

Socio-semiotic analysis of the short story *Alta cocina*, by Amparo Dávila.

Análisis sociosemiótico del cuento *Alta cocina*, de Amparo Dávila.



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Abstract.

In this socio-semiotic analysis of the short story "Alta cocina" by Amparo Dávila, we will find discursive traces that refer us to a traumatic past, referring to the conformation of a discursivized story through a testimonial format externalizing from the unconscious a truth for the partial relief of an event that recalls the era of dictatorships and the disappeared that they left in their wake. We work with discursive traces and with the specific relationship that operates between them as indicators of the social concerns of a socio-historical circumstance.

Key words: Semiosis. Analysis. Culture. Discursive registers.

Abstract:

En este análisis sociosemiótico del cuento "Alta cocina" de Amparo Dávila, encontraremos rastros discursivos que nos remiten a un pasado traumático, haciendo referencia a la conformación de un relato discursivizado por medio de un formato testimonial exteriorizando desde el inconsciente una verdad para el alivio parcial de un evento que recuerda la era de las dictaduras y los desaparecidos que éstas dejaron a su paso. Se trabaja con huellas discursivas y con la relación específica que opera entre ellas como indicadores de las preocupaciones sociales de una circunstancia sociohistórica.

Keywords: Semiosis. Análisis. Cultura. Registros discursivos.

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Introduction

The story "Alta cocina" by Amparo Dávila consists of nine paragraphs, without a particular structure, nor a homogeneous extension, it is linked to magical realism in its literary form and attracts us to a dysphoric, timeless atmosphere that sends us to a childish past. Although we never know for sure the age or sex of the narrator, we empathize one hundred percent throughout the story. We must keep in mind that the Mexican author suffered countless vicissitudes since childhood, and as she herself confessed and demonstrates in her texts, fear was a constant feeling that accompanied her even as an adult; inevitably, "Alta cocina" shows us that her way of making fantastic tales creates an atmosphere of empathy and also of discomfort.

Not only is the author capable of making the hair stand on end, she is also a master in the art of leaving an uneasiness in those who read it. "Haute Cuisine" is a story in which the narrator takes us by the hand to the memories, where he teaches us a strange method of family coexistence, the torture of some animals that bring everyone to the table, so much so that the fame of the dish reaches everyone's ears. The narrator does not want to participate in the taking of the animals, because he already knows their inevitable end, but his only action is simply not to take them, although another executioner is ready to bring them. The discomfort of the story is quickly transformed into empathy for the animals and into a judgment of those who allow and carry out the action of preparing them for the kitchen.

Everything that happens in the nine paragraphs is fast, with no room for heroic actions or argumentative modifications, the end is the same, no matter how many times she tries to give a twist to the plot, the author wastes no time in giving hope, she is implacable and the damage has already been done. The little animals die, as well as part of the narrator and the outsider reading.

Even though the story is significantly hopeless and lowers anyone's spirits, it encloses between its lines a much deeper intratextual meaning, which by means of discursive traces and a socio-semiotic approach will be analyzed.

Brief information about Dávila's story and its production.

Theoretical concepts

Culture is a notion with a multiplicity of meanings, which is why it can be understood from many disciplines and therefore has countless definitions. Although for a long time anthropologists, linguists and sociologists studied culture from their fields of action, the scarce dialogue between disciplines generated a number of theoretical-doctrinal complications that made it impossible to materialize a system that would allow a single definition, but, although these disciplines were different, they all had the same conclusion: Culture is intrinsically linked to the construction of "civilization", taking as a logical basis that, if there is a geographical space, this delimits the knowledge generated "only from there", therefore the beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and habits acquired by the human being who is immersed in that geographical space has unique characteristics of "that" society (Tylor, 1981, pp. 4-11).

