

# Umberto Eco:

## The Philosopher of Signs

*by Claudia Stancati*

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**Umberto Eco is best known to the general public for his novels and critical works in which he developed his theory of reception. Who realizes, however, that this aspect of his work is only one part of a general semiology organized around a philosophy of signs?**

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Better known to the general public for his novels than for his other writings, Umberto Eco (1932-2016) was both a teacher and a scholar, a commentator and a host, a theorist and a novelist. His remarkably extensive output (including some fifty books) and his scholarly contributions cover a wide realm extending from linguistics to philosophy by way of aesthetics, media studies, and literature—including children’s fiction. As a man of erudition preoccupied with questions of transmission and reception, he placed under the sign of philosophy the vast semiotic theory that crisscrosses his oeuvre.

### **Polymorphous, but Coherent**

In the early 1950s, at the University of Turin, Umberto Eco defended a dissertation on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas. He worked first for television as an assistant, then for the Bompiani publishing house, which he ran until 1975, and to which he remained loyal, publishing all his books with them down to the last months of his life. The transformation and concentration of the publishing world led him to found, with various friends, a new company, La nave di Teseo, which published his final book, *Papè Satan Aleppo. Cronache di una società liquida*, several days after his death.

In 1961, Eco became a professor of aesthetics at the University of Bologna. After the simultaneous publication in Italy and the United States of *A Theory of Semiotics* in 1975, he became a professor of semiotics at the same university—one so old, he liked to say, that, when it was founded, wild boar were still running around what would become Oxford and the Sorbonne.

Throughout his career, Eco maintained what he called an “affectionate interest” in the Middle Ages, having been, by his own admission, introduced to research by a “fat Dominican monk” who taught him rationalism. It was under the aegis of Thomas Aquinas that Eco began his voyage through, as he put it, “symbolic forests inhabited by unicorns and griffons.”<sup>1</sup> These symbols introduced him to the philosophical reflection on signs, and particularly on the way that signs refer both to things and to culture. With *The Name of the Rose*, published in 1980 and soon translated into many languages, Eco enjoyed success as a novelist yet he never abandoned philosophy—quite the contrary. In his fiction, he illustrated the principles that he theorized in his other books. At the same time, he pursued his ideas about literary reception and possible interchanges between scholarly production and mass culture. Whatever genre or format he happened to choose, Eco remained above all a philosopher who elaborated and deployed a philosophy characterized neither by system-building nor linguistic analysis, which were so fashionable among his generation.

To find unity in so vast an oeuvre is almost impossible. We shall attempt to do so by considering a few concepts that are central to Eco’s philosophical trajectory. First, in 1975’s *A Theory of Semiotics* and his essays for Einaudi’s *Enciclopedia* (later collected in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, published in Italy in 1984), Eco places semiotics on an equal footing with philosophy, conceiving it not as an analysis of language, but as a theory and analysis of culture in all its forms, nuances, and degrees, be it in literature, art, advertisements, comic strips (Eco was one of the intellectuals who founded the Italian journal devoted to comics, *Linus*), television, sports, humor, and music (which he practiced as an amateur). He explored these realms notably in “The Home Costume” (*Il costume di casa*, 1973, untranslated), “From the Empire’s Periphery” (*Dalla periferia dell’impero* 1977), “The Superman of the Masses” (*Il Superuomo di massa*, 1978, untranslated), and “Seven Years of Desire” (*Sette anni di desiderio*, 1983, untranslated).

Second, as Giovanni Manetti, who sees it as his most original trait, has rightly shown, Eco is noted for the twofold way he reads and understands signs: not only by tracing a relationship of equivalence, but also—and increasingly—by tracing a relationship of inference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the previously unpublished self-portrait of Umberto Eco published in the Sunday supplement of *Il sole 24 ore* on February 21, 2016, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> See Giovanni Manetti, “Inférence et équivalence dans la théorie sémiotique de Umberto Eco,” in Jean Petitot and Paolo Fabbri, eds., *Au nom du Sens. Autour de l’œuvre de Umberto Eco*, Paris, Grasset and Fasquelle, 2000, p. 157-175 (Italian edition by Annamaria Lorusso, Milano, Sansoni, 2001).

