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Beyond structural formalism: Archetypal Semiotics and the inferential turn in contemporary meaning analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the evolution of semiotic analysis requires a paradigm shift from structural formalism to inferential functionalism. By critically examining the limitations of Greimas's generative trajectory in accounting for the psychosocial depth and cultural variability of contemporary narratives, we introduce the foundations of Archetypal Semiotics as developed by Soares (2020-2025). This approach integrates Jung's analytical psychology to propose a methodology based on 'inferential contours' and 'functional apprehensions'. Unlike the abstract logic of the semiotic square, this model investigates how archetypes—understood as primordial ontological narratives—operate dynamically within texts like anime and manga. The article demonstrates that this theoretical inflection not only legitimizes pop culture objects but also provides a robust analytical toolkit for deciphering the symbolic and affective resonances that structure modern meaning-making processes.

KEY WORDS: Archetypal Semiotics, Greimas, Inferential Functionalism, Jungian Archetypes.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the case of Shinji Ikari, the protagonist of the acclaimed anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. A conventional Greimasian analysis would identify him as a subject-actant, map his narrative program (pilot the Evangelion unit), and describe his modal competences (not wanting to fight, but being forced to do so). Yet such a description, however precise, would fail to capture the profound existential anguish, the trauma of parental abandonment, and the collective resonance that makes Shinji an iconic figure for generations of viewers worldwide. What remains inaccessible to structural formalism is precisely the *psychosocial function* his narrative embodies: the archetypal configuration of the wounded child, the reluctant hero whose struggle mirrors the contemporary crisis of subjectivity in post-industrial societies.

This analytical gap is not incidental but structural. The semiotic theory developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas and his collaborators

(Greimas, 1983, 2009; Greimas & Courtés, 1979) constitutes one of the most systematic and influential projects for the study of signification in the twentieth century. Its core achievement—the generative trajectory of meaning, organized in fundamental, narrative, and discursive levels—provides rigorous instruments for decomposing texts into their minimal logical components. However, as numerous commentators have noted (Barros, 2005; Landowski, 2014; Fiorin, 2015), this very rigor entails a significant cost: the abstraction from cultural specificity, the flattening of psychological depth, and the marginalization of affectivity. Between the formal system of the text and the lived world of interpreting subjects, an epistemological hiatus installs itself—a blind spot concerning the pragmatic and symbolic mediations through which narrative structures become meaningful experience.

This blind spot has become increasingly problematic as contemporary cultural production, particularly in the realm of

globally circulating pop culture, demands analytical tools capable of addressing symbolic complexity, cultural hybridity, and affective engagement. Works such as anime and manga, as Jenkins (2009) argues in the context of convergence culture, are not mere entertainment commodities but complex symbolic systems that articulate myth, market, and subjectivity in unprecedented ways. Their transnational circulation and intense fan reception reveal dimensions of meaning that escape the fixed grids of structural analysis.

It is precisely within this epistemological interstice that Thiago Barbosa Soares's proposal of Archetypal Semiotics intervenes (Soares, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024, 2025). Rather than simply discarding the Greimasian legacy, Soares submits it to a critical inflection, shifting the analytical axis from structural immanence to the problematization of symbolic functions. Drawing on Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology (Jung, 2013), particularly the notion of the collective unconscious and its archetypal configurations, Soares reconfigures semiotic analysis as an investigation of how primordial narrative matrices operate within specific cultural contexts, mediating between textual structures and collective imaginaries.

This article advances three interconnected arguments. First, we contend that the Greimasian model, despite its heuristic power, reaches its explanatory limit when confronted with the psychosocial depth and cultural variability of contemporary narratives. Second, we propose that Archetypal Semiotics, through its methodology of inferential contours, offers a functionalist-inferential alternative that integrates structural description with symbolic interpretation. Third, we demonstrate that this paradigm shift not only expands the scope of semiotic inquiry but also provides a replicable analytical protocol for investigating transmedia narratives, with particular relevance for anime and manga studies.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 critically examines the Greimasian tradition, identifying its epistemological boundaries. Section 3 introduces the foundations of Archetypal Semiotics, detailing its Jungian underpinnings and methodological innovations. Section 4 systematizes the differences between the two approaches through a comparative framework. Section 5 discusses the contributions of Archetypal Semiotics to contemporary semiotic and cultural studies. Section 6 concludes by outlining future research directions and the broader implications of this theoretical inflection.

