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## *Magic as a semiotic therapy in activism: a belief-making theory*

*La magia come terapia semiotica nell'attivismo: una teoria del formarsi della credenza*

TATIANA J. JARAMILLO

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### ABSTRACT

La magia opera come fenomeno sociale radicato in una rete complessa di simboli e rituali, profondamente intrecciati nei sistemi di credenza della società. Esplorando il retroterra storico della magia e mappandone le dimensioni semantiche, questo articolo intende reintegrare una prospettiva semiotica sul concetto di magia. La teoria del "belief-making" è centrale in questa analisi, indicando in che modo il processo di costruzione della credenza si realizza attraverso il "triangolo magico" formato da: mago, rituale e credenza, la cui unità dà luogo all'atto magico. Questo approccio è applicato nel caso studio dell'opera *Fragmentos* di Doris Salcedo, dimostrando come il processo magico funzioni negli atti artistici collettivi di guarigione e restaurazione.

PAROLE CHIAVE: arte, attivismo, semiotica, belief-making, Doris Salcedo

Magic functions as a social phenomenon rooted in a complex web of symbols and rituals, deeply embedded in societal beliefs. By exploring its historical background and mapping its semantic dimensions, this paper aims to reintegrate a semiotic perspective on magic. Central to this is the proposal of the "belief-making theory", which argues that belief is actively constructed through a process where magician, ritual, and belief form a "magic triangle," making the magical act possible. This framework is applied in the case study of *Fragmentos* by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, illustrating how the magical process functions in collective activism-based acts of healing and restoration.

KEYWORDS: art, activism, semiotics, belief-making, Doris Salcedo

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### 1. A brief semantic map of the concept of magic

The concept of magic has been shaped by a wide range of meanings, often influenced by conceptual heterogeneity and ethnocentric biases. Historically, it has been contrasted with rationality, science, and religion, particularly in Western thought, where non-Western practices are often labeled as “magical” to emphasize the superiority of scientific progress. Scholars like Stanley Tambiah<sup>1</sup> and Marcel Mauss<sup>2</sup> argue that this distinction reflects cultural hierarchies, with magic often deemed “irrational” or “superstitious”. This distinction shows a Western bias in classifying non-Western practices as “magical” to elevate scientific and technological progress.<sup>3</sup> The discussion on magic is not only an indicator of conceptual boundaries but also a reflection of cultural and intellectual hierarchies. The complexity arises from the differing views of anthropologists, historians, semioticians, and cultural scholars, making magic hard to define.<sup>4</sup> Despite modern advancements, magic is still relevant today, rooted in symbols, rituals, and beliefs that shape cultural identities. Its study covers both European and non-European traditions, explored by various scholars. The many interpretations of magical practices complicate the creation of a unified theory, despite contributions from scholars like E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, B. Malinowski, M. Mauss, and S. J. Tambiah.<sup>5</sup>

This challenge of defining magic traces back to its earliest origins, rooted in the legacy of 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC Greece.<sup>6</sup> The term “magic” comes from the Iranian root *mag-*, leading to words like *maguš* and *magos* (magician), *maguey* (“to act like a magician”), and *magma* (“magician's action”).<sup>7</sup> This term was introduced through the Greeks’ contact with their political rivals, the Persians. It entered Greek through contact with the Persians, where the *mágoi* performed rites outside institutional cults and advised the king. Greek adaptation shifted its meaning, challenging negative stereotypes, with magic understood in antiquity not as a doctrine, but as ritual practices centered on the *magoi* as key figures in *mageia*.

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. S. J. TAMBIAH, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. M. MAUSS, *A General Theory of Magic*, Routledge, London 2001.

<sup>3</sup> A. GELL, *Technology and Magic*, in «Anthropology Today», 4 (2), 1988, pp. 6–9.

<sup>4</sup> D. HAMMOND, *Magic: A Problem in Semantics*, in «American Anthropologist», 72 (6), 1970, pp. 1349–56.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. D. G. HORVAT, *Theatre, Magic and Philosophy. William Shakespeare, John Dee and the Italian Legacy*, Routledge, London 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *Defining Magic. A Reader*, ed. by B. C. Otto, M. Stausberg, Routledge, London 2014.

<sup>7</sup> M. CARASTRO, *L'invenzione della magia in Grecia*, in *Il Novecento. Storia: Storia della Civiltà Europea*, a cura di U. Eco, EncycloMedia Publishers, Milano 2014, p. 434.

Plotinus, founder of Neoplatonism, developed an early theory of magic in his *Ennead*. He argued that magic operates through «cosmic sympathy»,<sup>8</sup> a force connecting all things. By ritually controlling this force, magic influences attraction and repulsion in the cosmos. This idea later influenced Italian humanists like Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, shaping the concept of *Magia Naturalis* and its study in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Plotinus's idea of *sympatheia* influenced Edward Burnett Tylor's theory of «sympathetic magic»,<sup>9</sup> where thought could affect reality. James Frazer later expanded this into the «law of similarity» and «law of contagion», showing how magicians imitate effects or use objects to influence others.<sup>10</sup> Frazer built on Tylor's ideas, studying magic's social aspects with Mauss and documenting rituals for healing, warfare, agriculture, and love.

Mauss viewed magic as a social phenomenon, an «art of transformation» shaped by social roles and collective beliefs. He created a method to study magic's performance and set it apart from religion and science.<sup>11</sup> Together with Henri Hubert, Mauss argued that magic is not just an individual practice but a collective cultural activity grounded in common beliefs.<sup>12</sup> They identified two key principles: all elements of magic stem from collective traditions, and belief in magic is essential for its effectiveness. Lévi-Strauss emphasized that both the magician's belief in their power and the group's collective belief sustains magic.<sup>13</sup> Without this shared belief, magic as a social practice would not exist.