## Charles Sanders Peirce on Inference

Charles Sanders Peirce distinguishes three types of inference in logical reasoning—deduction, induction, and abduction—depending on whether one proceeds from a rule to a particular case, creates a rule based on particular cases, or posits a general rule and particular cases of it based on known results. A sign is thus understood not only as the substitution of one element by another, but as a marker and summation of the work of knowledge.

A third crucial point is what has been called the problem of the referent, that is, of the reality lying beyond language and thought. With the signifier and signified, the referent is one of the semiotic triangle's three components: language can construct a universe of discourse and thus sever its anchoring in reality; yet signs are, even so, a feature of reality. Too often, however, referents prove to be an irritating and even troubling presence, which can lead semiotics to erroneous positions, insofar as codes and signs relate not only to extra-linguistic realities, but, very often, to cultural objects. Having previously agreed with Roland Barthes on the need to “kill the referent”<sup>3</sup> in order to address problems with which semiotics was, at the time, grappling, Eco revisited his dialogue with Barthes to plead for this problem's centrality to philosophy in general, and for the semiotic method in particular.

From *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975) to *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), by way of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), these perspectives are present in Eco's philosophical thought, in his theoretical essays as well as his works of fiction.

## An Original Semiotics

The theory of semiotics Eco proposes in his eponymous book is inspired by Saussure, but is structured around a classification of the different modes of production of signs, rather than a typology of signs. Eco places his semiotics in a philosophical lineage that includes Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles Morris, but which reinterprets the entire philosophical tradition in light of semiotics and the philosophy of language. While at the beginning of his *Theory* he posits an equivalency between the general semiology derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and philosophical semiotics, Eco most often adheres to the latter. The relationship between semiotics and theories and philosophies of perception, knowledge, and interpretation are his thought's privileged domain, in contrast to the idea of linguistics' autonomy, which arose with the reception of Saussure's teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> Eco recounted this anecdote at the end of the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium devoted to his oeuvre (“Quelques remarques conclusives,” *ibid.*, p. 617).

It is Eco's ambition to explore the theoretical possibilities and social functions of a unified study of phenomena of signification and/or communication; his goal is to build a general theory capable of explaining each occurrence of the semiotic function that depends on a code or a combination of codes. The novel thesis of his *Theory* is that the domain of semiotic phenomena and that of cultural phenomena are coextensive. Eco's semiotics consciously situates itself within the social sciences, while constantly interrogating its relationship to other disciplines—and constantly curbing semiotics' "imperialistic" aspirations.

Eco's semiotics consider semiotic phenomena from the standpoint of perceptive knowledge, but it is applicable wherever one encounters phenomena of communication and signification—wherever there are codes (that is, groups of entities that form a system with others), as signs, in the strict sense of the term, are always the outcome of the social activity of communication, and are thus inscribed in cultural codes.

The *Theory* is the outcome of the revision and formalization of Eco's earlier semiotic studies. It represents five major theoretical advances over them: a sharper distinction between signifying and communicative phenomena; a critique of the concept of sign and the usual typology that distinguishes between three kinds of signs (index, icon, and symbol, which is known as the Trichotomy) in favor of a far more complex division, in which these three types are further subdivided; and a critique of naïve, "one size fits all" iconism, which is abandoned for a more complex notion of iconicity. Eco works on a finely drawn historical canvas, which leads him to abandon the "simple" concept of the sign in favor of the study of the semiotic function, more or less the way that, in chemistry, one abandons "things" to study their structure and matter. Thus it becomes possible to pass from the typology of signs to the mode of production of signs and to the related realm of a theory of codes.

