

# The semiotics of ritual: Halloween in an American community

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## Abstract

Halloween is in the United States of America a widely spread festivity, always related to the world of children. This paper identifies some of the central semiotic procedures by which this seasonal ritual works. Our main hypothesis is that Halloween is an expression of a progressive process of initiation of children. Allowing the children to confront situations of fear is a ritual method of preparing them for what is a persistent reality in our culture and society: the fear of the unknown and unseen, the fear of a reality beyond of what can be seen and touched, of what can be controlled. The analysis is based in interviews made to a group of Indiana University students, to a group of children, and also in the observation-participation of my own family during Halloween activities in Bloomington, Indiana, USA, in 1992.

**Key words:** semiotic, Halloween, ritual, initiation.

## Semiótica del rito: Halloween en una comunidad norteamericana

### Resumen

Halloween es una festividad muy difundida en los Estados Unidos, siempre vinculada al mundo de los niños. En este artículo se identifican algunos de los procedimientos semióticos fundamentales que rigen el

funcionamiento de este ritual. Nuestra principal hipótesis postula que el Halloween es la expresión de un proceso progresivo de iniciación de los niños y los jóvenes. Permitir a los niños confrontar situaciones de miedo es un método ritual de preparación para lo que es una constante realidad en nuestra cultura y en nuestra sociedad: el temor de lo desconocido y lo no visto, el temor de la realidad más allá de lo que puede ser visto y tocado, de lo que puede ser controlado. El análisis está basado en entrevistas hechas a un grupo de estudiantes de la Universidad de Indiana, a un grupo de niños, y en la propia participación-observación de mi grupo familiar en las actividades del Halloween en Bloomington, Indiana, EE.UU., en 1992.

**Palabras claves:** semiótica, Halloween, rito, iniciación.

The following analysis<sup>1</sup> is based on my own experience of Halloween in October 1992, in Bloomington, Indiana, in the midwest of the United States of America<sup>2</sup>. I had the opportunity of experiencing this annual ritual so common in this country where I had been living for one year. Like most people, I had often heard about this interesting festivity whose origin is so ancient<sup>3</sup>. Even in Venezuela, my country, this ritual festivity has begun to be established in some private schools which, one way or another, have been under influence of American culture. During the last two weeks of October 1992, my children, my wife, and I

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society at Indiana University-Purdue University (Indianapolis 9-12 March 1995).

2 Acknowledgments. I would like to thank the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies of Indiana University, for appointing me as a Research Associate during the 1991-1992 period. Thanks to the help and support of its faculty and staff I was able to carry out this research. Particularly, I would like to thank Dr. Thomas A Sebeok and Dr. Jean Umiker-Sebeok, from the RCLSS, and Dr. Michael Jackson, from Indiana University's Department of Anthropology.

3 For a history of Halloweens origins see, among others, Kelley (1919).

participated in different Halloween activities. I had also the opportunity of collecting the statements of twenty of my American students at Indiana University about this seasonal ritual. I asked them to answer freely the following open questions: What does Halloween mean? For the children, is it an educational, negative, or just funny celebration? Why? The information I received from them is among the different elements I studied for my research. Nonetheless, some of the information that was given to me and that I thought was of a great value came from my own children David and Diego, who at the time were nine and six years old respectively. Their opinions and comments, and the way they experienced Halloween during those days were very important for my research because as Venezuelans, they had never experienced this ritual before. For the very first time in their lives they participated in this celebration as I did. They showed as much enthusiasm and excitement as the American kids who participated with them in this festivity. Like other American children in Bloomington, they had Halloween in their own schools. David was in fifth grade and Diego in kindergarten. According to his own story, David and his schoolmates:

- Dressed up in costumes
- Had a lot of candy
- Watched a movie ("The Watcher in the Wood")
- Saw their friend Robert, who got diarrhea "because he ate too much candy. Later he threw up."

