradictions it can communicate. Nevertheless, its true value lies in the way it shows new perspectives and ways of seeing the world. Despite distancing itself from the formal processes of public decision-making, artivism performs an expressly political function. This new form of art does not aim primarily to be appreciated but rather to raise awareness among a generally uninformed audience about socially relevant issues. This enables it to function as a new form of language, capable of transcending the merely aesthetic purpose of classical artistic communication.

The artist, co-founder, and research director of the ‘Center for Artistic Activism’, Stephen Duncombe, places *artivism* and its power as a potential mechanism of affecting the unconscious to the point of the mystical. This allows further integration of the concepts presented in this thesis, if belief-making is considered as the main force of power, conceived as an agent of change, of transformation, which has previously been described as belief, but we will then see how it is applied in art.

It is hard to think about art's power because the power of art lies beyond thinking. In the past, philosophers and critics called this the "sublime" quality of art. It is commonplace to judge a piece of art as beautiful or ugly, making these judgments based on cultural standards and personal preference. The sublime is something else: it can be beautiful, but it can also be horrific; in either case it is beyond direct description, beyond measurement, beyond even comprehension—what the philosopher Immanuel Kant called the "supersensible". As mystical as it is, or perhaps because it is so mystical, the sublime is a powerful force that affects us in ways that our conscious minds cannot always account for. (Duncombe 2016: 117)

When we talk about activism, we are definitely not talking about political art nor about aesthetics; it is not a philosophy of art nor an appreciation, but it is possible to define it as a political practice of art that seeks to stimulate a feeling, move us emotionally, or alter our perception. "Activism" has an *effect*, and moves the material world, while "art" moves a person's heart, body, and soul, it *affects*.

As recent developments in cognitive science suggest, we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts and more through stories and symbols that frame the information we receive. And, as any seasoned activist can tell you, people do not soberly decide to change their mind and act accordingly. They are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli. As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other's business. If there is a causal relationship, it is this: Affect -> Effect. That is to say: before we act in the world, we must be moved to act. (*Ibid*, 119)

These actions, then, affect and have an effect in the social, constituting the collective idea and the power of transformation mentioned above in relation to ritual. Duncombe explores the effect and affect of activism, admitting the difficulty of measuring its efficacy and the precision of the social change. However, he recognizes that the results only depend on what the artist wants through his art, making him/her a kind of *magician*, who decides the path to follow in the process of transformation of the unconscious of society.

Within the exploration of the effectiveness of activism as an agent of change and political challenger, under the research 'Does it Work? The Effect of Activist Art' (2016) by the Center of Artistic Activism, and under the direction of Duncombe, a list of objectives is proposed that are essential to consider when an artistic performance is aligned with the fundamentals of activism as a catalyst for society. These are the most relevant and directly related to the case study analysis that will be presented in the next chapter.

1. *Foster Dialogue*: This refers to creating conversation around uncomfortable issues, controlled solely by the parameters and setting of the artwork.

2. *Build Community*: This involves constructing, valuing, and maintaining community.
3. *Make a Place*: Recognizing the creation of a space for discussion where communities can physically go and participate in activities related to the political interests of the community.
4. *Invite Participation*: ‘Turning watchers into doers’. All artists should be involved, and spaces for collaboration should be opened.
5. *Transform Environment and Experience*: Altering people's experiences in their environment, both mentally and physically. This can be done by reconfiguring familiar spaces and challenging people to change their experience in an unfamiliar way.
6. *Reveal Reality*: Reflecting an aspect of the world that is unseen and providing information about it. More than just raising awareness, seeking to make the invisible visible.
7. *Alter Perception*: Changing the way people perceive reality through art. At the same time, proposing a ‘de-function’ of the world, an object, or a symbol.
8. *Create Disruption*: Disruption of culture, challenging how people commonly think about an issue.
9. *Provide Utility*: Creating a useful tool. Activist art practices aim to help specific audiences by offering them a service.
10. *Imminent Cultural Shift*: Having an immediate and long-term impact on the way people think and talk about an issue and even a sense of reality.
11. *Imminent Material Impact*: Having an immediate, visible, physical effect on the world. Altering material reality. At the same time, having a material result, like impacting political or socio-cultural practices.

3.1. Revolution of the Symbol

Both the collective action nature of activism and its capacity to transform the perception of the individuals who participate in it allows us to relate the magical act with an *artistic* performance. In fact, according to the contemporary view of Jesper Sørensen, in his work on the cognitive science of religion, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic, Action*, “is the primary element contained in magical agency. By acting a pre-specified sequence of motor

behavior believed to create a specific result by virtue of being a reproduction of a similar sequence of action ascribed to the sacred space” (Sørensen 2007: 67). From a semiotic perspective, rituals serve as mediums for translation and the ‘de-symbolization’ of societal constructs stored in the collective memory. In fact, according to Sørensen, “the procedural character of such actions, devoid of direct ascription of both symbolic meaning and direct instrumental causality, is an important part of the general tendency in magical rituals to de-emphasize symbolic interpretations” (*Ibid*, 68) The character of de-symbolization, is explained by Sørensen, on the interpretation of the magical agency, and the ritual action:

De-symbolization refers to the process by which conventional meaning is taken out of the actions and words employed in the ritual. Strictly speaking, this is part of the general process of ritualization (...) The process of de-symbolization has particular cognitive effects as it redirects attention from the symbolic meaning of an utterance or action to its perceptible (iconic or indexical) features. Further, de-symbolization allows the schematic properties of language to be foregrounded, leading to representations of investment of force (e.g., in iterations) and/or schematic redundancy. Together it is hypothesized that these two features of de-symbolization effectively direct attention towards perceptible features of the actions performed that will connect them to the immediate pragmatic context. (*Ibid*, 237)

According to the mentioned study on the cognitive theory of magic, it is possible to infer that the elements employed in ritualistic acts are subject to symbolic interpretations since ritualized actions demand such interpretations. This is explained in Sørensen’s model (*Fig.1*), where a circle is formed in which “a strong emphasis on symbolic interpretations provokes a search for magical agency elsewhere which, if not already ritualized, will be based on a special agent. When this agent disappears, actions intended to invest magical agency are ritualized and, finally, ritualization provokes a new symbolic interpretation”.

