

A WALK THROUGH UMBERTO ECO'S WOODS OF SIGNS

Madalin Onu, PhD

Editor-in-Chief

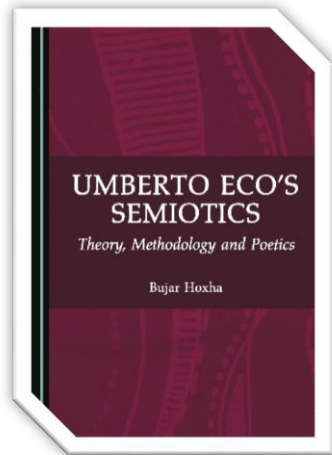
Brolly. Journal of Social Sciences,
London, UK

madalin.onu@lapub.co.uk

Abstract.

Book Review: Bujar Hoxha, *Umberto Eco's Semiotics: Theory, Methodology and Poetics*, CSP, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2022.

Keywords: Umberto Eco, semiotics, sign, symbol, signifier, signified, code, interpretation



1. YOU LAUGH, YOU DIE!

It was a crisp, foreboding morning at the end of November when Brother William of Baskerville and his young novice Adso of Melk arrived at the ancient, labyrinthine abbey. Shadows clung to the stone walls, whispering of an evil that slumbered within.

Are you treating it lightly?

The lifeless body of Brother Adelmo, a manuscript copyist, has just been found by monks; his face twisted into a final, grotesque laugh. Adso was now gripped by fear. Brother William, dispatched ahead to prepare for the impending debate on monastic poverty, stepped into the shoes of a detective.

So unfolds Umberto Eco's narrative from *The Name of the Rose* and, along with it, laughing gains deeper and deeper significance. It is a

semiotic quest, as Eco wasn’t only a great novelist, but a brilliant theoretician of semiotics too. The abbey, with its dark corridors and shadowy secrets, reveals a world which invites readers to explore how signs and symbols govern understanding and behaviour.

Humming with monks' silent toils, *Scriptorium* hid the library's true heart even deeper - a covert chamber, known only to a select few, that key held the most dangerous texts. Brother William, a master of logic and deduction, navigates the labyrinth, not just of the abbey but of language and symbols, thus uncovering that mysterious deaths were connected to a forbidden book - a continuation of Aristotle's *Poetics* that explored laughter. Brother Jorge, the old library's guardian, vehemently opposed it. Laughter becomes thus a symbol loaded with meaning and such many consequences. As Eco liked to say, “a narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise, he would have not written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations”.

One last example. *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* - another novel by Eco - likewise opens in quite an unusual way: “April is the cruellest month” - quotes the author. But why? What significance the reader should confer to “cruellest”, this time?

I'll leave it to you to uncover how its meaning forms and develops, although I might say Bujar Hoxha's book - *Umberto Eco's Semiotics: Theory, Methodology and Poetics* - might be a great tool in this direction (See Hoxha, 2022, 132).

Many know Umberto Eco as a writer. Yet, his legacy extends far beyond the pages of his acclaimed novels. There is another Eco, a scholar who delved into the very essence of human communication. At the heart of his thought lies a profound fascination with signs and symbols – the very building blocks of linguistic exchange and meaning-making. This fascination finds its most rigorous expression in his semiotic theories, a complex and captivating web that seeks

to untangle the intricate dance between signifier and signified, code and interpretation.

Shifting focus from his novels, Bujar Hoxha's compelling volume explores precisely these extensive works of Umberto Eco on semiotics and hermeneutics, such as *The Open Work* (1962), *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) or *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994).

2. MAPPING THE WOODS: SEMIOTICS AND NARRATIVES

Prof. Bujar Hoxha, a distinguished figure from Macedonia in the realm of semiotics, embarked on his intellectual journey as a linguist, delving into the subtleties of English and Italian languages. Umberto Eco's theories captivated him, leading his academic journey into this domain during his MA and PhD studies. With over two decades dedicated to unravelling symbolic systems, Hoxha's scholarly contributions have been profound, counting over 40 published papers. His fortuitous encounter with Dr Eero Tarasti, a trailblazer in semiotics, profoundly shaped his intellectual trajectory, providing invaluable guidance along the way. Driven by practical experiences, Bujar Hoxha also embarked on pioneering work in the "Semiotics of Autism", elucidating the profound dimensions of nonverbal communication. Currently, as a Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences at the South-East European University in North Macedonia, Bujar continues to expand the horizons of meaning-making systems, particularly in the realm of performing arts.

The book I am presenting to you primarily focuses on structural and interpretative semiotics. Eco's exploration of this field intersects closely with poetics, which is examined as a research methodology linked to semiology. The author builds an intriguing connection

between semiotics - as defined by Charles Peirce and some heirs of the Vienna Positivist Circle, and "semiology" - in the sense defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, referring to the "science of signs", a precise methodology that should solve problems with mathematical exactitude (Hoxha, 2022, 3).