The theory of the production of signs that Eco sketches encompasses various phenomena, such as the natural use of different languages, the transformation and evolution of codes, communicative interaction, aesthetics, and the use of signs to suggest things and conditions. As for the production of signs, Eco seeks to expand the number of entities, not to reduce them, and aspires to go beyond Pierce's trichotomy. In this way, Eco also transcends his project of a general semiotics, for he includes in the semiotic function signs that are not the result of social institutionalization. Indeed, Saussure's project did not, in its general semiotics, consider the role of perceptive semiosis, and Saussure limited his project to systems of socially instituted signs (for example, languages, maritime signals, fashion, and the rules of proper education). Eco, however, studies all cultural phenomena and the human experience as systems of signs that form codes. He maintains, for example, that the semiotic function that relates a particular occurrence to a general type is already at work when, upon seeing an animal, we are able to recognize it and relate it to a category or pattern.

The theory of codes illustrates the way Eco uses the legacy of Louis Hjelmslev, who built his semiotics on a logic that claims to be immanent to every language insofar as it is a system of signs. He applied the Hjelmslevian model to different theoretical contexts and

different levels of articulation. For codes, Eco sought to elaborate unified categories valid for all kinds of semiotic functions (whether verbal or not)—for designs, texts, and textual nebula. With a theory of codes that mixed together different semiotic systems, Eco transcends the boundaries of rigid classification.

The integration of these two perspectives—signs on the one hand, codes on the other—did, of course, make the structure of his *Theory* rather complex; but it is also what makes the book so rich. This twofold approach turns semiotics not merely into a field, but a discipline. This is, paradoxically, the source of the philosophical and epistemological unity of Eco's theoretical project.

For Eco, signification and interpretation are always connected. The sign is tied both to a “dynamic” object and to an interpretant, that is, to a representation that explains the sign by referring to other possible representations of the object. Thus there is never a tight and rigid relationship between the sign and its signification; the latter appears, rather, as a continuous chain of interpretive references.

It is thus the importance he attributes to the interpretive process that permits Eco to pose, at the semantic level, problems that usually occur at the pragmatic level: the idea of a cognitive background that is constantly changing and becoming increasingly specific allows him to turn from the model of the dictionary (a closed model, attached to literary signifieds) to that of an encyclopedia (the set of interpretive habits of a networked culture)—a concept that acquires increasing importance in the books he published after his *Theory*. The essays in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* are organized around the analysis of these concepts, but also on a philosophical discussion of all fundamental semiotic concepts—from signs to codes—based on the premise that a philosophical approach is quite simply constitutive of general semiotics.

The latter, according to Eco, runs up against three boundaries. First, it encounters academic boundaries, as other disciplines have addressed the same problems from different points of view. Next, there are “cooperative” boundaries, as other disciplines have engaged in semiotic conversations that must be acknowledged and translated into unified categories that, for Eco, should not be modeled on linguistic categories: Eco's semiotics is not, in fact, conceived exclusively on the model of language or languages. Its theoretical limits are constituted by objects that have not (or have yet to be) theorized from a semiotic point of view, while its theoretical limits are determined by the fact that general semiotics is a social science and a social practice—since all theoretical activity is a social practice. Eco's general semiotics remain open to all forms of revision and are able to transcend semiotic idealism by erasing the difference between scientific and literary culture, as the essays in *Kant and the Platypus* demonstrate.

