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Edited by
Paul Cobley and Kalevi Kull

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Umberto Eco in His Own Words

Edited by
Torkild Thellefsen and
Bent Sørensen

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Jürgen Trabant Semiotics, Semiology, Sematology

“And now tell me” – in the end I could not restrain myself – “how did you manage to know?”
“My good Adso,” my master said, “during our whole journey I have been teaching you to recognize the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book. Alanus de Insulis said that

*omnis mundi creatura
quasi liber et pictura
nobis est in speculum*

and he was thinking of the endless array of symbols with which God, through His creatures, speaks to us of the eternal life. But the universe is even more talkative than Alanus thought, and it speaks not only of the ultimate things (which it does always in an obscure fashion) but also of closer things, and then it speaks quite clearly. I am almost embarrassed to repeat to you what you should know.

(The Name of the Rose, 1984: 17).

Introduction

William of Baskerville explains to young Adso how to read the signs of the world or how to understand the world as an ensemble of signs. He is a semiotician in the Peircean tradition who recognises and interprets indices, icons and symbols. Abduction is the procedure of his inferences. He is a philosopher who asks what humans can know about the world and how: „was können wir wissen?“ As a medieval thinker he does not differentiate between nature and culture, also nature is a book and an image, *liber et pictura*: „the world speaks to us like a great book“ („il mondo ci parla come un grande libro“). He is, of course, Umberto Eco.

From semiology to semiotics

„La langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même“ is the main perspective of a linguist's work: the aim of linguistic description is the system behind speech. Speech, however, is the object under scrutiny. Therefore all linguistics is always or should be „lingüística del hablar“ (Eugenio Coseriu), a linguistics of speech, and should not suffer exclusions and reductions. Roman Jakobson's „nil linguist-

ici a me alienum puto“ is the ecumenical credo of such a linguistics. The *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916), however, is known for its papal exclusions: It excludes „external“ aspects of language, the „picturesque“ parts of linguistic activity as well as *la parole* from linguistics, and it even seems to exclude the outside world – *la chose* – from its concept of the linguistic sign as a unity of *signifiant* and *signifié*, because the sign belongs to the abstract worldless system and not to concrete worldly processes. Today we know that these exclusions are not Saussure's but due to the editors Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye who had assembled the *Cours* from the notes of Saussure's students. But the *Cours*, be it Saussure's or not Saussure's real thought, is the book that has deeply determined the character of modern linguistics in Europe. The only ecumenical and generous gesture of the *Cours* is the opening of the perspective of a wider science beyond language and the „linguistic sign“, a science of signs still to be established, *la sémiologie*. But the *Cours* leaves the question open what, apart from language, are „signs“ and what should therefore be included in that general science of signs.

Louis Hjelmslev (1973) gave the answer: He presents his „glossematics“ as the theoretical fulfilment and refinement of Saussure's intentions and elaborates the central concepts of the *Cours* in a strict formalist way. The sign therefore – that unity of *signifiant* and *signifié* – becomes a structure of four layers: expression substance – expression form – content form – content substance. The very core of Saussure's *arbitraire du signe* is now sharply grasped in the difference of the form of expression and the form of content. Structures having this structural trait, two divergent forms in the material and in the semantic level, are signs. Structures whose expression and content do not differ in their form are not signs. Hjelmslev calls them „symbols“. Images e.g. are not signs because they have the same form in the expression and in the content. Semiology deals with signs, not with images and other „symbols“.

This structural condition of semioticity – two diverging forms – is a rule of great intellectual severity and clearness. But it has the enormous disadvantage of excluding from semiology many manifestations of human culture that have „meaning“ but are only „signs“ in a general and everyday sense. Thus, the Hjelmslevian rule rather takes back the ecumenical generosity and openness of the *Cours* because there are few – if any – structures besides language that have this structural trait of the sign, i.e. that are „arbitrary“ or „doubly articulated“.