THE GREIMASIAN TRADITION: ACHIEVEMENTS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

The semiotics of Algirdas Julien Greimas represents one of the most ambitious attempts to establish a science of signification based on structural principles. Drawing on the linguistic legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, and inspired by the narrative morphology of Vladimir Propp, Greimas developed a theoretical architecture designed to reveal the deep grammar underlying all discourse (Greimas, 1983, 2009; Greimas & Courtés, 1979).

At the core of this architecture lies the generative trajectory of meaning, a hierarchical model comprising three interconnected levels. At the fundamental level, meaning is organized through elementary structures of signification, most famously represented by the semiotic square. This logical model, derived from Aristotelian oppositions, maps relations of contrariety, contradiction, and complementarity between semantic categories (e.g., life vs. death, non-life vs. non-death), demonstrating how values are constituted relationally and dynamically. The square generates the basic tension

that propels narrative development.

At the narrative level, this tension is actualized through programs and schemas. Greimas introduces a syntactic apparatus centered on actants—functional positions abstracted from concrete characters. The actantial model (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, opponent) describes the relational structure of any narrative, regardless of its specific content (Greimas, 1970). Transformations of states are mediated by modalizations (wanting, knowing, being able, having to), which define the subject's competence and performance.

Finally, at the discursive level, these deep structures receive figurative investment through enunciation. Abstract actants become concrete characters, narrative programs unfold in specific times and spaces, and isotopies—networks of semantic redundancy—ensure discursive coherence (Fiorin, 2015). The text, in its sensible manifestation, is thus the surface realization of a deep logical architecture.

The descriptive power of the Greimasian model is undeniable. It provides a precise vocabulary for decomposing complex narratives and comparing their structural patterns. However, this very precision entails significant limitations that have been the subject of sustained critical reflection.

First, the priority accorded to logical oppositions and abstract structures tends to homogenize cultural diversity. As Barros (2005) acknowledges, the model's universalizing ambition often submerges the specificities of historical and ethnographic contexts. The semiotic square, for all its elegance, operates as a transcultural invariant that says little about how particular cultures inflect fundamental categories with their own symbolic investments.

Second, the actantial model, by treating characters as functional positions, evacuates psychological depth and affective complexity. The subject-actant is a locus of logical operations, not a site of internal conflict, traumatic experience, or existential questioning. This becomes particularly problematic when analyzing narratives that centrally thematize psychological processes—precisely the kind of narratives that dominate contemporary serial fiction and anime.

Third, the generative trajectory's focus on immanence—the meaning internal to the text—creates a methodological barrier to investigating the pragmatic and affective dimensions of signification. As Landowski (2014) argues in his development of sociosemiotics, meaning is not merely structured but *lived*, emerging from interactions between texts and interpreting subjects embedded in social contexts. The Greimasian apparatus, by design, brackets these interactions.

It is important to note that Greimasian semiotics has not remained static. Developments such as tensivesemiotics (Zilberberg, 2006) and sociosemiotics (Landowski, 2014) represent attempts to address some of these limitations, introducing considerations of intensity, gradience, and social interaction. However, even these advances remain within a structural horizon that privileges formal description over symbolic interpretation. The question of how narratives engage deep psychosocial needs—needs for belonging, mastery, independence, stability—remains largely unaddressed. It is precisely at this juncture that Archetypal Semiotics enters the conversation.

ARCHETYPAL SEMIOTICS: FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Archetypal Semiotics, as developed by Thiago Barbosa Soares

(2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024, 2025), does not present itself as a rupture with the Greimasian tradition but as a critical synthesis that expands its analytical horizon. The pivotal move is the integration of Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology (Jung, 2013), particularly the concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes.

For Jung, the collective unconscious is a transpersonal psychic layer shared by all humanity, containing archetypes—primordial forms or patterns of experience that manifest across cultures and historical periods. Archetypes are not innate representations but "forms without content" (Jung, 2013, p. 42), structuring possibilities for experience that become actualized in culturally specific images, narratives, and symbols. The hero, the wise old man, the great mother, the trickster—these are not fixed stereotypes but dynamic matrices that generate infinite cultural variations.

Soares appropriates this Jungian framework while inflecting it in a distinctively semiotic direction. Archetypes, in his formulation, are understood as *ontological narratives*—deep story structures inscribed in the collective unconscious that predispose human beings to organize experience in certain patterned ways. Unlike Jung's more psychologically oriented approach, Soares emphasizes the *semiotic actualization* of archetypes: how they become manifest in concrete discursive forms and how these forms, in turn, shape collective imaginaries.

This theoretical move entails a significant epistemological shift. If Greimasian semiotics asks "how is meaning structured?", Archetypal Semiotics asks "what psychosocial function does a particular narrative configuration serve?" The question is no longer purely syntactic but functional and inferential. Meaning is understood not merely as the product of logical operations but as the outcome of interpretive processes that connect discursive traces to deep human needs.

