

# Hopes and Fears: The Semiotics of Orchestral Music in Left- and Right-Wing Populism<sup>1</sup>

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## **Hopes and Fears: The Semiotics of Orchestral Music in Left- and Right-Wing Populism.**

This article uses semiotics to study two audiovisual spots produced by populist political actors (Marine Le Pen, in France, and Unidas Podemos, in Spain) with the purpose of unveiling the multimodal discursive strategies they use. The analysis presented in the article focuses on the auditive dimension and studies how Le Pen and Unidas Podemos use orchestral music as a semiotic resource for meaning- and sense-making. The analysis proposes that the use these two political actors do of orchestral music in the analyzed spots is not random, but strategic. Moreover, it is argued that these strategic uses are aligned with recent scholarship on right- and left-wing populism: while – an example of right-wing populism – Le Pen draws on a discursive strategy aimed at provoking emotions like fear and anxiety based on exclusion, Unidas Podemos – an example of left-wing populism – uses one aimed at conveying the emotions of hope and possibility of change based on inclusion.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, researchers, political actors, the media and the general public have used the noun ‘populism’ and the adjective ‘populist’ extensively to refer to disparate contemporary political phenomena around the globe, both past and present and ranging from the left to the right extremes of the political spectrum. The peak of this widespread interest for populism took place in 2016, after the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States of America and the vote in the United Kingdom in favor of Brexit (Anselmi 2017).

In the academia, the voluminous amount of publications revolving around populism justifies speaking of the establishment of a new research field: that of ‘populism studies’. It consists of a federation of disciplines – comparative political science, political theory, political sociology, communication science and discourse studies, among others – gathered around this common and shared object of study. Despite the rise in popularity of the topic over the past two

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the conference “The Role of Emotions in Populist Movements”, organized by the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava, the ideas and arguments of this paper were presented and discussed in the Third Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPP3), organized by the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation of the University of Helsinki, Finland, in June 2022.

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decades, scholars have been trying to figure out the nature and dynamics of populism since the 1960s: in 1969, a seminal book was published following a conference held at the London School of Economics (Ionescu – Gellner 1969).

As a result of the growing academic interest for the phenomenon of populism – and since any theoretical debate must begin with an appropriate conceptual clarification (Pappas 2019) – political scientists and theorists have struggled for years to find a common and consensual definition of the concept of populism that can please all the scholars and researchers involved in studying populism. The question of the *genus* of populism has been particularly challenging: What type of social phenomenon is populism? Is it an ideology, a political movement, a type of discourse, a mode or logic of doing politics, a performative style, a political strategy or a cognitive frame? In the debates that these questions triggered, scholars have normally used the theoretical apparatuses and concepts made available by their respective disciplines. This has made of the debate a collection of echo chambers. Some researchers have even argued to drop the concept due to its conceptual darkness.

Even if consensus has not been achieved regarding the type of phenomenon that populism is, there are some commonalities that the multiple competing accounts seem to agree upon. As Francisco Panizza (2005: 1) argued back in 2005 – that is, before the most recent wave of academic interest in populism – “while there is no scholarly agreement on the meaning of populism, it is possible to identify an analytical core around which there is a significant degree of academic consensus.” This core is composed by the following elements: (1) a conception of the social realm as constituted by – and, at the same time, divided in – two groups, one of them being ‘the people’; (2) popular (or general) will and sovereignty as the normative principle underlying populist discourse; (3) an antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and an ‘other’ (classically in the form of ‘the elite’, albeit other others can be in play as long as they are distinguished in discourse of ‘the people’); and (4) the crucial role of the leader as a representative of ‘the people’, usually due to his/her charisma and personal traits.

Among the disciplines grouped and federated around the study of populism, discourse theory has made relevant contributions to the clarification of its mechanisms and dynamics. In particular, the works of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and their disciples in what is known as the ‘Essex School of Discourse Theory’ has paid special attention to the discursive logic involved in populist discourse (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Panizza 2005). Surprisingly, even if these scholars give discourse and meaning a central role in their attempts to make sense of populism, the references they make to semiotics – the discipline that studies signification, sense- and meaning-making – are extremely limited

besides some basic anchorage in some of the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, the so-called ‘father’ of structural linguistics and, with it, of semiotics.