The aforementioned attends to a historicity divided by the North Americans with the help of the English for its study in three parts: the *primitive culture* whose limit attends to the same economic historical process that marks Marx, simple division of labor, ingrained customs, religious beliefs, evolving to the *universalist culture*, which through historical processes, has been creating restrictions to understand that these ingrained customs are not the same in each society, thus identifying similar but not identical structures that individualize each entity. This gives rise to *modern culture*, or modern vision, where it is understood that the richness of the term is just the ability to nurture and not have a single definition (Giménez, 2016, p. 46).

Within each historical moment of the evolution of culture, we find three phases: *concrete*, which deals directly with customs, that is to say, the ways and forms of life that characterize a people. In its time this conception caused a stir, since no civilization could have higher ranks than European society, in addition to the determination of moral factors, which were conceived as particular to each society, i.e., the whole had similar moral values to build its social fabric. The *abstract* phase in the mid-nineteenth century, focuses on models of

behavior, changes the meaning of custom to model and is delimited as a system that seeks a meaning of values and models that regulate the behavior of people who are within the social group, is a factor for the complex study of law and rules, that is, it manages to abstract certain factors to study, independently of a whole, sectioning it, reducing the term to a system of quantifiable values. The last phase is the *symbolic*, in it priority is given to symbolisms, to the various meanings that things have and to the diversification from one civilization to another, moment in which linguistics takes relevance and will route the term culture to new visions (Giménez, 2016: 58). *Culture* is a modern term that still presents a number of ups and downs regarding how it should be approached.

The previously mentioned conceptions were highly criticized, because North Americans always require studying from a perspective of totality, as a form of superior knowledge about the other, biasing, showing their need to model and make diverse factors enter into those molds. This formulates constant clashes, but it is achieved that culture ceases to be a monopoly studied only by anthropology, so sociology, history, geography, psychology, semiotics and law, as social sciences, come to correct errors imposed by anthropologists who did not link subjects with each other, deconstructing this totalizing abstraction and formulating then the possibility of understanding *Culture* as unique and identity symbolisms dispersed in each civilization, endowing the symbol as an entity to which a meaning is granted, this creates a use, it is the signification what creates Culture (Giménez, 2016, p. 113).

For a long time culture was understood as an unequivocal access to that which was nourishing for the human being. Being cultured was synonymous with enjoying classical music, walks in museums and long silences in the countryside, were the maximum equivalent of culture. This previous vision sectioned those who were economically superior to those who were not, the educated knew how to read and write, had access to fine wood, better cymbals, better cities and more languages. Their field of knowledge was rich and specialized, which is why the definition fell short, since those who were economically poorly positioned had unique knowledge, thus creating a specialized field of knowledge unknown to the better

positioned. This anthropological vision changed when the French Revolution broke out and, although currently this conception is still in vogue, culture is studied more as a changing phenomenon than as a fixed extraction of "what should be" according to the imaginary of a few (Giménez, 2016, pp. 16-17).

With the reconfiguration caused by the French Revolution, academies were born and these promoted open debates that allowed unifying or at least understanding how they analyzed their subjects. North American anthropology had focused on a theoretical-evolutionary line that lasted until well into the twentieth century, but the English, either because they believed they could teach Americans how to improve their studies or as a real impetus to help, focused their studies on a line of historical continuity that allowed the possibility of marking a well-defined system, with defined and identical stages between civilization and civilization, that is to say, it was demonstrated that each civilization had been nurtured by one another and were not entirely unaligned entities among themselves, it is for this reason that a definition of culture frequently used in the field of history is that of the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, who managed to unite in a single definition the human being as a social and biological entity: "Culture is that complex whole comprising knowledge, customs and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Kahn, 1975, p. 31).

