
1. TOPICS.

Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive treatments of the discipline. It is also a turning point in Eco's itinerary through the forms of interpretive thought. The reason for listing both the Italian and the English version of some of his books is that, generally speaking, the translation are always touched up, updated and in part re-written, and occasionally sections and paragraphs are added or dropped in the later edition. Moreover, in the history and development of semiotics in Italy, Eco's opus is a milestone, an historiographical moment of consolidation as well as the compass needle locating paths and setting agendas for subsequent study. In this article, after a necessarily compressed but, hopefully, critically acceptable synthesis of some fundamental tenets of *A Theory of Semiotics*, we will proceed to analyze three major aspects of it:

A. First, we shall focus on the way in which the theory is actually constructed. This requires that we consider how the theory is explicitly elaborated, taking into consideration its component elements, their definition and use. Concluding observations will extend to inner or underlying presuppositions, their limits as well as their potential for further development.

B. In second place, we will be seeking the ways in which a *semiotic method* is construed, and look at its functioning and meaning to interpretation. The critical assumption here at work, developed elsewhere, is that theory and method are inextricably connected and interdependent, and that theory is basically related to ontology and ideology, whereas method is the formal-epistemological route needed to ground and legitimize the theory.

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C. Finally, we shall consider the outlook of semiotics on the arts and the question of a semiotic aesthetic, or an aesthetic semiotic. This will bear on any (often implied) consideration on the relationship between semiotics and social and cultural criticism. The reader should also bear in mind the interpreter's hermeneutic prejudice, evident in the occasional pointed criticisms coming from the phenomenological and hermeneutic camps.

2. TOPOS.

According to Eco 1979 [1976], a "general semiotic theory [should be able] to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes." (TS 3) Moreover, a general semiotics "should consider: a) a theory of codes and b) a theory of sign production." Here we must pause and clarify what is meant by these word/concepts. Eco's own explication and plan of attack reads as follows:

- In principle, a semiotics of signification entails a theory of codes, while a semiotics of communication entails a theory of sign production.
- The distinction between a theory of codes and a theory of sign-production does not correspond to the ones between 'langue' and 'parole', competence and performance, syntactics (and semantics) and pragmatics. (TS 4)

Immediately after this statement, which emphasizes early on in the book the shift away from structural linguistics, Eco writes:

It is not by chance that the discriminating categories are the ones of signification and communication. As will be [demonstrated], there is a signification system (and therefore a code) when there is the socially conventionalized possibility of generating sign-functions...there is on the contrary a communication process when the possibilities provided by a signification system are exploited in order to physically produce expressions for many practical purposes. (TS 4)

But if in this way he reiterates that semiotics comprehends and subsumes the other models of signification and communication -- the Chomskian, the Saussurean, etc. -- he is also suggesting an even broader horizon, so much so that it ideally should replace philosophy itself. The vista disclosed to inquiry by this discipline is also a sweeping vision:

- semiotics studies all cultural processes as processes of communication. Therefore each of these processes would seem to be permitted by an underlying system of signification... (TS 8)

In fact Eco goes on to explain that the two semiotics, that of communication and that of signification, are not "mutually exclusive approaches in opposition." (ib.)

Now in order to facilitate our exposition, we must quickly add the necessary remaining terms (that is, the conceptual definitions referred to for persuasive support) that go into Eco's semiotics. In brief, the communicative process requires the Passage of a Signal from a Source through a Transmitter along a Channel and Addressed to a Receiver. Of the familiar Jakobson model, Eco naturally assumes also the varying incidence on any message actually communicated of the five corresponding functions: referential, emotive, imperative, phatic and metalinguistic. (TS 262) It follows from these premises that Signification is possible only if a code exists.
already, that is to say, "if something stands for something else" that was (or is implied as possible to be) there, a crucial formulation to which we shall return again and again.

A first consequence of this axiom is that all the communicative stages acquire meaning, signification, or have a reason to exist, provided that the sign (or signal) represent or substitute for something else. This raises some problems, as if whenever our exchange is (deemed to be) meaningful, communication is also, simultaneously, hiding or obscuring something else. The Receiver understands, or rather "decodes," what this sign (eventually cluster of signs or message) means because, above and beyond the concrete necessary channels it had to go through, it falls within a network of systems and rules which he or she presumably already know and where, moreover, in the play of excluding oppositions and possible differences, the sign becomes the sole bearer of the necessary information.

3. THE FIELD OF INFERENCE

At the origin of the theoretical plan of Eco's book is what Ferdinand de Saussure did not say, the fact, that is, that he presumably never made clear what the signified was, "leaving it half way between a mental image, a concept and a [n undefined] psychological reality [non altrimenti circonscritta]," (TS 14-15) which however must be given within that global plenum called society. Therefore, according to Saussure signs `express' ideas and [], provided that he did not share a Platonic interpretation of the term `idea', such ideas must be mental events that concern a human mind. Thus the sign is implicitly regarded as a communicative device [artificio comunicativo] taking place between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate or to express something. (TS 15)

Here we begin to perceive some of the stress points in the theory. All semiological systems are "strictly conventionalized systems of artificial signs, such as military signals, rules of etiquette and visual alphabets." (TS 15) However, these systems make sense if the sign is taken as a communicative "device," that is, a man-made artificial "thing" which entails production and, before that, intentionality, a consciousness! But, as we will see, if it cannot be coded, it does not exist. Consciousness and intentionality are not thematized, and are curved to follow fast upon the explication and adoption of the rationalist notion of inference: "there exist acts of inference which must be recognized as semiosic acts." (TS 17) Inference however needs sign as a necessary support, as a floating Grund of sorts. Intentionality is subjected to the same kind of radical semiotic critique as will be the intensional fallacy and the extensional fallacy, further down in the section devoted to a Theory of Codes (see TS 58-59,62-66). We do find here, however, the statement: "Semiotics is mainly concerned with signs as social forces." (TS 65) Understanding these social forces is complex owing to their multifaceted functions, their being originally polymorphous, capable of suggesting different conceptions of thinking and the universe. Eco writes that from ancient times and down through Hobbes, for example (cf. Leviathan 1,3), "a sign was defined as the evident antecedent of a consequent or the consequent of an antecedent when similar consequences have been previously observed;" but it was also reconceptualized as "an entity from which the present or the future or past existence of another being is inferred (Wolff, Ontology, 1952); [and, finally] as a proposition constituted by a valid
and revealing connection to its consequent (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math*, VIII, 245)." (TS 17)

He must therefore make some fundamental assumptions in order to proceed with any of these definitions of sign and the connexed problem of intentionality/inference-signification, and he is well aware of the critical risks: "Probably this straightforward identification of inference and signification leaves many shades of difference unexplored: it only needs to be corrected by adding the expression \`when this association is culturally recognized and systematically coded'." (TS 17) We must keep on referring to these "shades of difference" because they will help us on the two-fold task of seeing what semiotics includes, subsumes, explains, and what it ignores, expels, cannot know.

For Eco, Saussure's ideas had this limitation: the problem of the *signified*, by remaining unsolved, remained an "open" question. A question which in his earlier work he had addressed on the basis of non- or pre-semiotic philosophies and criticism.\(^{13}\) Though the signified would later be the object of specific studies in the areas of semantics and pragmatics,\(^{14}\) in the early seventies, it was still the signifier that took center stage in his research. And the signifier was tractable, after all: Eco's historical-theoretical recollecting serves the purpose of illustrating the ample possibilities of the notion of the sign, taking in fact advantage of its concrete, empirical dimension. He can now transfer the notion of "communicative device" onto the plane of Peirce's conception of the sign.

4. SIGN, ABSENCE, THEORY

Crucial to the theory of semiotics is the work of Peirce. His definitions appear time and again in Eco. Here he cites:

By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in anyway resolvable into actions between pairs. (TS 15 [Peirce 1931, C.P. 5.488])

Where the sign is, once again, "something which stands to somebody for something in some respects or capacity" [2.228].\(^{15}\) Postponing the discussion on the interpretant, Eco is quick to point out that "the subjects of Peirce's 'semiosis' are not human subjects but rather three abstract semiotic entities, the dialectic of which is not affected by concrete communicative behavior." (TS 15) This is a crucial statement.