Including the perspective of semiotics in the study of populism is relevant for a number of reasons. To begin with, populism is a phenomenon carried out by human beings and hence is grounded on meaning- and sense-making. Therefore, the discipline that makes of meaning and sense their objects of study cannot be left aside. Over the past six decades, semioticians have worked hard in providing the discipline with the concepts, analytical categories and methods that any social science should have at its disposal to study the social domain, including practices and interactions. Second, populism is a phenomenon that constructs a particular vision of the social domain in discourse, such as the collective identity of ‘the people’ and its antagonistic relationship with an other that is defined in logical terms as not being a part of it. Therefore, understanding how discourse shapes perceptions of the social space requires a semiotic perspective. Finally, as a phenomenon aimed at triggering emotions in the electorate to mobilize them, populism must be examined from a semiotic perspective with a focus on how specific textual configurations can provoke specific emotions through the activation of culturally codified contents, that is, contents that pre-exist in culture and that populist political actors use strategically to mobilize the electorate.

In recent years, semioticians have shown interest in populism (Sedda – Demuru 2018; Landowski 2018, 2020; Fontanille 2020; Demuru 2021; Cervelli 2018; Kharbouch 2018). Recent issues of the journals of semiotics *DeSignis* and *Actes Sémiotiques* revolve around the topic. However, there is still not a single and encompassing semiotic approach to the phenomenon, i.e., one that studies populist meaning- and sense-making as a signifying system with its own internal logic.<sup>3</sup> A semiotic account of populism would consider it to be a *discursive practice* – as discourse theory does – that occurs within the political field and that is aimed at producing specific effects of sense in the electorate with the purpose of having an incidence in their worldviews and, hence, in their electoral behavior. These effects of sense are both cognitive and affective. Therefore, studying how populism is *meaningful* social discourse is a crucial task in the scholarly attempt to make sense of it.

Social semiotics is the branch of general semiotics focused on studying the production, circulation and consumption of meaning and sense within the social realm (Landowski 2014; Verón 1988; Marrone 2001; Ventura Bordenca, 2022). As such, it has relevant light to shed on clarifying what populism is and what its key mechanisms are. This article studies two audiovisual spots: one by Marine Le Pen (France) and the other by Unidas Podemos (Spain), two

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<sup>3</sup> My recent book *The Social Semiotics of Populism* (Moreno Barreneche 2023) is an attempt to fill this research gap.

political actors widely identified in scholarship as populist, with the purpose of unveiling how they use music – and, in particular, *orchestral* music – strategically as a semiotic resource to trigger the emotions of their audiences and influence sense-making within the political field. The study argues that the two spots reflect the insights of scholarship on left-wing and right-wing populism: while Unidas Podemos prefers to use a type of orchestral music that conveys hope, motivation and enthusiasm with the aim of triggering positive motivations in the audience, Marine Le Pen prefers to use a type of orchestral music that connotes tension, fear and the idea of a threat with the aim of triggering negative emotions in the electorate.

### **Social semiotics, discourse theory and political science**

The label ‘semiotics’ refers to multiple things. On the one hand, it refers to a general interest for signs, language, discourse, meaning and signification. In this first sense of the word, there have been enquiries of a semiotic nature since Antiquity, in the work of philosophers, political theorists and other thinkers that did not refer to themselves as semioticians. Moreover, linguists, political theorists and discourse analysts study the semiotic dimension of the phenomena of their interest, although they do it using the theoretical apparatuses and methods of their disciplines, and not of semiotics. The second sense of ‘semiotics’ is a specific discipline within the social sciences that grew from structural linguistics during the twentieth century and whose aim is studying meaning, meaning-making and signification in any semiotic system – not only in natural languages.

As a discipline interested in meaning- and sense-making, semiotics was already envisaged by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Saussure argued that semiotics would be the discipline focused in studying the life of signs in social life, and hence would be part of social psychology. Semiotics experienced its most relevant developments during the second half of the century – namely, the works of Algirdas J. Greimas (1966, 1970, 1983), Umberto Eco (1968, 1976), Jurij Lotman (1991, 1996), Eliseo Verón (1987, 1988) and other scholars has been crucial in giving semiotics a relative disciplinary autonomy and a scientific status, with a specific meta-language and the epistemological and methodological discussions that characterize any scientific domain.