Four chapters make up this volume. The First addresses Eco's narrative strategies, grounded in structural research methodologies. Chapter Two focuses on his textual techniques, distinguishing between "narration" as a semiotic process within fragments of artistic creation or social contexts, and "textual strategies", which consider the entirety of a text regardless of genre or artistic origin. The Third Chapter explores the informational processes for communication and symbol analysis purposes, such as encoding and decoding. This chapter also dwells on Peirce's contributions to semiotics and Umberto Eco's legacy, culminating in the concept of "open work". Finally, Chapter Four discusses the notion of "poetics", aiming to integrate it into the symbol interpretation procedures specific for this multifaceted theoretical framework. (Hoxha, 2022, 2).

3. DECODING DICHOTOMIES

Bujar Hoxha opens his book with an elegant observation: Umberto Eco's exploration of semiotics introduces the study of social phenomena through dichotomies, marking a significant shift in the structural approach (Hoxha, 2022, 20). Such an analysis brings forth new perspectives, embedding linguistics into a broader realm. Moreover, it delineates a dual understanding: on one hand, it translates normativity into language and, on the other, it thoroughly takes into account the mechanism of processing signs (Hoxha, 2022, 23).

Umberto Eco does not rest solely on structuralism but extends into the realm of generative grammar. This approach, championed by Noam Chomsky, deconstructs sentences from abstract forms to concrete expressions. It does so independently of the semantic content, making them grammatically coherent. Similarly, semiotics decodes messages devoid of their ultimate meaning, emphasizing the rules in generating sentences. The Italian author uses "transformation" to describe the process of rendering sentences into syntactically significant components, showcasing the philosophical stance of decomposing abstractions into practical applications (Hoxha, 2022, 25).

With the metaphor of the woods, Umberto Eco portrays this transformational process, depicting narratives that extend beyond micro-units to form macro-readings, often crossing disciplinary boundaries. This metaphor also underscores that communication is not merely about adhering to mathematical precision but about engaging fiction and imagination, particularly in literary arts.

Expanding on this idea, the study ventures into the essence of narrative construction by likening the literary or artistic text to a labyrinth, encouraging readers to navigate its twists and turns. This emphasizes that narrative texts are spaces of exploration and discovery. The metaphor of the woods thus stretches beyond literary tales to encompass all narrative texts, whether set in the urban maze of Dublin with Molly Bloom instead of Little Riding Hood or the cinematic landscapes of Casablanca with Ilsa Lund and Rick Blaine (Hoxha 2022, 35).

4. THERE'S MUSIC TOO IN THE WOODS: TIME IN SEMIOTICS

Time, as Bujar insightfully remarks, is a critical component in crafting writing techniques and critical approaches to art. The scene of *Grand March* in Verdi's *Aida* might be one example. Another is Verdi's *Rigoletto* (Hoxha, 2022, 37), where the narrative gracefully

oscillates between timelines. This technique enriches the storytelling by revealing Rigoletto's love for his daughter and the tragic history of her mother's death. Nevertheless, Gilda's heart is caught in a whirlwind of love for the Duke of Mantua, a truth she keeps hidden from her father. In the midst of their conversation, she becomes aware of the Duke's surreptitious presence nearby. Similarly, in Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, the persistent exchange between teacher and pupil unravels the mystery of consecutive deaths in the monastery, underscoring the temporal dimension in narrative progression.

The author extends his analysis to the concept of *ars ritardandi* — the art of delay — demonstrating how writers use seemingly unimportant details to captivate readers. This technique, prevalent in both Italian and world literature, employs intertextuality and fragmentation to create anticipation and enhance the narrative's depth.

Just as a walk in the woods. You go for a walk. If you are not forced to leave it in a hurry to get away from the wolf or the ogre, it is lovely to linger, to watch the beams of sunlight play among the trees and fleck the glades, to examine the moss, the mushrooms, the plants in the undergrowth. Lingeredoes not mean wasting time: frequently, one stops to ponder before making a decision (Hoxha, 2022, 42). Umberto Eco's examination of Dante's works exemplifies how strategic omissions and delays foster a sense of expectation, making the narrative journey more engaging.

In closing, the study illustrates how Tchaikovsky conveys the art of delay through his musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (Hoxha, 2022, 44). Overture and Fantasy's motifs slow down the progression of the plot, enriching its tragic essence. This musical analogy reflects Umberto Eco's broader assertion: the deliberate pacing and digressions in storytelling enhance artistic expression, inviting readers and listeners alike to immerse themselves fully in the narrative experience.

