

Umberto Eco's Writing Labyrinth: From the Code's Theory to the Interpretation Process

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Abstract:

The present text will concentrate on some of Eco's theoretical books on the semiotic method. The primary focus shall be on the narration theory, semiotics "proper" (at least, according to Peirce), and the structural approach to semiotics. The reason for stating the above is the interdisciplinarity in developing the semiotic method (as designated by Eco, among other related authors) to demonstrate its importance in the present century. Not only is one academic approach relevant for exploring scientific matters of the sort, but more of them (such as the dichotomies between ontology and epistemology, "artistic" vs "realistic" occurrences, as well as the method of writing itself as a "special technique"). As initially designated by Peirce, the "unlimited" semiosis process is meant to unite or see as a totality of several semiotic approaches closely related to Eco's work, besides, naturally, the permanent and uninterrupted "transformation" and moveability of signs. The goal is twofold: methodological and scientific.

Keywords: semiotics; interpretation; codes; Peirce; semiosis

1. Introduction: Umberto Eco's semiotics itself

Eco's contribution to semiotics demonstrates the omnipresence of the mentioned method for more than one reason. As we shall attempt to explain, some reasons represent revolutionary achievements, whereas others represent an integral part of existing theoretical paradigms (within the semiotic method, naturally). I shall generally divide them into two main totalities (entities): those that regard the development of the field itself (i.e., facts contributing to the establishment of the "semiotic process", or otherwise named: matters of "semiotics proper"), on the one hand, others, that regard methodological matters (i.e., "tools" that enhanced reaching determined theoretical paradigms), on the other. The last entity attempts to show how to create and exemplify diverse theoretical approaches in various life spheres. Other existing theories of semiotics, other than the ones mentioned above (authored by other scholars), however, have represented an additional component in Eco's theoretical understanding of the mentioned method, which, summed up in one word, have endeavoured to create what one may call "theoretical semiotics" today. It should be remarked, however, that the present text does not aim for an overview of semiotics' historical development. Instead, it aims to

provide an in-depth overview and analysis of Eco's contribution to it and its comparison with other "masters" of semiotics who have contributed to the discovery of similar innovative theoretical paradigms. Let me now intentionally pose matters the other way around.

What I explicitly mean is the following: first, not only is an artistic way of writing complex, multifaceted and "over-coded", but there are methods and ways to render a work artistic. One such method is the "narration theory" (both explicable through the structural or logical paradigms of semiotics, as I hope to be able to show), which is widely used and applied in Eco's theory. Though not the only one, it will be one of the objects of the present discussion.

Second, such methods are not and cannot be created "ad hoc"; instead, the procedures to which each one pertains hold their semiotic relevance. Moreover, the procedures I refer to explicitly regard Eco's codes theory above all other issues. Such procedures shall also be elaborated on in the present text for the above reasons.

Hence, one cannot see Eco's contribution to the semiotic field one-dimensionally (or taken only from one analysis aspect). However, one also has to be familiar with a spectrum of disciplines (mainly concerning "social reality", "objectified realities", or, after all, a "subjective" sort of "semiotic reality"), which represent an argument for inter and trans-disciplinary scientifically discussable matters.

It should, however, be undeniably true that authors like Eco (similarly to the works of other "masters" of semiotics) cannot be fully covered in a single contribution or a single monograph. The reason for this assertion is simple: Eco's contribution relates to a wide range of social, cultural and philosophical phenomena, out of which matters must be singled out for potential research.

For the mentioned reasons, therefore, this paper shall concentrate on some of his capital works, namely, "Theory of Semiotics" [see: (Eco 1975; 1976)], "Six Walks in the Narrative Woods" [see: (Eco 1994a; 1994b)], "The Role of the Reader..." [see: (Eco 1979; 1984)], and the "Open Work" [see: (Eco 1989; 1962)]. Naturally, the books in question shall be elaborated on to the extent this paper can allow. A logical question would follow: why are these Eco's works elaborated here, not others? The following lines of this text shall attempt to answer the question.