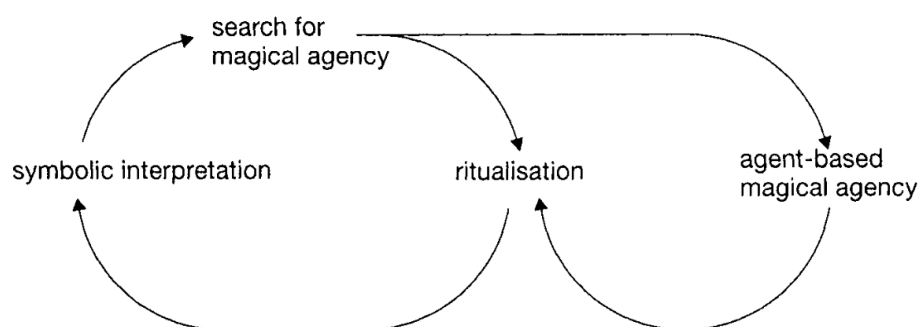


Fig.1 “Loop between symbolic interpretation, ritualization, and agent-based magical agency” (Sørensen 2007, 184).

The first loop represents the ritual use and a *revolving* of existing or imported symbolic material. The second loop has another entity, agent-based magical agency, in which magical agency is present, not by ritualization, but by a direct attributed relationship between an agent and a sacred space. This model of interpretation of the process of de-symbolization, which for this work I would consider more creative to use re-symbolization, because of the character of stirring (revolving), of not only changing or replacing, but of actively exercising an action that stirs the interpretation and the basis of beliefs, not only of the power referred to but of the power of change of a society, which needs the collective union to change. In essence, it becomes a catalyst for redefining the core of reality as a transformative mechanism, which dynamism aligns perfectly with the revolutionary character as it boldly challenges established norms and structures, not seeking to make policies but to the transformation of them.

The concept of magic as semiotic therapy is closely tied to the process of re-symbolization within ritual dynamics, providing an understanding of how rituals function within cognitive frameworks and pragmatic contexts. Magical rituals, as forms of semiotic therapy, often rely on symbolic meaning to convey messages, evoke emotions and facilitate psychological transformation. At the core of the magical act is the process of belief-making, in which collective beliefs are constructed and reinforced through ritualised practices, providing the framework through which symbolic actions acquire power and efficacy. However, re-symbolization, as part of the overall process of ritualization, involves decontextualizing actions and words, directing attention to their perceivable characteristics and their immediate pragmatic context, the immediate action; this shift in focus allows individuals to gradually reclaim agency over their narrative and foster a sense of mastery over their trauma.

Both the goals of activism outlined by Duncombe and the important potential of the re-symbolization process in rituals highlight the transformative process of activism. These aspects are clearly exemplified in a particular artwork that does not seek to romanticize the bleak realities of existence but rather critiques the pervasive issue of sexual violence within the context of death worlds. This artwork pushes us to rethink what these systems mean symbolically and question our beliefs about political oppression.

4. Artivism and Rituals in Colombian Fragments of War

After a five-decade-long war, Colombia reached a historic turning point in 2016 with the signing of a groundbreaking peace agreement. This moment marked the nation's resilience, symbolizing a shared determination to break free from the cycle of violence. During the signing ceremony, representatives from the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC EP) convened to ratify the agreement officially; a particularly impactful moment unfolded when members of the FARC EP laid down their firearms, a compelling and symbolic gesture marking a significant ceasefire. The weapons, once tools of war, were turned into symbols of peace. Instead of disappearing, they took on a new life as a unique form of artistic expression. *'Fragmentos'* (Fragments) (2017), by Doris Salcedo, a renowned Colombian artist known for her work in sculpture and



Image 1. Entrance of the exhibition. Photo by the author. January 2024

installation, with the aim of evoking emotional experiences and reflections amidst violence, armed conflict, mourning, trauma, and collective memory through her art.

'*Fragmentos*' will be analyzed as a case study, aiming to interconnect, in a practical way, the concepts of magic, power, and *artivism*, in order to understand how rituals, through artistic performances, can alter the notions of individual and collective reality and impact our understanding of the magical phenomenon and the belief-making notion, as a transformative power in the sociocultural context. The analysis will be based on Mauss's and Lévi-Strauss's methodology for understanding magical phenomena, which relies on magical performativity and its three major aspects: 1) The description of the ritual; 2) The magician and the circumstances in which the entire ritual takes place; 3) The ideas and beliefs of those performing the magical actions. Simultaneously, the artwork will be contrasted with the eleven basic objectives of a performance that are aligned with the principles of *artivism* presented by Duncombe. In addition to the literary and audiovisual material used for this analysis, an interview was conducted in January 2024 with Johan Gamboa (full transcription available in *Appendix 1*), the delegated director of the exhibition *Fragmentos*, located in Bogotá, Colombia. In this recorded interview, we talked about the process of the artwork, the artist, the magic act, and necropolitics in Colombia.