Diego also had a Halloween party at his school where he:

- Dressed up in costume
- Had his classroom decorated with scary things (ghosts, webs, spiders, etc.)
- Sang a song about a ghost
- Heard a story read by his teacher about Halloween
- Had candy

They also had a haunted house in their neighborhood. They went there (with me and their mother) into a very dark house where they saw a skeleton going downstairs, a living head separated from its body, the corpse, a dead person going out of his coffin, etc. A witch was receiving all the children at the front door. The children were in their costumes but

many of them were frightened of what they saw, and even Diego did not want to go in. After reassuring him, and in company of myself and my wife, he finally agreed to go in. (Of course, the temptation of having candy after touring the haunted house helped him to decide to go in).

Later, on October 31st the children went around our neighborhood saying "Trick or treat", and singing:

"Trick or treat,  
smell my feet,  
give me something good to eat,  
If you don't, I don't care  
I'll pull down your underwear".

Many of the houses they visited with other children were decorated with skeletons, ghosts, witches, and many jack-o-lanterns.

Finally, they went to the biggest mall in town, where the stores were giving candies to children who were walking in a long line from one store to another, as they did in the neighborhood.

This tour shows how Halloween is a festivity that permeates the whole society: from the family to the school, to the neighborhood, to the mall. There are other places where Halloween was also practiced, but those were spaces related to adults. I would like to focus my attention particularly on the participation of children as primary actors in this festivity.

## **CHILDREN, CANDY, AND FEAR**

When children were asked to tell what they liked most about Halloween, they answered that this festivity is an opportunity to get candy and have fun. What seems interesting for my analysis is this strange relationship between fun and scariness. Parents have been always very concerned about ideas and stories that could frighten their children because they fear the emotional and behavioral consequences of their children being terrorized. That means that we have a culture where the normal and common pattern of parents behavior in relation to their children's fear is to avoid their being terrorized. But at the same time, this same culture allows their children, once a year, to be frightened by some very strong symbols of fear.

A kind of rupture occurs in the "normal" cultural structure -what we expect to be considered appropriate in relation to the children. The structure is broken as it is taken out of its time and values. As many anthropologists have pointed out, festivals frequently are the necessary counter-proof of validation of what is considered normal<sup>4</sup>. This moving equilibrium is always tested by the same social and cultural elements and forces that created it. It is the result of tensions and counter-tensions which give movement and facilitate perennial changes in every culture. So instead of looking at these phenomena -children doing, with their parents' encouragement, what parents usually consider inappropriate for them- as a cultural contradiction, we ought to consider it part of a dialectic movement where some cultural patterns are expressed. Maybe this interpretive hypothesis requires a longer explanation. I will try to clarify this apparent contradiction by looking into the semiotic values associated with children in our culture. First of all, children are associated with the idea of /vulnerability/, and therefore it is the adults responsibility to take care of the children, of their physical as well as their emotional health. It follows, as a consequence, that adults must avoid putting their children at any kind of risk. The natural question that follows is why they expose their children to frightening experiences. I think the answer can be found in a semiotic opposition between **fear** and **fun**. We have always thought that fear is contradictory to fun, and that is true **when the threat of danger is real and unexpected**. According to my experience, fear during Halloween is frequently very real<sup>5</sup>. The problem

- 4 For a very interesting analysis of festivals see A. Falassi, ed. (1987).
- 5 In 1978 Lawton W. Posey complained about changes in the traditional American Halloween: "What used to be a relatively minor hilarity for children has become the haunt of adults and older youth who have taken advantage of the spookier elements of the season to do everything from raising money for worthwhile causes to winning souls for Christ". Talking about a haunted house he visited with his son in his city he added: "I am here to tell you that this was truly a frightening experience for adults and children alike". Moreover, worried by his son's frightening experience, he finally asked for "answers to the questions raised by the growing interest and enthusiasm of the young for the terrifying, the bizarre, the occult. Death already stalks the earth in such frightening forms that it seems unnecessary to augment its already somber mask". S. Magliocco has also