Within the general discipline of semiotics, *social* semiotics focuses its attention in how meaning and signification occur in social and cultural phenomena. According to Eliseo Verón (1988), every social phenomenon has a discursive dimension, and that dimension is semiotics’ object of study. This might sound redundant since *semiosis* (i.e., meaning-making) is not possible

outside the social realm: it is always intersubjective and based on processes of signification and communication (Eco 1976). In the denomination, the adjective ‘social’ is used as a way of rendering explicit the surpassing of the study of *semiosis* in natural languages or limited to the examination of closed texts such as literature, images, paintings and advertisements. Over the last couple of decades, various scholars around the world belonging to different research traditions within semiotics have been committed to grasping, describing, explaining and making sense of how society and culture work as systems of signification and communication (Eco 1976; Lotman 1991; Lorusso 2015; Verón 1988; Marrone 2001).

Within populism studies, the dominant approach when examining its discursive dimension is that of the Essex School, a research tradition that follows the political theory of Ernesto Laclau. There are multiple theoretical commonalities between semiotic theory and the well-known and extensively studied discursive accounts to populism (particularly, with the work of Laclau, Mouffe and the Essex School). These accounts remain however in the surface of the discipline and do not exploit its full descriptive and explicative potential. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001) – a book published in 1985 – Laclau and Mouffe propose a theory of discourse that takes the work of Ferdinand de Saussure as its starting point, albeit it does not engage with the semiotic tradition that developed around the work of the Swiss linguist during the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

In the book, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) declare that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, that meaning is attributed to objects depending on the structuring of a discursive field and that discursive structures have a material (and not purely mental) character (Laclau – Mouffe 2001: 93-96). In their understanding of discourse, the authors subscribe to a key structuralist premise, according to which meaning emerges as the result of being immersed in a system of differences, i.e., through an opposition with other meanings. In this same line of thought, in the book *On Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005: 68-69) defines discourse as “any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role” and argues that “whatever centrality an element acquires, it has to be explained by the play of differences as such.” This conception of discourse clearly reflects Saussure’s conception of how meaning works – a conception that has been embraced by the semiotic tradition as one of its key tenets.

As mentioned above, Verón (1988: 126, my translation) argues that “any production of sense is necessarily social” and that “any social phenomenon is,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, they retain Saussure’s distinction between *signified* and *signifier* as the two faces of the sign, while semiotics abandoned this dichotomy decades ago and, following Hjelmslev (1961), replaced it by one that establishes a distinction between a *plane of the content* and one of *the expression* as the two domains that are linked in the act of *semiosis*.

in one of its constitutive dimensions, a process of sense-making.” According to him, “it is in *semiosis* that the reality of the social is constructed.” Although Laclau/Mouffe and Verón seem to share their views regarding the inescapability of meaning-making in the social domain, the concepts and methods they use to deal with their objects of study differ: while the former and their followers tend to remain at a theoretical level (even if they insist in that their approach is empirically informed), semioticians tend to base their analyses in the study of a textual corpus from which conclusions can be extracted inductively. This is the method this article uses to understand how political actors that embrace the populist discursive practice use orchestral music as a semiotic resource for sense-making.

In line with his interest for meaning-making as a constitutive piece of the social realm, Verón (1987) studied thoroughly political discourse as a contest over meaning, in which political actors construct in discourse collective political identities by employing the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘them’, amongst other linguistic and semiotic resources. When dealing with populist discourse, studying how populist political actors construct the collective actor ‘the people’ in the texts (in a broad sense) they produce is crucial to understand the nature of this phenomenon which, as any political phenomenon, is inherently discursive and performative. Moreover, attention should be paid to how the people’s ‘enemy’ – or, more generally, its ‘other’ – is constructed in populist discourse and performances, together with how the populist leader presents him/herself as an embodiment of that collective identity imagined as unitary. Understanding how these mechanisms of meaning-making take place in the case of populism is the purpose of a social semiotics of populism (Moreno Barreneche 2023). Therefore, such an account is closely related to the recently developed socio-cultural and performative accounts of populism (Ostiguy 2017, 2020; Ostiguy et al. 2021; Moffitt 2016; Aslanidis 2020).