For one, it seems to be anti-behavioristic and yet, knowing of his adoption of Morris, there must be something else at work here. First of all, it claims that "human subjects" are not involved: but how so, if semiotics deals with cultural (or better yet: cultured, acculturated) communication (cf. AI 354-57), and the cultural is in principle a "human" product. Second, by stating that its dialectic is not affected by concrete communicative behavior, it is making a claim for its being removed, abstracted, or at any rate for placing it elsewhere from concrete communication. This betrays obvious formalistic and idealistic matrices at work,\(^{16}\) and the question of the relationship of theory and praxis, of how ideas get translated into reality, forcefully reemerges. Is the theory so metaphysical, so essentialist, so strongly inclusive (and therefore: exclusive) and self-legitimating that no matter what happens in actual human communicative intercourse the precepts will hold, the validity will not be affected? Does not the
"application" of the theory need to be translated into a method, a model, to be followed in reality, through human agency? And doesn't this have an effect on the very theory from which it is derived?

But let us assume, as Eco seems to do, that the method and the theory are unrelated (or at least that they can be conceptualized and studied as two autonomous areas of research), it would then seem that (semiotic) theory aspires to temporal-lessness, eternity, universalism, totality.\(^{17}\) This makes it a "strong" theory in the tradition of Aristotle,\(^ {18}\) Aquinas,\(^ {19}\) Locke,\(^ {20}\) and Kant, grounded in necessary but unprovable axioms and deducing everything from it. Indeed, even Peirce's triadic schema, which as a matter of fact left the door open to a more existential and ontological conception of human agency, the trilateral epistema potentially predisposed toward ontological hermeneutics,\(^ {21}\) this too must be reduced to a more manageable dualism through the development impressed on the discussion by Charles Morris.\(^ {22}\)

In 1938 Morris wrote:

Semiotics, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of objects, but with ordinary objects insofar (and only insofar) as they participate in semiosis.

(\textit{TS} 16)

This definition, resonant with the premises of one of the major efforts in twentieth century culture to come up with a Unified Theory,\(^ {23}\) seems to be also the ontological-theoretical foundation of Umberto Eco's semiotics of the code. In this view, there is no preoccupation with the real, with any sort of object, unless they are first translated into signs, unless they are \textit{taken as signs}, and finally \textit{exist as sign}....but not necessarily \textit{for} something (someone?) else not readily present, not concretely given. The center of the universe, the fundamentum inconcussum is an abstract sign which of necessity harks to something else, to an elsewhere. One gets the feeling that Hermes is showing only one side of himself, or telling half the truth.

Fortunately, however, this barycenter is exposed and subject to discoursive forces. It can be contested, critiqued. If we make even a small effort to read it as a metaphor, as an imaginative figura, the very definition of sign -- "\textit{something standing for something else}" (\textit{TS} 16) -- invokes its own ghost, casts an unshakeable shadow behind, acquires a double personality of which one always present, the other groping in the dark-infested background, or clapping in the depthless folds of reflection. Otherwise said, in order to prevent that the human interpreter enter the space between theory and method, between signification and communication, he or she also must first be changed into sign-entities, into sign-functions. Thus Eco's final touch:

The only modification that I would introduce into Morris' definition is that the interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood as the \textit{possible} interpretation by \textit{a possible} interpreter. (\textit{TS} 16)

In other words, this last gate open to a human existent subject is closed off unless it partakes in the chain or channel established by the sequence of signs during communication, and in this fashion it can be analyzed within a preventive statistical culculus, as the Theory of Semiotics will in fact proceed to do in later sections, with the model "Q".\(^ {24}\) (\textit{TS} 121-124) In fact, the notion of "human" here is not very human at all, because it exists, and makes sense, \textit{only} as a sign -- whether agent or reagent, shifter or variable, semantic marker or icon, -- \textit{within} a pre-established code.

5. INTERPRETER AND INTERPRETANT
The question of the status and function of the interpreter is picked up in detail in section seven of chapter two, (TS 68-72) which is dedicated precisely to a "Theory of Codes." (TS 48-150).

Developing and adapting the Peirce-Morris axis -- but not unresponsive to the most stimulating theories in linguistics, such as that of Hjelmslev (TS 51-54), Eco writes:

*The interpretant is not the interpreter* (even if a confusion of this type occasionally arises in Peirce). The interpretant is that which guarantees the validity of the sign, even in the absence of the interpreter. (TS 68)

Neither a he nor a she, but perhaps more appropriately an it, the interpretant is "another representation which is referred to the same `object'," in other words, another sign-function. Citing Peirce directly, we read that a sign is "anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (TS 69 [Collected Papers 2.300]).

We may ponder here whether this understanding of the interpretant as sign doesn't make it somehow superfluous, contingent, unnecessary to the very basic ontology of semiotics. It is certainly something to be considered if we have already seen how Peirce's triadic scheme was pushed toward a bipolar or dichotomous matrix. The following passage is consistent with this evident attempt at making semiotics a philosophic and scientific discipline. "The idea of the interpretant makes a theory of signification a rigorous science of cultural phenomena, while detaching it from the metaphysics of the referent." (TS 70)

Let us pause and ask: Is this possible? Is reference so easily disposed of? Metaphysics means, if nothing else, or amidst other known meanings, reflection on something, that is to say: thinking, deciding, referring, interpreting, understanding. If these aspects are removed, in what way can we still speak of a "semiotics of experience," or a "semiotic analysis of..." anything, from meteorology to architecture to feminism? A quick look at theories of reference explored by American linguists and analytic philosophers warns us against the danger of doing away with the referent, and about the mind boggling complexities that arise from even postulating the idea that signification and communication can even be said to exist without some sort of reference, whether this be metaphysical, empirical, transcendental, positive or rationalist, alluded to or camouflaged under more evident structures and acts.25

But let us continue with Eco's own synthesis of the possible ways in which an interpretant can be perceived:

a) It can be the equivalent (or apparently equivalent) sign-vehicle in another semiotic system. For example I can make the drawing of a dog correspond to the word /dog/.
b) It can be the index which is directed to a single object, perhaps implying an element of universal quantification (<all objects like this>).
c) It can be a scientific (or naive) definition in terms of the same semiotic system, e.g. /salt/ signifies <sodium chloride>.
d) It can be an emotive association which acquires the value of an established connotation: /dog/ signifies <fidelity> (and vice versa).
e) It can simply be the translation of the term into another language, or its
substitution by a synonym. Finally, it can also take on the form of
f) the entire syllogism deduced from such premises as /all men are mortal/ or
/Socrates is a man/. (TS 70)

Without pretending to be exhaustive about the implications of the above schemata of the
interpretant, we can nonetheless observe that,

a) There exists a relational action of correspondence or of substitution taking place even
before we can speak of meaning or whatever notion of intrinsic qualities. Meaning is, in short,
*already* and indeed *always* exchanged, transposed, dislocated, -- in concrete historical cases
tragically short-changed! -- the moment it enters the signifying chain, its bearing the message to
be decoded within the enabling code marked fundamentally by an ontological absence, an *other*
site, or locus, or origin. Looking ahead, the correspondence theory of meaning goes through
complex legitimizing procedures when it wants to latch on the real world of physical, emotional
and social existence.  

b) The empiricalness, the presence of things, which we saw can only exist as signs (and
therefore as a sign-index which points by signalling a sign-object marked also by its
quantifiability, i.e.: numbers insofar as "mathematics is a system of signs,") relies furthermore on
the assumption that metonymic sequential reasoning organizes the very structure of the thinking
process. The *Theory of Semiotics* is, as its Italian title says, a *Trattato*, and the ordering of its
referents, in the real world, must follow the methodological rules typically employed in these
texts, such as derived from set theory. The development of this expositive mode and what it has
meant to the history of western thought would make a profoundly interesting study, extending as
it does from Aristotle through the Medieval logicians, the scientific and mathematical
revolutions of the XVII and XVIII centuries, the ideological and philosophical debates of the
XIX century, and rethought finally in the twentieth-century basically upon the tracks of
incredible discoveries in physics. We might say that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-
Philosophicus* is the apogee of this orbiting itinerary, its achieved perfect abstraction,
indifference, silence, near invisibility from the extreme light it projected. Wittgenstein started
rejecting it in the later twenties. A strong persuasive rhetorico-methodic model of exposition
deployed in the *Theory of Semiotics*, which Eco later in his career also (though in part) exposed
to doubt, turning to the novel.