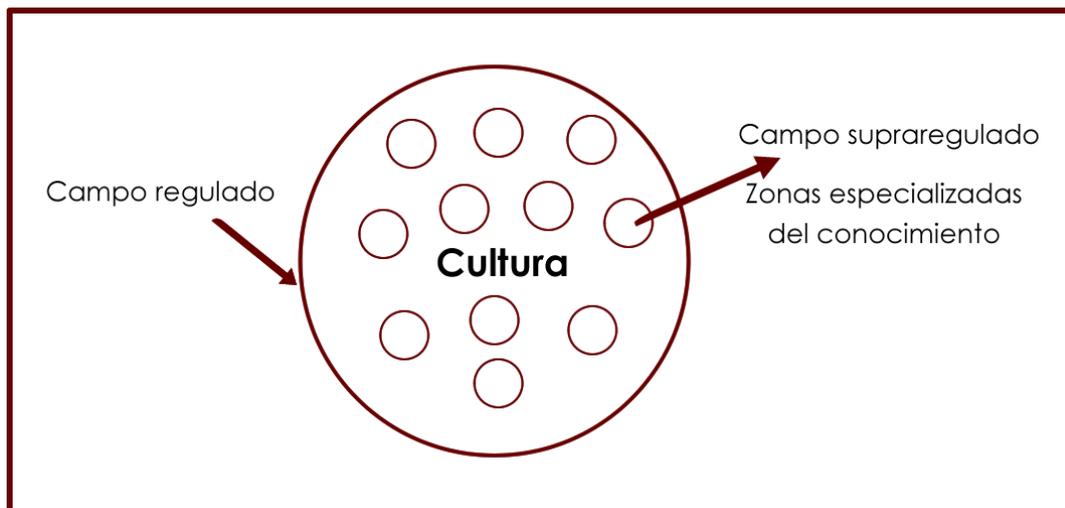
The new era of dialogue marked the end of the 19th century and opened the way to the transdisciplinarity of the 20th and 21st century, emphasizing that everything in culture has a meaning, therefore, following the Soviet Yuri Lotman, culture is a text in itself (Lotman, 1996, p. 82).

For Edmond Cros, discursive formation occurs: "Whenever we can locate and define a regularity between objects, types of enunciation, concepts, choices and themes" (Cros, 2003, p. 14). It is for this reason that discourse plays a capital role in the advent of the subject; it is through its assimilation that a *self* is generated in relation to selfhood and otherness. In the generation of a text, the set of discourses that a subject possesses are consciously or unconsciously activated, giving rise to the textual insertion of various worldviews.

Culture is not a homogeneous field, therefore, we can consider it as an entity that is nourished and evolving. There is a unique phenomenon in it that is identified as segmentation of culture, i.e., culture is a field in itself that is divided into much more specialized fields, with its own limits and rules that allow for interdisciplinarity (Cros, 2003).

A text does not necessarily reflect reality as it is; what it formulates is a total or partial reproduction of social life, homologizing spaces, times and representations for an interpretation of the environment. A tool to study it is to take the texts as occurrences of the Supraregulated Fields of Semiotic Production (See **Figure 1**), which require previous knowledge to access them, i.e., the experience and circumstances where we are born precede the fact, therefore, they play a major role as vectors of social dynamics (González Vidal, 2012).

Figure 1.



Source: Own elaboration

While it is true that culture is a field of order in the world, linguistics and discourse analysis use it to systematize phenomena that need to be individualized for their study, giving rise to the location of discursive marks or registers that allow knowledge to be re-signified. Texts can be anything, but within them there are details that make them unique. Metaphors are frequently used within these texts and thus bring the reader closer to the partial meaning,

as well as provide him with the necessary tools to understand where he is going. The limitation of the text is given by the text itself, but also the subject's own experience that approaches the text refers to the baggage that, conditioned or not, presupposes a meaning different from the one intended when it was created (Lotman, 1996).

In short, culture is the human being's way of being in the world; in other words, it is a mode of existence born of the symbolic capacity of our species.