### **Towards a social semiotics of populism**

The expression “social semiotics of populism” refers to the study of how populist political actors use semiotic resources – words, gestures, attire, social media posts, style, attitudes, music, etc. – for sense- and meaning-making within the political domain. In recent years, semioticians and discourse analysts have approached the phenomenon of populism and focused on different of its aspects, such as why populism emerges in particular contexts where there seems to be a lack of institutional trust (Landowski 2020), how populist leaders perform their identity as part of ‘the people’ (Cervelli 2018), how they use social media to create an idea of authenticity and commonness (Demuru 2021) or to relate with their audiences (Escudero Chauvel 2019), or what are the main

traits of populism as a particular type of discourse (Sedda – Demuru 2018), among others. However, these approaches tended to be concrete case studies and a general semiotic approach to the phenomenon of populism was still missing.

The political phenomenon of populism can be approached as a *discursive practice* anchored in the use by political actors of a specific narrative structure: the Populist Narrative Structure. According to structural semiotics – and, in particular, to Algirdas J. Greimas – individuals produce discourse – in an act of enunciation – using narrative structures as their base. For Greimas, “individuals are the ones who fabricate discourse” and “they do so by using narrative structures that already exist, that actually coexist with individuals” (Greimas – Ricoeur 1989: 555). However, according to Greimas,

narrative structures do not exist per se but are a mere moment in the generation of signification. When the subject of enunciation says something, he utters a durative discourse and proceeds by means of figures that are linked up. It is the figures that bear the traces of narrative universals (Greimas – Ricoeur 1989: 557).

The Populist Narrative Structure is used as a matrix to divide the social space in two groups and to create in discourse two collective identities: ‘the people’ and an other, which is defined in logical terms as ‘not-the-people’ but filled with positive content depending on the issues that are relevant in the context where the Structure is used. Therefore, the enemies of ‘the people’ can be the elites, but also migrants, multinational companies, politicians or even countries, like Mexico and China in Donald Trump’s discourse.<sup>5</sup> Populist discourse sets and presents these two collective subjects in an antagonist relationship, i.e., as enemies that cannot achieve a consensus. Therefore, the other is normally depicted as a threat to the well-being and interests of the collective identity ‘the people’.

Antagonism is a crucial ingredient for populism to exist as a discursive practice since the ambiguous and vague category of ‘the people’ only gains value (meaning) relationally, i.e., thanks to the existence – in discourse – of an other that is used as a scapegoat to provide ‘the people’ with some frontiers and a semiotic core that defines its collective identity (Moreno Barreneche 2020). According to this sociosemiotic approach, an actor, party or movement is populist if and only if the scrutiny of their discourses and performances evidences the use of the Populist Narrative Structure as the ground for meaning-making in discourse. The task of the semiotician would therefore be

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<sup>5</sup> According to Marcia Macaulay (2019: 175), for Trump “Mexico does not represent a geographical entity or the Mexican people; instead Trump constructs Mexico as a personified political agent that acts for itself against America.”

to analyze discourses and study how these reflect the use of the Populist Narrative Structure. In this sense, populism is a matter of degree and can be present (or not) in the specific textual productions of a political actor.

This approach serves to explain, among other aspects, why populism is a phenomenon that can be found both on the left and the right sides of the political continuum. In this sense, the sociosemiotic approach coincides with Mudde's (2004) idea of populism as a thin-centered ideology, i.e., something that needs to be combined with other, stronger contents. Since ideology is a discursive construct – i.e., it can be accessed only through discursive articulations –, the sociosemiotic approach would abandon this contested category and refer to it as a discursive practice within the political domain. This denomination includes the ideological, performative, rhetorical and strategic dimensions of populism since all these are constitutive of any discursive practice. Therefore, the semiotic approach is also closely related to discourse-theoretical, performative, communicational and socio-cultural accounts of populism.

The social semiotics of populism argues that populism is a discursive practice anchored in the use of a specific narrative structure that is abstract and needs to be evidenced in specific texts. Therefore, the study of enunciation plays a key role in the efforts to identify populism and its dynamics. Here is where populist leaders become crucial figures for researchers: it is them who articulate discourses and performances grounded in the use of the Populist Narrative Structure; it is them who will fill the empty spaces of the Structure – ‘the people’ and ‘the people’s other’ – with specific contents – and with them, with meaning – that are relevant within the political contexts where they are active; it is them who will use semiotic resources (words, images, gesture, attire, music, advertisements, etc.) to construct a specific (populist) worldview aimed at triggering emotions in the electorate and attracting their votes.