c) *Definition* is the standardization of a measure, the printed currency for the social
codification of what something *is*, so that it can reasonably be exchanged without having time
and again ponder upon what it *is, might be, could be*, etc. It may not be an anthropological
necessity, but we can argue that definitions are necessary in a social-cultural realm in order, if
nothing else, to get on with the business of living mere everyday life. Definition is not meant to
be questioned. The interpretant that escapes definition -- the case where it might bring into the
order of discourse foreign, extraneous notions, logical impurities, etc. -- must be defined (an
intentional act) within a code (to be discovered, albeit through deduction, induction, even
abduction). In short, the interpreter as a socially and existentially given interlocutor or force is
detached from his/her field of signification and exchange unless it plays by the rules and
principles that apply to communication and signification *as such*: uhm! We don't have a choice:
it is the formal system of sign relations that matters foremost, reality is merely a hypothesis.
Does semiotics stretch a veil over the Nietzsche's nihilistic truth whereby the real world has become a fable?

d) *Association* in Eco manifests an obvious algebraic lineage, and an empiricist-skeptical philosophical heritage, reiterated throughout this and later works. It comes perilously near a behavioristic understanding of language use, insofar as *connotation* is sucked up centripetally to become (or made to approximate) *denotation*, with all the "predictable" implications concerning identity, systematicity, predictability, finally manipulation. By the same token, it does vindicate the relevance of the *pragmatic* aspect of communication and sign-production.

e) *Synonimity* is understood and defined solely with regard to the pre-established, pre-coded correspondences along the signifying chain, $A\ B\ C$ in X (English) = $A\ B\ C$ in code Y (Italian). Similarly, $A\ B\ C$ in metalanguage $P = A'B'C'$ in metalanguage $S$. As we will see further down, when applied to the work of art and aesthetics in general, this proposition will subject the entire semiotic edifice to strain and stress, even fractures.

We can generalize at this juncture by stating that the THEORY of semiotics thus far outlines is also, necessarily, a FUNCTIONAL METHODOLOGY of formal definitions and relations grounded upon LOGICAL-RATIONALIST EPISTEMOLOGY, and as such prone to all-inclusive and totalizing statements. Within this order of the universe, and insofar as the interpretant is a "category" that can fit in with both, a theory of codes and a theory of sign production, then "one should even consider as interpretants all possible semiotic judgments that a code permits one to assert about a given semantic unit, as well as many factual judgments." (TS 71). And yet the interpretant also "defines many kinds of proposition and argument which, beyond the rules provided by the codes, explain, develop, interpret a given sign." The concept is actually pre-disposed to the possibility that some interpretants "escape" so to speak the semiotic universe, or even that they may "enter" the system, though in the end it must be arraigned into the fold of semiotic justification.

Eco is not unaware of the "semantic" (if not altogether "hermeneutic") multiplicity of the concept of interpretant. Because it is such a broad category, he writes, "the interpretant may turn out to be of no use at all and, since it is able to define any semiotic act, may in the last analysis become purely tautological." (TS 71) And yet this vagueness, he continues, may in fact be its "force" and the condition of its "theoretical purity." Another rationalist and scientific chimera, this idea of a "pure" uncontaminated state (though we must agree it is useful in guiding laboratory research as well as in establishing metamathematical principles). The grounding presupposition of the two separate realms, that of ontology and that of the ontic are clarified once again, and made to relate by means of correspondences and analogies of various types:

The very richness of this category makes it fertile since it shows us how signification (as well as communication), by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes cultural units in an asymptotic fashion, without ever allowing one to touch them directly, though making them accessible through other units. Thus a semiotic unity never obliges one to replace it by means of something which is not a semiotic entity, and never asks to be explained by some Platonic, psychic or objectal entity. (TS 71)

According to Eco, we do get very close to the order of culture, but its explication, its *sense*, can only proceed on another plane. The wording in the cited passage suggests that this is a liberating situation, perhaps in view of the fact that in the sixties and early seventies in Italy as well as in
large parts of Europe and America the polemical interlocutors were still (neo)idealism, Platonists of all stripes, phenomenological rationalism, orthodox (pre-Lacanian) Freudism, Lukacsian theory and (dialectical) materialism. Whatever the case, the dualism, the dichotomous self-referring, including/excluding relationship persists, and the threat of tautology is turned inward to serve as mainspring and essence of its own validity: "Semiosis explains itself by itself" (TS 71), in Italian, "La semiosi si spiega da sola" (TSG 104) wherefore "this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows communication to use signs in order to mention things." (TS 71)

When focussed on cultural events, entities, processes, the interpretant is a function of the possibility of accumulation and of hierarchy, and its usefulness and persuasiveness grows as it exhausts or pre-empts all channels of communication within any given code. As he states early on, the signal does not have to elicit a simple stimulus, but ought to solicit an interpretive response or answer (cf TS 8). But it is now clear that here once again by interpretive behavior what is intended is the setting into a code, codification, so the function of the interpretant consists in its switching or routing or placing a message within a receptive, specific code or sub-code. The interpretant therefore is charged with relating homologies, differences, deviances, approximations to the necessarily pre-given conventions or codes. The interpretant makes one think of an electric relay, a psychological dispositif, a mechanical governor, in some cases even a chemical catalyst or, finally, and most appropriately, a computing processor. It, the interpretant, is not a he, or a she, interpreter: theoretical purity is (or claims to be) de-gendered, a-sexual, non-classist, anti-ideological, rationalist by election, pluralist by default.

6. CULTURE

There are three more broad areas of investigation which we must look at in order to have a more composite view of semiotics. The first concerns the notion of culture, the second the dynamic of invention, and the third the question of the status of idea/s.

Let us momentarily return to the suspended questions concerning the referent. From the semiotic standpoint, it seems we have a very ambivalent relationship with culture, insofar as communicating something with a meaning is actually irrelevant: what counts is that there is a communicative act or process. When Eco himself with a pinch of irony calls semiotics a "theory of the lie" (TS 6-7, 58, etc.) he may be exacerbating Modern Rationalism, bringing out the paradoxical Socratic virtue of demonstrating how something must be right before it can be said to be true. If you can say the opposite of a statement, then it is a valid assertion, independently of whether it obtains in the order of the real: the world as hypothesis, once again:

Every time there is possibility of lying, there is a sign-function: which is to signify (and then to communicate) something to which no real state of things corresponds. A theory of codes must study everything that can be used in order to lie. The possibility of lying is the proprium of semiosis just as (for the Schoolman) the possibility of laughing was the proprium of Man as animal rationale. (TS 58-59)

Fleshed out, moreover, of both intension and extension, deprived of reference (but `mention' is saved) and other worlds (unless they are logical "possible worlds," the cultural world "is neither
actual nor possible in the ontological sense." Cultural critics seduced by semiotic analyses, take notice: your analyses are not about reality, but about signs! What is sought, what can function within a theory of codes is not the referent, but the content, which must in turn be "defined as a cultural unit." (TS 63)

Cultural units are presumably capable of producing social effects, therefore when they are transposed into signs they exhibit semantic content; but semantics is not semiotics, (LI 54 ff), and semiotics can reveal how signification is arrived at and comprehended:

Given two sentences such as /Napoleon died at Saint Helena on May 5, 1821/ and /Ulysses reconquered the kingdom by killing all the Proci/ it is irrelevant to a code theory to know that historically speaking the former is true and the latter is false...The fact that for us the second sentence connotes "legend" is semiotically analogous to the fact that it could yet be proven in some future civilization, on the basis of as yet unknown (or false) documents, that Napoleon died in a different place on a different day (or that he never existed)." (TS 65)

Healthy Humean skepticism to avoid totalizing sentences about anything at all. To conclude, culture is defined on the basis of the following four assumptions:

a) "The production and employment of objects used for transforming the relationship between man and nature;

b) kinship relations as the primary nucleus of institutionalized social relations;

c) the economic exchange of goods." (TS 21)

d) The birth of articulated language.

As the other underlying assumption of the entire enterprise is that culture is a communicative phenomenon based on a system of signification within a realm of codes, it follows that, plausible and radical hypothesis, culture "must be studied as a semiotic phenomenon" and, plausible and more moderate hypothesis, "all aspects of culture can be studied as the contents of semiotic activity.' (TS 22). We notice here how the Italian theoretician stands clear of any ideological imposition and essentialism.

The conceptual model (or better yet: the historical paradigm) is furnished by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is mentioned frequently throughout. This had in part been done already in SA and is here...recodified. The author does little with entry c) on the exchange of goods and its semiotic aspect. What draws our attention is d), the issue of the birth or origin of language, which brings Eco, when dealing with "radical invention," to meet up with and debunk idealist aesthetics.

