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THE MEANING OF FESTIVALS
Reconfiguring the semiotic approach

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Introduction

Contemporary humanities and social studies related to the meaning of festivals are based
on two obvious presuppositions. One is that the meaning of festivals is generally recognised
through typical expressions, such as that festivals can ‘make’ meaning (Holloway, Brown &
Shipway 2010; Knight, Freeman, Stuart, Griggs & O’Reilly 2014), and meaning can be ‘at-
tached to’ (Crespi-Vallbona & Richards 2007; Getz 2010), ‘identified with’ (Versnel 1992) or
‘offered by’ festivals (Lucas 2014). The other presupposition, which is based on the previous
one, is that the meaning of festivals may be classified into various sorts, either according to
the social representation system it has its roots in, for example, social meaning (Lewis 1997),
cultural meaning (Quinn 2003) and political meaning (Waterman 1998), or according to the
relationship between a festival and its host – individual meaning (Stadler, Reid & Fullagar
2013) and group meaning (Getz 2010).

These two presuppositions share two common points. First, both of them view festivals
as an object or a complex set of objects, so that festivals can be produced, carried, divided
and compounded as a physical object is. Second, both of the presuppositions assume that
festivals are made up of components such as special costumes; food; a mascot; a particular
colour; a core person who organises the festival; or a particular day, time, place and venue.
In short, both the meaning and the components of festivals are divisible and, whether as a
whole or as divided elements, festivals can be thought of as symbols. Therefore, the analysis
and study of signs – semiotics – is an important approach for studying the meaning of festival.
This approach includes Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralism semiology, Charles S. Peirce’s
pragmatist semiotics and Victor Turner’s anthropologic symbolism (symbolic anthropology).

Contemporary studies on the meaning of festivals demonstrate two easily perceivable
contradictions, one of which is relevant to the genesis of the meaning. Some argue that a
festival ‘offers’ meaning (Lucas 2014), while others argue that meaning can be ‘given to’ a fes-
tival (Waterman 1998). The second contradiction is relevant to the specific way meaning has
been studied in the festival context, and seems to directly correspond with the two positions
in the first contradiction. Some people tend to believe that the meaning of festivals is rela-
tively fixed if it is identifiable and explainable, while many others argue that the meaning of
festival depends on the festival context (Mewett 1988). This is a reflection of the atmosphere
of epistemological relativism that has been very popular in the fields of humanities and social research in recent decades.

However, in the attempt to lay a new foundation for the study of festivals in the coming decades, there is no excuse to turn a blind eye to those obvious or potential disagreements and contradictions in the study of the meaning of festivals. Therefore, contrary to the common practice of directly applying existing theories and concepts, this chapter tries rather to delve into the semiotic study of meaning on a more fundamental level, so as to reconsider the inquiry domain and basic frame of the study, expose any potential deficiencies in contemporary studies and propose directions for possible future improvements in the study of festivals.

### Reconfiguration of the semiotic approach

#### Semiosis and holism

Saussure’s semiology, which is closely concerned with linguistics, and Peirce’s semiotics, which is closely concerned with phaneroscopy (i.e. his independent version of phenomenology) and logic, are the two major generally recognised schools of thought on sign (Cobly 2010, p. 3). Though appearing to be associated with the same archaic Greek term – *smeion* (static and real sign, symbol, icon or mark) (Liddell & Scott 1996, p. 1593), the significances of their names are quite different. Saussure’s *semiology* is apparently the blend of *smeion* and *logos*, which means ‘interpretation or research on smeion’, while Peirce’s *semiotics* is actually coined from another Greek word – *smeiosis* (signifying, indicating) (Peirce 1955, p. 282), which is used to describe the dynamic signification process instead of the static sign.