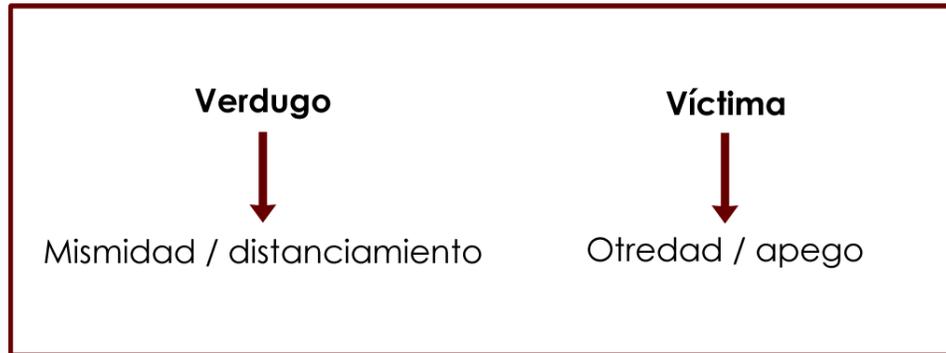
The discursive registers in the story "Haute Cuisine

The previous idea applied to Amparo Dávila's story allows us to find the line of spatial delimitation.

He speaks of a dysphoric and closed space, which, with some other elements, at first makes us believe that the limited space is the family home, more specifically the kitchen of which the narrator subject is intradiegetic (when the narrator is inside the story he narrates) and equiscent (the narrator knows the same as the reader) (Genette, 1993). But it is not the named space where the narrator seems to want to lead, but, rather, refers to the prison environment. The delimitation of space within the text is extremely important because it endows the reader with a feeling of immediacy of the loss of freedom, both in decision making and in the lack of abstraction of the space to which one is subordinated by the family bond and the undermining presented by the narrator.

The subtraction of the condemned is clearly read when, torn from their place of origin, they go and fulfill a function in another space. Playing with the idea of dictatorships, where kidnapping was the mark of subjugation so that the environment knew that "that person" was under a yoke from which he could only get out if he answered "well" to countless questions, the answer to which only the questioner knew. Two main ideas play a decisive role here. The first is the coercion that achieved through intimidation and violence forces the victim to accept his condition and the second is the inaction that the narrator, partially immersed in the same environment, is a forced spectator and not a direct participant (See Figure 2).

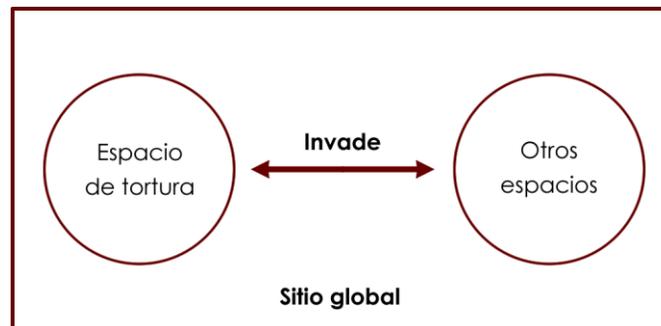
Figure 2.



Source: Own elaboration

The screams are undoubtedly a code that, without prior knowledge, automatically refer us to suffering, despair, anguish, torture. Within the text, anguish is provoked by the suffering of the other, frequently expressed with the representation of water. Rain as the containing symbolization of suffering, affecting a non-participant and plunging the reader into understanding and empathy towards the narrator. While it is true that the above attends to a semantic load, the reader understands that, the narrator is immersed in a situation of torture, suffering and extermination of which he does not want to be part, but he is a partial accomplice (if this figure exists), since he does not provide the victims, but neither does he point out what he sees wrong in it, until, abstracted from the situation he understands the scope of it (See **Figure 3**).

Figure 3.