### **Populism, emotions and the role of music in sense-making**

Scholars interested in populism have approached the phenomenon with a focus on emotions and affect. According to Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín (2019: 2), “regardless of the analytical approach one adopts to define populism, the emotional dimension that characterizes the political sphere is to be taken into account if we want to shed light on this phenomenon and the current dynamics in democratic legitimacy.” For Donatella Bonansinga (2020: 99), “populism is *peculiarly* emotional, as *specific* affective states contribute to its rise, development and success.” Emotions – and, in particular, *ressentiment* – have been a subject of interest for Nicolas Demertzis (2006), who sees a link between this emotion and populism.

Approaches to populism with a focus on emotions reflect the so-called ‘affective turn’ within the social sciences (Thompson – Hoggett 2012; Ticineto Clough – Halley 2007), which aims at overcoming the centrality that positivist science has given to reason and rationality, and expand research to consider also emotions, passions and affect. The study of emotions is also another common aspect between sociology (Stets – Turner 2006, 2014), political sociology (Clarke et al. 2006; Thompson – Hoggett 2012) and semiotics – regarding the latter, passions became of interest for researchers in the wake of the 1990s (Greimas – Fontanille 1991; Pezzini 1991; Fabbri – Sbisà 1985) and, since then, have been considered a constitutive part of how discourse is meaningful. Therefore, any study of populism from a perspective focused on emotions and affect should not leave the semiotic perspective aside. Moreover, this is a domain where various social sciences, including semiotics, could collaborate.

As a result of the explosion of the research field of ‘populism studies’, how populist political actors and parties use music has also been an object of interest for scholars. In particular, researchers have focused on how populist political actors use popular, pop and mediatized musical contents for meaning-making and, in particular, to construct the collective identity of ‘the people’ through the use of musical resources that pre-exist in culture and that bring connotations of being popular (Caiani – Padoan 2023; Dunkel – Schiller 2022; Caruso 2020; Magaudda 2020).

For semioticians interested in studying the performances of populist political actors and the sense they construct with them, the following questions could be a good starting point: How can music guide the possible interpretations of a text (for example, a speech or a script)? How does the meaning of a text change depending on the music that is used with it? Music is a *semiotic resource* among many others that can trigger emotions thanks to how sounds are culturally codified – particular combinations of sounds can provoke positive or negative emotions. As is discussed below, thanks to its cultural codification as part of the discursive genres of movies and television series, orchestral music is a very productive and useful semiotic resource to trigger emotions, in particular when tapping into emotions of exclusion and *ressentiment*, like it is usually the case in populism.

A text read out loud by a political candidate – live during a rally, but in particular in an audiovisual spot aimed at circulating widely in the public sphere – is already a configuration of meaning aimed at triggering emotions: words serve to express ideas and influence voters’ attitudes, which should then translate into an action: a vote of support for the candidate. However, when a specific song, soundtrack or type of music is chosen to accompany the text, the effect of sense that the verbal text produces is strengthened – and might

even change – thanks to multimodality, i.e., the conjunction of different signifying matters (Machin 2007). In this sense, music becomes a semiotic resource capable of producing new meanings and, as such, guiding the interpretations of a signifying conglomerate – the same verbal text accompanied with emotional or somber music might trigger different interpretations and meanings.<sup>6</sup>

### Corpus and methodology

This article is interested in throwing light on how populist political actors use music as a semiotic resource in their overarching sense- and meaning- making efforts. Although they do not use orchestral music only,<sup>7</sup> the article focuses on the use of this specific genre that is codified in culture and that can be found in numerous cultural products, such as movies, movie trailers, advertisements, television series and other cultural products where it is used with the aim of triggering the audience's emotions. Given that orchestral music has specific connotations tied to it thanks to cultural convention and use, it is interesting to reflect on why the political actors studied in these pages might have chosen this particular musical genre for their electoral spots. The corpus of analysis is composed of the following two audiovisual spots:

1. 'Clip de campagne officiel – Marine 2017' by Marine Le Pen (France).  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYWnuQc5mYA>
2. 'UNIDAS PODEMOS (Spot 2019)' by Unidas Podemos (Spain).  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3G6yuQkh2o4>

Recent scholarship has argued that right-wing populism tends to combine the Populist Narrative Structure with exclusionary, nationalist and xenophobic political contents with the purpose of creating fear and anxiety in the electorate (Wodak 2015; Anastasiou 2019; De Cleen – Stavrakakis 2017). This is the case because the combination of the discursive practice of populism with right-wing contents assumes the existence of a 'people' that is culturally, ethnically and even nationally homogeneous, and that this homogeneity is threatened by others that are defined in cultural, ethnical or national terms.