Thus, the various meanings of magic highlight its complexity and historical significance in analyzing social relations since ancient times. However, this also reveals the ambiguity of the term, leading to different definitions proposed by various authors. In recent years, the study of magic has also gained prominence in

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. PLOTINUS, *The Enneads*, trans. by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1966.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. B. E. TYLOR, *Primitive cultures*, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1958 [1871].

<sup>10</sup> J. G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, McMillan New York 1915 [1890], pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> While Mauss's theory of magic has been subject to significant criticism, particularly for its ethnocentric assumptions and its structuralist approach that often disregards cultural dynamism and relational frameworks, this paper employs his perspective as a historical foundation for engaging with the broader debate on magic and belief systems. Mauss's work remains a cornerstone in the anthropological study of magic, offering a systematic framework for understanding its social and symbolic functions. However, it is not the intention of this paper to uncritically adopt his theoretical framework. Instead, Mauss's ideas serve as a point of departure to explore how contemporary approaches—rooted in semiotics, cognitive science, and ecological thought—might reinterpret or expand upon his foundational insights. This historical anchoring allows for a more nuanced engagement with the evolution of the concept of magic in academic discourse.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. H. HUBERT, M. MAUSS, *Sacrifice Its Nature And Function*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1964.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Myth and Meaning*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2001.

other disciplines, including semiotics, cognitive science, and sociology, reflecting its interdisciplinary relevance. From an anthropological standpoint, recent works such as *The Myth of Disenchantment* by Josephson-Storm<sup>14</sup> challenge the notion that modernity has led to the decline of magical beliefs. Instead, Josephson-Storm argues that these beliefs persist and have transformed within contemporary societies. Similarly, Matthews *et al.*<sup>15</sup> emphasize the coexistence of magic, religion, and science, demonstrating how these systems continue to interact and evolve rather than being mutually exclusive. In the field of cognitive science, Gustav Kuhn<sup>16</sup> explores how magical thinking influences everyday decision-making, highlighting its cognitive persistence even in scientifically oriented societies.<sup>17</sup> This aligns with broader discussions in cultural studies, such as those by Harvey,<sup>18</sup> who examines the relational and ecological dimensions of animistic beliefs, further blurring the lines between magic and other epistemologies.

Semioticians have approached the study of magic from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives, analyzing how magical processes function as systems of signs and symbols that mediate relationships within specific cultural contexts.<sup>19</sup> This focus on the semiotic mechanisms of magic expands its significance in ritualistic practices to encompass broader forms of cultural and symbolic expression.

Thus, contemporary scholarship illustrates that magic is not a static or obsolete category but a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon that continues to inform social, cultural, and ecological relations. By integrating perspectives from anthropology, semiotics, and cognitive science, current debates emphasize the enduring relevance of magic in understanding belief systems and human experience in the modern world. For this reason, this article will propose an integrated proposal of magic, showing the ability of semiotic methodology to unfold how the magical act extends through the construction of belief in manifold social layers.

## 2. Magic as a semiotic structure

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. J. Å. JOSEPHSON-STORM, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017.

<sup>15</sup> L. J. MATTHEWS, W. B. HERTZOG, T. KYRITSIS, R. KERBER, *Magic, Religion, and Science: Secularization Trends and Continued Coexistence*, in «Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion», 62, 2023, pp. 5-27.

<sup>16</sup> G. KUHN, *The Powerful Role of Magical Beliefs in Our Everyday Thinking*, in «MIT Press Reader», 19 July 2022. <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-powerful-role-of-magical-beliefs-in-our-everyday-thinking/> (visited 23/01/2025).

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. G. KUHN, *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. G. HARVEY, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, Hurst, London 2017.

<sup>19</sup> S. J. TAMBIAH, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* cit.

A careful analysis of anthropological texts reveals identifiable structures or patterns that govern magical acts and their effects on individuals and society. These structures are embodied in three key elements: the figure of the *magician*, the *ritual*, and *belief*. In fact, at the core of any magical practice is the figure of the “magician”, as described by Mauss<sup>20</sup> and Malinowski,<sup>21</sup> or the “sorcerer”, in Lévi-Strauss’s terms.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of historical or cultural context, this figure plays a central role in the magical action, particularly in the ritual. The magician’s authority is established through their exceptional status, and this power is reinforced by the belief of participants – not only in the magic itself but also in the socially constructed attributes of the magician. As Mauss and Lévi-Strauss emphasize, belief in the magician is critical; without it, the magical act loses its impact.<sup>23</sup> Lévi-Strauss refers to the belief in magic’s effectiveness, pointing to the sorcerer’s confidence in their techniques, the participants’ trust in the sorcerer’s power, and the collective faith of the group.<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, rituals—whether magical or cultural—function as essential mechanisms for reinforcing the authority of the magician and for transmitting collective beliefs within a community. While rituals are carefully structured and follow culturally established norms, they often obscure the deeper intentions or symbolic meanings held by the performer, presenting actions that appear traditional and predictable on the surface but carry layered, culturally specific significance. From a semiotic point of view, rituals within any culture stem from specific ideas or intentions, follow a precise logic, and are guided by traditional norms that reflect culturally contextualized rules for acceptable behavior. Victor Turner argues that rituals reveal the deepest values of a group,<sup>25</sup> expressing social impulses and cultural mixtures.<sup>26</sup> Understanding magic and its rituals emphasizes consideration of the social groups involved, as collective needs often give rise to individual needs.

In exploring Juri Lotman’s contributions to the semiotics of magic, Peet Lepik’s work *Universals in the Context of Juri Lotman’s Semiotics* explores Lotman’s theory of “cultural universals”.<sup>27</sup> While Lotman did not directly publish any texts about magic, Lepik analyzes lecture notes to examine his thoughts on magic as part of a

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. M. MAUSS, *A General Theory of Magic* cit.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. B. MALINOWSKI, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic. A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, George Allen & Unwin LTD, London 1935.

