

Cinzia Bianchi\*

# Thresholds, boundaries, limits: Ideological analysis in the semiotics of Umberto Eco

DOI 10.1515/sem-2015-0015

**Abstract:** This essay traces the evolution of Umberto Eco's thinking from a particular point of view, that of his reflections on ideology and ideological discourse. The reason for this choice is that ideology is one of the themes that is associated with the mature phase of Eco's work, generally regarded as beginning with the *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975, A Theory of Semiotics). Moreover, by examining ideology it is possible to piece together a complex path of intellectual reconsiderations and redefinitions involving both the discipline of semiotics and the broader cultural context. To tackle this topic it is in fact necessary to refer both to the general ambit of Eco's semiotics and the historic and cultural context in which these studies originated.

**Keywords:** Eco, ideology, encyclopedia, interpretation, social practice

## 1 Ideology: from codes to interpretation

This essay traces the evolution of Umberto Eco's thinking from a particular point of view, that of his reflections on ideology and ideological discourse. The reason for this choice is that ideology is one of the themes that is associated with the mature phase of Eco's work, generally regarded as beginning with the *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975a) [A Theory of Semiotics (1976a)]. Moreover, by examining ideology it is possible to piece together a complex path of intellectual reconsiderations and redefinitions involving both the discipline of semiotics and the broader cultural context. To tackle this topic it is in fact necessary to refer both to the general ambit of Eco's semiotics and the historic and cultural context in which these studies originated.

Semiotic theories on ideology were elaborated within a fairly clearly defined time span, between the 1960s and 1970s, when semiotics was beginning to become institutionalized. The technological development of mass media, for instance, unquestionably led to the emergence of studies on communication

---

\*Corresponding author: **Cinzia Bianchi**, Department of Communication and Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy, E-mail: [cinzia.bianchi@unimore.it](mailto:cinzia.bianchi@unimore.it)

and the definition of its general laws as central issues for many studies that had previously been “hosted” within other disciplines. It was in these years, strongly influenced by the historical and political phase Western societies were going through, that ideology became a topic of analysis intriguing and complex enough to be a good testing ground for many semioticians. Though not regarded as essential to the same degree, the dynamics and function of ideology was an issue that, for a certain period, had to be given adequate consideration. In those years there was a great deal of talk of semiotic frameworks of ideology, ideological signs and ideological connotations, with a wealth of comparisons, in-depth studies, adopting of positions and debate.<sup>1</sup>

In a number of books by Eco, for instance *La struttura assente* [The Absent Structure] (1968a), *Le forme del contenuto* [The Forms of the Content] (1971) and above all the *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975a) [A Theory of Semiotics (1976a)] explicit reference is made to ideology, linked to the idea of the encoding and decoding of messages. Eco’s theory of codes was subsequently reworked into a theory of interpretation, in which the concept of the encyclopedia, which can be described as a more in-depth exploration, both quantitatively and qualitatively, of the concept of the code itself (see Section 3), acquired increasing importance. This fruitful reformulation brought Eco’s theory to full maturity, and took place in the same period as other revisions and theoretical advances, such as those of Roland Barthes.<sup>2</sup>

In Eco, this process involved a shift in semiotic focus towards considerations of an interpretative nature, in which the Peircean reading of semiosis as a chain of constantly interrelating signs got the better of a structural approach. In Eco’s theory this change entailed the postulation of an encyclopedia-based semantic model, where, in order to explain the complexity of each individual sememe it is necessary to take into account the intrinsic, contextual, circumstantial, historical, social, and indeed other properties. As Violi (1998) argues, the notion of the encyclopedia in Eco’s work functions as a “connecting concept” between a theory of knowledge and a theory of interpretation. On the one hand, this concept allows Eco to overcome a code-based semiotic theory, while on the

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Roland Barthes’ works on ideological connotations (1957 and 1964), or the Marxist semiotics of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1968, 1972, 1974, 1978, 1985, and 1992). For more about Rossi-Landi, see Bianchi (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars of Barthes tend to divide his work into at least two phases, a “semiological” one distinguished by a Sartrean and Marxist perspective, semiological science and structural analysis, and a “post-structural” period, after the 1970s, characterized by disengagement, intellectual wanderings, the pleasure of the text and an interest in subjective acts (see, for example, Barthes 1973, Barthes 1977, Barthes 1981, Barthes 1982, and Barthes 1984). Barthes’ thinking is explored in Marrone (1994).

other, it provides him with the necessary framework for the regulation of interpretation (see Eco 1979a and 1990; Section 3).