Doris Salcedo explains: "In war, we speak of attack and counterattack. In peace, we speak of monuments and counter-monuments". *Fragmentos* (Fragments) is a counter-monument. This idea emerged within the context of Colombia's armed conflict, where Salcedo sought to transform violence and pain into an artistic expression that promoted reconciliation and healing. A commissioned work by the Colombian government as a way of not only building memory but also reminding society of one of the fundamental rights of victims: non-repetition. In the short documentary elaborated by the National Museum of Colombia (2020) and directed by Salcedo, it is explained that the nature of a monument is exaltation, and counter-monuments make, indeed, the counterpart of exaltation, inviting to reflect and recognize the victims suffering.

4.1. *The Ritual of Transmutation and Re-symbolization in Fragmentos*

The counter-monument started development with the collection of 39 tons of the handed-over weapons and melting them down. This object, once a *symbol* of violence, is then subjected to a process of material transmutation through fire, as a natural medium of transformation. This allows us to begin to place the creation process of this artwork as a magical act, where we can observe the characteristics of the ritual and its logic presented by Mauss.

After the process of melting the iron, Salcedo invited 17 women victims of necropolitics, more precisely, sexual violence in Colombia, who, now turned into artists, were in charge of forging the metal as a ritual act of “catharsis and healing” (*See Appendix I*). It is important to highlight that within the concept of necropolitics, Mbembe presents sexuality as inextricably linked to violence and the dissolution of the limits of the body and self. As such, sexuality concerns two main forms of polarized human impulses, excretion and appropriation. Establishing a correlation between death, sovereignty, and sexuality (2003: 15). The collected weapons, objects-symbols of threat, violence, and terror, also seen as phallogentric, after being subjected to burning fire capable of transmuting the state of its solid matter, were hammered to the point of creating 1288 tiles that would compound the final work.

Salcedo, whom we could recognize in this analysis as the *magician* (more about this in subchapter 4.2), gathers these women and invites them to be part of the work with the objective of using the symbolic object of war, now transmuted into a completely different material form, shape and function, as a medium of transformation and healing of the wound of sexual violence, where the physical action of forging metal with hammers, allows them to release the rage and pain they share inside.

This ritual of transmutation and forging the metal appears to respond to a precise logic, a collective representation of feelings and common beliefs, which gives rise to an accepted and translated expression interpreted by the group. Taking back the concept of magical semiosis, proposed by Lotman, this ritual, as a system of communicative functions, shows the capability of magic as a sign-creating process. Following a repetition of acts with effects that retroactively modify the symbol, the victims, now artists, described the process

of hammering in this ritualized action, as an act of cathartic liberation from the weight and pain through the symbolic act of forging the metal of these weapons. As presented by Sørensen, under this action it is possible to recognise the process of re-symbolisation of weapons, where their conventional meaning changes for a collective and is exposed to the public. By virtue of the actions and words used in the ritual, particular cognitive effects are produced, shifting the attention from the symbolic meaning of the element of war, violence, and also its direct phallogentric relation to sexual violence. By translating the action into a therapy process, evidencing the indirect influence of the sign and the re-signification process of the symbol and the belief on the unconscious of the magical agents, the effect of magic in this particular ritual is the evidence for considering it as a semiotic therapy.

The civil victims described the catartic process of the ritual, not only referencing the physical action, but also pointing out the phenomenological perception of other elements, the sounds. Where other senses are also part of the process of transformation in the ritual, adding another channel of perception related to the stored memory, an acoustic sign to be remembered and revived in the ritual of transformation

When we melt down the metal, and then we made ‘boom boom’ noises, which sounded like gunshots, the first thing we felt was anger, and we started to hit that again, really hard, and we worked fast (...) Hammer strokes full of anger and fury, for myself, for the others. Hammering out my own story and that of the others because I have listened to the stories of other women victims. (...) One begins to throw out the venom as if to release the anger, and all the thoughts of what happened come to one, then one hits and hits, and when one begins to unload the force, one rests. For every hammering that I gave, I threw away all those memories”. Civil Victims of Colombian Conflict, in *Fragmentos*, the short film. (2020: 18’00)



Image 2 Women forging the molds of the tiles. Photo taken from [Caracol Radio](#).

These women described the moment as a magical act, the ritual of transforming the symbol, as a moment that changed their lives and allowed them not only to express their

deep feelings but also opened a new path that today, according to Gamboa, continues to be built. They now represent the ‘turning watchers into doers’ of activism fundamentals, leading new dialogues around the rights of victims and becoming artists who fulfill the action of guiding, building a community in order to continue the process of healing and transformation of war wounds.



Image 3,4 Taken by the author. Photos of the counter-monument inside. 2024

These 1288 tiles, once weapons and a symbol of war for Colombian people, were placed on the floor of a colonial house in downtown Bogota. An abandoned state-owned house that represents several symbolic aspects for the artist. According to Gamboa, the ruins of the interior remain visible, representing the state of constant deterioration of a body that has been the victim of violence, especially sexual violence. Remembering those places, now contextualized as death-worlds, where the state never arrived, and it is the armed actors who impose law and order, by sacrificing their society. Additionally, the location of this counter-monument is in the same area as the Presidential Palace, surrounded by important battalions, the Palace of Justice, and the Congress of the Republic of Colombia, putting into discussion the position of the circles of power and their complicity in the phenomenon of violence, either by action or omission.