7. INVENTION

In Part Three, which deals with the theory of Sign Production, there's a chapter on typologies of modes of production, where we encounter a subsection dedicated to "Invention" (¶ 3.6.7). Here we read:

We may define as invention a mode of production whereby the producer of the sign-function chooses a new material continuum not yet segmented for that purpose and proposes a new way of organizing (of giving form to) it in order to map within it the formal pertinent element of a content-type. (TS 245)
The explanation should ring familiar by now. Invention is a case of ratio difficilis brought forth within a heteromaterial expression. However, since there exists no prior convention to correlate the various elements of the new expression with the whatever chosen content, "the sign producer must in some way posit this correlation so as to make it acceptable, that is to say, intelligible or readable." Invention is displayed against a spectrum of message production which includes recognition, choice, replica, each requiring a particular mapping process (cf. Tables 40-44 in TS 246-56). Inventions erupt from, or are based on, the passages from physical givenness to stimulus, to perception and thence to informing, followed by abstraction in a semantic model and its representation in sememes. There is transformation throughout and invention is conceived as that arrangement which places the greatest amount of stress, and shifts the emphasis toward, the very institution of a comprehensive field of decodable sememes.

In the following subsection on "Invention as code-making" (TS 250-56; ¶ 3.6.8), we find a further subdivision between a "moderate invention," largely predicated upon an interplay of coded semantic models (for instance, in figurative painting), and "radical invention," which is extraordinary insofar as "the sender more or less bypasses the perceptual model, and delves into the as yet unshaped perceptual continuum, mapping his perception as he organizes it" (TS 254). Basically what takes place in this instance is that the producer injects messages for which there is no existing code, and in fact the code is to be derived from the expression itself. At times this creates confusion and, on the concrete historical plane, rejection and destructive criticism:

Take the case of the Impressionists, whose addressees absolutely refused to recognize the subjects represented and said that they 'did not understand', that the painting 'did not mean anything', that real life was not like that, etc. This refusal was due to the addressees' lack not only of a semantic model to which the mapped items might be referred, but also of a percept to guess at, since they had never perceived in this way. (TS 254)

In short, what happens anytime we have a radical invention, is primarily the introduction of a new code of signification which requires that the addressee (the viewer, the listener, the reader) come up with previously unthought notions of perception, semantization and finally chance a decoding. This happens not only in the arts, but also in the sciences, as in the not too-dissimilar Kuhnian thesis of paradigm formation (see also TS 188, ¶ 3.4.11). Meaning assumes some sort of correlation, and to propose codes for the explanation of strange, radical inventions means postulating artificial codes to literally figure out what a message might mean. Once these are stabilized through convention, that is to say, by means of repeated analogous experiments and confirmations such as to find acceptable code(s) or metalanguages within at the very least a community (of scientists, readers, scholars, etc.). The radical inventor basically gambles on the possibility of semiosis, and often fails miserably.

The above assumption, however, may "carry speculation about languages back to the position adopted by Giambattista Vico, who proposed that languages rise as poetic inventions and are only accepted by convention afterward." (TS 254) Eco is quick to point out that by no stretch of the imagination should radical invention be understood according to an idealist model. Apart from the fact that Vico cannot be reduced to the idealist version of his thought, and that this observation makes sense primarily in the context of Italian culture, the real problem here appears to be the toilworn issue of where languages come from, the birth of speech from some nebulous beginning, an argument which semiotics cannot and will not deal with. In fact,
consistently with its dualist rationality, code semiotics considers "invention" not as a category or type of sign production -- in which case it should be possible to isolate and demonstrate the radical invention, the auroral moment that doubles as the prototype example of the birth of language -- but, rather, as "one among various modes of sign production, collaborating with others to correlate functives and to establish various sign-functions" thus avoiding the "idealist fallacy." On the historiographic plane, of course, this is accurate, insofar as "Croce's linguistics [overestimated] the creative power of the speaking subject." (TS 256) Semiosis, in short, "never rises ex novo and ex nihilo," so that "in the semiotic universe there are neither single protagonists nor charismatic prophets. Even prophets have to be socially accepted in order to be right; if not, they are wrong." (TS 256)

Certainly this position goes a long way toward demolishing myths about genius, supercreative talents, and the notion of Truth as above human understanding: indeed, if it cannot be communicated, if it does not find a Receptor or Addressee, a truth (-message) is not only meaningless...it does not even exist. And once extended to an understanding of culture, it is a good antidote to notions of priority or superiority: "No new culture can ever come into being except against the background of an old one." (TS 256). Invention, we might even say, creativity, is just one more way of arranging the relationships between Sender and receiver, playing according to the particular case with replicas, stylizations, ostentations and so on. The semiotic universe is ultimately a continuum of transformations, inventions are simply another (often exalted) way of changing something around...

8. BASIC IDEAS

Looking at how semiotics deals with ideas brings us a further step along the path to an understanding of how this theory and its connexed method is a quintessentially Modernist frame of mind. To even sketch the issues raised by the problem of what ideas are, where they come from, and what is their nature and structure is a major philosophical enterprise, certainly not within the range of this exposition. Yet on the basis of our reading thus far, this is not as daunting a task as might at first be expected: for, on the basis of the Theory, it is enough to consider whatever we think ideas are as signs. We learn here that, on the basis of the fact that there exists a play of pointing and rebounding (deictics and reflection) from one image to the next, and on the basis of the fact that there is such a thing as a chain of concepts, the entire flow of thought can be looked at as a system of signs, and most cogently when -- as is obviously the case with ideas -- something stands for something else. In brief, "even ideas are signs" (TS 166; ¶ 3.3.4) In retracing the history of this assertion, Eco writes that Peirce aligns himself along a very ancient philosophical track, which comprises Ockham, Hobbes and Locke:

These ideas are not (as the Schoolmen believed) a mirroring image of the thing; they too are the result of an abstractive process (in which -- let it be noted -- only some pertinent elements have been retained) which gives us not the individual essence of the named thing but their nominal essence. This nominal essence is in itself a digest, a summary, an elaboration of the signified thing. (TS 166)

It follows from this that:
The procedure leading from a bunch of experiences to a name is the same as that which leads from the experience of things to that sign of things, the idea. Ideas are already a semiotic product. (TS 166)

Therefore, though aware that in Locke's system "the notion of idea is still linked to a mentalistic view," we are authorized "to replace the term 'idea' (as something which takes place in the mind) by 'cultural unit' (as something which can be tested through other interpretants in a given cultural context) and Locke's position reveals itself very fruitful for semiotic purposes. Berkeley too (Treatise, Intr., 12) speaks of an idea as general when it represents or stands for all particular ideas of the same sort." (TS 166-67).

When we turn to sign production, where we are entreated to consider that "the notion of 'sign' is a fiction of everyday language, whose place should be taken by that of sign-function," (TS 158, my emphasis), judgment, too, falls under the semiotic scythe. What happens when in society a cultural unit is defined in terms of another for which no code is given? If it does modify the pre-existing system, as it must, how does it do so? Citing Cassirer's Der Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neuren Zeit, Eco writes that:

The analytic judgment is the one in which the predicate is contained implicitly in the concept of the subject, and the synthetic judgment is that in which the predicate is added to the subject as an entirely new attribute, due to a synthesis obtained from the data of experience.

He then goes on to ask:

Why then, according to Kant, is "all bodies are extensive" analytic and "all bodies are heavy" synthetic? Simply because Kant referred to the 'patrimony of thought' which he presumed to be known to his contemporaries. It is worth noting that "body" for him was not a referent but above all a cultural unit. (TS 158-59)

In other words, from Descartes and through the Encyclopaedists, extension was attributed to this cultural unit as an "essential quality" which was part of its definition, whereas weight was thought to be an "accessory and contingent quality" not essential to the definition:

Judgments are either analytic or synthetic according to the existing codes and not according to the presumed natural properties of the objects. Kant explicitly states in the first Kritik that 'the activity of our reason consists largely...in the analysis of ideas which we already have with regard to objects'. (TS 159)

Therefore, following also upon the tracks of Morton White who argued for the untenability of the analytic-synthetic dualism, judgments are better dealt in semiotic terms, which automatically excludes all factual judgments unless they are first turned into metasemiotic or semiotic statements.