## The Realist Turn

By 1996 and the colloquium dedicated to his work at Cerisy-la-Salle, the proceedings of which have been published as *Au nom du Sens. Autour de l'œuvre de Umberto Eco* (“In the Name of Meaning: Around the Work of Umberto Eco”), and even prior to the publication of *Kant and the Platypus*, a “realist” turn is discernible in Eco’s thought. Patrizia Violi recalls how, even at the time of the *Theory*, Eco reflected on the connection between perception and semiosis—that is, the relationship established between signs and meaning—when he examines the way signs are engendered. By this period, Eco maintained that the signified is not only produced in language, but is already apparent in perception. In its interest in perception, his work resembles Husserl’s phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> It is by way of a theory of perception interpreted in light of semiotic categories that he grappled with the theoretical knot of realism and addressed a number of themes in cognitive science. In doing so, he gradually managed to separate the question of realism from that of objectivity. His rereading of the path leading from Kant to Pierce and then to cognitive science is based on the connection and differences between the concepts of “scheme,” “model,” and “prototype.” In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco presents what he would have liked, with a hint of irony, to call a “critique of pure semiotics” and a “critique of practical semiotics.”<sup>5</sup> Extending the comparison, *Kant and the Platypus* might be called his “critique of semiotic judgment.” Indeed, the philosophies of Kant and Pierce are, for Eco, two turning points that—even as he brushes up against phenomenology—leads him down a path that begins simply with the recognition of objects by perceptive judgment. This judgment remains, in a sense, “private” until an interpretable and “public” signified has been constituted, even though its constitution has been through every phase of the cognition process and is thus its outcome.

Furthermore, Eco addresses the Kantian theory of the transcendental schematism. For Eco, the schematism is an a priori intellectual product rather than a creation of the imagination. A schema is a proposition that has the logical form of the thing it represents. Eco thus sees it as an icon, like diagrams or algebraic formulas. Pierce’s ever-increasing influence leads Eco to shift from “referent” to “object” and allows him to shed light on the connection between knowledge, signification, and ontology. Thus he continues, in all his work, to ask a major question: are there trend lines or even laws that make some organizations more natural than others, in the sense that the stability of some modalities of knowledge is grounded in the nature of things; or, to the contrary, does being dissolve into language—so, anything goes? This point was much discussed at the Cerisy colloquium, leading Jean Petitot to write, for the conference proceedings, an essay on Eco’s shift to realism. Indeed, in *Kant and the Platypus* Eco presents a form of realism that he calls “contractual”: we speak of a thing because it exists, but we speak of it according to the forms and limits established within a cultural community made possible by a kind of contract. He softened, in this way, general

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<sup>4</sup> Patrizia Violi, “Eco et son referent,” in Petitot and Fabbri, eds., *Au nom du Sens*, p. 5-26 and Jean Petitot, “Le nervature del marmo. Osservazioni sullo ‘zoccolo duro dell’essere,’ in Umberto Eco.” *Ibid.*, p. 71-92.

<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Milan, Bompiani, 1975, p. 6.

semiotics' natural boundaries as he had analyzed them in the *Theory* in order to focus his analytical work on this same terrain of primary semiosis—the first constitution of a signified in perception—through the recognition of an object, situated along the boundaries of any semiotic activity. While it is true that this activity typically takes place within an institutional framework, it is also true that the primary semiosis is undoubtedly one of its preconditions. Cognitive types, and the contents from which they arise, are glimpses of what will become, thanks to language, the intersubjective and public dimension of knowledge, before even communication occurs. For Eco, a philosophical semiotics must reflect what he calls the “mystery of the indicial act,” but it must also, at the same time, recognize that its specific duty is to study it in such a way that, on the basis of the original phenomena, an intentional practice and the articulation of indicial systems can be born.

Once again, it is Peirce who leads Eco to the roots of the cognition that founds the possibility of signification; but, contrary to what he did in the *Theory*, Eco turns the dynamic object into the *terminus a quo* rather than the *terminus ad quem*, while remaining within semiotics' boundaries, such as the difference between the stimulus-response relationship and the triadic relationship—the only one that is truly semiotic—and, while holding on to the concept of the sign as an institutionalized sign, it assigns primary semiosis the indispensable role of a stage prior to knowledge and signification. Eco finds the material foundation of this process in the icon, as a pure quality that “leaves” the object, without being true or false. Pursuing this direction, he draws on interpretive work that tends to detach iconicity from its historic connection to the visual images. Thus it is in perceptive judgment that the “immediate object” (as Peirce calls it) first presents itself, even when this presentation remains vague, as in the case of unknown object, such as the platypus. Thus the “immediate object” ceases to be a “private” effort at knowledge; it is interpretable due to its public character, which takes away the distinctive character of the thing presented to us, turning it into an attempt at knowledge offering a first glimpse of an object that can be seen again and/or enhanced.