Out of the matters explained above, one must emphasise here at least two significant matters which explicitly regard semiotics: the first issue is the narrative process and the text as semiotic entities (as seen in Eco's understanding), and the second one is "Eco's theory"¹. Alternatively, one determines here which components are utilised to create a semiotic theory, as understandable, as designated by Eco's provisions. My choice, naturally, is intentional: it aims to disclose the "enigma" that semiotics in Eco's comprehension holds [like I have also mentioned elsewhere; see: (Hoxha 2022)]. Explicitly speaking, disclosing metaphoricality, implicitness instead of explicitness, and interpreting in the realm of meaning is, in other words, what Eco mainly discusses, but semiotics generally discusses. Such an "enigma" [as, after all, described in detail in Eco's "Absent Structure", see: (Eco 1968)] will be an object of our discussion, both attempting to exemplify Eco's theoretical and narrative works. The aim is, therefore, twofold: theoretical in terms of presenting essential postulates in semiotics and practical in exemplifying them regarding Eco's and other authors' artistic productivities.

2. The communication process as a theoretical challenge

2.1. The “code” notion in Eco’s understanding

I will initially refer to two critical semiotic matters: the communication and signification process [as Tarasti sorts them, see: (Tarasti 2015)]². Let me attempt to clarify the reason(s) for the importance of the mentioned notions. The reason, in turn, is simple: to explicate Eco’s “labyrinth” of writing, or his semiotic “intrusion” in almost all life spheres and the arts field generally, one must clarify which elements construct a semiotic process. After all, as I hope to be able to show, sign definitions in Eco are given by way of encoding and decoding processes [see: (Eco 1976; 1975)]. I find this matter essential and mutually inclusive of the communication processes. Matters that precisely concern semiotics, however, should be explained subsequently.

Otherwise, communication is as old as human existence. One can trace it to ancient times and the prime developments in the philosophy of science. Explicitly speaking, however, its actual scientific nomenclature obtained its full status in modernity and post-modernity [at least, in its general terms, see (Deely 2001)], disregarding the fact, as mentioned, that the “concept” itself, or the theoretical assumption of a “human inter-activeness”, has long time ago existed. It relates somewhat to *natural* phenomena compared to *cultural* ones. Let us now return to the “communication process” and its relevance to the semiotic method.

Notwithstanding the above facts, not only did communication cover various disciplines that later grew into new (or, later re-shaped) scientific discussable matters, but it also covered matters exclusively characteristic of human nature in terms of our psycho-physical development (such as in the case of “perception”, “cognition”, and “sensation”, as we hope to elaborate further on). These and other facts (still to be mentioned in this text) make this component necessary for explicating Eco’s theoretical contribution to semiotics.

Otherwise, we all communicate to survive, or at least render the meaningfulness of our reciprocal inter-activeness to understand our multifaceted functionality properly. Not only is this philosophically and psychologically relevant, but it is also biologically significant: even our nervous system interacts uninterruptedly, commonly in the shape of transmission of signals, “messages”, to make us biologically functional subjects. In this sense of the word, this inner and outer activity of our being(s), either in the straightforward or metaphorical sense, marks a process in a permanent movement. It asserts a thesis of the “signs way” [see: (Deely 2009)] on the one hand and the definition of our “umwelt” and “inner world” (or: *Innenwelt*) [see: (Deely 2001)] on the other, aimed to enhance, or better expressed, finally produce a *Lebenswelt*³. It means, in other words, it defines our biological status as well. It also marks the signs of a permanent movement for the sake of the process of semiosis [among other related matters, see (Peirce 1960)].

Let us now attempt to show how such signs behave in determined circumstances: understandably, from a semiotics viewpoint. Two key issues can at least be concluded from the above assertions: the first regards a relation between our organic functionality (independently functioning, i.e., excluding our consciousness or intentional functioning), and the next one regards a signification process

deriving from our behaviour and conceptualising things and phenomena (therefore, being of a philosophical and logical origin). In my view, the first one regards definitional matters, whereas the second one regards relational and methodological matters, as I hope to be able to show. Moreover, suppose one wishes to further “semiotize” the mentioned terms. In that case, it supposedly belongs to the semiotic study, as we shall see, precisely because of the interpretative capacities of semiotics in the first place, but of the human reasoning and imaginative power in the second.