Peirce’s signification process requires that three elements must be present at the same time, i.e. something to signify, something to be signified, and a way to signify, which correspond, respectively, with the three elements in Peirce’s sign system, i.e. *representamen*, *object* (or *designatum*) and *interpretant* (Peirce 1958, p. 343). Originally, these three elements were indivisible. *Representamen* (i.e. the sign itself, including symbols) is usually the easiest element to be identified and used. When it is used, it is destined to connote or interpret in a certain way or rule (the *interpretant*) an idea (the *object*) expressed or indicated by the *representamen*. The signification process, i.e. the semiosis, in which any sign is involved, is more fundamental than the sign itself (or any symbol, icon, index or mark). Logically, semiosis as a whole precedes the three constituent elements of a sign, and it requires that each of these three elements must be present at the same time without absence.

The *holism* of sign may be viewed as a ‘theoretical common denominator’ of the two major contemporary schools of semiotics and also the first point to be considered in introducing any new semiotic frame. The position of *holism* does not completely negate the value of studying an ‘objective’ sign. After all, according to both Saussure and Peirce, the operation of semiotics cannot be conducted without a keen sense of identification of the ‘components’ of a sign. Therefore, observation of the objective world should always be a basic requirement for semiotic researchers. Nevertheless, either a two-element dyad constituted by sound-image and concept (or the *signifier* and the *signified* defined by Saussure), or a three-element triad constituted by *representamen*, *object* and *interpretant* (developed by Peirce) starts from the *holism* of sign. Researchers should only divide a sign to explore its constituent characteristics and evolution, instead of taking it for granted from the beginning that in reality these two or three elements can exist independently before they constitute a sign.

From a methodological perspective, Peirce’s semiotics has a sounder position on *holism* over Saussure’s semiology. Saussure himself has a clear position on *holism*, as his conception...
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of sign originally meant an integrated whole of sound-image and concept in the human language phenomenon connected through mental activities (Saussure 1993, p. 74a). Roland Barthes, the critical heir of Saussure's theory, also clearly pointed out the structural indivisibility of the signifier and the signified (Barthes 1972, pp. 111–112). Regrettfully, holism, the primary characteristic of a sign system, has been ignored by many researchers interested in semiotics. In fact, research into the meaning of 'festival' conducted by many researchers to date is just research on sign(s) or symbol(s), instead of genuinely semiotic or semiotic research. This could be an ontological trap that prevents semiotics from contributing more to festival studies.

Structure and interpretation

Researchers often define a research object based on their own life experience or knowledge needs. This method of investigation can be described as ‘structuring the object’. With this method, all information or knowledge is based and focussed on the object, unless the object in question is inherently viewed from the very beginning as a whole, i.e. an all-possible and non-objectified world. Therefore, understanding things based on an individual’s own knowledge background and cognition ability suggests that human knowledge is always produced in a certain direction towards a certain object and described as a certain structure. The structure used here should not be interpreted as a composite constructed from various static components, relations, forms and quantity, but rather as a perspective and an approach to direct the researchers to seek better cognition of the related object without ignoring its holism and to acknowledge that any possible answer will have its own orientation and limitedness.

Both Saussure’s dyad frame and Peirce’s triad frame are structured research approaches. Due to the orientation and limitedness of individual researchers, knowledge on the object of study derived from structured research, i.e. the so-called interpretation in contemporary humanities and social research, might be unlimited. Researchers who want to utilise the analysing power of semiotics always need to have an open mind. As to interpretation or derivative understanding, the two major frameworks relating to signs have some differences but are basically consistent.