Indeed, Eco believes that perceptive semiosis develops when one is able to make perceptive judgments about a thing through an inferential process; it is the outcome of reasoning. This process is articulated at different levels: the first is that of “cognitive types,” which are overtaken by what he calls “nuclear contents” and finally by “molar contents,” which he mentions to distinguish that which is known through experience—cognitive types and nuclear contents—from that which is known through culture. It is in this context that Eco discusses, drawing on the work of the Polish scholar Anne Wierzbicka, universal primitive semiotics, that is, the earliest forms of signification, the basis of all language and culture.

This discussion leads yet again to the distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia, the first representing linguistic knowledge and the second corresponding to the—potentially unlimited, and in any case broadly open—totality of factual knowledge about the world. Patrizia Violi observed that the encyclopedia can be boiled down to other distinctions that partially encompass it, such as the opposition between essence and accident, subject and

object, factual truths and judgment-based truths and, finally, semantics and pragmatics. All these distinctions ultimately refer to the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic, and the possibility of differentiating linguistic from non-linguistic phenomena, given that the relationship between being and language is the question on which this phase of Eco's intellectual work hinges.

## Philosophy's Little Red Riding Hood

The idea advanced in the *Theory of Semiotics* that a system of signification is an autonomous semiotic construct allows one to grasp the connection between the various aspects of Eco's oeuvre. The difference he explores between use and interpretation is a reference point for understanding his analysis of texts and makes it possible to investigate the kind of reality that is Shakespeare's Hamlet, little red riding hood, or Sherlock Holmes, as well as their status as cultural truths. The same ideas inspired Eco's theoretical interest, his practical activity in the realm of translation, and his taste for narration and images. In his novels, Eco blends his extraordinary erudition into this taste for narration: in these books, semiotics becomes a kind of crime fiction, the past becomes the mask of the present and the future, and philosophy overlaps with popular fiction.

The philosophical problem of the relationship between being and language underpins Eco's interest in the cultural forms of being—in texts, stories, and poetic creations—for, as he writes in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994; translation, 1998), fictional texts help us in our metaphysical poverty: in them, we seek the stories that can make our existence meaningful.

The books by Eco that were highly successful in France include *Lector in fabula* (the French title of which translates as “Interpretive Cooperation in Narrative Texts”), published in 1979, which shows that the interpretation of texts rests on an active collaboration between author and reader. Eco examines that which, in a text, simultaneously unleashes and regulates the freedom of interpreters; he seeks “the structure of the work's openness”: what the text does not say, but, at the very same time, it assumes, promises, and implies; the implicit and that which leads its readers to fill in the blank spaces. Eco calls “model reader” an ideal reader who, mastering all of the text's references—including the implicit ones—is capable of actualizing all of its virtualities. This idea is obviously fictitious, the real reader that each of us is experiencing, over the course of the reading experience, his or her own shortcomings.

In *The Open Work* (1962), Eco intersects with—without naming him—the poetics of Gaston Bachelard. Alongside “the large book” “that teaches one so slowly,” in which philosophers study the system of the world, Bachelard places on his solitary philosopher's table, with “objects imprisoned in their shapes,” books of poetry and novels. With the help of



reveries about the elements that demand “endless thoughts” and elicit “immeasurable images.”<sup>6</sup> Bachelard founded a philosophy of reading, and constructed an aesthetics of literary imagination.