lies with the **unexpected** because it is an experience out of control. The American society can cope with fear when this experience is planned ahead, when it is under control by some means. As one of the children in my neighborhood pointed out "to have fear is also to have fun." Yes, but only when this fear is foreseen, anticipated, as when going to the amusement park where we go knowing that some of the amusements are based on scary situations, sometimes based on a supposed risk of being hurt, sometimes based in confrontations with the unknown as in a haunted house. An adult can easily distinguish between a situation artificially created to generate fear and even terror and a genuinely threatening situation. The adult has been educated to cope with the idea of mixing -under certain circumstances- fear and pleasure, fright and fun. And even an extensive industry, dedicated through many ways to create strong emotions of terror and fright, exists in almost every city or town in the whole world. That means that fear is a customary experience in every culture. Consequently, the whole culture and the practices derived from creating it will develop many ways of teaching the new members of the community how to deal with fear as a commonplace cultural component.

### **HALLOWEEN AS A RITUAL OF INITIATION**

If we follow the same analysis that we began to develop before, we will see that it is possible, among other complementary interpretations, to consider Halloween as a ritual of initiation. In fact initiation practices are based on socially established conventions that are supposed to build the way the members of a group within a society are to be taught in a manner that will allow them to accomplish tasks beyond their range. In semiotic terms, a ritual of initiation is a cultural practice whose main aim is to give the initiated some **competence** by means of which he will be able to reach the appropriate achievement of certain **performances**. According to the semiotic theory developed by A.J. Greimas (1979) and partially based in V. Propp (1965), the way to gain competence is to go

pointed out, in his work about a haunted house in Bloomington, "quite a few haunted house visitors are children, some of whom are very frightened by the experience" (1985:22).

through tests which will allow the initiate to gain qualifications in order to succeed in his future performances. As it is well known, Propp has distinguished three types of tests in folk tales: qualifying, decisive, and glorifying. The qualifying test corresponds to what is known in anthropology as initiation.

From a semiotic point of view, the initiation is a practice whose aim is to allow the initiate to acquire competence in two ways or modalities: knowing-how-to-do and being-able-to-do. Therefore, actors involved in initiation rituals are going through a test established by a particular society to grant them authorization to perform activities or practices or to have knowledge or experience they had not usually been allowed to have or to perform before. In talking about children's autumn traditions in England, it has been pointed out that rituals like Halloween are "a dividing line between adulthood and childhood, integration and isolation," and that "the literal threshold of the house also becomes the archetypal threshold in the rite of passage into adulthood" (Beck, 1985:27). This interpretation relates to the life cycle experience of children, but does not take into account the relationship between this rite of passage and the main semiotic contents of the ritual. Furthermore, this interpretation contradicts the reality of what usually is considered the beginning of adulthood, usually considered to be after puberty. At least for children at an age still well before puberty, this interpretation seems to have no relevance. I believe that this segment of the population is the one with the most active participation in this ritual festivity.

The activities in which my children took part in Bloomington had the same main characteristics that a ritual of initiation usually has. During Halloween they were having tests that were increasing their capabilities to endure fear, to put up with the fright, and to transform their fear in fun and joy. Even if the dose of this fear is small, still many children we saw were feeling it as something very disturbing. When we went to the haunted house in our neighborhood, not only my children but the twenty or so other children that were there were very frightened, especially of an adult who was wearing a mask like the one used by Jason, the main character in the series of films "Friday the 13th." This person had an electric saw, like the one used by the character in one of the film's scenes. He tried to scare the children with it and he certainly did. Many of these children were really frightened. Real fear.

Despite the different meanings that Halloween has had for different cultures and different times and societies<sup>6</sup>, I believe that one of these meanings is centered on a method of dealing with fear. The ritual festivity is supposed to make the children familiar with fear as a common ingredient of social and cultural life, an ingredient which the children will find and will have to deal with during their lives. In addition, this initiation, aimed at the new members of the community, has been sweetened in order to soothe the process.