The methodological innovation of Archetypal Semiotics lies in its systematization of analytical procedures through the concept of *inferential contours*. Unlike the deductive logic of the generative trajectory, which applies pre-established categories to texts, inferential contour analysis operates through a dynamic interplay between empirical observation and abductive inference.

We can formalize this method as a three-step protocol:

Step 1: Empirical Anchoring (Perceptible Traces)

The analyst begins by identifying the perceptible traces of the narrative—actions, dialogues, visual configurations, actantial relations. At this level, the descriptive apparatus of Greimasian semiotics remains useful: one can map narrative programs, identify actantial positions, and describe thematic investments. However, these descriptions are not ends in themselves but *data* for the next step. For example, analyzing the character Trunks in *Dragon Ball Z*, Soares (2025) identifies his actions: traveling from a devastated future, delivering warnings, fighting androids, protecting his mother. These are the perceptible traces.

Step 2: Abductive Inference (Sensitive Contour)

The second step moves from description to inference. Drawing on the perceptible traces, the analyst infers the *sensitive contour*—the archetypal configuration that organizes the character's narrative function. This inference is abductive in the Peircean sense: it seeks the best explanation for the observed phenomena. Why does Trunks act as he does? What deeper pattern gives his actions coherence and resonance? The answer, in this case, is the archetype of the *caregiver*, but inflected in a tragic-heroic key: a caregiver burdened

with trauma, responsibility, and the weight of a destroyed world (Soares, 2025). The sensitive contour is not directly observable but is inferred as the organizing principle of the character's narrative existence.

Step 3: Functional Mapping (Psychosocial Axes)

The final step situates the inferred contour within a functional framework. Soares draws on the typology developed by Mark and Pearson (2001), which distributes archetypes along axes of fundamental human needs. Two axes are particularly significant:

- **Independence vs. Belonging:** This axis captures the tension between self-assertion and connection to others. Archetypes such as the Innocent (belonging through goodness) and the Orphan (belonging through shared vulnerability) occupy different positions along this continuum.
- **Stability vs. Mastery:** This axis captures the tension between security and achievement. Archetypes such as the Caregiver (stability through nurturing) and the Hero (mastery through triumph) articulate different responses to this fundamental polarity.

By mapping inferred contours onto these axes, the analyst can specify the psychosocial function a character or narrative configuration performs. Trunks, for instance, embodies the tension between caregiver stability (protecting others) and heroic mastery (fighting to change the future), a tension that resonates deeply with audiences navigating their own conflicts between responsibility and self-actualization.

The method of inferential contours rests on a fundamental distinction between two dimensions of analysis, which Soares (2023a) terms the *perceptible* and the *sensible*.

The perceptible dimension encompasses the objective, observable features of discourse—the material traces that can be described with structural precision. This is the domain of traditional semiotic analysis, where actantial roles, narrative programs, and figurative investments can be systematically mapped. Archetypal Semiotics does not abandon this dimension but treats it as the necessary starting point for analysis.

The sensible dimension, by contrast, concerns the subjective and collective resonances that perceptible traces evoke. It is the domain of affective experience, implicit values, and deep psychic needs—the territory where narrative symbols find their echo in the collective imaginary. This dimension is not directly observable but becomes accessible through inferential operations grounded in analytical psychology and functional typologies.

The analytical task, therefore, is to articulate these two dimensions: to show how perceptible traces point toward sensible configurations and how these configurations, in turn, illuminate the psychosocial functions of narrative. Meaning, in this framework, is neither purely immanent (located in the text) nor purely subjective (located in the interpreter) but emerges from the dynamic interplay between textual structures and shared symbolic experience.

experience.

ARCHETYPAL SEMIOTICS VS. GREIMASIAN SEMIOTICS: A DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS

The relationship between Archetypal Semiotics and the Greimasian

tradition is best understood not as simple opposition but as dialectical synthesis. If Greimasian semiotics represents the *thesis*—the rigorous formal description of meaning structures—and Jungian psychology represents the *antithesis*—the exploration of deep psychic patterns—then Archetypal Semiotics emerges as the *synthesis* that integrates structural precision with symbolic depth.