Source: Own elaboration

To reinforce this interpretation we will quote the short film "Los vecinos" from 2015, authored by the Chilean director Diego Figueroa Saavedra, which narrates us in fiction mode the autumn of 1975 in Santiago de Chile during the military dictatorship. The protagonist, Antonio, whose name we will know by his son on the phone, is an elderly professor, who, because of the political issue stops attending classes and for the time being leave the apartment where he lives alone. He prefers to coexist oblivious to what is going on outside his apartment. He does not read the newspaper, does not have television and does not listen to the radio. He lives, somehow, isolated from the outside, dedicating his time to reading, writing, watering the plants in his garden and only at certain hours listening to classical music, whose time is minimal, we imagine to avoid any news that would break the bubble he has created to repel the "other".

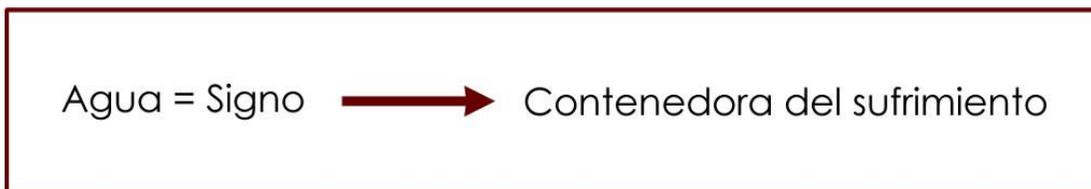
All this changes when new neighbors arrive. First there are light knocks, high radio frequencies, then, it increases when the voices of more people and the screams become continuous, repetitive, heartbreaking. Antonio can only imagine what is happening on the neighboring wall, in fear, while watering the plants, he peeks over the fence and discovers a few armed men, cleaning up in the neighboring yard, playing ball. The ball falls on his side, they ask for it back and wish the professor a good day, who in panic returns to his apartment and avoids at all costs going out to water the plants again. They die, as a symbolism of what is happening inside the professor and on the adjoining wall.

Depression, despair, the impossibility of acting, the suffering he feels for others and the screams, melt the professor into a cycle that is broken only slightly when he hears the undoubted screams of a woman. He screams in turn and hits the wall: "leave her alone" is the only thing that the professor has managed to string together in what seems like months, they stop on the other side, a chair moves, some steps are heard, the knock on the door, the motionless professor listens as a man, the one who presumably carries out the acts of torture, stands at his door and tells him that he should go to breakfast with his son, just as the boy proposed to him that same morning on the other side of the phone in who knows where. The man, weighed down, walks away and continues his work. The defeated professor

resigns himself to plugging his ears, and the next morning he picks up the phone horn and reluctantly accepts breakfast and leaves the apartment.

It is the most harrowing sixteen minutes to experience and it is, without a doubt, a web of unique sensations of which we are aware, but not privy to first hand. We have the context, we know the sensations and we know everything that happens in the short film, but it is the discursive marks that allow us to actually define what we are seeing, what we are hearing and where the outcome is heading. The screams are the code that moves the argumentation in the short film. We can thus say the same thing about screams, tears and water in the whole text of "Alta cocina" by Amparo Dávila (See **Figure 4**).