There are two other aspects I would like to examine in relation to the Halloween festival. The first one is the stories told about the dangers, the real dangers, that children can meet during their "Trick or Treat" tour. I am talking about the many tales of razor blades, glass, or pins hidden in apples, poisoned candies, and drugs placed in different kind of treats. Although these stories have been reported in most cases to be false, they also have contributed to the spread of fear among parents, and therefore among children. Today these stories are a strong part of the Halloween festivity itself. The second aspect is the fact that during the festivity, newspapers and schools inform the parents and children about the precautions that should be taken in order to avoid dangerous consequences. Even the main hospital in Bloomington offered the community free X-ray screenings of treats in order to prevent any child from getting hurt. "The Herald Times" of Bloomington also offered the parents a list of precautions to be taken with the same objective.

I think that the whole situation, involving newspapers, hospitals, schools, and neighborhoods, comes as a reinforcer to the dangers and fears of the entire celebration. The effect of this entire experience on children relates to the semiosphere<sup>7</sup> in which it is necessary to interpret the ritual.

6 For an account of different interpretations see Belk (1990).

7 Lotman has developed the concept of semiosphere which he defines as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of language" (1990:123). The semiosphere, he adds, "can be regarded as a generator of information" (127).

## THE SEMIOTIC OF FEAR

We can classify emotions into two macro categories: */pleasant/* and */unpleasant/*. The first one is defined as what is agreeable to the mind or to the senses. All cultural practices can be regarded from these two perspectives. They even constitute the basis of philosophical systems of thought. According to the attention given to one or another we have a hedonistic or an ascetic perspective. In our hedonistic contemporary societies the main attention is focused on having pleasant experiences as a way of reaching happiness and wellbeing. The dominant axiom of pleasure is contrary to the petition for renunciation and sacrifice. Moreover, we can define fear as the feeling or emotion produced by the anticipation or presence of a danger that threatens us. The semantic chain where fear usually appears will be like this:

*/security/* —> */danger/* —> */fear/*

This semantic chain is a pattern that we can apply to the syntactic chain performed by children during the Halloween ritual. In fact, children leave the security of their family and their homes and go to the neighborhood, to the streets, where usually, according to our cultural standards, dread and apprehension are to be found.

"home" —> "streets" —> "dread"

I think it is noteworthy to mention that, again, this process of exposure to */fear/* is with parents consent and, sometimes, encouragement. Like most initiation rituals, Halloween is a way of teaching and learning. There are some implicit risks, but risk, parents would say, is part of life, and it is in life where what seems contradictory becomes integrated and reconciled. The play of ritual is usually a dialectic encounter between terms and values that generally play opposite roles. I think that this is especially true when we analyse the Halloween ritual. In fact, the radical opposition between */pleasant/* and */unpleasant/* is neutralized by */fear/* as a feeling or emotion than can be, at the same time, */pleasant/* and */unpleasant/*.

## THE SEMIOTIC INVERSION OF GIFT AND DONOR

According to the canonic semiotic formula, we have three pairs of actants (subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent). In the case of

Halloween, there is an inversion of the typical Object as one having good connotations or as one usually considered as a positive object. In fact, the object with which the Subject (in this case the children) are going to be in conjunction is a negative object: *fear*. In first analysis that means that the sender (the parent) seems to be in a position of sending a negative gift to the receiver (also the children). I think that it is this feature that characterizes, from a semiotic point of view, the ritual of initiation: the sender gives to the subject a negative gift in order to allow him to become competent. In other words, the qualifications the initiate is trying to acquire must be obtained by means of a test which implies some kind of loss, or sacrifice, or suffering, some kind of *unpleasant* performance. In some rituals this unpleasant test might include loss of some body part (hair, prepuce, clitoris, etc.), loss of property (money, animals), pain, or some physical or mental endeavor. The qualifying test which the subject undergoes will allow him, in the end, to obtain the necessary competence for further tests. In the Halloween ritual the children, by learning how to control their fear, how to deal with it, will be able to confront dangerous situations in real life.