<sup>22</sup> C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, New York 1963.

<sup>23</sup> ID., *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Routledge, London 1987, pp.167-185.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. ID., *Structural Anthropology* cit.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. V. TURNER, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1977.

<sup>26</sup> ID., *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology*, in «Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies», 60 (3), 1974, pp. 53-92.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. . LEPIK, *Universals in the Context of Juri Lotman’s Semiotics*, Tartu University Press, Tartu 2008.

broader system of intellectual algorithms. Lotman saw culture as built upon universal structures, such as mythological, magical, religious, antithetic, and metaphorical codes – each serving as essential components of human intellect. These universals organize, store, and transmit information, forming a framework for understanding cultural texts and rituals.

Lotman's understanding of ritual is deeply associated with his semiotic theory, through which he describes ritual as an integral communication system linking the profane and sacred worlds. Rituals, in his view, encode and transmit information, transforming culture through repetitive acts that organize memory and meaning.<sup>28</sup> This process echoes Lepik's analysis of Lotman's views on magical semiosis, where magic is treated as a sign-making system.<sup>29</sup> Lepik argues that magic, as a cognitive and communicative act, operates as an intellectual instrument that creates meaning through ritual.<sup>30</sup>

The magical act, according to Lotman,<sup>31</sup> represents a crossing of semiotic boundaries – a creative process that generates new languages and meaning systems. This crossing introduces new semiotic fields, as described by Lepik:

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.<sup>32</sup>

Lotman's interpretation of magic as a semiotic phenomenon positions it as a pre-verbal, systematic act that generates meaning through ritual. This framing highlights the role of magic in human culture, where rituals not only communicate but also transform collective memory into meaningful semiotic structures. Despite the lack of institutional support in modern times, magic has persisted, as Lepik notes analyzing Lotman's lectures: «Magic has turned out to be a unique phenomenon in culture because it has strangely managed to survive in varied forms».<sup>33</sup> The semiotic approach highlights the profound link between magic and collective memory, emphasizing its role in shaping community identities over time and across different contexts. Through the ongoing transformation of signs and rituals, communities

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. J. LOTMAN, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, I. B. Tauris, London 1990.

<sup>29</sup> P. LEPIK, *On universalism in connection with the interpretation of magic in the semiotics of Juri Lotman*, in «Sign Systems Studies», 30 (2), 2002, pp. 555–576.

<sup>30</sup> P. LEPIK, *Universals in the Context of Juri Lotman's Semiotics* cit., p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> When speaking of Lotman's positions on magic, remember that no writings on magic have been published by the Russian semiotician, so we refer to Lepik's analyses as cited above.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 97.



employ magic as a means of processing collective traumas, creating shared narratives that shape and redefine their worldview.

Mauss<sup>34</sup> also emphasizes that rituals are more than mere symbolic acts or contracts; they are transformative processes, akin to the work of craftsmen. However, it is through a semiotic perspective that the dynamics of rituals can be unpacked, revealing how they are deeply connected to spatial and symbolic elements, shaping the collective reality they act upon. From a cultural semiotic standpoint, these ritual acts form the foundation of social relations, transmitting knowledge and meaning. As the semiotic tradition<sup>35</sup> has effectively demonstrated, all cultural phenomena – whether in art, science, or magic – operate as negotiations of meaning. Repeated ritual actions solidify into traditions, creating shared belief systems that support and perpetuate these practices.<sup>36</sup>

This collective belief, as Bruno Latour argues, is not an isolated mental state but the product of interactions and relationships among people, shaped by shared experiences and narratives.<sup>37</sup> Belief, then, becomes a social phenomenon, emerging from communal interactions and reinforced through rituals. In this sense, magical rites only hold power when recognized and believed in by the community.<sup>38</sup> Thus, rituals, both magical and other forms of expression, act as communicative processes, enabling intersemiotic translations. It is in this perspective that Georges Bataille links art and magic, suggesting that both arise from a fundamental human interaction with the world, reshaping reality through symbolic interpretation and collective belief.<sup>39</sup> In this view, magic and art share the ability to manipulate reality, using symbols and rituals to negotiate meaning within a cultural context.

### 3. Magician, rituals, and belief

<sup>34</sup> M. MAUSS, *Techniques of the Body*, in *Incorporations*, ed. by J. Crary and S. Kwinter, Zone Books, New York, 1992 [1934], pp. 455–477.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. A. J. GREIMAS, *Du sense*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 1970; P. FABBRI, *La svolta semiotica*, Laterza, Roma 1998.

<sup>36</sup> As noted by a reviewer, it would be valuable to explore how rituals, collective beliefs, and meaning are connected to collective consciousness, the unconscious, and social and cultural habits. However, due to space limitations, this topic will be left for future investigation, requiring thorough attention and scientific rigor.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. B. LATOUR, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Duke University Press, Durham 2010.

<sup>38</sup> 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 regarding the “fixation of belief”. Cfr. C. S. PEIRCE, *The Fixation of Belief*, in «Popular Science Monthly», 12 (1), 1877, pp. 1–15.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. G. BATAILLE, *La peinture préhistorique. Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, Éditions d'Art Albert Skira, Genève 1980.

Magic and beliefs emerge not only as forms of cultural production but as dynamic forces that shape the symbolic and material realities of society. In an analogical approach offered by semiotics, we can observe how this expression of manipulation<sup>40</sup> acts similarly in the practice of artists and craftsmen who, through their creative processes, reconfigure the world by incorporating meaning into their works. Just as a magician or sorcerer uses ritual and beliefs to transform perceptions and experiences, artists and craftsmen imbue their creations with meaning by altering the symbolic and material aspects of society. Artists, like magicians, insert deeper cultural or emotional meaning into their works. Thinking and making are identified<sup>41</sup> in this magical-artistic expression. Craftsmen, through their manipulation of matter and the forms of nature, draw on rituals capable of transforming personal and collective realities, as well as politics and society. Belief, however, serves as the basis on which magical rituals, scientific practices, and artistic expressions take shape, highlighting their universal role in all disciplines.