Eco’s essays take as their subject matter poetry, music, and painting in the way that the work’s structure provides the glimpse of a worldview that passes through, rather, the hidden structure that the subject renders manifest. Eco finds his examples from a number of French poets, from Valéry to Verlaine and Mallarmé, for whom naming an object meant eliminating three quarters of a poem’s pleasure, which consists in incremental guesswork and suggested dreams. This poetics of suggestion seeks to keep the work open to its readers’ freedom, and realizes itself thanks to its interpreters’ emotion and imagination. It is the reader who draws from their most intimate recesses a response forged along the path of the mysterious consonances that lure the sensibility and the imagination. Thus work of art harbors within itself a multitude of interpretations.

Art, rather than allowing us to know the world, produces forms in the world that are added to those that exist, while having life and laws of their own. For Eco, poetic language implies this reversal of language’s emotive and referential functions, in which all signification must remain indeterminate in order to connect with other significations, in the successive readings that poetry requires. Given that modern physics has established the reign of indeterminacy, one should not be surprised that the reader would be fascinated by the infinite possibilities of an open work, which embraces the projections of its unconscious, asking that we set causality aside and ignore all semantic univocity so as to make unpredictable discoveries and establish new alliances. And it is precisely on this terrain that Eco circles back to Bachelard’s theories of the creative imagination.

### Bachelard’ Concept of Creative Imagination

Images are primary psychic forces, stronger even than ideas and lived experience. If images were destined to reproduce sensation more or less faithfully, “one has difficulty seeing how imagination could overcome this initial lesson. Imagination would have to confine itself to commentaries.”<sup>7</sup> The “deceptive light of etymology” would lead us to believe that “imagination [is] the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is no *imaginative act*. If the image that is *present* does not make us think of one that is *absent*, if an image does not determine an abundance—an explosion—of unusual images, then there is no imagination. There is only perception, the memory of perception, a familiar memory, an habitual way of

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<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of the Candle*, Joni Caldwell, trans., Dallas, Dallas Institute Publications, 1988 [1961], p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*, Paris, José Corti, 1948, p. 92.

viewing form and color. The basic word in the lexicon of the imagination is not *image*, but *imaginary*.”<sup>8</sup>

Work on narrative modes and cultural objects is, for Eco, a new occasion to pose a central philosophical question: that of the nature of science or, rather, the sciences. For Eco, knowledge of the world resembles science; but his conception of the latter is both unitary and plural. The difference between natural sciences and cultural sciences must be examined at the semiotic level. The former are interpretation of data, and thus first-order interpretations, while the latter are interpretations ranging from the second to the umpteenth-order. But from the moment that they concern generally valid symbols and objects that can be publicly observed, both consist of shared elements that are markers of their scientific character.

Eco founded, in this way, a “syncretic” approach to semiotics<sup>9</sup> that managed to integrate the philosophical and logical traditions, the legacy of Hjelmslev, and the structuralist tradition, while remaining open to revision. General semiotics is, in his view, a philosophy of language that applies its own categories to all expressive forms. Every time the adjective “general” is applied to the study of linguistic phenomena, signification, and communication, we face what Eco, speaking of general semiotics, calls “a philosophical gesture.”<sup>10</sup> For Eco, the philosophical gaze is aimed precisely at generality.

#### Further Information:

- Interview with Umberto Eco, “Bulles de savoir,” October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Y0its-bzI>
- Umberto Eco, “L’écriture et le souci de la langue,” École normale supérieure, video published online February 22, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdPG\\_aQzIM8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdPG_aQzIM8)

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<sup>8</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Frederick Farrell, Dallas, Dallas Institute Publications, 2011, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Oswald Ducrot et Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, Paris, Seuil, 1995 [1972], p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, “Segni, pesci e bottoni, Appunti su semiotica filosofia e scienze umane,” in *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, Milan, Bompiani, 1985.