One of the foundations of artivism refers to revealing the reality, to make visible the invisible, and that coincides Salcedo's (2017), with works of art, where through telling stories of victims, she gives voice to those who have none, she says that the three legacies of violence are "void, silence and, absence" and highlights them in the counter-monument. An empty space that proposes silence and reflection and where the absence of those who sacrificed or were sacrificed for a war that did not belong to them is honored.

This ruin is that symbol, seeing that there is a ruin, asking ourselves what happened here in a context of violence, and thinking about those areas of the country that are devastated by violence. In that purpose, it is then marked to leave the ruin, both to place the space in this part of the city, as well as the ruin that feeds the narrative of what is wanted to be told here, which is precisely that counter-memory, the memory not told from the heroism of war but told by those who have suffered the official history, in that context. (Gamboa, 2024)

4.2. Doris Salcedo as a Modern-day Magician

Tapping into ancient beliefs and practices to create something new and thought-provoking, an artist like Doris Salcedo can be presented as a modern-day magician. Much like the ancient sorcerers who wielded rituals and incantations to effect transformations, she harnesses her boundless creativity and imagination to challenge conventions and stir deep-seated sentiments. Just as belief in the magician's skills gave credibility to his incantations, so faith in the artist's vision fulfills their creations with meaning, just as outlined by Hawthorne; emphasizing the artist's capacity of creating and imagining future scenarios.

Known for her powerful and evocative installations and sculptures that often address themes of violence, loss, and memory, focusing especially on the experiences of people affected by political conflict and social injustice in Colombia and around the world, Salcedo's art often incorporates everyday objects and materials, such as furniture, clothing, and soil. These types of elements of natural origin, directly comparable to the objects that magicians incorporate/d in magic rituals, are manipulated and transformed through labor-intensive processes, generally involving techniques such as stitching, weaving, forging, and welding. By altering these familiar objects, Salcedo permeates them with new layers of meaning, evoking themes of fragmentation, absence, and resilience. Through her art, she aims to create spaces for reflection and remembrance, inviting viewers to confront difficult

histories and engage with very sensitive social issues; as an activism principle, *creating disruption*.

Her artistic process generally begins by researching historical events, particularly those related to political violence and social injustice. She collects testimonies, interviews survivors and victims' families, and visits sites of trauma to gather firsthand accounts and materials. According to the conversation with Gamboa, Salcedo's way of construction is deeply collaborative, "she often involves local communities and artisans who contribute to the creation of her artworks". The collaborative character of this artist allows us to recognise the main characteristic and the basis of the magical power, the collective.

In the case of *Fragmentos*, this was explained by the Delegated Director, when asked specifically about the process of contact and participation of women in the artwork:

The selection of the women was a process directly by Doris. Just as her decision within the negotiation itself, that the government chooses her, well, she also starts working with these networks of women victims and makes a selection of these women, who more than victims define themselves as survivors, it speaks to a afterwards, to not give up, to not remain in the condition of victims. (*Ibid*, 2004)

By shifting attention away from trauma and victimhood itself and by focusing on the ritualised actions of this artwork, Salcedo empowered these victims to regain control of their own narrative and overcome feelings of powerlessness and rage. Through this participatory engagement, the distribution of the sensible between the artist and the participants as active agents in their own healing journey, led them to finding healing and empowerment through the shared experience of ritualised action.

The analogy between the role of the artist, specifically in the case study of Doris Salcedo, and that of the magician can be corroborated for several reasons, in addition to those already discussed in this thesis. This arises from a semiotic view of her works, which reveal hidden stories of pain and loss, bringing to light the lives and suffering of victims of violence and conflict that would otherwise remain invisible. An analytical approach of a semiotic nature reveals how her art transforms private pain into visible collective memory, turning personal trauma into a matter of public consciousness. Another dimension that aligns Salcedo with the magician is her ability to transform reality through the innovative use of materials and spaces, turning everyday objects into powerful symbols of memory and trauma, as already stated in subchapter 1.1.1, and according to Mauss, the magician has the

power to influence collectives, and of most important for this analysis, the power to cure illnesses, in this case, understood as traumas. As a magician, and with her status of authority, Salcedo also employs symbols and rituals in her artistic processes, infusing her works with profound meaning through belief-making. Her installations often require lengthy and meticulous processes, reflecting rituals of commemoration and testimony, which imbue her works with a sacred dimension. This ritualistic and symbolic approach is essential for understanding the depth of her work and the way she communicates complex and painful topics.

Doris Salcedo can be seen as a magician of contemporary activism because, through her artistic practice, she unveils the invisible, transforms reality, creates profound emotional experiences, utilizes rituals and symbols, and manipulates space and time to convey complex stories and meanings. Her works are not merely art objects but instruments through which the audience can explore hidden dimensions of the human condition, much like a magician expresses through their craft.

4.3. The Belief in the Magical Act

As mentioned along this thesis, collective belief and its agency, is what drives the power of magic. This leads us to analyze the various beliefs that surround not only the artistic process represented as a ritual, and the belief in the magician/artist, but also the components that contribute to our understanding of belief-making. This understanding goes beyond mere transformation and also extends to the culmination of the magical act. Through the process of re-symbolisation, a new belief emerges, bound up with the outcome, which shapes a new reality, the sensation of healing.