My hypothesis, according to which one of the most important multiple senses of Halloween in contemporary American culture is the initiation of young generations to the dark side of life, is supported by the fact that, for instance, the "Trick or Treat" tour around the neighborhood carries plenty of warnings: there is not only the possibility that children might suffer attacks from strangers but also the terrible dread of being hurt by means of substances (drugs, poison) or objects (razor blades, glass, pins) hidden in the treats they are going to receive. Indeed, we have here again the transformation of a supposed positive gift (a treat) into a negative gift (glass, poison, etc.). This inversion is the reduplication of another inversion: the children who are supposed to receive a beneficial gift will receive a harmful one, and, at the same time, the neighbors that are supposed to give a beneficial gift will give a prejudicial gift. In other words, the donor will become an anti-donor. This polemic structure<sup>8</sup> is the semiotic expression of a conflict between the world of

8 For a semiotic definition of this concept see Greimas and Courtés (1982:238).

childhood, seen as a realm of innocence, and the world of adulthood, seen as a realm of conflictual relationships to which the children must become accustomed.

## FROM JACK-O-LANTERNS TO PUMPKINS

One of the most common elements in Halloween ritual is the Jack-o'-lantern made these days with a pumpkin inside of which a little lantern is placed, after carving the eyes and mouth that resemble those of evil spirits. The pumpkin process of transformation is something interesting because it reveals to me one of the very interesting hidden codes of the Halloween ritual. In fact, what we do with a pumpkin is a process of semiotic inversion by which what is usually presented as beneficial is transformed into something prejudicial. The pumpkin is not only a food but a very appreciated one in American culture. It constitutes the symbolic food representation of another ritual festivity, Thanksgiving, where the pumpkin is a representation of the good harvest, of family life and friendship. When we take out what is edible in a pumpkin and put in what is considered malefic we are making a transformation that can be represented as follows:

"food" —> "evil"; /beneficial/ —> /prejudicial/

The process has two steps: 1) to take out what is "good" and 2) to put in what is "bad". This semiotic process is the same that we have seen when some "evil" people take out what is good in a candy or an apple and instead put in drugs, poison or razor blades. At a deep semiotic level what is at play in this transformation is an opposition between /in/ and /out/ used to express the semantic opposition between /good/ and /bad/. In a Levi-Straussian way, we can represent this relationships as follows:

/good/ : /in/ :: /bad/ : /out/

where : = is to, and :: = as.

This same relationship between /in/ and /out/ underlies the following story of the origin of the Jack-o' lantern:

"One version of the Jack-o' lantern story comes from Ireland. A stingy man named Jack was for inhospitality barred from all hope of heaven, and because of practical jokes on the Devil was locked out of hell. Until the Judgement Day he is

condemned to walk the earth with a lantern to light his way".  
 (Kelley, 1919:49-50).

Jack is out of heaven in that way because **he did not allow other people to get in** (to give hospitality). And because of his jokes on the Devil, he also is refused any possibility of getting into hell. That means that the actor is refused any possibility of having /good/ because he can't be /in/ in any case. He must remain /out/ forever. The story seems to show that /outness/ is even worse than being /in/ in hell.

### FROM HOME TO A HAUNTED HOUSE

The same dialectical structure we have seen before takes place again when we analyse the relationship between "home" and "haunted house." During the Halloween ritual the parents in some way take the children "out of their home," or the children of their volition decide to go out to the streets, to the neighborhood for their ritual "treat or trick." Thus, in the same sense that we take something "good" (something nutritious) out of a pumpkin, we also take our children, people who are "good" because we love them, out of our house. With a haunted house we do exactly the opposite: we put in something "bad": ghosts, devils, skeletons, witches, etc., and also we put something "good:" we put the children. It is there, in the haunted house, where the dialectical encounter between "bad" and "good" is accomplished, and thus, where the qualifying test take place. Thus, the haunted house is an inversion of the home. The transition between "home" and "haunted house" is a transition from security to insecurity, from familiar to strange, from living parents to death ghosts, from "good" to "bad." This same transition is accomplished through the transformation of a pumpkin into a jack-o-lantern which is, again, a transition from nutritious to non-nutritious, from beneficial to prejudicial, from "good" to "evil." This striking parallel can be represented saying that