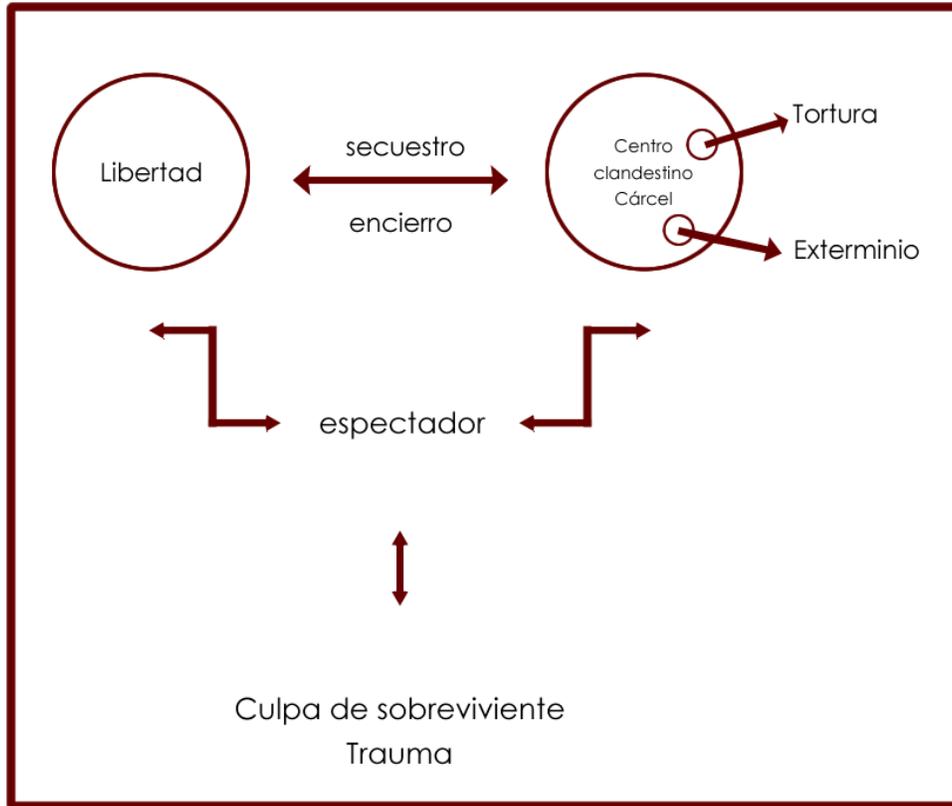
Figure 4



Source: Own elaboration

As in the short film, in Dávila's story the non-voluntary immersion and the empathetic but inactive role create in the narrator a palpable sense of guilt that he has apparently been carrying around for some time. The plausible representation is his constant torment, when, already far from the situation, each representation of the sememic codes, be it the rain, the black beads, the loneliness, cause a physical affection and a systematic regression that prevent him from forgetting his childhood (See **Figure 5**).

Figure 5



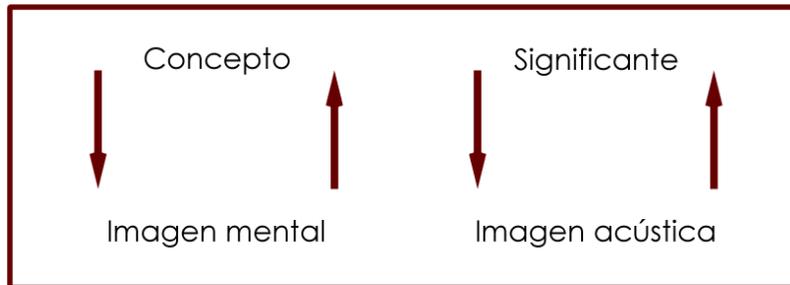
Source: Own elaboration

Trauma

Jacques Lacan, known for his theoretical contributions on psychoanalysis based on the analytical reading of Sigmund Freud, generated a transdisciplinarity between psychoanalysis, philosophy, mathematics, structuralism and linguistics.

Lacan developed a so-called theory of language. In it, he theorized the science of language, that is, linguistics with structuralism, and joined mathematical topology to create a formula to simplify its study. Very much attached to the Saussurian algorithm that it comprises (See **Figure 6**):