This is why Latour's definition of belief as a result of relationships between people describes the transformative power of ritual. In its ability to unite individuals with a common purpose and belief, it facilitates the creation of new shared realities that eventually become a new reality. This re-signification of a shared idea, represented in various forms, is achieved through dialogue and action. In the case of *Fragmentos*, the possibility of recognising the ritual as a space and act of transformation is what allows the victims to accept being part of the work. These women, now also artists, believed not only in the power of healing that

participation in this work offered them, but also in the power and guidance of Salcedo, who initially invited them to be part of the work not only to collectively transform the symbol and with their labour construct the counter-monument, but also as a space of catharsis where the performative action proposed physical actions, bringing the body to confront exercises that, based on beliefs and realities, have transformative and therapeutic effects.

Semiotic analysis reveals how this artistic practice profoundly stirs the inner trauma of victims by constructing a social belief through collective ritual. Through semiotics, we can see how a performance manipulates symbols within people's inner lives. The interaction between the inner experiences of the victims and the artist-magician's manipulation of signs and symbols demonstrates how these two spheres communicate through the magical-semiosis act of belief. In this context, belief establishes the conditions necessary for the magical act's effectiveness. The analysis of communicative bridges between internal and external processes of belief and the construction of reality reveals how these connections shape our perception of the world. Reality, in this context, manifests as a magical act that can be influenced by shared systems of signs and symbols. This process can be directed towards healing trauma, as the re-symbolization of events in a person's life occurs through the performance of belief-making. This transformative act redefines experiences, facilitating emotional and psychological healing.

As discussed in chapter two, collective beliefs and rituals facilitated by the magician can act as mechanisms for coping with collective trauma. Within this framework, artistic expression serves as a means of materialization. A semiotic act based on a belief leads to a consequent effect, specifically healing in this context. This analysis shows the profound impact of semiotic structures on cultural practices and their potential for addressing psychological and emotional wounds through ritualistic and symbolic actions.

Conclusion

This thesis is structured around the analysis of magical phenomena in cultural contexts. Of particular interest is the exploration of the history of magic and its semantic developments, revealing the connection between magical processes and ritualistic structures. Indeed, as observed in the first chapter, the notion of magic belongs to a polysemous realm that has required the effort of multiple discourses regarding its nature, origin, and development within specific societies. In particular, the discourse offered by the anthropological and philosophical domains has been analyzed through a corpus of texts foundational to the expression of the notion of magic in contemporary contexts. In articulating the underlying challenge in defining the concept of magic, three structural axes of magical processes were delineated: the figure of the magician, the ritual process, and the belief as its main power. Within this context, a reinterpretation of these domains was undertaken not only in light of contemporary philosophical and anthropological theories but also through semiotic approaches and methodologies. By presenting the perspectives of authors such as Lotman and Nöth, the work highlights, on one hand, the expressive power of semiotic analysis regarding the semantic openness of magic and, on the other hand, the limitations of the semiotic field, which has struggled to engage with the topic. Indeed, within the field of semiotics, there have been very few attempts that have rigorously investigated magic and its effects on society and culture through semiotic analysis. This indirectly underscores the contemporary semiotics' need to recognize and shed light on the reasons why general and cultural semiotics have not intensively addressed the theme of magic in social relations and its effects on power dynamics and among individuals.

To tackle the issue of semiotic analysis of magic, the areas shedding light on the characteristics of magic and its effects have been investigated. In particular, the power effects of magical processes in social groups and modern societies have been delineated through notions that have become central in current philosophical debates, such as that of *death-worlds*. In this context, the efficacy of a reinterpretation of power through the lens of semiotic inquiry, relating magical processes to power processes concerning the life and death of individuals, has been described and demonstrated. This discourse has led to addressing issues related to biopolitics, necropolitics, sacrifice, and the structure of the “distribution of

the sensible". The strength of these notions confines magic within its purely social and sensible effects that affect both the individual and society. For this reason, semiotics is one of the tools that must be employed to reframe the concept of magic in contemporary discourse.

Magic, as addressed in the second chapter, indeed opens up semiotic discourse to reinterpret magic as a semiotic therapy. The aim of redefining magic as a semiotics therapy holds the value of re-symbolizing the effects of magic by directing them towards a re-signification on the level of ritual. The ritual, as well as the figure of the magician, are structured within power relations that can be expressed in favor of not only individual but also social healing. Within this work, it is hypothesized that the value of semiotics therapy is founded on belief-making, namely on the structure of meaning creation based on collective belief. In this collective belief, whose strength is expressed in belief-making, lies the ability to realize and give rise to an alternative reality, whose expression intersects the imaginary and the real through belief. In this sense, belief emerges as a communicative form of collective reality, whose enactment is facilitated by belief and ritual coordinated by the magician towards a certain objective. These empirical effects of magic must be rigorously analyzed by semiotics, and this could be a starting point for future research.