5. MODEL READER AND DYNAMIC TEXT

The second chapter shifts focus from the narration process to text and textual strategies. Central is the concept of *Reader*, as an active interpreter. The Italian semiologist introduced the *Model Reader*, a theoretical reader anticipated by the author to interpret his writings as intended. This contrasts with the empirical one, which lacks a contextual framework for full engagement (Hoxha, 2022, 48-54). There are also two types of *Model Readers*: one driven by curiosity and the other by deeper engagement with the text (Hoxha, 2022, 65).

Hoxha clarifies Eco's distinction between "open" and "closed" texts, emphasizing the former's invitation for reader participation and the latter's static nature. Furthermore, he delves into the interplay between narration and textual techniques, shedding light on how the spectator is deciphering artistic creations. In sum, the cooperative nature of reading and the generative potential of textual analysis enrich our understanding and underscore the importance of interpretive participation.

6. MEANING - FROM SIGN TO SIGNIFICATION

Chapter Three targets the core principles of semiotics, emphasizing the relationship between codes, narration, and representational methodologies from the philosophy of science. Umberto Eco termed this comprehensive approach *General Semiotics* and highlighted the significance of sign as the basic unit of communication.

Bujar elucidates his view on interhuman communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, as primarily aimed at exchanging information. He details this theory as it maps the journey of a message from source to destination, encompassing direct speech as well as written and artistic contexts. In other words, he refers to all

cultural phenomena as sign systems, showing how communication is inherent to most fields within humanistic and social sciences.

In Eco's model, a message travels from its source, encounters potential noise, transforms into a signified message, and reaches its destination through encoding and decoding, with codes and lexical contents playing paramount roles at each stage. The concept of semantic "noise", which can alter a message's meaning during transmission, is skilfully pointed out by the author.

Furthermore, the process of signification, or obtaining meaning, is inseparable from communication and information processes. Eco's integration of Peirce's trichotomy of the sign-object-interpretant relationship emphasizes the triadic nature of signs in creating meaning. Ultimately, Hoxha underscores the importance of context for signification, noting that meanings evolve through successive interpretations.

7. DECODING ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS THROUGH POETICS

In the final chapter, we dive into the intricate world of interpreting art, particularly literature, through the lens of Eco's concept of *open work*, as it developed across different artistic periods, from Byzantine times to the modern era. The Italian challenges readers to produce their unique comprehensions of artistic expressions, emphasizing the interplay between narration, text, and reader engagement.

It delves, then, into the expansive realm of poetics, questioning whether poetry is exclusive to literature or if other forms of art can also embody poetic qualities. Umberto Eco gave examples from music, showcasing how performers have different degrees of liberty to interpret works in various ways, fostering openness within artistic expression.

Hoxha's analysis culminates with reflecting on the cognitive processes underlying interpretation, emphasizing how information, communication and semiotics connect. Eco's legacy to Peirce is also

well displayed. In essence, all of these challenge readers to engage with art actively, to interpret and reinterpret, thereby contributing to the ongoing evolution of meaning.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Prof. Bujar Hoxha examines the semiotic theories of Umberto Eco, leading readers on a profound and illuminating journey through the frameworks constructed by one of the 20th century's most erudite scholars. He deftly unpacks the layers of meaning-making systems, historical intertextuality, and philosophical inquiry, making this volume a great companion for both seasoned Eco enthusiasts and new readers alike. With a keen analytical eye and an engaging narrative style, Hoxha celebrates Umberto Eco's contribution to semiotics, inspiring a deeper appreciation for the complex interplay of signs and meanings that characterize his intellectual legacy.

Hoxha's analysis also paves the way for numerous potential studies that could further elucidate the detailed and multifaceted nature of Eco's theoretical works. By emphasizing the connections between them and broader intellectual traditions, he sets a stage for interdisciplinary dialogues that can enrich our understanding of both Umberto Eco's contributions and the wider landscape of contemporary semiotic theory.

I am tempted, therefore, to correlate and leave open a study on how Umberto Eco's exploration of *the poetics of the open work* finds resonance with H.G. Gadamer's hermeneutics. In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the interpreter and the text, wherein understanding emerges through a *fusion of horizons*. Similarly, Eco's notion of the open work underscores the significance of interpretation as a collaborative act, wherein both the creator and the audience engage in a continuous dialogue to unfold layers of meaning. Moreover, his discussions on music exemplify how the performative aspect of artistic expression

embodies Gadamer's notion of play. Music, with its inherent openness, serves as a vivid manifestation of the hermeneutic process, wherein performers and listeners alike participate in the production of meaning. Thus, through Eco's lens, *the poetics of the open work* not only encapsulates the essence of artistic interpretation but also echoes fundamental principles of hermeneutics in the realm of aesthetic experience.