In the sixties and seventies of the last century, the disciplines of cultural objects, extending beyond the works and texts of high culture to any manifestation of human creativity, were looking for a common theoretical roof for all these objects and activities that have meaning. Saussure's generous project of „semi-ology“ seemed to grant a strict scientific method for the *Geisteswissenschaften* that – beyond hermeneutics – apparently lacked scientificity, and it contained

the promise of a unified science of culture. But since the post-*Cours* Hjelmslevian semiology restricted itself to language-like structures, it could not play that role successfully. The science of signs, therefore, had to look for another theoretical foundation.

Here, Umberto Eco comes in. Eco gives up the „French“ project of a *science des signes* closely connected to linguistics as well as the term „semiology“ that belongs to it. He proposes with *La Struttura Assente* (1968) a science of signs based on the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. And he calls it „semiotics“ in the English terminological tradition. Locke had called logic „semiotics“ in 1690. The „semiotic“ project is clearly connected to philosophy, and, with Eco, will always be a philosophical quest.

In the context of that struggle of theories and terminologies, it is interesting to compare the destiny of Roland Barthes's semiology to Eco's semiotics. Both authors first dealt with objects and phenomena of popular culture without any reference to a particular theory of signs. Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) are socio-political interpretations of cultural objects, like cars, films, culinary habits etc., e.g. the famous analyses of the DS, „Julius Caesar“ and *steak frites*. Roland Barthes is Eco's model. Eco deals with comics, TV, pop songs and other objects of mass culture, e.g. in *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964). But then, both authors feel the need for a theoretical foundation of these analyses of cultural objects. Roland Barthes chooses the „French“ proposal, i.e. Hjelmslev's elaboration of Saussure's project, as a basis for his *Eléments de sémiologie* (1964), Umberto Eco bases his approach on the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. Roland Barthes rather quickly gives up any serious semiotic theory, interestingly enough in the moment he becomes a professor of semiology at the Collège de France. His inaugural *Leçon* (1977) is a flamboyant goodbye to semiology, a spectacular but consequential move, because the linguistic semiology is not a theory well adapted to the wild and anarchistic production of human creativity he is interested in, passionately beyond „la langue en elle-même et pour elle-même“.

Eco's semiotics on the other side flourishes: After his continuous development of a coherent semiotic theory from *La Struttura Assente* (1968) via *Einführung in die Semiotik* (1972) towards the *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975), he elaborated different aspects of his theory of semiotic interpretation in always more details: from *Lector in Fabula* (1979), *Limiti dell'interpretazione* (1990) to *Kant e l'ornitorinco* (1997), to name just a few, a continuous production of semiotic theory.

The *Ornitorinco* is his latest explicitly theoretical book, and some people might say that Eco has given up semiotics, that he is back to the philosophy of knowledge. That is true, but he never was elsewhere: His work is, from the very beginning, an inquiry into human knowledge, into Kant's first question „Was

können wir wissen?“ His first teacher Luigi Pareyson understood aesthetics as a philosophical investigation into a specific form of human knowledge: as a theory of „formativity“ (*formatività*) (cf. Luigi Pareyson 1954). And Eco's study of Saint Thomas' aesthetics (Eco 1970) is just this: an (anti-Crocean) inquiry into the formation of beauty as bodily and mental „vision“. Eco then delves into the most diversified forms of human cultural productions. These are, of course – and here his formation as an aesthetician is fundamental – forms of *embodied* knowledge. Since Eco starts from the reflexion of works of art and beautiful manifestations of nature, his theory of knowledge, his „logics“, is never a theory of „pure cognition“, but of material formations of cognition. Hence Peirce's philosophy of the „embodiment“ (this is Peirce's term) of thought in signs, in all possible forms of signs, is just the theory that corresponds to Eco's philosophical quest: Peirce's semiotics reaches beyond aesthetic creations and interpretations but in a certain sense also confirms the Italian master's philosophy. This is why Peirce had to become Eco's „second“ teacher, not Saussure or Hjelmslev. Not so much the „system“ behind the action (as in the linguistic semiology), but the action (of cognition) itself is the pragmatist heart of that philosophy. It considers human cognition as a multifaceted production of signs of all kinds of material manifestations and complex extensions. And it conceives of understanding as a creative inferential activity: as abduction. As a theory of cognition, it is not only about understanding human signs, but about understanding the world tout court („il mondo ci parla come un grande libro“). The *Ornitorinco*, eventually, explicitly poses the problem again of how humans understand the world, how they categorize things unknown, how they use the signs they already have and create new signs to grasp the world anew.