In presenting a reinterpretation of contemporary approaches to magic, this study intertwines the innovative field of activism with that of magic, offering a series of analogies and isotopes typical of semiotic methodology. In doing so, a case study drawn from the works of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo was proposed. The case study was presented, described, and analyzed with a semiotic lens aimed at offering an analogy of the structures of magical processes (the magician, the ritual, the belief) with those of artistic activism aimed at healing individuals involved in war trauma within the context of the Colombian conflict of war. The significance of this analysis, whose semiotic methodologies follow some phenomenological and sociological approaches, has given rise to a reinterpretation of activism as a process that resymbolizes collective trauma in an attempt to heal it by altering its signifying content. This allowed us to see how art can serve as a structure for healing social wounds in certain contexts or how a certain type of art can be identified with semiotic therapy. The strength of this analogy has led the discourse of this work to emphasize how semiotics can unveil magical processes within various meaning-making structures (political, social, artistic) that emerge from an underlying structure of belief-making. The innovative

proposition of this work, in fact, presents itself as a proposal to re-read belief in the light of collective knowledge and healing processes, where belief emerges as a necessary structure for any approach to change and, therefore, to revolution. And it is precisely a symbolic revolution that must be discussed when conceiving activism as a process of re-symbolizing meaning processes. The revolution of activism in culture, as well as of magic in society, prescribes a semiotic approach to belief as an underlying stratification of change.

In conclusion, the thesis presents itself as a proposal regarding the therapeutic aspects of collectivity and individuality through semiotic therapy, namely magic. In doing so, the work describes magic and presents it in its polymorphic nature, demonstrating the semiotics' ability to analyze and reinterpret it according to specific paradigms and parameters. Semiotics understood as a critique of ideologies, indicates a way out from the power forces that grip the lives of individuals and societies, whose strength lies in the manipulation of symbols and signs. In this sense, it is a matter of proposing the use of magic as a tool to free the masses from the yoke of power. Ultimately, it is about recognizing the magical power of semiotics, whose positive effects can lead to addressing a new expression of art aimed at the care and healing of society and communities from traumatic events.

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Appendix 1. Conversation with Johan Gamboa about *Fragmentos*

This conversation, approved for publication, took place on January 14th, 2024, at the counter-monument *Fragmentos*, in Bogota, Colombia. Johan Gamboa is the Manager of *Fragmentos*, has a Master's in political science, and is an expert in political art.

- jgamboam@unal.edu.co
- aromero@museonacional.gov.co

Tatiana: How does this space (*Fragmentos*) work? Is it only a counter monument? Or an open space for exhibitions?

Gamboa: In some way, what began with Doris ends up being that some of these 17 women fulfill the function of guiding others to continue spreading their experiences in the space. Last year, for example, there was a symbolic reparative action called *Desamadas* (Unloved). Survivors of forced recruitment were invited, and these walls were filled with micro-stories recounting their experiences in a metaphorical way, with the intention of taking ownership of the space. It's not just a space that was built to be left as is; they invite other people, not just women. The idea is to make the space visible to talk about forced recruitment, forced abortions, being part of an armed group, or being in a conflict zone, lending oneself or having to be in the middle of two armed groups, and well, having to survive those double dynamics where you must be an enemy of both and at the same time collaborate with both. The purpose is for these women to become sources to replicate what was done through Doris.

T: They continue with the maintenance of memory, with the act of change. They (the 17 women), when they exhibit their works, are they only related to discourses and literary texts? Are there objects?

G: Yes, regarding the exhibitions. The latest exhibitions have been more video installations. The last one was by an Argentine artist who spoke about institutional and police violence, and before that, we had an exhibition by Beatriz González, about forced disappearance and the discovery of bodies in mass graves. There have been exhibitions where objects have also been placed on the counter-monument.

T: Let's talk about The House. The ruins?

G: Well, the backyard: It's about putting on paper plants that come from jungle areas, which are very similar or come from more jungle-like areas, alluding to the experience of rural areas in the conflict. And of course, the ruins, which are three segments of ruins, and all the architecture of the space that was adapted based on the ruin. Tatiana: Are the ruins original to the house?

It's a 250-year-old house from the colonial era; as such, the house doesn't have a direct history with violence (more of an institutional neglect of the house). When we see the ruin and place

it, there is a very strong intention from Doris Salcedo that the ruin allows us to connect even if only symbolically with the scenes of violence. So, what the ruins are, the dialogue of the ruin with the counter-monument, and the architectural spaces themselves, which is the work she does jointly with Carlos Granada (architect), is to think about what she defines as the three legacies of Violence:

- Void
- Silence
- Absence

Obviously, with the intention that it not be a monolith, that people also add their own legacies of violence, that people also add their own memories of those phenomena, and that's why there is a dialogue between these three elements: the architectural, the ruin, and the counter-monument.

As for this ruin specifically:

The owner of the house passed away in '62. His properties came under the state's control, and it entered a state of progressive deterioration. So when we think about fragments, there are two key elements: first, a space close to the circles that have been complicit in the phenomenon of violence, either by action or omission. Here near is the presidential palace. Important battalions, palace of justice, and congress. This ruin is that symbol, seeing that there is a ruin, asking ourselves what happened here in a context of violence, and thinking about those areas of the country that are devastated by violence. In that purpose, it is then marked to leave the ruin, both to place the space in this part of the city, as well as the ruin that feeds the narrative of what is wanted to be told here, which is precisely that counter-memory, the memory not told from the heroism of war but told by those who have suffered the official history, in that context.

The ruin invites us to place ourselves in Bojayá in the eastern plains in Urabá, where different armed actors have passed through, or where the state, whether by action or omission, has also been complicit in these acts of violence.

That's another key detail. It's about thinking about oneself, the exercise of transitional justice, that it's not a justice of winners and losers, and it's a justice facing the victims, the truth of those victims, and the recognition of that dignity as victims. Pointing out culprits is obviously important, but sometimes in pointing out culprits, a great deal of truth that many people are demanding is omitted. A mother victim of false positives, a woman, or a child who was recruited by the guerrillas... those types of victims are sometimes overlooked because what's important to people is that the guerrilla or paramilitary be brought to justice and that's it. So, there's also thinking a little about that justice facing the victims, and the purpose that fragments have within the exercise of the transitional justice scenario.