home : pumpkin :: haunted house : jack-o-lantern

This structure seems to have similarities with what, according to Kelley (1919), seems to be the pattern of the old Halloween ritual among the Celts: the souls of all those who had died were allowed to come to the world of living human beings. As Belk said, "...on Samhain night the ghost of the dead emerged and visited their old homes" (1990:508). Thus,

in the opposite way of souls going from the world of dead to the world of living, to their ancient homes, the children go from the world of living (their homes) to the world of dead (the haunted house). According to this preliminary hypothesis, today's Halloween has preserved, inverting it, the same structure of the ancient ritual, fulfilling it with new contents and new practices, according to the new conditions. This hypothesis, here merely roughed out, calls for further analysis.

In this series of inversions, the children, as the souls of the dead among the Celts, are moving in opposition to their usual behavior: instead of going home to find security and protection they are asked to go out to take risks and confront danger; instead of a protective and sheltering house they are invited to go to a frightening and strange house. In the same way that something "good" and "beneficial" as a pumpkin is transformed into the opposite, the house, a powerful symbol of protection and reassurance, is transformed into a place of fear and anguish.

In her analysis, S. Magliocco has noted two interesting aspects of a haunted house in Bloomington. First, she asserts that "the haunted house makes fear enjoyable by localizing it and confining it to a limited area"(1985: 25). In other words, the placement of what is "bad" or "frightening" in a limited space creates a border between /security/ and /fear/. That means that it is within the limits of a space, within its /interiority/, that the controlled situation of fear is built. As in a typical ritual of initiation, the situation is under control and surveillance. Second, Magliocco considers that for adults the haunted house is a form of folk drama, but for young children the experience "may be extremely frightening"((1985): 26). What is interesting here is the presence of fear, which many children -mine included- felt when they were at the haunted house in our neighborhood. If it is true that, according to R. Baker (quoted by Magliocco:21), "the threads of the modern world come from human sources," it is also true that we still fear the unknown, death, the dark side of our life.

## **HALLOWEEN COSTUMES: THE SELF AND THE OTHER**

The same hypothesis may be extended to the analysis of costumes, which represent a way of hiding the "normal," "real" human being and putting to play, in the "outside" world, a representation that, in most of

the cases we saw in Bloomington, was related, one way or another, to what we may call "devil," frightening, or spooky. In this case the actors involved seem to represent what is culturally understood as "bad", putting this meaning in the kind of costume they have chosen. In a sense, they show their dark side that, according to a widely spread stereotype, every human being has. In his analysis of Halloween costuming among young children in Bloomington, J. H. McDowell has pointed out that "the Halloween costume theme was generally viewed as an extension of the self," and that "costuming, a representation of the other, was clearly perceived as an extension, even a revelation, of the self" (1985:7). This dialectic between the /self/ and the /other/ overlaps with the pattern we have seen before: /in/ and /out/ or /interiority/ and /exteriority/.

## CONCLUSIONS

I think that the Halloween festivity expresses an interesting pattern in American culture that we cannot reduce to a simple process of mass consumption (Stone, 1959). Even though consumption is an important component that has even allowed children to be perceived as present and future consumers, there are other cultural aspects which the ritual is related to.

I believe that the series of inversions performed during the Halloween ritual is an expression of a progressive process of initiation of children and youths. Allowing the children to confront situations of fear is a ritual method of preparing them for what is a persistent reality in our culture and society: the fear of the unknown and unseen, the fear of a reality beyond what can be seen and touched, what can be controlled. Placing their children under surveilled situations of fear, under tests and risks, permits the parents to improve the emotional preparation for adulthood. The annual festivity will allow the children to become gradually acquainted with realities for which they will not always find rational answers.

Fear is an emotion that must be mastered in order to gain control of one's personality, capacities, and abilities. The Halloween annual ritual is an opportunity to find the way of controlling fear and becoming used to cultural components sometimes difficult to cope with, especially for the youngest. Even if this festivity might be regarded as a passage between childhood and adulthood, it is my belief that the most important

purpose of Halloween in American contemporary society is to initiate the children to what the world is beyond home, beyond its security and protection.

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