Table 1 systematizes the key differences between the two approaches across multiple analytical dimensions

Analytical Dimension	Greimasian Semiotics	Archetypal Semiotics (Soares)
Epistemological Focus	Structural formalism oriented by systems of oppositions and generative trajectories	Inferential functionalism oriented by psychosocial apprehensions and symbolic functions
Conception of Meaning	Product of immanent narrative syntax governed by universal abstract categories	Result of inferential operations articulating perceptible discursive traces with deep human needs
Psychological Foundation	Implicit and predominantly individual (logical subject of discourse)	Explicit, grounded in Jungian analytical psychology and the notion of collective unconscious
Subject Status	Actantial, functional, and abstract	Symbolic and psychosocial, traversed by culturally modulated archetypes
Privileged Object	Texts as exemplars of universal signification mechanisms	Situated cultural narratives (anime, manga, contemporary media) and their ethnological variations
Analytical Method	Generative trajectory (fundamental, narrative, discursive levels)	Inferential contour analysis and functional mapping on psychosocial axes

The differences systematized in Table 1 have profound epistemological implications. Greimasian semiotics, anchored in the structuralist project, conceives meaning as a property of systems—an immanent logic that can be described independently of its cultural and psychological actualizations. The analyst's task is to reconstruct the grammar that generates any possible narrative.

Archetypal Semiotics, by contrast, conceives meaning as a *relation* between textual structures and interpreting subjects embedded in cultural contexts. The analyst's task is not merely to describe structures but to understand their *function*—what psychic and social work they perform for the communities that produce and consume them. This functionalist orientation does not abandon structural description but subordinates it to interpretive understanding.

The shift from structure to function entails a corresponding shift in the status of the subject. In Greimasian semiotics, the subject is an actantial position—a node in a relational network. In Archetypal Semiotics, the subject is a symbolic being, traversed by collective patterns that exceed individual consciousness and resonate with deep psychic needs. This conception aligns with contemporary developments in cognitive narratology and affective neuroscience, which increasingly recognize the role of narrative in shaping and regulating human emotion (Boyd, 2009; Gottschall, 2012).

Both approaches grapple with the tension between universality and particularity, but they do so in different ways. Greimasian semiotics privileges universality: the generative trajectory aims to describe structures that underlie all narratives, regardless of cultural provenance. Cultural specificity appears only at the discursive level, as figurative investment in deep structures.

Archetypal Semiotics, while recognizing universal patterns, emphasizes their *ethnological variation*. The hero archetype, for example, manifests differently in Japanese shonen anime than in Western epic traditions. These differences are not merely superficial but reflect distinct cultural configurations of subjectivity, sociality, and value. Soares's analyses of characters from *Dragon Ball Z* (Gohan, Trunks, Mr. Satan) consistently attend to how archetypal patterns are inflected by the specific context of Japanese post-war popular culture and its global circulation (Soares, 2023b, 2024, 2025).

This attention to cultural specificity aligns Archetypal Semiotics with the tradition of cultural semiotics associated with the Tartu-Moscow School (Lotman, 1990), which conceives culture as a semiotic system that generates meaning through the dynamic

interplay of universal structures and local codes.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ARCHETYPAL SEMIOTICS

The most fundamental contribution of Archetypal Semiotics lies in its expansion of the semiotic object. By integrating structural description with symbolic interpretation, it moves semiotics beyond text-centered analysis toward what might be called a *semiotics of experience*—the investigation of how narrative forms mediate and shape human subjectivity.

This move addresses what Landowski (2014) identifies as the "risk" of semiotics: its tendency to reduce living meaning to dead structure. Archetypal Semiotics, by contrast, treats texts as *interfaces* between collective imaginaries and individual psyches. The meaning of a narrative is not exhausted by its internal logic but includes its capacity to resonate with audiences, to articulate shared anxieties and aspirations, to provide symbolic resources for navigating existential challenges.

This epistemological reorientation has implications beyond semiotics proper. It contributes to broader debates in the humanities about the nature of meaning, the role of narrative in human life, and the relationship between structure and experience. By demonstrating that structural analysis and depth psychology can be productively integrated, Archetypal Semiotics offers a model for interdisciplinary work that respects the rigor of formal analysis while remaining attentive to the richness of lived experience.

The systematization of inferential contour analysis as a three-step protocol (empirical anchoring, abductive inference, functional mapping) represents a significant methodological advance. Unlike the intuitive interpretations that often characterize psychologically oriented criticism, this protocol provides explicit procedures that can be taught, replicated, and critiqued.

The protocol's adaptability is particularly noteworthy. While developed primarily through the analysis of anime and manga, it can be applied to a wide range of narrative forms: films, television series, video games, literary texts, even brand narratives and political discourses. Any cultural artifact that organizes experience through character and plot can be investigated through this lens.