Peirce's program is elaborated on the basis of an incredibly rich experience of human semioses in Eco's theoretical works – but also in his literary production. All his novels are about the difficulties, the abysses and the joys of „reading“ the signs of Man and Nature. In the worlds created by Eco the mysteries of interpretation, of understanding and misunderstanding the signs of the world and the humans constitute the very core of the narration. Humans are interpretive animals, *animalia hermeneutica*, or, as we should say with regard to Eco's philosophy of interpretation, *animalia abductiva*. The famous scene from Eco's novel, quoted in the beginning, is a scene of sign interpretation, of abduction.

Consequences: overcoming the “linguistic imperialism”

In order to demonstrate the impact of Eco's semiotics, I want to come back to the historical moment of the struggle between the linguistic (Saussure-Hjelmslevian) and the philosophical (Peircean) foundation of the science of signs – and to my own work as a semiotician. As an enthusiastic structural linguist, I yearned for developing scientific tools for an objective description of linguistic entities beyond the sentence: of (literary) texts. Literary studies, particularly the interpretation of literary works, seemed to me a rather subjective, not very rational activity. Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena* offered a fascinating, strictly scientific theory for a science of texts: Hjelmslev did not only elaborate the concept of the sign of the *Cours* by the differentiation of content and expression and of form and substance but he also showed a way to include what the *Cours* had excluded (style, social, historical, literary aspects of language) through the concept of „connotation“ (as opposed to „denotation“), and his „semiology“ extended linguistics to semiotic unities beyond the word. However, in order to become an object of semiology, a „real“ sign had to have content substance, content form, expression form and expression substance, i.e. the linguistic structure of „double articulation“, a different form of the content and a different form of expression. Therefore, I happily discovered the double articulation of the literary text as a „connotative“ sign in a very audacious construction of connotative and denotative forms and substances of expression and content. (cf. Trabant, 1970).

But, this very structuralist model, eventually, proved to be inadequate for the text just because the generalized concept of the sign depended upon the structure of the linguistic sign. The text – or speech, discourse – is the most complex linguistic object, that is for sure, but it is not „arbitrary“ like the word. It is the living appearance of language. It is immersed in other semiotic manifestations like gestures, pictures, music, and dance. And it is structurally parallel to these manifestations: it is a „symbol“ (in the Hjelmslevian sense), not a sign. It is made of words and more complicated syntactical structures, but as a whole it is not like a word. Therefore the „semiological“ (linguistic) path towards the text is misleading. The Peirce-Eco kind of philosophical semiotics is better adapted for a semiotic theory of literary texts. It has a much wider, much subtler concept of the sign: It considers thought (=signs) in all its material manifestations, it grasps signs as processes (and not so much as structures), it differentiates the deictic, the mimetic and the arbitrary aspects of these processes through its differentiation of indices, icons and symbols, it hence is not limited to „arbitrary“ linguistic forms, and it yields a theory of interpretation that grasps the creative and auda-

cious procedure of understanding: abduction. After translating Eco's fundamental semiotic treatise (*Einführung in die Semiotik*, 1972) I had to reconsider my own post-Saussurean literary semiology. In my second book, therefore, I chose a completely different approach to semiotics from the standpoint of a theory of actions that did not squeeze the literary text into the Procrustean bed of the linguistic sign.¹ Eco oblige.