T: How is the treatment of the counter-monument?

G: A cleaning of large proportions is done, specifically line by line, room by room; the rest are the cares and simple maintenance of any floor. However, there are certain materials that can corrode or damage the piece in terms of oxidation. Care must be taken with liquids.

T: How many visitors does the counter-monument have? Is there awareness?

G: Daily visitors: It depends on the season and purpose. 200 pax per day or 30 to 40 pax. Access to the historic center and cultural offerings is hampered by closures of the area due to its proximity to the presidential palace. Another important element is the lack of knowledge about the space. Many people, even living here, pass by and don't know what's here, nor do they know what was done with the weapons. It's a surprise to stand and position oneself on this element and all that each of those marks on the floor represents, of those roughly 50 molds from which a total of 1280 tiles were taken. The molds, or some of them, are in a room of the national museum called Being Society. In that room, there is a segment where one of the sofas taken from the palace of justice is, there are several elements alluding to war and peace, and there are also the original molds used to make fragments.

T: What is the reaction of people to the location and the work?

G: People say, why isn't it on the street, more public space. They expressed that the weapons themselves are not in a museum. But there are also people who come and say...

Recently we had a visit from the Embassy of Northern Ireland and they expressed that in their peace process, the weapons were stored in an underground container and only two people know where they are, and that's it.

So, it's also, many think about how we can resignify the spaces of our territories that have also been transgressed by violence.

It goes both ways. Space is also subject to controversy, and that's the idea. If fragments are a monolith, it's a failure, because counter-memory is controversial, so if fragments were to be a bible, a monolithic untouchable monument, then it wouldn't have the power that Doris herself wants. Let it be a space for dialogue, let it speak, let it spark debate, where exhibitions can even present different versions of violence, or talk about different armed actors. But that's also it, awakening those elements. Until November 2023, there was an exhibition on violence, police repression, and attacks on protesters' eyes in different parts of the world, an Argentine artist worked with survivors of that process in Colombia. And the exhibition was made, video installations, where the idea was to question the actions of the police. Before that, with Beatriz González (Colombian artist) also questioned the actions of the army with false positives. There have been other exhibitions where the actions of the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, actions of symbolic reparation, guerrillas that forcibly recruited personnel from the age of 6, have been questioned. It's also that, they are antagonistic versions, and it is from that antagonism that dialogue is built.

T: Is the state also questioned?

In the exhibition I mentioned about police violence, as they were very recent and concrete events where the people giving testimonies in the video installations were from the governments, where something very much alive, very recent, from the years 2020, 2021, was questioned. People also question that, they question the actions of the state, either by action or omission, remembering those places where the state never arrived and it is the armed actors who impose law and order.

T: Let's talk about the women: How were the women selected to participate in the work?

G: The selection of the women was a process directly by Doris. Just as her decision within the negotiation itself, that the government chooses her, well, she also starts working with these networks of women victims and makes a selection of these women, who more than victims define themselves as survivors, it speaks to afterwards, to not give up, to not remain in the condition of victims. There is a life beyond that, of how painful it was. But it's a cathartic process. It invites us to think that forgiving is an extremely difficult exercise. How there is that extreme of thinking that making war is easy, those who don't make it think that, those who don't have to do that exercise of catharsis or of thinking about forgiveness, also believe that forgiving is easy. We are also in those two extremes, trying to socialize and talk to the audiences of the work.

G: In all the wars of the world, one of the least talked-about things is sexual violence, where rape has become a weapon of war and where violating the body becomes part of the battlefield. So, in that sense, as the book by this author from Eastern Europe, Svetlana Alexievich, would say (*War's Unwomanly Face*), then that official narrative is a narrative of heroes, of men, of grand invasions that invisibilize sexual violence but which has been inherent in any conflict in the world. So the idea is also to put on paper the atrocious act of sexual violence, to give it visibility, and also to understand that it is not an isolated event. There are armed groups in different parts of the world that have the order to rape because it is an act that harms the other, that breaks the dignity of the other, that breaks the being of a person, even though they may physically remain alive but the being has been destroyed. So there is a very strong intention to talk about a topic that is uncomfortable, a topic that is obviously atrocious, unpleasant, but that we do not see in many of the monuments and history books, documentaries that we see precisely about war.

T: Why do all the selected women have stories of sexual violence and there are no other women victims, were they born guerrillas?

G: It lies in the artist and her intention to place us in sexual violence. The faces of women in war have many facets, but the artist wants to place us in the space of the dignity of sexual violence and to think about that body as a territory and what is done by transgressing that body as such.

T: It's the act of "killing the being" without ending the life. "I kill but leave them alive bleeding out." It's very important to connect as if the symbol is the weapon, they were not murdered by firearms, but by the sexual weapon, a violation of life.

G: This also goes hand in hand with what the monument is, it is very patriarchal, it is in many scenarios phallogentric, and in that sense, the counter-monument we have here proposes that dynamic, that's why it's a horizontal body and there's an intention for the monument to be on the ground, there's a permanent contact with that memory, and that's achieved through the feet. So it's very important to highlight that, it's an opposition to the verticality of the monument. Common monuments largely depict male figures, and we see figures, a scenario of a very phallogentric society. So, to break with that phallogentric society that tells a selective story, of a selective memory of war, this completely horizontal body is placed that invites us to talk about that violence against women. Starting with sexual violence, but also talking about other forms of violence against women. In Colombia, women have handed over their children to the war, or have given birth to children in the war, or have been pierced, displaced, humiliated, or forcibly recruited by armed actors, and within

those armed actors, they have also been subjected to types of abuse by their "comrades" within those groups as well.