As we mentioned above, the aesthetic text also must be studied as an "example of invention" (TS 261-276; ¶ 3.7). Here we learn that semiotically the text is marked by these more or less consequent processes:

a. Manipulation of the Expression;

b. Reassessment of the Content;

c. Code Changing;

d. Awareness of the World (TSG 328 has: "visione del mondo")

e. [Production and Representation of] A network of diverse Communicational Acts eliciting highly original responses. (TS 261)
Delimiting as merely *operative* (or functionalist) the reliable Jakobsonian formulation of the five functions of language, Eco cannot but consider the poetic function as essentially "ambiguous" and "self-focusing ["autoriflessiva" in TSG 329]). From within semiotics, ambiguity can be defined as a violation of the rules or a deviation from the norm in the syntactic chain bearing the message in such a way that the Addressee cannot make heads or tails out of it. Ambiguity, on this account, is crucial to aesthetic production and understanding, though it does raise some problems:

Ambiguity is a very important device because it functions as a sort of introduction ["vestibolo" in TSG 330)] to the aesthetic experience; when, instead of producing pure disorder, it focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretive effort ["orgasmo interpretativo"] (while at the same time suggesting how to set about decoding) it incites me toward the discovery of an unexpected flexibility in the language with which I am dealing. (TS 263)

It can be said the definition is reductive because we get the impression that ambiguity cannot constitute a dimension of chaos or disorder, whereas it may be precisely what the work of art is questioning or is trying to relate to. Mythological, mystical and visionary works, as well as some key avant-garde experiences (such as Surrealism), stand to lose much by this position, despite the fact that Eco himself started his artistic/literary career by frequenting simultaneously the world of Aquinas and the work of James Joyce. When Eco says ambiguity functions as an "introduction" to the aesthetic experience, does he mean that there is a first moment in time, in consciousness, in mind, when a whole set of other and different processes go to work -- curiosity, urge, labor, imaginings of sense, preliminary formulations or sketches, etc. -- so that, afterwards, a coherent (semiotic) explanation and judgment be elaborated, cast into the network? But if this is so, why are not these same processes part of the semiotic process? Experience itself may be rhetorically described, and causes and explanation adduced and produced, but from the semiotic standpoint we can only learn of the fact that this is the case, that the signs for experience are relating to the signs for the ordered universe of the (master) code. And seen from a methodological and pragmatic perspective, is not this "practice" very close to what philologists and hermeneuticians have always done? Eco quite appropriately recalls Spitzer, (TS 263) but we could just as well include, foremost Vico, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Timpanaro, Pasquali, Terracini, Menendez-Pidal, Benveniste, and even structuralists like Contini.

9. AESTHETICS

Though he confutes Croce (DA 18-21) for basing his aesthetic on the timeworn categories of Expression and Content, Eco nevertheless states:

A first step toward an aesthetic definition of ambiguity might be represented by the postulate according to which in aesthetic texts an ambiguity on the *expression* plane must involve a corresponding ambiguity on the *content* plane (TS 265; my emphasis)\(^5\)

Eco's conception of aesthetic experience is moreover greatly influenced by the Russian Formalists, Slovskij in particular, "[who] anticipates by some thirty years the analogous
conclusions of so-called 'informational aesthetics'." (TS 264) In this view, the aesthetic experience increases the "difficulty and the duration of the perception" through devices of estrangement and de-automatization of language. However, since perception itself becomes a sign (or is taken in its sign-function aspect), the main characteristic of the aesthetic experience is that it makes pertinent a particular artifact or cultural-unit. This crosses somewhat over into the scientific domain, and would seem to confer to the aesthetic experience a gnoseological capacity. When earlier in the Theory, in "The segmentation of semantic fields" (TS 76-81; ¶ 2.8.3), Eco explains and exemplifies the many possible ways in which a semantic field can be cut up, hierarchized, dissolved and reformed, he writes: "science comes to know that reality [on wavelengths] after having divided it into pertinent units." It is a Receiver (a reader, a scientist) who decides to make the range of wavelengths from 430 mm to 650 mm pertinent -- let us paraphrase, relevant to a formal understanding of reality, -- to communication about light because with those figures, those conferred attributes, we can speak more technically, more "scientifically," that is, from within a highly codified discipline, namely optics, of the colors everyone perceives everyday. In light of this parallel, the aesthetic dimension lends itself to more structured and functionalist analyses. And its very ontology leans heavily on scientific models and practices. For example, the aesthetic experience become sign takes up a position within a universe of signs in which what is made highly pertinent is the very material that makes the work be (at least empirically, ontically), its being matter, concrete substance. In linguistic terms this means that art highlights the existence and force of the signifier above that of the signified. Through the fifties and the sixties, in the wake of what the artistic avant-gardes had experimented directly, critics from the various branches in the humanities looked at all facts of culture under the revolutionary impetus of structuralism, a scientific approach which among other things brought out the theoretical and methodological importance of the signifier. But it must also be recalled that, coming from a different historical and ontological grounding, an integrated structuralist-Marxist materialism had also underscored the crucial role played by the very materials artists use, and their function within an aesthetic theory. For semiotics, things stand otherwise. "In the aesthetic text, the matter of the sign-vehicle becomes an aspect of the expression-form" (TS 266). As any material employed is already in part charged with cultural signification, art manifests an aesthetic overcoding at both ends, the expression plane and the content plane. The example he gives of Gertrude Stein's well known line A rose is a rose is a rose (TS 270) clearly illustrates the case of overcoding, as the excessive redundancy of the verse actually produces "an increase in informational possibilities," though these happen, we must once again quickly interject, because a Reader or receiver is so "estranged" or "detoured" that he or she immediately begins connecting (therefore hypothesizing) with different connotative subcodes, "i.e. the allegorical, the iconological, the iconic. The work is thus 'open' to multiple interpretations." (TS 270; Eco recalls his own "pre-semiotic" 1962 work, now OW)

10. INTERPRETATION

The question of the many possible versions that can be given of an aesthetic experience or object brings semiotics to its outer limit, the point in fact where the theory attempts to master chaos itself. It is well known that Eco has done extensive work on labyrinths and abduction, and
that later in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984) and *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) he will suggest the model of the encyclopedia as the plenum for unlimited semiosis, the interpretable social and cultural horizon of message exchange, but in this "middle period" he is still staking out a *whole that must* be rendered in terms of codes and sign-production. In order to put some order into the infinite possibilities of interpretation raised by the work of art, it is useful, he argues, to make recourse to an *aesthetic idiolect*, which "must be postulated in order to comprehend the fact that the work works" [deve essere postulato per comprendere il fatto che l'opera funzioni. (*TSG* 340n)]. Once again a willing or positing consciousness, some sort of subject, decides a priori (or at least before in time and context) that the work communicates something, something graspable solely in terms of their givenness as signs. To postulate anything is a methodological necessity which allows the theory to stand up. We had observed earlier how theory and method go together, and influence each other reciprocally. On the basis of the theoretical presuppositions thus far summarized, we should be able to predict the connexed methodological structure and function of the aesthetic idiolect. It is in fact a re-production in different terms of the same basic mechanism we have been exploring all along.

If we take an hypothetical unreadable or strange text, we must, above and beyond its impenetrability, *suppose* a systematic ordering of its as-yet-unknown rules. There exists in fact a *contextual solidarity* which requires we perform semiotic commutation tests in order to arrive at its *systematic rule*. The explanation for this state of affairs rests once again on an analogy with the the basic tenets of structural linguistics:

...[the] work of art has the same structural characteristics as does a *langue*. So that is cannot be a mere `presence'; there must be an underlying system of mutual correlations, and thus a semiotic design which cunningly gives the impression of non-semiosis." (*TS* 271)

Homology is the key critical concept here. It should not be too difficult to see how, with the growing exegencies of the pragmatic aspect of communication, and the greater focus on the Decoder/Receiver of the message(s), *langue* will have to be replaced by *encyclopedia* later in *SPL*. At every level and for every message, Eco writes,

the solutions are articulated according to a homologous system of solutions, and every deviation springs from a *general deviational matrix*. Therefore, in a work of art a *super-system of homologous structural relationships* is established rather as if all levels were definable on the basis of a single *structural model* which determined all of them. (*TS* 271)

The work thus acquires also a corresponding *super-sign function* which draws up a more complex cluster of correlations. How do we approach, define, even talk about some of these correlations? By positing a new meta-concept attuned to the code:

The rule governing all deviations at work at every level of a work of art, the unique diagram which makes all deviations mutually functional, is the *aesthetic dialect*. (*TS* 272)

This is quite a task, for in some cases to map out of "all" these deviations can get very complicated indeed. Consider some of Eco's own analyses in the *Theory of Semiotics* and in *The Role of the Reader*. One can perceive here how semiotics borrows the concepts behind the more traditional, and methodologically proven, notions of genre, style, historical period,
Zeitgeist, dominant, etc.:

Insofar as it can be applied by the same author to many of his own works (although with slight variations), the idiolect becomes a general one governing the entire corpus of an author's work, i.e., his personal style. Insofar as it is accepted by an artistic community and produces imitations, mannerisms, stylistic habits, etc., it becomes a movement-idiolect, or a period-idiolect, studied by criticism or the history of ideas as the main artistic feature of a given historical group or period. (TS 272)

The four idiolects identified, pertaining respectively to the work, the corpus, the movement, and the period, can be organized hierarchically and made manageable. But in order to be consistent with this premises thus far, Eco must de-realize, de-ontologize the non-semiotic import of these categories, and define them in a manner analogous to the interpretant: "Insofar as it produces new norms accepted by an entire society, the artistic idiolect may act as a meta-semiotic judgment changing common codes." (TS 272) A series of plausible meta-semiotic judgments on action and agency within the semiotic universe will allow us to grasp and define, to evaluate and explain how, for instance, the chosen ideolec -- say, that of corpus, or of period -- forms an underlying "hierarchy of competences" and executions that be identified at the molecular, even "molar," level, sketching a canvas toward a general interpretation, and warrented by the (presupposed, or posited) methodological necessity of a system of systems. Though the rhetoric here evokes a cluster of analogous concepts developed by transcendental phenomenology.

11. CRITIQUE

It is in this section of the work that we also find, ripening seed for future investigations, Eco's theory of interpretive acts, interestingly enough related to the work of art and its (re)generative power. And again we find that a theory of interpretation cannot be scinded from its methodological routes, from its epistemologically legitimizing steps.

Inasmuch as the idiolect constitutes a sort of final (though never completely achieved) definition of the work, to read an artistic product means at once: i) to induce, that is to infer a general rule from individual cases; ii) to abduce, that is to test both old and new codes by way of a hypothesis; iii) to deduce, that is to check whether what has been grasped on one level can determine artistic events on another, and so on. Thus all the modes of inference are at work. Like a large labyrinthine garden, a work of art permits one to take many different routes, whose number is increased by the criss-cross of its paths. (TS 275)

As far as characterizations of the work of art go, this last one is excellent: ample, suggestive, acceptable by any of several different definitions of art that can be tossed in a discussion. But we want to underscore the reference to processes of cognition and the generation of common knowledge patterns, tropes that insure the unencumbered linking between lexico-formulaic statements about reality, culture, the meanings that can be produced, processed and reissued into an ever shifting communicative network.

Let us now briefly summarize once again some of the fundamental tenets of the theory of semiotic codes. A code is given on the basis of oppositional couples or dichotomies, distinguishing and contraposing Expression and Content (TS 48-50); in collapsing Frege's
epistemological triangle (Sinn, Bedeutung, Zeichen) into a Sense/Symbol operative conceptual pair, it divests the Bedeutung of any "real world" import, making it function as a 'type' (as opposed to a 'token') "very akin to...content" (TS 60), it eliminates the Referent, insofar as the referential fallacy consists in supposing that the meaning of a sentence is in any way related to the corresponding object (TS 58-9); it brackets off Intentionality as basically irrelevant to semiotic communication and understanding (TS 15-19); it does not deal with Extension, insofar as it falls within the precincts of propositional calculus or of theories of truth (TS 62-66). It does however recognize as its ultimate epistemological limit the Indeterminacy Principle (TS 28-9), though this is not really elaborated by Eco in this context, unless we choose to see the unlimited semiosis emerging from A Theory of Semiotics as the proof of this infinitesimal calculus, and the validation of its methodological applicability no matter what.

If we look at the later works, we cannot but notice how some areas of the Theory have been elaborated more than others. The definition of metaphor, however, remains still a structuralist one, a complex, overcoded, and variously charged metonymic process of sense-production (or transfer) along a network of buzz-words, catachretic fields, and logically inferred associations (within that complex but ultimately recognizable and modellable code, i.e., what can be called the cultural encyclopedia of a society. And there is a non-semiotic way of reading Eco's important article, "Intentio Lectoris: The State of the Art," (LI 44-63), and that is, ethically, as well as broadly philosophically, in the sense that there is a limit to how much we can squeeze out of a text (or the interpretation of any phenomenon whatsoever), that, if we cannot agree as to which is the better interpretation of two contending views, we ought to be able to agree as to what constitutes a totally false or irrelevant interpretation. This is said partly in response to the interpretive free-for-all that was triggered by some overenthusiastic second-generation deconstructionists (or textualists), especially in North America; partly to exemplify the difference between interpretation proper and the use of texts as instrumental proofs in something quite alien and otherwise finalized, ultimately not touching upon the text or event per se. His interpretation of symbol, moreover, both in the chapter especially dedicated to it, "Symbol" (SPL 130-163), as well as in the historical reconstruction of interpretive theory in "Two Models of Interpretation," (LI 8-22), is still very much conceived in the terms of a dualistic, half-present/half-absent coin to be decoded out of any system of signification. Difference is lost: neither grammatological nor deconstructivist, and far from being hermeneutic, difference assumes an empirical, commonsensical dimension: "the presence of one element is necessary for the absence of the other" (SPL 23). Interpretation proceeds along formal presuppositions, and the work is ultimately a "closed work," an entity which can only exist in the interim between theory of the code (which tells us what is, what makes sense, what is to be accepted) and processess of sign-formation (which concentrates on methods, practical pathways of getting the stimulus, the pulse, the byte across a technical or formal plane). Despite the recent attempts to regain not only the extra-linguistic, or the non-semiotic, by extending the definition, range and applicability of the theory, the great problem which underlies code semiotics is precisely all those "assumptions" or, more technically, axioms in a neutral (or logical) language, which do not allow it to thematize and respond in concreto to the stimulations coming from the subject, memory, ethos, praxis. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhyzome is accepted, (PNR 57; SPL 71-72) but it does not lead to textual tectonics, it is "used" rather as a metaphor for an endless signifying network of pulses and signals that spur further sign-chains, and trigger that many more (absurd, bizzarre, "new")
signals to go across the communicative mesh, no more, no less.

And yet the Eco of the early stage, the young scholar who was writing on the changing cultural panorama and its implications for a theory of culture, was also well aware that intersubjectivity, that dialogical reciprocity (even between subject and object) cannot be escaped, cannot but be central to any theory of interpretation, including the later semiotics: "...there is no positioning of a problem and undertaking of a descriptive approach which does not contain in itself -- in the very way in which it perceives itself and chooses its specific starting points -- a fundamental indication concerning the interpretation of the phenomena themselves." (DA 287) Here the phenomena are analyzible provided you assume the existence of a legitimizing code, a movable reconfigurable code, which can explain logically and functionally that something is such and so and nothing else. Theory and method are indeed correlated, though in the Theory the emphasis is more toward method, toward demonstrative models of its functioning, than toward reitering the legitimacy of the foundationless Grund. In this sense, criticism is finally a spurious discourse, a gatekeeper and a trigger, a leaf floating down the river, the exacerbation of value and purpose resulting from -- paradoxically! -- the infinite possibilities of (semiotic) permutations.

12. CODA

"The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or a ladder, that we construct in order to reach something; but after, we have to throw away the ladder, because we discover that, even though it was useful, it made no sense." William of Baskerville in The Name of the Rose.
NOTES


2. In a career that spans nearly forty years, *The Theory of Semiotics* comes at midpoint. It is not difficult to distinguish an "early" stage in Eco's thought, basically from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, a "second" or "mature" stage which covers the years 1968-1980, characterized by the consolidation and emergence of his semiotics (and of which the *Theory* is the high point), and a still on going stage of study which appears evenly divided between the philosophy of language and cultural criticism. Of course, the picture is much more complex. Eco has always been engaged on several fronts at the same time, something which is still looked upon with suspicion in American academic circles. However, as he explicitly states in the Introduction to *Sette anni di desiderio*, 1983, pp. 5: "Every so often I collect into a volume articles, occasional writings, polemical pieces, the *nugae* or observations that once used to be confined to personal journals or diaries. But in an age that not only allows but encourages circulating in public one's own immediate reactions to problems and events, the pages from a diary come out serially, in the print media. They have the advantage of not being written for posterity, but rather for one's contemporaries, often running into contradictions and risking imprecise judgments. But for who writes professionally, this is the most appropriate (and at any rate the most responsible) way of committing oneself politically." See a similar remark in his preface to *Travels in Hyper Reality*, 1989. Finally, we cannot discount (though we will not take it up here) the influence the writing and success of his two major novels had on his thinking and research through the eighties.