It is evident that many individuals participate in rituals, scientific practices, and artistic expressions not necessarily because they fully endorse the specific messages, meanings, or purposes associated with these activities, but rather for the social experience they provide. However, belief functions as a foundational element underlying any action within a social context. For instance, participation in rituals often stems from a belief—explicit or implicit—that the activity holds some utility, even if one consciously perceives it as futile; otherwise, the action would not be performed. Similarly, individuals engage in artistic expressions, often driven by social dynamics and pressures, because there is an underlying belief that other participants or observers assign meaning or value to these actions. This subtle and pervasive role of belief underscores its fundamental importance in shaping social interactions and cultural practices. In short, belief is not only oriented on the performance of an act and its positive function but extends under every decision-making in a certain social fabric.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> For Greimas, manipulation is a central concept within his semiotic theory, particularly in narrative semiotics. Manipulation refers to the process by which one subject (the manipulator) influences the actions of another subject (the manipulated) to make them perform a certain action or adopt a particular behavior. This does not necessarily occur through coercion, but rather through the use of persuasive strategies, promises, threats, or symbolic incentives that convince the manipulated to do what the manipulator desires. Manipulation involves a dimension of symbolic contract, in which the manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, accepts the conditions set by the manipulator. Cfr. A. J. GREIMAS, *Du sens II: Essais sémiotiques*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1983. For a renewed perspective on this term in contemporary semiotics, see: *Towards a Semiotics of Manipulation*, ed. by A. Pozzo, R. Gramigna, in «Versus – Quaderni di Studi Semiotici», 2, July-December 2023.

<sup>41</sup> L. MALAFOURIS, *How does thinking relate to tool making?*, in «Adaptive Behavior», 29 (2), 2021, pp. 107-121.

<sup>42</sup> Refer to the well-known example that illustrates how, when faced with uncertainty in making a choice, we often flip a coin to let fate decide. However, as the coin spins in the air, we instinctively find ourselves hoping for one specific outcome over the other, revealing our true preference. This



This process mirrors the creative power of art, where artists, through imagination and symbolic manipulation, generate new interpretations of reality that are collectively accepted and understood. In both magic and art, belief functions as a transformative force: what is imagined, when shared and ritualized, becomes reality.<sup>43</sup> Lotman's semiotics indeed frames magic as a cultural system that continuously transforms collective memory through processes of meaning-making, linking past trauma with present understanding.<sup>44</sup>

Just as belief in the magician's power legitimizes their rituals,<sup>45</sup> belief in the artist's vision, imagination, and creativity affirms the significance of their creations. Viewing the magician through the lens of art highlights the shared qualities of creativity and imaginative power, underscoring their profound impact on the rituals they perform. In fact, American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne's theory of art and creative imagination, as studied by Harry C. West, places the artist on the same level as the magician.<sup>46</sup> West refers to Hawthorne's comparison of the imaginative and creative abilities shared by both figures. This ability to envision and create future scenarios, a "vision of poetic truth", and the modification of reality allows meaning to be found in both objects and ritual actions.

Magic is a form of communication in which rituals act as acts of healing or transformation, interpreted by both the individual and the group. The analogy between the magician and the artist offers a compelling lens for understanding certain dynamics of creative power, transformation, and belief. While this analogy is not fully developed here, it provides a foundational framework that can be expanded upon in future research. It reveals some critical intersections between these two figures:

- 1) Creativity as the power of the magician/artist: Both the magician and the artist wield creative power, utilizing their imagination to project new realities. This power is not merely personal but also collective, as it shapes

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demonstrates how belief operates as an underlying foundation, subtly guiding our decision-making even when we attempt to rely on chance to resolve our indecision.

<sup>43</sup> A. MILLER, *The Artist as Magician*, in «Meanjin», 62 (2), 2003, pp. 41–47.

<sup>44</sup> This relationship between magic, collective memory, and the transformation of trauma will be discussed in greater detail in Section 4 and in the Case Study, where the role of rituals and symbols in re-shaping collective narratives is further analyzed.

<sup>45</sup> The legitimization of this radical perspective on belief naturally takes into account other factors at play, such as social pressure, the desire for inclusion, power and force, conspicuous wealth, habits, and more. However, belief, as we are conceptualizing it here, is a driving force behind the subject's actions within a complex and stratified social fabric. This does not imply that belief functions as a linear mechanism driving social relations. Rather, through an infinite chain of interconnected beliefs about various aspects of the world, this chain gives shape to social pressures, desires, power dynamics, and, as Charles Peirce argues, habits. These habits ultimately consolidate ancient beliefs that, over time, become so ingrained that we no longer consciously recognize them as beliefs.

<sup>46</sup> C. H. WEST, *Hawthorne's Magic Circle: The Artist as a Magician*, in «Criticism», 16 (4), 1974, pp. 311–325.

both individual perceptions and broader cultural narratives. The magician creates an illusion or transformation, while the artist produces a work that challenges or redefines the audience's understanding of the world. This shared ability to influence and reshape perspectives highlights their analogous roles as creators within their respective domains.

- 2) Transformation through ritual and art: Magical rituals and artistic processes share a structured nature, employing symbolic manipulation to induce change. For the magician, this transformation may manifest as healing, altering material reality, or engaging with the metaphysical. Similarly, the artist engages in symbolic acts—whether painting, writing, or performing—that can transform not only how the audience perceives the world but also how they act within it. These transformations are embedded in the use of symbolic codes that are understood within a cultural context.
- 3) Belief as a mechanism: Central to both magic and art is the concept of belief. Drawing on Charles S. Peirce's<sup>47</sup> insights into belief and habit formation, it becomes evident that both the magician's and the artist's power rely on the audience's trust in their ability to transcend the ordinary. In both cases, belief acts as a semiotic foundation: for the magician, belief in their ability turns what might be perceived as mere trickery into a meaningful act of transformation; for the artist, belief in the authenticity and communicative power of their work allows art to reveal deeper truths through imagination and symbolism.