On the contrary, left-wing populism positions itself as a movement aimed at deepening democracy (Mouffe 2018; García Agustín 2020). Therefore, its discourse revolves around the idea of hope, inclusion and new opportunities.

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<sup>6</sup> Within semiotics, the most relevant approach to music is that of Eero Tarasti (1994, 2002, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> To mention a few examples, Bernie Sanders used the song "America" by Simon and Garfunkel in some of his electoral spots, and Podemos used the song "Power to the People", by Patti Smith. It could be argued that the selection of these songs is not random, but strategic.

As opposed to right-wing populism, left-wing political actors that choose to frame their political contents in populist terms do not seem to assume the existence of a people in cultural, ethnical or national terms, but rather in economic ones: ‘the people’ has been excluded by the elite and needs to group, team up, awake and fight for their rights and well-being.

As is argued below, the selection of the music used in the two spots that constitute the corpus of this article seems to reflect these two overarching discursive strategies in a clear manner: while the music of right-wing populist Marine Le Pen’s spot conveys a sense of threat and fear through exclusion, the one by Unidas Podemos goes in the opposite direction and conveys a sense of hope through inclusion. In both cases there is a discursive articulation of the Populist Narrative Structure – ‘the people’ versus an ‘other’ – with other contents. Some of these other contents are of a political nature, while others are related to the emotional dimension, which is also a constitutive dimension of *semiosis* within the social sphere. Here, music can be seen as playing a central role as a semiotic resource aimed at guiding interpretations of the meaning conveyed in the spots.

### **Analysis and discussion**

The analysis that follows will compare the music used in Le Pen and Unidas Podemos’ spots. The working hypothesis is that the former illustrates prototypically the meaning-making strategies used by right-wing populists (Fear), while the latter does so for left-wing populism (Hope).

With regards to its content, Le Pen’s spot is clearly right-wing for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is highly nationalistic: ‘the people’ is equaled with the collective identities ‘the French people’ and ‘France’. Secondly, it revolves strongly around an other that is both internal (those who have betrayed and let France fall) and external (Islamic fundamentalism). The tone of the message is one of urgency, of an immediate action to make France great again. The whole semiotic apparatus evidenced in the spot seems to have the purpose of creating the sense of threat, fear, danger and an imminent catastrophe, as is typical of right-wing populist political actors (Wodak 2015). As Ambre Deharo (2017) argues, it is a spot that looks like a Hollywood movie trailer and, as such, uses music “charged with emotion.”

The music chosen for the spot is orchestral and begins softly, with a touch of melancholy (conveyed by strings that play a melody using some major chords) that guides interpretations regarding a mythical (but human) Marine Le Pen that is alone, on a beach, contemplating and thinking about France, its past and its future, and expressing her love towards the French nation. In this first part of the spot, the discursive strategy behind the discursive production seems

to be that of constructing a romantic hero that longs for a national identity that is threatened. Around 00:20, the music quickly changes into something different, more dynamic and vivid, as soon as Le Pen begins mentioning the problems that France faces. Thanks to the effect of music, the melancholy, humanity and contemplation used in the beginning of the spot become a need of a political leader who can take care of France's problems and challenges. Beside strings, the melody includes the use of other orchestral instruments such as drums, strings in a different pitch and wind instruments (horns). The melody is not any longer soft and nostalgic, but dynamic, vivid and dramatic, and throughout the spot (in particular in 01:10), it intensifies. The orchestra creates tension and seems to conduct – through a method of *in crescendo* and by using minor chords – to an inevitable conclusion. As Deharo (2017) argues, as the spot advances, music “intensifies and becomes darker [*s’assombrit*].” In semiotic terms, the spot's music evidences a change in its quality (intensity, melody, harmony, etc.). There is a process that implies moving from one semantic value – for example, that of /romantic nostalgia/ – to another – that of /action is needed/ – as does the text that Le Pen reads out loud. The question of how this change signifies is relevant for semiotics, as is the more specific question of how music strengthens the semantic values conveyed by Le Pen's words and the images used. Here, meaning-making is a multimodal phenomenon and all the semiotic matters – words, images, music– contribute at creating sense and meaning.