Here are the major works referred to throughout this article, and their adopted abbreviation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LI 1990</td>
<td>The Limits of Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABEM 1987</td>
<td>Arte e bellezza nell'estetica medievale (Milano: Bompiani).</td>
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<td>ABMA 1986</td>
<td>Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages (New Haven: Yale University Press).</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFL 1984a</td>
<td>Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio (Torino: Einaudi).</td>
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<td>SPL 1984b</td>
<td>Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNR 1984c</td>
<td>Postscript to the Name of the Rose (New York: Harcourt)</td>
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<td>LF 1983</td>
<td>Lector in fabula; la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi (Milano: Bompiani).</td>
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<tr>
<td>RR 1979</td>
<td>The Role of the Reader; Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).</td>
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The Reasons of the Code

SM 1978a, Il superuomo di massa; retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare (Milano: Bompiani).
AI 1978c [1964], Apocalittici e integrati; comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa (Milano: Bompiani).
PI 1977, Dalla periferia dell'impero (Milano: Bompiani).
TSG 1975, Trattato di semiotica generale (Milano: Bompiani).
OA 1972 [1962], Opera aperta (Milano: Bompiani).
FC 1971 Le forme del contenuto (Milano: Bompiani).
SA 1968 La struttura assente (Milano: Bompiani).

For a critical and bibliographical overview, see Gianfranco Bettetini and Francesco Casetti, "Semiotics in Italy," chapter 13 in The Semiotic Sphere, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (New York: Plenum Press, 1986), pp. 293-321. For a comprehensive view of semiotics in Italy up to the appearance of the Trattato di semiotica generale, see Augusto Ponzio, La semiotica in Italia (Bari: Dedalo Libri, 1976). On Eco's fortune in Italy, see the recent book by Margherita Ganeri, Il "Caso" Eco (Palermo: Palumbo, 1991), which contains, besides an extensive bibliography, excerpts from articles and reviews of all of Eco's works from 1956 to the present.

See my book Il fantasma di Hermes; metodo critico, retorica, filosofia dell'interpretare (Ravenna: Longo, 1992), and the article "Repositioning Interpretive Discourse: From 'The Crisis of Reason' to 'Weak Thought,'" in Differentia, 2 (1987):83-126.

As late as 1970, Eco is still working within the horizon of a structuralist "semiology;" see for example "La critica semiologica," in I metodi attuali della critica in Italia, ed. by Cesare Segre e Maria Corti (Torino: ERI, 1970), pp. 371-404. There are however many clear signs here and elsewhere in the writings of these years, that he is preparing the philosophical and in part cultural-ideological "shift" towards the notion of "semiotics." See Eco's treatment of Saussure in TS 14-15. Bettetini and Casetti write, in Semiotics in Italy, p. 302: "In La struttura assente [1968], Eco breaks away from the extremisms of French structuralism (too biased by ontologism) and makes his way toward a theory of signification that will be further elaborated in Segno [1973], thus resorting to Peirce's neopragmatism and Morris' behaviorism and aiming at the unification of the structuralist dimension and Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language, without however neglecting the European logicians."

See Segno, pp. 18-19, where Eco cites a 1938 passage by Charles Morris whereby semiotics will henceforth replace philosophical reflection (on itself and its own language), ultimately becoming a metamethodology; this will be taken up further down in this article. See also Thomas A. Sebeok, American Signatures; Semiotic Inquiry and Method (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 152 ff.

The Italian text, apparently written after the English version, says the following: "la semiotica studia tutti i processi culturali come processi di comunicazione. E tuttavia ciascuno di tali processi...etc.": The "Therefore" [for "tuttavia"] has actually the sense of a "Yet" in the Italian, so one may conjecture a less causal and necessary relationship between processes of communication and systems of signification.

But as will become clearer further down, there are some aporias present in Eco's conception of communication, or at least in his ambiguous handling of the term vis à that of signification. For a critique, see Augusto Ponzio, La semiotica in Italia, pp. 41-49.
The Reasons of the Code

I have explored the topic of the cruciality of the unsaid or hidden sense of interpretation in my above cited Il fantasma di Hermes and in Prefaces to the Diaphora; Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity (W. Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991).

See Gianfranco Bettetini Produzione del senso e messa in scena (Milano: Bompiani, 1975), and Eco's own note in TS, pg 30; It is interesting to note that in the body of text, early on in his exposition (pp 9-10) Eco defines the "political boundaries' of semiotics, in this way also "assigning" to the other dominant schools their own legitimized cultural-ideological working space.

Nowhere is this more dramatically demonstrated than in Sebeok's zoosemiotics. See "Vital Signs" and "Animal' in Biological and Semiotic Perspective," in Sebeok, American Signatures, cit., pp. 107-132 and 159-173.


The work of his teacher Luigi Pareyson (1918-1991) is everywhere present in the early Eco, at a time when he most willingly responded to the new theories on the horizon and seemed to "try them out" one by one as he focused every more closely on the question of communication and signification; see for example AI, DA, and AC, which collect studies and essays on mass culture, aesthetic theory and the poetics of the avant-garde respectively. The first essay in OW, "The Poetics of the Open Work," takes up and develops notions fundamental to Pareyson's Estetica, teoria della formatività (Firenze: Sansoni, 1954 [1960; 1990]). See also Eco's own essay on the theory of formation and the phenomenology of the work of art, corresponding to ch. 7 of OW, pp. 158-166. For a non-semiotic exposition of Pareyson's theory of interpretation, see Peter Carravetta, "An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Luigi Pareyson," Differentia, review of italian thought, 3-4 (Spring/Autumn 1989), pp. 217-241.

Consider the attention given to "extra-textual" or "cultural" referents and their possible "effects" not only on code formation and sign-production, but also on meaning-reception and strategies of decoding, in the later SPL and LI, discussed in part further down in this article.

In Eco's words: "A code is a system of signification insofar as it couples present entities with absent units." (TS 8) Further down, he reiterates and expands: "When -- on the basis of an underlying rule -- something actually presented to the perception of the addressee stands for something else, there is signification." (TS 8)

But at this stage Eco has left Pareyson behind and is staking out his own territory, strong in the various schools of linguistics and the history of logic.

Critics have remarked on how Eco's semiotics tends toward the all-encompassing, the totalizing, and therefore the imperialistic. See sample responses in Ganeri, Il "Caso" Eco, cit.

See for instance TS 4, where he explicitly mentions Aristotle's distinction between power and act, as parallel to his distinction between rules and process.

Let us recall that Eco's first book is on medieval aesthetic and logic, and he will return to these areas again and again, from the early PSTA and AC, to the later ABMA and chapters in SPL.

See TS 166-67; SPL 19. Locke is also touted as the great forerunner (and maybe "grandfather") of Modern Semiotics by John Deely and Thomas Sebeok in Frontiers in Semiotics, ed. by John Deely, Brooke Williams, and Felicia E. Kruse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 3-42. See also Sebeok, American Signatures, cit., p. 151.

In Italy at least, work in this direction has been done by Carlo Sini, in Semiotica e filosofia (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978), and Passare il segno (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1981).

Charles Morris was practically first introduced in Italy by Ferruccio Rossi-

23 We ought to recall that Morris was, together with Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap, one of the theoretical leaders behind the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science project of the mid- to late-thirties. The original 19 monographs have been gathered and reissued in a two-volume edition: Foundations of the Unity of the Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Eco's analysis of the KF model (and of all American linguistics), and of the particularly flexible and fruitful model Q (from Quillian's semantics) would require separate and detailed study. He returns to these in LF and especially in RR. The Q model will furnish the theoretical underpinnings of his later notion of encyclopedia; cf. SPL 68 ff.


25 This path has been explored most intriguingly by Hans Hörmann, Meaning and Context; An Introduction to the Psychology of Language, ed. by Robert E. Innis (New York: Plenum Press, 1986), and by Giuseppe Mininni, Psicosemiotica (Bari: Adriatica, 1982).

26 See for instance L. Bloomfield, "Language or Ideas," in The Philosophy of Linguistics, ed. by Jerrod Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 19-25: "Non-linguists (unless they happen to be physicalists) constantly forget that a speaker is making noise, and credit him, instead, with the possession of impalpable 'ideas.' It remains for linguists to show, in detail, that the speaker has no 'ideas,' and that the noise is sufficient -- for the speaker's words act with trigger-like effect upon the nervous systems of his speech-fellows." See also, in the same anthology, the chapter by J.A. Fodor, "Some notes on what linguistics is about," pp. 146-160.