To begin, let us refer to the “code”. Eco’s definition(s) of the “code” notion, otherwise, refers precisely to the above assertion, among other issues defined throughout his theoretical discussions. Explicitly speaking, one would rightly ask: why should one choose the “code” when explaining Eco’s semiotics? The reasons are complex and entail a wide range of scientific discussions.

First, the “code” notion is as interdisciplinary as semiotics is today. Not only does it concern rigorous sciences, as it has been initially conceived, [see for instance (Shannon and Weaver 1948)], but it concerns humanities: almost each life sphere. Moreover, the theses in question discuss code’s mutual exclusivity or inclusivity with semiotics. What I mean is, how many times does the message have to be encoded to get a metaphoric relevance? How inclusive is it in communication science, and what is it? Which scientific principle renders it semiotic?

The answers to the posed questions are found in the code’s functions [see: (Eco 1975; 1976)]. If the four functions (as described by Eco) combine or unite, we conclude that a semiotic process is at hand. It is so because of the following: not only have “classical” communication processes been overcome in Eco’s theory, but they have also been “revisited” for a semiotic process. It means a “semantic” (explicitly speaking: “meaning”) feature has been added, including a semiotic process. There are two arguments to prove the above: the second code function in Eco argues the “meaning” features’ addition, in the first place and the second, there is physical and semiotic information distinguishability in Eco’s understanding [see: (Eco 1968:57; 1975)]. It means information can be conceived of in many of its underprints or comprehensions.

Semiotic information must be singled out from other “types” of information, which may belong to the communication sciences or other related scientific fields. Either seen as “signals”, “information” still unprocessed, or already “transformed” into messages, they contain the component of the sign. In other words, signs get complex if encoded or better expressed if semiotically processed. For this reason (and other reasons to follow), these “types of information” must be singled out. Understandably, it is the *semiotic information* that we are interested in.

Explicitly speaking, therefore, “semiotic” information is the information ready to be processed for further procedures that render it semiotic in the sense of inducing or deducing meaning. In other words, the aim is to render, generate, induce (depending on the approach) or deduce meaning. If one includes the mentioned terms, then not only does the information get encoded through determined procedures (as is known through “classical” models of communication), but it also contains a semiotic relevance. In other words, semiotics “begins” in terms of the relatedness of signs among each other, their ability to combine, and finally, their ability to signify.

If one conceives the scientific entities in the mentioned fashion, one will conclude, as Eco himself would frequently state, that the “information”, in the semiotic sense of the word, is in the permanent movement [see: (Eco 1968; 1976), my paraphrasing] for the sake of transforming itself into a brand-new shape. If such an assertion holds its scientific validity, then one should be aware of the code’s theory’s importance in the semiotic sense of the word. We ask: why do we emphasise the “movement” itself? The answer is because later (in terms of a “semiotic process”), such mentioned “information” in movement holds its possibility to “transform” or “re-shape” itself employing “interpretation” when it becomes a message, as we shall attempt to show. One should finally not doubt that such “interpretation”, besides fundamental sign “functions”, is a part of Eco’s comprehension of the semiotic method, in the first place, and in the second, it is an introduction to the “complex semiotic function” as I have named it elsewhere [see: (Bujar Hoxha, O’Halloran, and Passarini 2022)].

The permanent movement of signs⁴ and their reciprocal relatedness, otherwise, as recently launched semiotic theories claim [see, for instance:(Deely 2009; 2001)], renders the information a message or makes it subdue to a semiotic process, by which it holds a semiotic relevance either by way of actualising it [such as, in: (Greimas 1973)] or by way of further encoding processes. It thus marks a significant shift in conceptualising the communication process: an essential component is being added, the one of meaning.

When meaning becomes a part of the scientific discussion, one should conclude that not only one shape of the semiotic information (as defined by Eco) is what we are interested in. It means, in other words, that the information renders itself a message if adequately encoded. It is precisely at this point that phenomena are rendered semiotic. After all, as Eco himself says, such a viewpoint is phenomenological [see: (Eco 1962; 1989)]. We ask: why is that so? Because of, understandably, more than one reason.