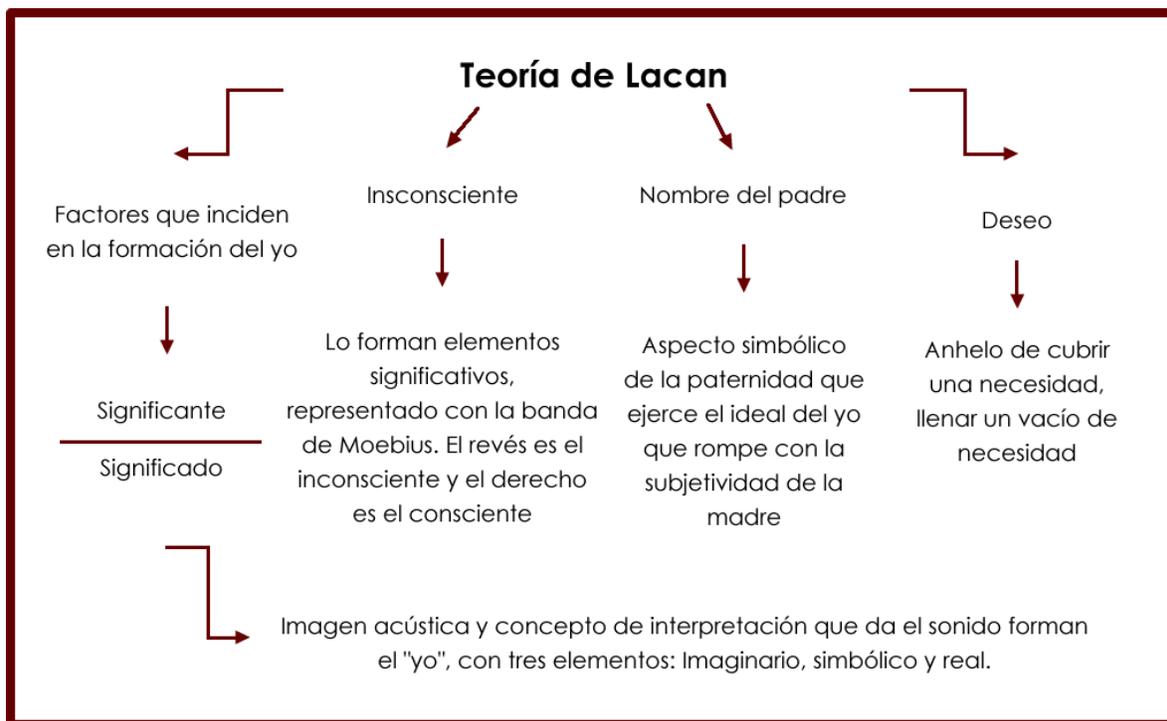
Figure 6



Source: Own elaboration

The Lacanian framework is very simple, it pretends to be a doctrinal tool that states that the "I" is constructed from the discourse of the "other" and it is through language that it is structured, that is to say, others construct us and not ourselves, but: "For Lacan to introduce the concept of unconscious in his elaborations it was necessary that he had the synthesis of multiple thoughts of other authors" (Fernández, 2001, p. 163); as we stated above, Freud's conscious and unconscious I and Saussure's formula. It is necessary to clarify that Lacan's construction is not an extension of these disciplines (psychology and linguistics, respectively), but the use of selected elements that enrich psychoanalytic theory. He uses the best of Freud in terms of his studies of the human being and the structuring of Saussure's language that makes the functioning of the unconscious comprehensible. "Since this author makes a return to Freud, without leaving aside some of these elements that allowed him to think a new theory of the structure of language, that is, of the signifier; in this way, he makes the logic of the unconscious understandable" (Becerra Fuguen, 2014, p.1) (See **Figure 7**).

Figure 7



Source: Own elaboration

Lacan's theory and its framework is there to explain the creation of the subject who occupies his space in language as a reciprocal link.

The structure by itself means nothing if its expression does not exist, where the question of the subject always arises. It is the subject insofar as it is represented by a signifier for another signifier, and the signifier is not apprehensible in its signification if a sign of the subject does not appear there. Therefore, having understood the structural reason that constitutes language in Lacan, it is convenient to observe its resignations taken to the field of knowledge of the unconscious, that is, the subject as effect (Becerra Fuguen, 2014, p. 2).

The above is extremely important, since, the structure that notions the "I" has in its framework the idea of trauma, whose only purpose is to model the subject that will join the language.