First, the earliest series of Saussure’s dyad terms include langue and parole. Langue, as a holistic sign of sound-image and concept, is embedded in society, hard to alter and thus is static, while parole is the specific speech used in everyday life by any person but influenced by langue. However, this dyad cannot be explained the historical evolution of language. Although he recognised this in his later years, Saussure had no time to reconfigure his entire thought system and only briefly made some remedy notes relating to the ‘historical reality of time’ (Saussure 1993, p. 110a). In his Mythologies, Roland Barthes gave up the fixed distinction between langue and parole. The only dyad completely inherited and accepted from Saussure is the holism in a sign of sound-image and concept. Following from the primitive sign system – the language system – Barthes created a secondary sign system – the myth system. The original meaning of ‘myth’ in ancient Greek (mythos) is ‘speech’ (Liddell & Scott 1996, p. 1151). Barthes specifically pointed out that the myth system, as with the language system, has a dyad structure of the signifier and the signified, and that the signifier in the myth system corresponds with the holistic sign in the language system, while the signified in the myth system is any potential concept developed from that holistic sign (Barthes 1972). In doing so, Barthes discovered the mechanism of idea, knowledge and ideology, and he further developed this in a three-layered system of signs that consists of reality, denotation (meta-language)
and connotation (Barthes 1972). The connotation and reality layers have become a meaning system in social life that can be continuously interpreted and remade, and that is open, changeable and endless.

Second, as noted, Peirce’s semiosis has three elements, i.e. representamen, object and interpretant. It is notable that the ‘interpretant’ is an equivalent or even a more developed sign (Peirce 1967, p. 798) created by representamen in the mind of a human. As a sign, the interpretant will be involved in a new triangle of semiosis and derive a new representamen. That is to say, every interpretant may change to a new representamen (Echtner 1999). In Peirce’s words, the interpretant ‘keeps “becoming a sign, and so on ad infinitum”’ (Peirce 1932, p. 303). This is exactly the unlimited semiosis emphasised by Umberto Eco (1976, pp. 68–69). The analysis frame of Peirce’s semiotics clearly points to the social construction of the meaning of sign, implying that thorough understanding of the meaning of sign may be accessed through structured interpretative analysis of the holism of sign, or by considering any conceivable and practical effect that it may have.

A new semiotic approach consisting of holism, structure and interpretation is coming into form and seems to have some theoretical common factors between the two major schools of semiotic systems, which are traditionally viewed as quite different. From a functional perspective, holism involves rule setting and general description, while specific operation is carried out through analysis of structure and subsequent interpretation. Holism leads researchers to make keen judgement on and abstraction from reality as a whole. However, operationally, Peirce’s triadic sign system might be more suitable than Saussure’s dyadic sign system because the triadic sign system not only has a sound philosophic basis – pragmatism – but also enables researchers to take into account social reality.

Possible relationships between festival and meaning

Puzzles in metaphysical entity analysis

Taking a semiotic approach, researchers investigating the meaning of festivals should first try their best to define the sign as a whole. There are three puzzling questions to be answered. First, is meaning embedded in festivals, i.e. is it a part of the festival which can be observed by examining a distinct component of the festival? Second, is meaning attached to festivals, i.e. connected with festival as an external matter? Third, are there any other sorts of relationships between them?

The first two questions reflect a metaphysic position commonly held in contemporary research into the meaning of festivals, such that a festival is considered to be an entity, the meaning is an entity too and all possible relationships between these two entities are the object of research.

We can surely disagree with the view that meaning is embedded ‘in’ festivals. Obviously, if ‘in’ describes a constituent and inclusive relation, then all components ‘in’ a composite entity are essential for such an entity to exist. However, even though people have different answers to question like ‘what is a festival’ and have not understood or cannot get in touch with the so-called ‘meaning’, they still can identify the fact that a festival is being held by other people as a mixture of actions in the real world. It is obvious that analysis of an entity based on metaphysics is not applicable in such a case.

Similarly, views that propose that meaning is ‘attached to’ festivals are quite problematic too. A potential presupposition of such a view is that a festival is an independent occurrence and meaning is another independent occurrence, which can be randomly combined together.
At first glance, this view seems to be completely consistent with the diversified descriptions and understandings of festivals, which were introduced at the beginning of this chapter, and are often highlighted by researchers. However, even though festivals are changeable and dynamic, such views fail to explain why some festivals always have a particular meaning, or some restrained meanings, rather than random or unlimited meanings? What is combining festivals and meaning in certain way or, in other words, in a certain structure? This question cannot be convincingly answered through analysis based on metaphysics. Therefore, it seems appropriate to disregard such metaphysical positions.