The music of the spot resembles that used in trailers of Hollywood movie or dramatic series characterized by action, conflict and suspense produced by the cultural industry, like superheroes movies or the acclaimed fantasy drama television series *Game of Thrones*.<sup>8</sup> In trailers of cultural products like these, music contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of tension, which guides interpretations of the images and the text chosen for the spot and that has a strategic purpose in the sphere of enunciation: to trigger the curiosity to watch the movie or the series. The same semiotic strategy seems to be the one chosen for Le Pen's spot: the audience must realize that France is in danger; that there is a threat that is both internal and external, and that something must be done to protect ‘the people’. Orchestral music contributes to this overarching sense-making strategy thanks to the connotations it has based on cultural coding and previous use: it is a type of epic, anxious, dark type of orchestral music, aimed at triggering emotions such as tension or anxiety and to boost the figure of the leader as a hero. Therefore, in this spot music fulfills a function in the narrative articulation of discourse: it leads the receiver to see what Marine Le Pen says in her spot as a situation of conflict and threat, where ‘the people’ must unite and

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, this *Game of Thrones* trailer and its use of orchestral music, which resembles that of Marine Le Pen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPLWWIOCOOQ>

fight, guided by a strong leader who is on their side. Music contributes to construct in discourse a narrative of antagonism, a political leader and a collective actor – the French people – that is threatened and that must act to protect itself.

Unidas Podemos' spot seems to propose a different sense-making strategy. It begins with a long section that depicts how 'the other' – in this case, the global and Spanish elites – created a number of problems and injustices for the Spanish people, a collective identity defined in economic terms as the ordinary, plebeian, unprivileged citizens of Spain. For the first part of the spot, the music is simple, uses a flute with a basic and playful melody and serves to ridicule those who are presented in a sequence of images as members of the collective identity 'the elite'. The use of this type of instrumental music goes in line with the images and editing strategy chosen to construct the idea of the other in this spot: it does not seem to take it seriously – it is rather ironic and mocks it. Towards the middle of the spot (01:20), its focus and the tone change: it does not revolve any longer around 'the elite' and how they have let 'the people' down, but around 'the people' as a collective social actor with agency; it does not any longer mock the enemy, but conveys a message of hope: "together, we can do it" ("unidas, podemos", in Spanish).

This change in the focalization of the spot is also evidenced in the use of orchestral music, which also here seems to serve a narrative function. As in Le Pen's spot, here is also a change in the musical score – from value /A/ to value /B/ – that can be interpreted as a change in the sense that the spot aims at constructing. This might explain why the music used for the second half of the spot differs in its tone and intensity from the one used in the first half, even if it is always the same score. The orchestral component of the second half is notorious: more instruments and arrangements are used to convey something that could be recognized as the semantic value of /heroism/. It resembles the music used in the audiovisual industry when a hero – normally depicted in virtuous terms – is ready for the final battle, like in Ridley Scott's movie *Gladiator*.<sup>9</sup> The message that the text conveys is that changes must be made to the Spanish political system, and it is up to this left-wing coalition to do this with the support of the Spanish people. As opposed to that of Le Pen's spot, the message of Unidas Podemos' spot seems aimed at motivating the electorate *positively*, i.e., through the use of a message of hope, inspiration and opportunity, to be an active agent of a political change that will expand democracy and include sectors of society usually left aside by the ruling economic and political elite.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, this song from *Gladiator*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unb3FdsT5fQ>

When paying attention to the music chosen for these two spots, it is visible how the soundtracks are aligned with the messages conveyed by the text and images. The two spots could be labelled as populist since they seem to be grounded in the use of the Populist Narrative Structure: through linguistic and visual semiotic resources, they construct a people that exist in the social space along an other, with whom there is an antagonistic relationship. However, the two political actors construct the people, the other and their relationship differently, and they use different semiotic resources for that purpose. Music helps guiding the possible interpretations of the audiovisual spots as multimodal texts, i.e., texts that combine different signifying matters (images, words, music, etc.). While Le Pen's spot generates – through words and music – the feeling of urgency for a political leader that can take care of the threats and imminent civilizational dangers that France is facing (according to the enunciator's worldview), Unidas Podemos' spot conveys a message of hope, heroism and the need of a change not to protect the Spanish people from dangers, but aimed at widening democracy, a goal that is still possible if the people awakens and works together with the political leader. While Marine Le Pen's spot seems to convey an idea of “we are going down” framed in negative terms, Unidas Podemos' spot seems to convey the opposite content “we can go up” framed in positive terms. In both cases, music serves as another semiotic resource to make the Populist Narrative Structure visible in discourse: there is an antagonism within society, like in the narrative plots of movies and television series – therefore, the use of orchestral music seems justified by cultural codification.