Moreover, the protocol's integration of multiple theoretical traditions—structural semiotics, analytical psychology, functional typology—creates opportunities for triangulation and cross-validation. An interpretation generated through inferential contour analysis can be checked against actantial descriptions, archetypal classifications, and ethnographic evidence of audience reception.

Archetypal Semiotics has played a significant role in legitimizing pop culture objects, particularly anime and manga, as valid and complex objects of semiotic inquiry. Soares's analyses of *Dragon Ball Z* characters demonstrate that these apparently simple narratives possess sophisticated symbolic architectures that reward serious analytical attention.

This legitimization is not merely thematic but theoretical. By showing that anime engage universal archetypes in culturally specific ways, Archetypal Semiotics challenges the traditional hierarchy of cultural objects that privileges canonical literature and art cinema. It suggests that popular narratives, far from being degraded forms of culture, are laboratories for the contemporary reconfiguration of myth and symbol.

This contribution aligns with broader movements in cultural studies and media studies that have sought to understand popular culture as

a site of meaning-making, identity formation, and collective imagination (Jenkins, 2009; Storey, 2018). Archetypal Semiotics provides these movements with a rigorous analytical toolkit that complements their critical and ethnographic orientations.

Finally, Archetypal Semiotics offers a critical resource for understanding how cultural industries mobilize affect and shape subjectivity. By mapping narrative configurations onto axes of fundamental human needs, the approach reveals how media products strategically engage audiences at deep psychic levels.

Consider, for example, the prevalence of caregiver and orphan archetypes in contemporary narratives. These configurations speak to anxieties about attachment, loss, and responsibility that are particularly acute in late modern societies characterized by family instability and social fragmentation. By analyzing how these archetypes function in specific narratives, Archetypal Semiotics can illuminate the ideological work that popular culture performs—the ways it manages collective anxieties and offers symbolic resolutions to social contradictions.

This critical dimension positions Archetypal Semiotics within the tradition of immanent critique, which seeks to uncover the social content embedded in cultural forms. It demonstrates that formal analysis need not be apolitical; on the contrary, precise formal description can be the precondition for effective ideological critique.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR ARCHETYPAL SEMIOTICS

This article has argued that Archetypal Semiotics, as developed by Thiago Barbosa Soares, constitutes a significant epistemological inflection in the field of semiotic studies. By integrating Greimasian structural analysis with Jungian depth psychology, and by systematizing a methodology of inferential contours and functional mapping, it offers a paradigm that moves beyond the limitations of structural formalism while preserving its descriptive rigor.

The contributions of this approach are multiple. Epistemologically, it expands semiotics toward a science of symbolic experience. Methodologically, it provides a replicable protocol for narrative analysis. Culturally, it legitimizes pop culture objects as complex symbolic systems. Critically, it offers tools for understanding the affective strategies of cultural industries.

However, this paradigm is not without limitations. The inferential nature of sensitive contour analysis raises questions about interpretive validity: how can we ensure that inferences are not merely projections of the analyst's own psychic configurations? The integration of Jungian concepts, with their controversial history and metaphysical residues, requires careful epistemological vigilance. The functional mapping onto psychosocial axes, while heuristically useful, risks oversimplification if applied mechanically.

These limitations, far from invalidating the approach, define a research agenda for its continued development. Four directions seem particularly promising:

First, the method of inferential contours could be refined through dialogue with cognitive science and neuroscience. Recent research on narrative comprehension and emotional engagement (Boyd, 2009; Hogan, 2011) provides empirical resources for grounding and validating archetypal analysis.

Second, cross-cultural comparative studies could investigate how archetypal configurations vary across different cultural contexts.

How does the hero archetype function in Japanese shonen manga versus American superhero comics? What does the caregiver look like in Brazilian telenovelas versus Korean dramas? Such studies would test the universality claims of archetype theory while attending to cultural specificity.

Third, diachronic studies could trace the evolution of archetypal configurations over time. How has the orphan archetype transformed from nineteenth-century novels to contemporary anime? What does the trickster become in digital media environments? Such studies would illuminate the historical dynamics of collective imaginaries.

Fourth, applied studies could extend Archetypal Semiotics beyond narrative analysis to other semiotic domains: brand communication, political discourse, ritual practices, digital interfaces. In each domain, the core question remains the same: what psychosocial function does this symbolic configuration perform?

In a world saturated by globally circulating narratives, where ancient mythic patterns are continually reconfigured in new media forms, the need for analytical tools capable of addressing symbolic complexity has never been greater. Archetypal Semiotics, by bridging structural precision and interpretive depth, offers not merely a method but a lens for understanding how narratives continue to shape—and be shaped by—the collective psyche of human cultures.

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