**Phenomenological analysis**

This chapter proposes an important judgement: meaning cannot exist independently. Although we can use the words, meaning cannot be understood without reference to the phenomenon under study. This judgement has its basis in phenomenology, especially related to Edmund Husserl’s thought on *objectification* (Objektivierung) (Husserl 1987) of the human conscious experience. Husserl identified the existence of two different meaning-attributing components (Husserl 2001, p. 191), which are inherently rooted in the human consciousness experience. One of the components refers purely to the activity of presentation (objectification) which can produce *intentional meaning*. The other component is the effect or result of objectification, i.e. *filled meaning* – the content constructed and expressed by intentional meaning. Husserl also used pairs of terms *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (meaning or significance) (Husserl 1987, p. 28) to describe the genesis of meaning as a whole.

Hence, once a meaning is determined as the object of research, the associated ‘genesis of meaning’ should also be explored. This may directly lead to two new propositions. One is that, no matter whether intentionally or unintentionally, ‘festival’ and ‘meaning’ can be separated; thus the ‘meaning’ here, without a genesis to rely on, loses its foundation. Another proposition is that such genesis of meaning is highly consistent with the semiosis emphasised by Peirce and that it reflects the genesis of sign elements.

Is it possible that there is a third relationship between ‘festival’ and ‘meaning’? Besides ‘embedded in’ and ‘attached to’, there might be another relationship: they are closely connected, even overlapping, they permeate each other or melt into one. This, however, may seem unreasonable, as how can festival and meaning be melted into one?

To answer this question, it is necessary to introduce the thoughts of Martin Heidegger, a phenomenological philosopher. Heidegger, deeply provoked by Husserl, held that meaning is not something primarily expressed as a word or a proposition. For Husserl, meaning ‘is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself’, and ‘structured by fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, is the “upon which” of the project in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something’ (Heidegger 1996, p. 142). Though seeming obscure, these two statements have clear layers of meanings. First, meaning does not generate from nothing but always emerges from the existing life background, presenting an existential-practical meaning that appears to some extent in a primitively vague state or, in Husserl’s words, presenting a ‘*Sinn*’. Second, meaning is generated in certain directions or structures, not in a completely random, casual or uncontrollable manner; rather, ‘from’ or ‘as’ something. Hence, the context is important. Third, based on the previous two points, the primitive meaning of a thing or an event is all of the possible conscious experiences associated with the thing or event in certain context, i.e. direction or structure, while the implication or semantics directed to by mentioning of ‘meaning’ in language is just a derivative form of such holistic meaning or conscious experience.
If we consider the third possible relationship between ‘festival’ and ‘meaning’ outlined earlier, we can see that this is the only feasible relationship between ‘festival’ and ‘meaning’ that can be identified, understood and accepted. The following analysis is conducted with reference to Figure 4.1. On the one hand, when a ‘festival’ is being experienced in real time and in real life as an ongoing festival, for example, when people are enjoying experiencing all the events and atmosphere of a festival, ‘festival’ exists in the overall background of lifeworld (Lebenswelt) (Husserl 1970, p. 103) in a structured existential-practical form. It exists, it is present and it is being experienced. This thus presents an unlimited diversity of meanings in a very open ‘as…’ structure: for example, ‘as a medium of cultural memory’, ‘as a channel of access to social identity’ or ‘as a place for escaping the self’. On the other hand, when a ‘festival’ is being thought about or talked about as an objectified festival, for example when someone is asked in an interview by a researcher to say something about a specific festival, as an object being discussed, considered or studied, ‘festival’ may only present its meaning as a cognitive-linguistic form in a relatively narrower context. In this latter case, the meaning would be better defined as ‘implication’ or ‘semantics’.