Sematology

I sometimes wonder why Eco gives so little importance to Giambattista Vico, perhaps the most important Italian philosopher. If I am not mistaken, Eco refers to Vico only with regard to the question of the origin of language (in *La ricerca della lingua perfetta*, 1993) and with respect to the concept of metaphor (in *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, 1984). But Eco has not treated Vico as his major Italian predecessor in the philosophy of signs. Vico is, however, a semiotic philosopher, who belongs to the family of philosophers of language, signs or symbols like Condillac, Herder, Humboldt, Peirce, Cassirer, i.e. of thinkers who oppose theories of embodied knowledge to philosophies of „pure“ cognition.

Vico's philosophy is – like Kant's or Descartes's – a philosophy of knowledge. The *Scienza Nuova* is not primarily a philosophy of history as many think but it asks the same question as the *Critique of pure reason* or the *Discours de la méthode*: How is true knowledge possible?² Descartes answers: *cogito ergo sum*, the only true knowledge is the certainty that I think. To this epistemology of radically pure thought Vico opposes his *verum factum*: We only know for sure what we have made ourselves, and since we have made the *mondo civile*, we can find true knowledge – *scienza* – only in the man-made world, not in nature. What is the *mondo civile* we have made ourselves? On the one side it is the ensemble of the political institutions, the organization of our *polis*, but on the other side it is the ensemble of signs generated by humans to manifest their *lógos*, the theoretical appropriation of the world. From the very beginning, humans create their thought as phonetic and visual signs, and these signs develop historically in the plethora of human culture, changing their internal structures from indices (*cenni*), via icons (*immagini*) (as an example of these pictures Vico mentions Homer's *sémata*) to symbols (*voci*). Vico does not only narrate the origin of language but he devel-

1 Jürgen Trabant (1996).

2 Giambattista Vico (1744).

ops an elaborated scenario of semiogenesis and a dynamic classification of signs, a philosophical „sematology“ (this is, with „semiotics“ and „semiology“, the third term used in the history of the science of signs for the designation of the discipline). A semiotic encounter of Umberto Eco with his Italian fellow sematologist Giambattista Vico would be a great philosophical event.

Rocco Capozzi

Conceptual Metaphors for Eco's Encyclopedic 'Epistemological Metaphors'

... a metaphor allows us to travel along the pathways of semiosis and to discover the labyrinths of the encyclopedia. (Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, 1984: 126–127).

Eco and Joyce – the background

In the late fifties Eco conducted a most remarkable examination of Joyce's narratives, and in particular of *Finnigans Wake*. This early study was originally part of the first edition of *Opera Aperta* (1962). In 1965 *Le poetiche di Joyce* appeared as a separate volume. The English translation *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos. The Middle Ages of James Joyce* came out in 1989. There is no question that this meticulous analysis of puns, metonymy and metaphors has had a profound influence that will resurface (like most of his encyclopedic knowledge) in several of his works. For example in *The Name of the Rose* during the debates among Venantius, William and Jorge da Burgos about Aristotle and metaphors we recognize echoes of *Le poetiche di Joyce*: "The question, in fact, was whether metaphors and puns and riddles, which also seem conceived by poets for sheer pleasure, do not lead us to speculate on things in a new and surprising way" (1983: 82).

In a description of Joyce's work, in the section "The Epiphany as an Epistemological Metaphor," of *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos*, we read:

The work thus becomes a grandiose epistemological metaphor. It is a metaphor – not a literal model but an analogy. Rather, it is a field of analogies, for *Finnigans Wake* does not embody one particular description of the world but utilizes contradictory images from diverse frameworks. It is as if the author has sensed new ways of seeing things and mirrored these different points of view, simultaneously, in the linguistic structure. (: 74).

Also in *The Role of the Reader* (1979) we find two interesting observations:

Since *Finnigans Wake* is itself a metaphor for the process of unlimited semiosis, I have chosen it for metaphoric reasons as a field of inquiry in order to cover certain itineraries of knowledge (: 70); [and] the pun, which constitutes a particular form of metaphor founded on subsequent chains of metonymies. (: 72).

Rocco Capozzi, University of Toronto, Canada

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