T: How do you think the peace process in Colombia is going?

G: There are some key elements. The first is that this Agreement involved ending a conflict. One of many in the country. That served as a starting point for other processes. There are very, let's say, ultra-conservative sectors, who have an intention that these processes do not prosper, but it is also about placing ourselves or thinking about what happens behind those dynamics. There are two versions of the country there, a country that wants Peace and another that wants Victory. They are two ways of approaching, of looking at the war. So it's also about seeing that at this moment there are territories where the state was supposed to have arrived, and it hasn't, the bargaining chip is still the coca paste, as happens in some regions of Guaviare and Caquetá, where there are no coins or bills, but the coin and the bill. One buys rice with coca paste, for example. And the dynamics move from there. And all this anxiety that comes in elections, because we are very anxious democracies, not just Colombian, well, these democracies generate very high expectations that ignore processes and that, not seeing results soon, start the great disappointments. Also, the impact of the agreements is not felt as much in a place like Bogotá as it will be felt in a rural area. In a rural area, if there are parts where there is armed conflict, there is crop substitution, where there are phenomena of tourism that reached regions where tourism didn't go before, for example, to talk about some governmental achievements. So, those are also the regions where it is felt more; when the agreement is signed, in a city like Bogotá, one questions, where is the impact? But in the other regions, both positive and negative impacts have been felt. Negative because there are new armed actors, dissidents, who have arrived to occupy those scenes.



Image 4 Taken by the author. Photo with Johan Gamboa at the counter-monument inside. 2024

Magistritöö kokkuvõte

Maagia ja võim rituaalses artivismis: surmailmade sümbolne revolutsioon

Magistritöö uurib maagiat tänapäeva ühiskonnas, rõhutades selle rolli kultuuriliste identiteetide ja kogemuste kujundamisel sümbolite, rituaalide ja uskumussüsteemide kaudu. Vaatamata sellele, et maagial on sügavad ajaloolised juured ning et seda on põhjalikult käsitlenud antropoloogia, on see suuresti semiootika pilgu alt välja jäänud. Käesolev uurimus püüab seda lünka täita, kui uurib maagia ja uskumuste kujunemise keerukat suhet ning näitab, et semiootika võib pakkuda raamistikku maagia funktsiooni mõistmiseks nii individuaalsete kui ka kollektiivsete kogemuste kujundamises. Esimene peatükk annab ajaloolise ülevaate maagiast ning tutvustab antropoloogide ja filosoofide definitsioone, tuvastades neis kolm põhikomponenti: maag, rituaal ja uskumus. Lõpetuseks püüab esimene peatükk raamistada maagia semiootilisse narratiivi, rõhutades selle rolli uskumuste kujundamise protsessides. Teine peatükk integreerib Peet Lepiku kaudu kättesaadavaid Juri Lotmani avaldamata töid ja Winfried Nöthi lähenemist, eesmärgiga joonistada välja semiootiline vaade maagilistele protsessidele. Lisaks uurib see peatükk rituaali, võimu ja tänapäevaste sotsiaalsete dünaamikate seoseid, mõistes viimaseid Jacques Rancière'i mõiste tajutava jaotuskord alusel: maagial on potentsiaali ühiselt tajutav ümber jaotada. Lõpetuseks arutatakse kolmandas peatükis artivismi mõistet, mis viitab võitlusele võimudünaamika vastu seeläbi, et teostatakse sümbolne taastähendustamine. Kolmas peatükk keskendub maagia, rituaali ja võimu vastastikmõjude uurimisele tänapäevases artivismis, millel on potentsiaali teha domineerivate võimustruktuuride kriitikat ning neid muuta. Artivismi peamisteks funktsioonideks on kehtivate ideoloogiate vaidlustamine ning sotsiaalse muutuse soodustamine, mis põhinevad sümbolite taastähendustamisel. Peatükk paigutab artivismi semiootilisse raamistikku, et uurida, kuidas see ristub maagiliste protsessidega, kui püüab mõjutada sotsiokultuurilist arutelu. Viimane peatükk esitab juhtumiuuringu Colombia kunstniku Doris Salcedo teostest „Fragmentos“, mis pakub hea näite maagia, rituaali ja võimu ristumisest. Magistritöö näitab, kuidas Salcedo teos taastähendustab Colombia vägivaldtraumat ja vaidlustab võimustruktuure. Sedakaudu omandavad varasemalt käsitletud teoreetilised mõisted praktilise kasutuse. Eesmärk on näidata, kuidas semiootika pakub uue tõlgendusraami maagia ja artivismi jaoks, rõhutades nende ühiskondliku muutuse potentsiaali. Magistritöö kasutabki semiootilist meetodikat tekstide analüüsiks ja ideoloogiakriitikaks, et pakkuda välja tänapäeva kultuurile sobilik maagia ümbertõlgendus. Siin ühendatakse ajaloolised, filosoofilised ja antropoloogilised vaatenurgad, et uurida, kuidas maagia, võim ja kunst mõjutavad uskumuste struktuure ja sotsiokultuurilisi protsesse. Uurimus rõhutab sedasi maagia tähtsust tänapäeva ühiskonnas.

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Tatiana Jaramillo Jaramillo

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