To sum up, although the two spots use a similar narrative plot (there is a disadvantageous situation for the collective identity ‘the people’ that needs to be reverted), they thematize it differently in discourse: Le Pen's spot proposes a configuration of images, text and music aimed at triggering negative emotions like anxiety, fear, threat and danger, while Unidas Podemos seems to prefer provoking positive emotions such as hope, heroism and the possibility of change. In conveying these messages, orchestral music plays a crucial role thanks to how it is codified in culture based on uses that both the enunciator and the model reader share as members of the same national semiosphere.

## **Conclusions**

Semiotician Eero Tarasti (2016: 20) claims that “all musical semiotics start from the premise that music carries meanings, that it possesses sense and that it constitutes a meaningful activity.” In the political domain, this is the case since music can function as another semiotic resource used strategically to trigger emotions in the electorate, together with words, images and gesture, among

others. However, this is not always the case: during an electoral rally, functional music can be randomly played to generate an ambience, what does not imply that every song that is played has been selected for a strategic reason linked to sense- and meaning-making. Nevertheless, in cases like those studied in this article, music seems to be used with a strategic purpose and aimed at influencing the emotions of the electorate. As such, it is a signifying matter that should be properly and systematically researched to shed light on political sense- and meaning-making, together with words, gestures, attire, advertisements and other resources that can be meaningful to people as participants of the public sphere.

This paper is an attempt to explore a possible research line – mainly for semioticians and students of discourse, but also for political scientists, although some studies already exist focusing on populism and music – by identifying a link between right-wing populism and music that triggers negative emotions and affects (fear, anxiety, threat, insecurity), and left-wing populism with the opposite set of connotations (hope, inclusion, happiness, opportunities). In this sense, these links are only a research hypothesis that must be proven based on the examination of a larger corpus of populist texts. To begin with, more spots by Marine Le Pen and Unidas Podemos should be examined with the purpose of exploring if the use of music is consistent and, therefore, can be identified as a semiotic strategy. Moreover, the use of music by other political actors identified as populist should be examined to test the hypothesis presented in these pages. Due to the discursive strategies normally used by right-wing and left-wing populist political actors, it is expected to find evidence to support the link between a negative and positive tone in the ways these political actors frame political change and try to reshape the political imaginary (Moreno Barreneche 2019).

The association between types of populism and types of orchestral music is not necessary but the result of historical practice and the mediation of culture. Although some types of music could be more evidently codified in culture for populist meaning-making (for example, popular or traditional music), they are not cast in stone and can be used to produce different meanings: in this sense, the fact that a type of music is more frequently used by right-wing populism does not mean that it can *only* convey right-wing populist messages. The fact that right-wing populism prefers a type of music that is highly dynamic, vivid and tense to convey its politics of fear (Wodak 2015) reflects how tension, fear, anxiety and danger are coded in culture through the association with a specific type of orchestral music. Dozens of movies, TV series and their promotional trailers confirm this codified association in the form of a discursive genre. The same occurs with the heroic and virtuous type of orchestral music preferred by Unidas Podemos in their spot and other left-wing politicians, populist or not,

like Evo Morales in Bolivia, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina and Bernie Sanders in the United States (Moreno Barreneche 2023).

In this sense, the correspondence between the left-right political continuum and the musical dimension evidences how populism is a discursive practice anchored in certain codes and cues that are defined in cultural terms. Nevertheless, there is space for alternatives and new modes of meaning- and sense-making: a right-wing populist political actor might want to frame its political contents using music that conveys hope; and a left-wing populist political actor might want to frame its contents by triggering negative emotions. In this sense, the question remains open regarding why a right-wing populist actor, a representative of a discursive genre that normally embraces a highly nationalistic and exclusionary type of discourse, might see convenient to convey his/her message through music that activates positive emotions such as hope and inspiration, instead of going down the standard road of creating fear, anxiety and a feeling of threat. To answer questions like this, semiotics can be an adequate discipline, in a close collaboration with other disciplines within the social sciences interested in emotions and affect.

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