27 One might make the same emblematic claim in the parallel situation of Heidegger's Being and Time, which can conceivably represent the culmination of a particular way of doing philosophy, after which the recess or descent or decline of Modern metaphysical thought begins. See my abovementioned book Prefaces to the Diaphora where I argue how this state of affairs spurred in part the emergence and rise of the notion or idea of a "post-Modern Epoch."

28 We must defer to another place and time a study of Eco's notion of the rhetorical, as well as of his own "creative" writing, the novels The Name of the Rose and Foucault's Pendulum.

On this see Susan Petrilli, Significs Semiotica Significazione (Bari: Adriatica, 1988).

29 See how the pragmatic turns into a major aspect of semiotics in "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Text Semiotics" in LI 203-221.

30 But the tautology is not explored, or exploded, as we find for instance in Heidegger's analyses of "things [that] thing," that "space spaces," or "thinking thinks," in some of the essays in On the Way to Language and Poetry, Language, Thought.

Hermeneutics, also, "mentions" things, and is circular, as it can begin anywhere on the discursive chain (along the circumference of its "circle," so to speak), but the reference is rehabilited through diverse modalities of being and existence, not excluding the rational-geometric, but far from limiting itself to this ordering principle only.
The Reasons of the Code

Methodology, ed. by Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; and Beyond Methodology, ed. by Mary M. Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). It is interesting to note that both Eco and Derrida begin their very different yet concurrent de(con)struction of structuralism with studies on the theories of structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss. This area has been studied most profitably by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, beginning with his early Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune (Padova: Marsilio, 1961), and on through Linguistics and Economics (L'Aja: Mouton, 1975) and Language as Work & Trade (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey, 1983 [1968]). For a critical monograph on Rossi-Landi's entire career, see Augusto Ponzio, Rossi-Landi e la filosofia del linguaggio (Bari: Adriatica, 1988). This was de rigueur in the late fifties and through the seventies in Italy. Idealism (with its connotations of immanence, historicism, actualism, aristocratic liberalism, history as freedom, and so on) was the primary polemical target of such different books (and therefore of as different philosophies) as Luigi Pareyson's Estetica (1954) and Verità e interpretazione (1972); Luciano Anceschi's earlier Autonomia ed eternomia dell'arte (1936, repr. 1976) and his Da Bacone a Kant (1972) and Le poetiche del novecento in Italia (1972); Galvano Della Volpe's Critica del gusto (1960); Renato Barilli's Per una estetica mondana (1964); Enzo Paci's La filosofia contemporanea (1957 & 1974); and so on. Here once again we can overhear echoes of Luigi Pareyson's theory of formation, as found in his Estetica, cit. During this period, the question of the foundation of knowledge, and its necessary though always excluded reference to a "real" community, was being explored also by Aldo Gargani, Il sapere senza fondamenti (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), whose position was not far from that of Rorty. See the slightly different explication in the Italian text, TSG 319. Eco is given a more generous treatment in SPL 107-108, where his thought is associated to a "cultural anthropology" which effaces the chronological or sequential development of cultures, focusing rather on their cyclical activity, in a sense creating a simultaneity of overlapping cultures, ergo of codes. However, it could also be argued that, given that there must be an Addressee, and that certain interpretants or markers make the transmission and decoding possible, it doesn't really matter who or what receives and decodes the message! But then, why go through all this trouble... Vico also had said something to this effect, that each culture is evolved from a prior one, and naturally claims older or more prestigious ancestry vis à vis their neighbors or contemporaries. Peirce is once again invoked as the inspiring auctoritas behind this position, and we have explicit references to paragraphs 5.480, 5.287, 5.283, and 5.284 of his Collected Papers. What an opportunity for a deconstructionist to attack the whole edifice of semiotics and efface its arbitrary, self-betraying stratagems, and its fictive, indeed "creative" nature behind its rigorous conceptual apparatus. This reveals an underlying immanence, present also though elaborated in different terms in Lyotard's Le Différend: the mere instancing (or: coming into being, being "born") of a sentence necessarily displaces all others and negates another possible one which could not come into existence at the same time or place (or spacetime). But whereas Lyotard will develop this in view of the tensional dis/accord between their semantics and power ("phrases in dispute" is the subtitle of the English version), in Eco the appearance, the givenness of sentences are placed within an already existing signic network, adding to the possibilities of communication by its immediate status as the (new) nth element in the channels needed by the signifying chain to connect Sender to Receiver. For all intents and purposes, these processes translate into "methodological" steps or subcategories or localized zones of inquiry, and
their usefulness or "applicability" is undeniable. Eco's "readings" of contemporary cultural phenomena are rich and varied and always illuminating. See THR, SM, AI, OW.

40 See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in The Structuralists From Marx to Lévi-Strauss, ed. by Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972). In the present context, Eco says, "we prefer to translate `poetics' with `aesthetics'." This practical (but also: methodological) move is, like the one concerning Kant above, akin to the bringing of a particular set of problems and issues with their own language and history into the fold of semiotics, an effect of semiotic cooptation by metadiscourse.

What I think we should add to this state of affairs is the necessary hermeneutic component. For in the case in which the referential code does not exist, the reader (listener, viewer) must come up with, that is, participate and respond with his/her own positing of possible meanings. These meanings are no longer under the jurisdiction of a semiotic, but make sense only phenomenologically, hermeneutically, and bring the question of the speaking of other to that of other-speaking, where sign-formation is not a different order of discourse, but the formal half of a signifying practice which is forever on the verge of silence, misunderstanding, and slipping into the uncoded, uncodifiable abyss. Allegory is more than saying that a lion in a story is a courageous or strong man. In this latter case, a theory of the figura would cover the areas left exposed by the semiotics of the code, but it would require a rethinking of the notion of rhetorics (which of course would have to be critical of the way rhetorics is understood by Eco, in TS 147, 276-88 et infra). I have explored the topic of a dialogical rhetorics throughout my Prefaces to the Diaphora, cit.


42 It becomes ever more clear how the arts and the sciences were traveling parallel routes, at least for the past century or so. And it is well known that Jakobson, Sklovskij, Eichenbaum and Tynjanov frequented the various circles of the (mostly Russian) avantgarde of the post-WWI period. See Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism (L'Aja: Mouton, 1964; Tzvetan Todorov, Théorie de la littérature (Paris: Seuil, 1965; Boris Tomasevskij, Teoria della letteratura (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978); René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, 1970 [1942]). We should recall that the Russian Formalists were especially concerned with the aesthetics of literary communication; cf. Erlich, Ch.s X and XV.

43 This critical movement is too well known and recorded to have it cross-referenced bibliographically. It has given us the crucial work of Lacan, Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Genette and others. According to Gianni Vattimo, if we can elect one school of thought among many as the most representative of a given cultural period, we can say that marxism was the cultural koine of the fifties and part of the sixties, structuralism (and deconstruction) the koine of the late sixties and seventies, and hermeneutics the koine of the eighties; cf. his article, "Hermeneutics as Koine," in Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3 (1988), pp. 399-408.

44 See for instance the abovementioned Galvano Della Volpe, Critica del gusto, cit.

45 See for instance the notions of "sistematica dei sistemi," and system as "idea limite" in the work by Antonio Banfi (1886-1957), and of his disciple Luciano Anceschi. Of course Eco early on distanced himself from this school of thought, representing another polemical target of his Apocalittici e integrati (1964); a critique of transcendentalism could still be found as late as 1984 in "The sign as identity" in SPL 25.

46 When he found himself "ont the other side of the barricade," that is, when he had written an aesthetic work himself, Eco plays upon this notion; cf. PNR 1-2, 4 et infra.

47 See Eco's handling of epistemic triangles in Segno 22-27 and 124-126. For interesting developments of the idea that natural language itself is the
"primary modelling system," see Sebeok, American Signatures, cit., pp. 175-86. Of course both scholars are aware of and often cite the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, but in reality very little is made of the overall philosophical and rhetorical implications of this understanding of "human" language.

Temptations to see processes which "are the same" in different historical epochs begin with the affinity between Thomism and structuralism discovered early on in PETA 243-64, and appear as late as LI 20.

See for instance Paul J. Thibault, Social Semiotics as Praxis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), for a semiotics which responds to and integrates the thought of Bakhtin, Bateson, Gramsci, Foucault, Halliday, Habermas.