First, “classical semiotics” (by which we intend structural and post-structural semiotics) [see: (Tarasti 2000)] needed a sort of “conflictual situation” in order to render issues “semiotic”. This, in its broadest understanding, asserts the structural method in semiotics. In such a case, one has to see, analyse, or elaborate on an encoded message. Second, Eco’s codes’ functions’ definitions entail multiple possibilities for the meaning’s choice; therefore, they can “overcome” the dual or dyadic view of semiotic phenomena (that early structuralism used to foresee). Not only can this be done in rigorous sciences (as explained in Eco), but it can also be in arts and humanities. Eco’s merit, in my opinion, lies precisely in the following issue: he interconnects both mentioned fields through the codes’ functions. The aim is to render an interpretative sort of semiotics. In the sense as explained above, by “interpretation”, here we mean more than one obtained “meaning (s)” or “re-shaping” it after all. The choice, finally, which “meaning” shall be determined as final, belongs to the semiotician: its interpretability is endless, as we hope to explain further in the text.

As should be expected, matters get more complex at this point. Once interpretation is mentioned or applied, one should be aware of its complexity: it does not regard only structural semiotics but Peirce’s

conceptualisation of the signs and their signifying functions. Additionally, it also regards finalising meanings in the “metaphoric” sense of the word: rendering signs moveable and “transformable” [see: (Greimas 1973)].

I believe that Eco has combined several scientific approaches to make life and artistic phenomena visible, accountable, and analysable by semiotics. Thus, semiotics' borderlines become limitless. In other words, they regard both “real life” and “cultural” phenomena. It is to understand, finally, that interpretation as a philosophic phenomenon entails Eco's known “world of possibilities”, or, as he precisely says, “possible worlds” [see: (Eco 1962; 1979; 1989; 1984)], which argues Eco's legacy to Peirce.

Before presenting more scientific data in the mentioned context, let me exemplify this through a specific process that emerged from artistic expressivity. The goal is to connect several semiotic approaches according to Eco and demonstrate their applicability.

3. The narration process as Eco's theoretical challenge

3.1. Does it belong to the structural method, or is it interpretational semiotics?

Narration as a method (in arts, in general, or semiotics itself) means telling or better-expressed retelling. One can use this term of Latin origin in many instances in science, such as medicine, the arts, everyday speech, psychology, etc. As I have emphasised elsewhere [see: Hoxha 2018)], it may be utilised by a patient who tells or narrates to the specialist what his/her health problems are. It may as well be utilised in psychiatry to tell past events in human life: the aim would be to reconstruct a past event, to see what has previously happened, so that one can diagnose it and find solutions for determined problems. One may rightly pose the question: what does it have to do with semiotics?

To answer such questions, one must be reminded of the following: once defined as a “science of signs” [see: (Saussure 1959)], and today, as a science of the “cognitive interpretation of meaning”, semiotics is obliged to examine past events: be they realistic taken from real life, or of an imaginative nature, belonging to artistic realities. Eco's concern is exactly how narration can be pertinent and why. Which elements in an artwork's creation contribute to its flow of events? Why do some elements of an artwork contribute to its “delaying the end” [see: (Eco 1994a)]? To give answers to the above questions, one should assemble more data.

It should, however, be understandable that in the instance of Eco, “narration” as a component is used to describe and interpret artistic creations, which are complex in their semiotic understanding either because of their decomposing in tinnier units, or because of juxtaposing components, to aim to create a totality, say, for instance, a text. Two critical matters can be singled out in this context: the understanding of the “narration” component itself (mainly originating from structural semiotics) and the “text” notion, understood in its semiotic comprehension (belonging both to the structural and philosophic approach to semiotics).

I have singled out both approaches for the following reasons: if structuralism was focused on dichotomies (or, like I said, on various sorts of “conflictual situations”), one must compare two different phenomena. For instance, why do the “black” and “white” contrast? Is there any meaning

deriving from the mentioned notions? What are the elements used to constitute a semiotic relation? All these questions, naturally, have their responses if seen by the eyes of a semiotician. Let me try to explicate the connectivity between structuralism and narration now.