This analogy between the magician and the artist underscores their shared capacity to reshape perceptions and realities. However, it should be noted that this comparison is not exhaustive and requires further development. Both figures operate within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that influence how their power is perceived and legitimized. Future research could explore how these contexts mediate the audience's trust and the efficacy of their actions, providing a more comprehensive analysis of this analogy's potential.

#### 4. *Magic in artivism as a semiotic therapy*

Magic, as mediated through collective beliefs and rituals, serves as a crucial tool for addressing and processing collective trauma by providing a communal framework for interpreting shared pain and suffering. This fosters social cohesion and resilience. Italian semiotician Patrizia Violi highlights that trauma is no longer

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<sup>47</sup> C. S. PEIRCE, *The Fixation of Belief*, in «Popular Science Monthly», 12 (1), 1877, pp. 1–15.

viewed as an ontological or universal experience but rather as a culturally shaped phenomenon, subject to varying interpretations depending on specific contexts.<sup>48</sup> Trauma, whether personal or societal, imprints deeply on memory and shapes belief systems, influencing how the past is understood and impacting present and future experiences. Violi further argues that collective trauma operates as a «cultural symbolic process»,<sup>49</sup> reconstructing and reinterpreting trauma in hindsight, thus influencing how it is remembered. Gilad Hirschberger, who emphasizes the role of meaning-making in trauma-affected societies, argues that trauma victims find meaning through culturally transmitted traditions, which focus on group survival.<sup>50</sup> This embeds trauma within symbolic meaning-making systems, strengthening group identity and mitigating existential threats. In this way, collective trauma becomes central to a group's identity, shaping its worldview and prolonging the memory of the event, making closure more difficult. Magic's role in collective healing ties into this, functioning not just as a cultural practice but as a mechanism for managing collective trauma.<sup>51</sup>

This interpretation aligns with the German semiotician Winfried Nöth's concept of magic as «semiotic therapy»,<sup>52</sup> where magic is understood as a communicative act that serves as a therapeutic process for both mind and body. Nöth builds on Malinowski's idea of magic as a symbolic act intended to bridge gaps in practical life and resolve crises. Viewed through this lens, magic functions as a symbolic and therapeutic tool, influencing the unconscious and fostering collective healing. Nöth further incorporates biosemiotic perspectives, examining animal behavior to shed light on ritual. He argues that ritual, as an evolutionary adaptation of behavior, serves a communicative function by enhancing the clarity of signals for their recipients. Emotional expressions are conveyed through intentional, goal-directed actions, which sharpen communication and increase the effectiveness of rituals. This insight, merging both socio-cultural and biological perspectives, underscores the universal role of rituals in communication among humans and animals alike.

These transitions, marked by ritual, serve as mechanisms for processing information and guiding individuals through life stages.<sup>53</sup> Thus, rituals play a fundamental role in encoding and transmitting cultural memories, shaping both individual and collective identities.<sup>54</sup> What semiotics must reconsider in depth is the

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. P. VIOLI, *Landscapes of Memory. Trauma, Space, History*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, pp. 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> G. HIRSCHBERGER, *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning*, in «Frontiers in Psychology Journal», 9, 2018, p. 1441.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. B. MALINOWSKI, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston 1948.

<sup>52</sup> W. NÖTH, *Handbook of Semiotics. Magic*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1990, p. 188.

<sup>53</sup> A. VAN GENNEP, *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1960.

<sup>54</sup> J. LOTMAN, *On the dynamics of culture*, in «Sign Systems Studies», 41 (2/3), 2013 [1992], pp. 355-370

foundational structure that enables these dynamics to take shape, particularly the role of belief and its influence across cognitive, social, ritual, religious, scientific, and discursive processes.

### 5. *Transformative potential of activism*

Magic's role in collective healing, as a symbolic and therapeutic process, parallels the transformative potential of *artivism*. The blend of the words "art" and "activism", refers to the practice of using art as a tool to address and challenge social and political issues. While the exact origin of the term remains unclear, its use has grown in contemporary discourse, describing artists who infuse their work with explicit social or political meaning.<sup>55</sup> Artivists aim to reveal hidden truths and bear witness to societal traumas, often operating anonymously to confront power structures and expose the consequences of injustice. Although artivism differs from traditional activism, which directly seeks to change power relations, it plays a distinctly political role by offering new perspectives and reshaping how audiences perceive the world. The primary goal of artivism is not artistic appreciation but to raise awareness and spark discourse around socially relevant issues, transforming art into a language of social change.

Artivism exists at the intersection of art and activism, blending creative expression with sociopolitical action. Unlike traditional activism, which often focuses on direct material outcomes, artivism leverages the affective power of art to evoke emotions, challenge perceptions, and inspire reflection. Rather than treating artivism and activism as rigidly distinct, they are better understood as points on a spectrum, with most practices occupying a hybrid space. As Grant Kester<sup>56</sup> highlights through *dialogical aesthetics*, and Claire Bishop<sup>57</sup> through relational art, artivism blurs boundaries by combining symbolic transformation with tangible sociopolitical engagement. This spectrum allows for flexibility, acknowledging the interplay between creative and material effects in driving change.