In fact, when we are considering the meaning of a festival in the sense of primitive meaning, as the consideration is always focussed on the existence-practice, or ‘lived experience’, of each individual or group associated with the festival, it may be better to abandon the popular phrase ‘the meaning of festivals’ at this level and use ‘festival-meaning’ instead, a new expression with more emphasis on the inseparable connection between them.

**A semiotic illustration of the phenomenological findings**

Based on the phenomenological analysis made earlier, the three layers of ‘meaning’ have been revealed and the concept of holism required in semiotics has been interpreted. While holism is being interpreted, in fact, ‘structure’ and ‘interpretation’ are delineated too. The ‘festival-meaning’ in a semiotic approach can be explicitly explained later based on Peirce’s semiotic terminology (Figure 4.2).
First, ‘holism’ indicates an ontological standpoint held by this framework on the object of research and is the logic starting point for all further thinking. Whatever the difference in scale, size and influence of the semiotic whole is, a meaningful sign whole is definitely equivalent to a semiosis in the core of Peirce’s system. As for festival research, both ‘festival’ itself as a sign and some popularly recognised symbols of festival appearing in concrete form may be deemed as a semiotic whole. The key point is that all these symbols must be ontologically taken as a semiotic whole, either as the ‘festival-meaning’ whole in the existential-practical level or as the lifeworld whole associated with life experience.

Second, ‘structure’ indicates the teleological methodology of this framework, which reminds researchers to try to find appropriate and irreducible elements of a sign system. In Peirce’s system, as noted previously, such a sign system consists of the three elements: namely, representamen, object and interpretant, and their relationship. Moreover, the genesis of ‘structure’ is associated with the limitation of cognitive ability and the directivity of cognitive purpose. As for ‘festival’, the analysis of its structure first requires researchers to identify those basic social sectors involved in the sign system of a festival and their intertwined relationships.

Third, ‘interpretation’ indicates an effective approach in semiotic research. Interpretation is, in its most common sense, to translate or to understand something by restating it with different ways. In the continuous process of interpretation, there are some phenomena that can hardly be perceived of and confirmed using common methods, and thereby form concepts, introduce point of views and raise propositions for further study. In the context of festival research, on the one hand, propositions may be put forward on a certain meaning of a festival; on the other hand, other propositions may be put forward on social realities revealed by such meaning. Therefore, it is further understood that the so-called ‘meaning of festival’ acquired in the cognitive-linguistic level is only one preliminary possibility of interpretation of meaning. As it is highly dependent on everyday language ability, such interpretation can be easily conducted and even be mistaken as the whole content of the meaning of festival.

How can more possibilities be explored? Three possible interpretations can be imagined here (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 New framework for analysis of ‘festival-meaning’ based on Peirce’s terminology
The most direct interpretation approach is to analyse the interpretant as emphasised by Peirce (‘interpretation I’), i.e. the interpretant in the previous semiosis needs to be interpreted by a new semiosis, thus entering into an unlimited semiosis.

On the basis of Peirce’s interpretant analysis, we may expect that the other two elements of the whole, i.e. representamen and object, are actually involved in some other semiotic whole(s) and thus need to be further interpreted as well; in other words, their different elemental roles in other semiosis need to be interpreted (‘interpretation II’). In short, representamen and object need to be analysed and discussed too. In the context where a specific festival is deemed as a semiotic whole, researchers are required to continue to investigate greater semiosis such as local culture, traditional culture or popular culture. The continuous interpretation of representamen and object, in addition to the continuous interpretation of interpretant (as originally required by Peirce), will finally form a very complicated and expansive landscape of signs. We may imagine that the utmost interpretation of this abstract landscape of signs is actually a holistic process of understanding our society and culture.