Let me give some examples first. If Saussure's semiotics [see: (Saussure 1959)] focused mainly on binary analysis, it did not mean that entities always represented a relation, a semiotically relevant matter. What matters instead in semiotics is the combination of the two: either *langue* and *parole*, as Saussure would say, or say, an image as compared with its linguistic nomination (or nomenclature), a word with its meaning, or a "word" (taken from the linguistic viewpoint, with its "another" meaning, the one that someone would only refer to, but not visualising it). In structuralism, such "pairs" of items or entities create a relation. Therefore, a "relation"⁵ is a semiotic entity or function. Alternatively, as Eco says:

A sign-function is realised when two *functives* (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation; the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign function (Eco 1976: 49).

Correlation, therefore, is the keyword here. One can think of a semiotic function if entities presented, seen, or elaborated combine. If this is semiotically justifiable, then naturally, even past events described in an artistic expression obtain their semiotic status. It is so because, to describe them, one should reconstruct events at least. Then, of course, some practical questions follow: why did Eco compare the description of Alexandre Duma's works (and events in them) with realistic historical occurrences? Why, then, so many documents were used to describe determined "stories narrated" in "The Name of the Rose" [see: (Eco 1980)]? Has the "echoing of the caves" in Foster's "A Passage to India" [see: (Forster 1981)] any meaning, or does it only repeat itself endlessly, while the main characters of the story tell us of determined events happening in the "story narrated"? Alternatively, even further questions: what nature did "a hidden love" have between Mrs Quested and Dr. Aziz, or should it have by all means been forbidden? It is worth noting that all these questions, belonging principally to different narrative works, have their responses if viewed semiotically.

I shall present here only a single case out of the questions above. In concrete terms, one must suppose, or better expressed, "suggest" that sympathy, an apparent likeness, occurs between the two protagonists in "A Passage to India". It becomes gradually evident to the reader that such a sort of "sympathy or love" between the two is almost impossible, as Foster is attempting to explain the relations between the "coloniser" and the "colonised". It is to conclude that this example and other examples of the sort regard a semiotic relation, above all.

Otherwise, in most cases, they regard "content", i.e. as Eco says, the *fabula* of the story. In other words, they intend to answer the question of the reader's interest in what has been written. Secondly, and more importantly, they may regard the "time flow" of events, which marks either a shift in content's conceptualisation or another "text" which becomes a part of the "main text". What matters to us here instead is the question: how many times has the author referred to in determined

related contexts regarding various stories narrated to enhance the reader's interest in the text? Not only does this create a semiotic relation (a "relation", as intended in the above Eco's citation, or in the structural sense of the word), but it also refers to the interpretation of an artwork (in case, determined theoretical "tools" combine to reach a particular goal). I intend to assert that oppositional relations can also understandably enhance meaning and its interpretation, including all necessary components. Hence, both approaches to semiotics (structural or logical) are relevant for a decent analysis and for obtaining meaning in artworks. The truth is that, besides what has been mentioned above, the meaning can also be "inferred" and "abducted", as Peirce says. It is so because the more a "single" time-flow of events that occurs in a work, as long as it may last, another one can become a part of the "main text": through another "text", another time, a new sort of flow of events. In such a case, one sort of "text", in the semiotic sense of the word, must interpret the remaining one. Thus, only two contradicted items would not suffice. For this reason, Eco names or defines the different types of authors and readers. The aim is the "encyclopaedic" knowledge [see: (Eco 1979; 1994b; 1984)], which each of them must possess. Finally, this is the instant and the case in which, as Eco says, interpretation becomes an integral part of the semiotic processes.

4. Concluding remarks

Except for the facts above, which have attempted to assert that "meaning" as a semiotic entity must be reached through interpretation, there is a possibility of a multifarious or a multiform interpretation of artworks. It should be remarked, however, that, naturally, interpretation as a process, as mentioned, regards all life spheres. Instead, I have chosen artworks primarily because of their "obviousness" of determined elements, which make them diverse, or better expressed, unique, compared to the rest of social reality (or, of "living world"), or as Deely expresses himself, *Lebenswelt* [see: (Deely 2001)]. After all, as we are attempting to demonstrate the above assertions practically, how can one call resulting entities "final" in semiotics after whichever semiotic process has been accomplished? Is it impossible to interpret them permanently or using other ways of interpretation? Or, after all, is it possible to interpret them using other "tools" different from those initially used?