Recent insights from cognitive science reveal that we understand our world less through logical analysis and more through stories and symbols that shape how we process information.<sup>58</sup> This aligns with the principles of artivism, which seeks to move people emotionally rather than relying solely on rational argumentation. As

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<sup>55</sup> Cfr. T. V. REED, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. G. H. KESTER, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. C. BISHOP, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking, fast and slow*, Straus and Giroux, Farrar 2011.

activists know well, individuals don't typically change their minds through sober reflection; rather, they are inspired to act by emotionally resonant stimuli. The relationship between affect and effect is thus intertwined, suggesting that affect (the emotional impact) must precede effect (the tangible change). As Stephen Duncombe emphasizes, «[...] before we act in the world, we must be moved to act».<sup>59</sup> These actions, then, both affect individuals and have an effect on the social landscape, contributing to the collective consciousness and the transformative power discussed earlier in relation to ritual. Duncombe acknowledges the challenges in measuring the efficacy of activism and the precise nature of social change. Nevertheless, he asserts that the outcomes depend fundamentally on the artist's intentions, positioning the artist as a kind of magician who navigates the transformative process within the unconscious of society.

In the research titled *Does it Work? The Effect of Activist Art* (2016) conducted by the Center for Artistic Activism and led by Stephen Duncombe, a framework of objectives is established to evaluate the effectiveness of activism as a catalyst for societal change. Key objectives include fostering dialogue around uncomfortable issues through controlled artistic settings, building and valuing community, and creating physical spaces for political engagement. The research emphasizes the importance of inviting participation, transforming both environments and experiences and revealing unseen realities to provide new perspectives. It also highlights the need for disrupting cultural norms and offering utility to specific audiences through actionable art practices. Furthermore, the objectives stress the significance of both imminent cultural shifts in public discourse and immediate material impacts that alter physical realities and socio-political practices. Collectively, these objectives provide a comprehensive approach to understanding and harnessing the transformative potential of activism at all levels, in which one can see the making of art in the process of sociopolitical therapy.

## 6. *Activism as a de-powerment device*

The collective nature of activism, along with its ability to transform participants' perceptions, draws a parallel between magical acts and *artivistic* performances. Jesper Sørensen emphasizes that action is central to magical agency.<sup>60</sup> He asserts that by executing a specific sequence of behaviors, individuals believe they can produce a desired outcome, mirroring actions associated with sacred spaces. From a semiotic perspective, rituals facilitate the translation and "de-symbolization" of

<sup>59</sup> S. DUNCOMBE, *Does it Work? The Effect of Activist Art*, in «Social Research», 83 (1), 2016, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> J. SØRENSEN, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic*, AltaMira Press, Lanham 2007.

societal constructs embedded in collective memory, like a “de-powerment” that can manifest when the symbols and rituals that once held significant cultural, spiritual, or social power are reinterpreted or rendered meaningless. Sørensen describes ‘de-symbolization’ as «[...] the process by which conventional meaning is taken out of the actions and words employed in the ritual»,<sup>61</sup> and notes that the procedural nature of these actions often downplays symbolic meanings and direct causal relationships, reflecting a tendency in magical rituals to shift focus away from traditional interpretations. This emphasis on de-symbolization aligns with the objectives of activism, which seeks to disrupt conventional understandings and create new dialogues, ultimately transforming societal perceptions and experiences. By drawing on the cognitive processes behind magic, activism can be seen as a powerful mechanism for change, engaging participants in a transformative journey that challenges their existing beliefs and contributes to collective healing and awareness.

The study on the cognitive theory of magic suggests that the components used in ritualistic acts are open to symbolic interpretations, as these ritualized actions inherently require such interpretations. Sørensen’s model illustrates this concept (Fig. 1) by depicting a cyclical process where a strong focus on symbolic meanings prompts individuals to seek magical agency elsewhere. If this agency is not already ritualized, it will be attributed to a particular agent. Once that agent is no longer present, the actions intended to confer magical agency become ritualized, ultimately leading to the development of new symbolic interpretations.

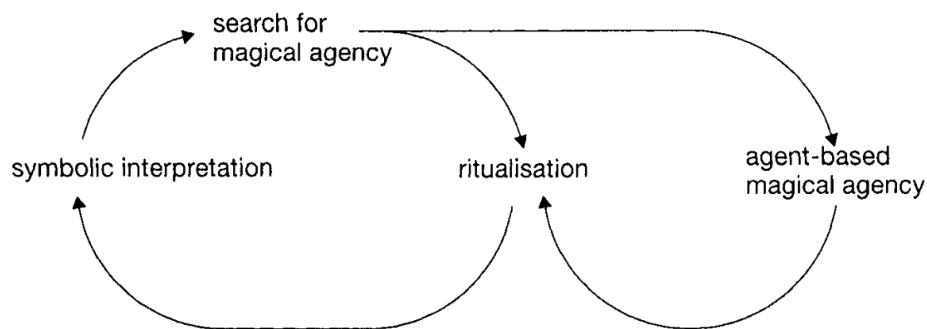


FIG. 1 – Loop between symbolic interpretation, ritualization, and agent-based magical agency (SØRENSEN 2007, p. 184).

The first loop in the model illustrates the ritualistic use and cyclical nature of existing or imported symbolic material. In contrast, the second loop introduces an agent-based magical agency, where magical agency arises not through ritualization but through a direct relationship between an agent and a sacred space. For this analysis, we prefer to

<sup>61</sup> Ivi, p. 237.



use the term “re-symbolization” instead of “de-symbolization” because we are referring to processes where symbols are not just being stripped of their original meanings but are actively being given new or transformed meanings. “Re-symbolization” reflects a dynamic process where the meaning is fluid, shifting to adapt to new contexts or collective beliefs. In contrast, “de-symbolization” implies a more static process where meanings are removed or reduced to perceptible elements (like the physical attributes of an object). When focusing on how rituals or actions are evolving to take on new meanings – especially through communal reinterpretation – re-symbolization highlights this active transformation. When symbolic objects, acts, or rituals gain new roles or significance within society, it’s more accurate to describe this as re-symbolization, as it encompasses not only the alteration or replacement of symbols but also the active process of reshaping interpretations and the foundations of belief.