In social reality it is very likely that the same group of representamen and object may come from different semiosis, that is to say, are different in interpretant only. Then, the researchers need to explore all possibilities of the interpretant (‘interpretation III’). In consideration of the purposiveness and directivity of structure thinking of human beings, the difference between interpretants is expected.

As can be seen from the aforementioned possibilities, interpretation is both complicated and fascinating for research. This may inspire researchers to experimentally and creatively interpret any seemingly simple festival phenomenon. The methodological guarantee is that ‘structure’ and ‘interpretation’ are specific analyses of the meaning of ‘festival’ on two different levels in the ontological premise of holism.

Conclusion

This chapter has readdressed the semiotic perspective on the ‘meaning of festivals’ and explored both pragmatism (Peirce) and phenomenology (Husserl and Heidegger) as philosophical foundations underpinning this perspective. A proposed theoretical framework is summarised later. ‘Meaning’ itself cannot be separated from any event, including festivals, to exist alone. The primitive ‘festival-meaning’ is closely connected with various specific existence-practices in the lifeworld background; thus diversified explanation and interpretation are almost unavoidable. Just like reality or lived experience prior to representation and reflection, ‘existential-practical’ is a more fundamental logic preceding ‘cognitive-linguistic’. Therefore, people first acquire on the prelinguistic level the primitive ‘festival-meaning’, which is not necessarily ‘uttered’, but thereafter, it becomes possible to get the derivative and ‘uttered’ ‘meaning of festivals’ that is connected only with expressed experience by using language at the cognitive and linguistic level. This can explain why, after a lived experience of festival has ended or is recorded in memory, one can keep attributing new meanings to this experience through recall and retrospection. On the one hand, the lifeworld itself keeps accumulating its content, and its connection with the primitive ‘festival-meaning’ keeps changing. On the other hand, what one is trying to attribute to the festival is actually some derivative implication, as all recall and retrospection present mostly in the form of concepts for thinking or speaking.

In terms of research into the ‘meaning of festivals’, a primary inquiry manner would be interpretive, open and descriptive questions like ‘how is the meaning of festival’ or ‘how’ to
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experience, *how* to present, and *how* to represent the meaning of festival instead of being limited to metaphysic or linguistic questions such as *what is the meaning of festival*.

Taking the new semiotic approach established in this chapter, the two contradictions in the current studies as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter can be explained somewhat here. As to the first contradiction related to the genesis of meaning, the more possible truth might be that festivals do not offer meaning; neither can meaning be given to festivals. Rather, people get primitive and prelinguistic ‘festival-meaning’ from their lived festival experience in their lifeworld. Once they need to communicate with each other, or even with themselves (such as writing a diary or blog), such communications are very likely expressed in language, and during such expressing process, it is natural that omissions of meaning will occur. Further, even greater omissions might be caused by trying to express meanings using linguistic marks such as numbers, formulae or models. As to the second contradiction, related to the specific way of studying meaning, if only considered from a linguistic perspective, the meaning of ‘festival’ certainly presents relatively fixed, identifiable and understandable characteristics since it can be spoken or written down. But if we consider the fact that the meaning of ‘festival’ is generated from a specific existence-practice – the lived festival experience – and that such existence-practice is always embedded in the continuously changing world in the manner of life experience, the meanings of ‘festival’ certainly could contain unlimited rich interpretations of ‘festival-meaning’, which may be imagined as ultimate meaning.

The new approach put forward in this chapter is not intended to radically criticise or negate all past and contemporary semiotic analyses on the meaning of festivals but rather to point out two possible directions for improvement. First, this chapter suggests that researchers should pay more attention to exploring the theoretical foundation behind their chosen study methods or tools. Second, this chapter suggests that researchers should not ignore the various disagreements and contradictions that exist, nor should they casually deal with these disagreements and contradictions with an attitude of epistemological relativism. Even though there is arguably no single correct theory in the humanities and social research field, there are surely some theories that can better define the scope and nature of issues studied and thus are much more useful for presenting views that can stand up to challenges.

References