The answer is undoubtedly "yes". The above assertion and other "contextual circumstances" (supposedly included in a possible semiotic analysis), as Eco himself says, [see, (Eco 1979; 1994b)] make the "semiotic situation" interpretable. What I mean is the following: all interpretations are possible on the one hand (including their diversity), but on the other, not all interpretations are semiotically relevant. Let us attempt to describe this situation.

Earlier in the text, I mentioned the "complex semiotic function". By such a "semiotic function," I intend to emphasise interpretability above all. One rightly asks: why? For the following reasons.

Besides the unification or uniting of determined "tools" (such as, in the cases mentioned above, of the "oppositional" phenomena in structuralism) that assist in creating and performing a semiotic process, there are such "semiotic situations" where the process of decoding (thus, using Eco's terms) becomes "difficult" or challenging. I intend, therefore, by a "complex semiotic function",

the instances when the meaning cannot be immediately disclosed or better expressed when one needs to decode an entity more than once. It regards situations when the “semiotic object” (using Greimas’s terms) is not instantly visible or decodable. Similarly, to what I have written elsewhere: “By a complex semiotic function, I mean multi-layered meaning productivity [see, (Eco 1976; Peirce 1960; Tarasti 2015)], which not only pertains to existent constituent elements compounding it (or that are part of its composition), but also to such elements that might not be concretely visible or existing, but rather, that can be imaginative or referential” [see,(Hoxha 2023)]. A logical question follows: why do I mention semiotic functions at this point of the text? The answer is because of the interpretation process, or in other words, because there is more than one way of interpreting phenomena.

Let us sum up this discussion now. First, starting from the encoding and decoding processes, Eco rightly relies on a communication process, aiming to produce a signifying one. By the process of signification, however, he means including a “third” component, such as given by the definitions Peirce gave to the semiotic study. Second, as mentioned, this situation entailed adding the “meaning” features and enabling an interpretation process. Its vividness and obviousness can naturally be better seen in artistic creativity, as they are exposed to the audience. Third, and most importantly, each signification process relies on diverse sorts of “interpretants” in Peirce’s terms [see:(Eco, 1986)] because not a single sort of interpretation can be thought of as “final” in semiotics.

In my view, the article in question attempts to clarify the “labyrinth” Eco mentions (1986), not only for the philosophic reasons he thoroughly elaborates in his writings but also for practical ones: the diversity and multifariousness of his scientific entities. It is finally to remark, as also Deely claims (2001), that Eco’s legacy to Peirce (and structuralism, analogically) is due to the “conventional” nature of signs as well as to the “cultural” phenomena, as opposed to the “natural” ones, which definitionally, since the prime developments of semiotics entailed the “sign”, and its meaning outcomes [see: (Deely, 2001; Eco, 1986)]. It is so because the goal is, in my view, human inter-activeness, as I mentioned in sense-making, and the signs’ permanent movement for the sake of an unlimited semiosis process, a fact that does not contradict earlier established semiotic theories and paradigms. Finally, the multifariousness and diversity of approaches are a reality in semiotics. However, it is also true that, on the other hand, if only one “theory” or “paradigm” were in question (or a methodological way of analysis), then semiotics would not be as interdisciplinary and omnipresent (almost in all life spheres), as it is today.

Endnotes:

1. Understandably, other matters related to this term shall gradually presented in the following sequences of this text.
2. As otherwise known, the two concepts in question, are not novel in semiotics. Their utilization for scientific purposes has began even before the Middle Ages [see: (Deely 2001)]. It is also true on the other hand, that the present text must focus on its specific interests and underprints.
3. According to Deely (2001), as we shall attempt to explain, especially in the Modern Era of the philosophic thought.
4. By which I intend “the signs’ way” [see: (Deely 2001)].

5. Understandably, the term stemming from philosophy generally [see: (Deely 2001)], does not hold unique connotative capacities in the field of semiotics. Let us remind ourselves of Piaget, who said to have “hired” from the linguists the term “semiotic function”, by which he intended, linking, or better, relating the “form” to its “function” (in the sense that some structuralist say to connect the “form” with the “essence”, or “meaning”) [see: (Piaget 1969)].

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