### *7. Belief-making theory: the core of magical effect*

In the context described, activism functions as a magical process rooted in belief-formation, where its power lies in deactivating certain symbols by re-signifying them through precise rituals orchestrated by the artist-magician. This redistributes power based on a shared belief. The narrative framework for what can be called “belief-making” – presented as a working hypothesis – can be traced through various everyday expressions found in society. This enables us to articulate how belief-making manifests in different social phenomena, providing a basis for defining the concept.

Belief-making can be understood as a deep semiotic process within the semiosphere, emerging from a collective and relational process of interpretation shaped by past knowledge and experiences stored in society’s memory. At the same time, it is also a cognitive process that produces tangible effects on both body and mind, guiding behavior in social contexts. It creates an identification between imagination and reality or even compels reality to align with imagination. Magic opens up a semiotic discourse that reinterprets both magic and activism as forms of semiotic therapy.

The goal of redefining magic as semiotic therapy is to reframe the effects of magic, directing them toward cultural re-signification through ritual and art. Rituals and the role of the magician are embedded within power dynamics that can be directed towards healing – both individual and collective. This work demonstrates that the value of semiotic therapy is grounded in belief-making, a structure of meaning-making founded on collective belief. The power of belief-making lies in its ability to materialize alternative realities, where the imaginary and the real intersect through shared belief. In this sense, belief becomes a communicative form of

collective reality, enacted through ritual and belief coordinated by the magician or the artist in their manipulation of social reality. The empirical effects of magic in art and the art of magic require rigorous analysis by semiotics, presenting a promising direction for future research.

In this sense, what we are asserting is that at the foundation of acts that manipulate reality – whether they be political actions or simple everyday statements about information concerning the world – there lies a process of belief-making. Consider, for instance, the placebo effect, which is a form of self-suggestion induced by the relationship with a recognized authority (in this case, the doctor, but not exclusively), leading the individual to trust in the truth of a given belief. Strengthened by this conviction, the believer activates a physiological process within their body, the effect of which aligns with their thoughts.

This can be argued based on the fact that, before making any claim about the world, there must be an underlying belief-making process,<sup>62</sup> a process that is inherently semiotic. Belief, therefore, forms the basis of every cognitive process, since to gain any kind of knowledge about an object in the world, one must first believe in the existence of that object, believe that the object possesses certain properties, and believe that what one knows and experiences about it is true. For this reason, belief is intimately connected to the notions of reality and truth, both in philosophy and semiotics. Moreover, Umberto Eco referred to semiotics as a “theory of lies”,<sup>63</sup> suggesting that semiotic analysis involves identifying and dismantling the lies perpetuated by power. In this way, belief emerges as an inherently cognitive process that simultaneously engages with reality, truth, and power. So, to paraphrase Duncombe’s phrase «Before we act in the world, we must be moved to act», we can say “Before being moved to act, we must believe in something that exists in which to act”.

### 8. Case study: the ritual of de-powerment and re-symbolization in *fragmentos*

After five decades of conflict, Colombia reached a pivotal moment in 2016 with the signing of a landmark peace agreement. This event signified the nation’s resilience and collective resolve to escape the cycle of violence. During the official

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<sup>62</sup> It can be hypothesized that there is a minimal belief in this relation to the objects of the world that we share with other organisms. The minimal belief can be interpreted from a biosemiotic perspective, where organisms, in order to construct their *semiotic niche*, need to develop beliefs that emerge from the relationship between their own body and the surrounding environment. In this sense, the body itself must manifest certain beliefs to manage an indeterminate environment even before being able to spatially explore it. However, this hypothesis would need to be examined more thoroughly to verify to what extent these processes truly underpin the interaction between organism and environment.

<sup>63</sup> U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1976.

signing ceremony, representatives from the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC EP) came together to ratify the agreement. A particularly powerful moment occurred when members of the FARC EP laid down their firearms – an act rich in symbolism that marked a crucial ceasefire. These weapons, once instruments of war, transformed into symbols of peace and rebirth. Instead of vanishing, they were repurposed into a profound artistic expression. *Fragmentos* (Fragments) (2017), created by Doris Salcedo, a prominent Colombian artist known for her sculptures and installations, aims to evoke emotional experiences related to violence, mourning, trauma, and collective memory through her art.

Doris Salcedo states: «In war, we speak of attack and counterattack. In peace, we speak of monuments and counter-monuments».<sup>64</sup> *Fragmentos* serves as a counter-monument arises from the context of Colombia's armed conflict, where Salcedo sought to transmute violence and suffering into artistic expression that fosters reconciliation and healing.

The development of this counter-monument began with the collection of 39 tons of handed-over weapons and melting them down. The transformation of objects once linked to violence through fire initiates a magical act, embodying the ritual logic outlined by Mauss. Following the melting of the iron, Salcedo invited 17 women who were victims of sexual violence in the context of the war to participate as artists in a ritual act of “catharsis and healing”. The weapons, perceived as symbols of threat and violence, were transformed by the fire into a new form. The molten metal was then hammered into 1,288 tiles, forming the final artwork.

In this context, by tapping into ancient beliefs and practices to create something new and thought-provoking, Doris Salcedo embodies the role of a modern-day magician. Like sorcerers, her creativity transforms, and belief in her vision gives her work meaning, as Hawthorne emphasizes the artist's power to envision and shape the future. She gathers these women to engage with the symbolic object of war, now transformed into a new material. This act of forging becomes a healing process, allowing participants to release their shared pain from sexual violence. The ritual, aligned with Lotman's concept of magical semiosis, transforms emotions into a collective expression, shifting the symbolic meaning of weapons. As Sørensen notes, this kind of re-symbolization alters the conventional meaning of weapons, redirecting focus from war's symbolism to its direct link with sexual violence.