According to Lacan, there is an essential and common trauma that we all share: in his *Seminar X*, Lacan goes so far as to suggest that being born is a traumatic experience: he calls it "*the trauma of birth*" [the birth trauma]. We all share this common trauma, because we all emerge into the same "Other environment." (Bruner, 2019)

Trauma is a word that has no fixed meaning, it attends to a phenomenon linked to a situation in which a subject is left with some mental "alteration", but each psychoanalytic tradition has its own understanding of the term. Psychoanalytic thought defines itself in very different terms, in terms of trauma and its persistence (Lacan, 1992, p. 10).

For Lacan, trauma is perfectly defined by Freud, he makes no demerits in what he says and transfers it to his studies as it is:

We describe as "traumatic" the external excitations that are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies such a connection with a breach in an effective barrier against stimuli. An event such as an external trauma is bound to provoke a large-scale disturbance in the energy functioning of the organism and set in motion all possible defensive measures (Freud, 1961: 23).

But, as his thought is epistemologically nourished, Lacan adapts and adds certain factors to the Freudian definition. After reading Kierkegaard, Lacan focuses on repetition, in his book *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1987), we find that he takes Kierkegaard's definition with its two precepts, *Wiederholung* (repetition) and *Erinnerung* (memory) which are two sides of the same coin: "Repetition and memory are the same movement, except in opposite directions, because what is remembered is repeated backwards" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 131). Although he agrees, Lacan believes that these two related concepts have reality as a limit, that is to say, the subject remembers his past but not the traumatic event or events since they are not symbolized for the subject, but the void created by the trauma is there, taking up Freud to complement his idea, "hysterical symptoms can be resolved if,

from them, we can find the way back to the memory of a traumatic experience" (Freud, 1962, p. 195).

All this takes us back to Saussure's signifier / signified, the sign that as a symptom is present in the reading of a doctor to discover the disease in the signs that help us to externalize a trauma. This is why Amparo Dávila's text acts as a means of catharsis to achieve a partial relief and liberation from pain, through a discursiveness in testimony format, very *ad hoc* to the so-called truth commissions, which emerged after the reestablishment of the democratic order after the end of dictatorships, mainly the Chilean one as the most contemporary case.

The externalization of the unconscious discourse is very present as a testimonial format in the song *María Pilar* by the Argentinean Teresa Parodi, where we find figures such as war, dictatorship, torment, disappearance, illegality. This text not only serves as a means of externalization of a trauma, as catharsis and as recognition of a dark time, but as a protest and visibilization, which can be assumed by all those who lived the referenced historical context, "We can verify that the experience of the past was going through a process of discursivization (a "grammar of memory" or politics of memory) from specific forms, which came to have a capital importance in the discursive formation of that moment and were available for textualization" (González Vidal & Morales Campos, 2017: 19).

Conclusion

This is a literary text so the meaning is only suggested and not explicit, but there are many discursive traces whose functions are to link the fictional account to reality. The elements, whatever they are, condescend to make a framework that brings us as close as possible to what is known, although the temporal and dystopian space, the characters, the places are only a representation of reality.

The discursive traces lead to make an inference that allow us to access its meaning. The closed space as a functional use of an imprisonment, the screams as part of a lot of emotions, relief and what actually generates the most perpetual trauma, the kidnapping

represented by the subtraction of the animals from their place of origin to the kitchen where they will be disappeared.

Undoubtedly, the above precepts were extracted thanks to the interdisciplinarity of linguistics with more branches of the humanities, but not only that, culture, whatever its place of origin, contributes more and more in any field, since the knowledge derived from each subject nourishes every aspect of the analysis of almost any text.

It is important to remember that each text is a construction in itself whose conclusions may be different according to the approach with which it is approached, the background of the subject who interprets and the subject from which his vision allows him to focus, are extratextual elements that may be very different from the intention that the author had as a line to show.

However, from a socio-semiotic perspective, the objective is to unveil the paths of meaning circulating in a discursive formation at a given moment of its historical evolution.

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