By framing this process as therapeutic, we can observe the indirect influence of signs and the re-signification of symbols and beliefs on the unconscious of these magical agents, demonstrating the magic embedded in this ritual as a form of

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<sup>64</sup> Extracted from the video presentation of the performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7rAb200JV8&feature=youtu.be> (visited 27/01/2025)

semiotic therapy. The civil victims articulated their cathartic experiences, emphasizing not only the physical act but also the sensory dimensions involved. Sound, in particular, plays a crucial role in the transformative process, evoking memories tied to their experiences. One participant reflected:

When we melted 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.<sup>65</sup>



FIG. 2 – Women forging the molds of the tiles. Photo taken from Caracol Radio.

These women characterized the experience as a magical act, describing the ritual of symbol transformation as life-changing, allowing them to express profound emotions and chart a new course for their lives, which, according to Johan Gamboa, the exhibition’s director, is still unfolding. They exemplify the shift from being passive watchers to active doers, embodying the principles of activism and fostering new dialogues around victims’ rights. As they emerge as artists, they fulfill the role of guiding and building community, continuing the process of healing and transforming the wounds of war.

The 1,288 tiles, once weapons and symbols of conflict for the Colombian people, were installed on the floor of a colonial house in downtown Bogotá. This abandoned state-owned building carries multiple symbolic connotations for the artist. Gamboa notes that the interior’s ruins reflect the ongoing deterioration of a body victimized by violence, particularly sexual violence. These ruins evoke memories of places now regarded as death worlds, where the state failed to intervene, and armed actors

<sup>65</sup> Civil Victims of Colombian Conflict, in *Fragmentos*, the short film, 2020: 18’00.

imposed their own order, sacrificing their communities. Furthermore, the counter-monument is strategically positioned near the Presidential Palace, surrounded by key military installations, the Palace of Justice, and the Congress of the Republic of Colombia, prompting discussions about the complicity of power structures in perpetuating violence.



FIG. 3 – Photo of the counter-monument, taken by the author, 2024.





FIG. 4 – Photo of the counter-monument, taken by the author, 2024

One foundational tenet of artivism is to reveal reality, making the invisible visible. This principle resonates with Salcedo's belief that art serves to give voice to those who have been silenced. She articulates that the legacies of violence manifest as "void, silence, and absence", all of which are poignantly represented in her counter-monument. This empty space invites contemplation and honors the absence of those who were sacrificed in a war that was not theirs.

Salcedo contemplates the symbolism of the ruins, questioning the historical narratives that surround them within a context of violence. She emphasizes the importance of preserving these ruins as part of the narrative she aims to convey – a counter-memory that diverges from the glorified stories of war heroes, focusing instead on the experiences of those who bear witness to. This demonstrates the power of the magical process not only to show what remains veiled from the eyes, but to heal through a process of symbolization based on the path of a shared ritual. This power grows when others fail, for example that of violence, military policy, social past, cultural rules. The power of magic is not to replace a power, but to re-symbolize this power, giving or subtracting power. It is therefore a matter of noting that the magician, ritual and belief are factors not only necessary to the magical act, but also the pillars of its structure in every expression of magic.

In this sense, Salcedo activated an ancient archetypal structure of ritual among women through the process of belief-making. It is this process – where the magician becomes the belief-maker – that makes the magical act's effects possible. Only belief,



together with the magician and the ritual, as the three points of a magic triangle, can bring to light the profound effects of deep belief, inherent in the existence of every individual.

### 9. Conclusion

This study reconsidered the concept of magic through the entangled perspectives of semiotics and activism, illustrating its continuing significance as a cultural and symbolic process firmly rooted in collective practices and belief systems. Grounded in the foundational ideas of Juri Lotman, Winfried Nöth, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, this work has framed magic as a dynamic mechanism in which symbols, rituals and beliefs interact, a process that we have formalized in this paper as a theory of belief creation. This theory posits belief as the driving force behind the creation of meaning, a semiotic motion that links imagination and reality by incorporating shared cultural values into ritual and artistic practices.

Central to this analysis is the argument that belief creation operates as a dual process: it is both deeply cognitive, influencing individual perception of reality, and deeply relational, shaping social and cultural dynamics through collective interpretation. Magic, when viewed through this lens, transcends its traditional connotations to emerge as a form of “semiotic therapy”, a means of re-signifying symbols, reconfiguring collective memories and enabling the transformation of society. The case study of Doris Salcedo's *Fragmentos* illustrated this principle in practice, showing how activism functions as a contemporary ritual capable of processing trauma and catalyzing healing by mobilizing shared belief systems and reimagining cultural narratives.

The “belief making theory” points out further that beliefs are fundamental to all processes of knowledge and action. Before any engagement with reality, beliefs precede cognition, shaping our understanding of what exists, how it exists and why it matters. This insight aligns with broader semiotic investigations into the construction of reality and truth, emphasizing that belief serves as the connective tissue between cognition and action. Belief, mediated by social structures such as authority, ritual, collectivity, and culture can produce tangible and material consequences, reinforcing the role of belief as an active force in shaping individual and collective reality.

By situating belief-making within a broader framework of power and culture, this work contributes to ongoing debates on the semiotic foundations of action, agency and social transformation. Echoing Umberto Eco's idea of semiotics as “discipline of lying”, this work has shown how belief creation not only constructs

reality but also dismantles illusions of power embedded in cultural systems. Magic and activism, therefore, are not relics or isolated phenomena, but vital semiotic tools that continually shape and reshape the cultural fabric of societies.

This study serves as a starting point for further investigation into the interplay between belief, power and the creation of meaning. In this sense, belief is the grounding stone of all human engagement with reality, a communicative and semiotic process that defines not only how we understand the world, but also how we change it, making the *possible* a form of the real that shows its intrinsic connection to belief processes and magical acts. This perspective opens new avenues of research into how rituals, symbols and artistic practices continue to shape contemporary cultural, social and political landscapes and how art and magic, understood as therapy, can heal past traumas by creating alternative futures.