Although there is not a constant concern with the issue of ideology in Eco's writing – which was only explicitly studied through to 1975, and it subsequently touched on in the *Lector in fabula* of 1979 – the second part of this essay will attempt to explore the kind of relationship that exists between a theory of ideology and of ideological discourse with other concepts such as the encyclopedia and interpretation, developed by Eco from the 1980s onwards (see Section 4).

The aim is to identify which elements of interpretative semiotics can still be useful in understanding ideological phenomena and their theorizations, even though modern-day semiotics would no longer regard its main task as being that of unmasking the ideology underlying texts, nor would it think that a “semi-ological war” was still necessary in order to radically change society. Notwithstanding this, and quite irrespective of any theoretical and political fervor, it would be unwise to underestimate the potential offered by modern semiotic tools for grasping the interpretative dynamics of texts and discourse in which ideological meanings and values are transmitted together with aesthetic, stylistic, and other values, and for understanding the relationship between the former and the latter in a period of a total fracturing of points of view as well as of the cultural and social “fabric.”

## 2 Boundaries and thresholds of semiotics

### 2.1 The boundaries of analysis

Although ideology is dealt with most fully and systematically in *A Theory of Semiotics*, which will be examined in the following sections of this paper, a number of key points that were to be constantly reiterated by Eco are outlined in two of his earlier books (Eco 1968a, 1971). Above all, Eco tends to set boundaries from which semiotics should not stray when treating ideology. An individual's principles and patterns of expectancy, and “what an individual thinks and wants,” are irrelevant to analysis. Semiotics, according to Eco, can identify the universe of knowledge of the addressee and the group to which the addressee belongs *only* if it is communicated.

Explicit reference is thus made to the system of communicative conventions shared by at least one group of people. Ideology is understood as a *vision of the world shared* by many speakers and potentially at least, by a whole society. Semiotics, as the science that studies the relationship between messages and

codes, makes them comprehensible, and furthermore, can show us the universe of ideologies reflected in the pre-constituted modes of language. There is a close relationship between codes insofar as they are systems of expectations in the universe of knowledge, just as one can observe that the variations in codes also depend on the variation of ideologies; this is because a certain way of using language can be identified with a certain way of conceiving society.<sup>3</sup>

The wholly “public” framework of the conception of ideology is also reaffirmed when it comes to examining the dynamics involved in encoding and decoding messages. Decoding takes place on the basis of the addressee’s ideology, or on the basis of the ideology that, depending on the circumstances of the communication, the addressee presupposes in the addresser. In *Le forme del contenuto* [The Forms of the Content], in particular, Eco emphasizes how the choice of codes and sub-codes is unquestionably influenced by the circumstances of communication, but also by the ideological inclinations of the addressee (1971: 147). In any case, this sphere of analysis is regarded as an extra-semiotic residue (like circumstances) that, though determining semiotic events and semiosis, is extraneous to the encoding.

The addressee’s previous knowledge is not relevant to the study of semiotics if not in the general sense that all knowledge is inevitably “already structured in semantic fields, systems of cultural units and therefore value systems” (1971: 147, my translation).<sup>4</sup> It is not the individuality of the addressee as subject-agent that must be taken into consideration, but rather the ideological phenomenon is to be seen from the point of view of a general semiotics in which individual visions of the world are a way of giving form to the world itself, and are understood as parts of the Global Semantic System.

In fact, a single semantic system is nothing other than a partial interpretation of the world, and can be revised from an entirely theoretical point of view every time new messages introduce new attributions of value, depending also on the material conditions of life, but “semiotics is not interested in knowing how

---

**3** According to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (Whorf 1956), systems of communication determine the world vision of a given civilization. It is assumed that a very close interaction exists between the world vision of a civilization and the way in which it makes pertinent its semantic units. Whorf also suggests a close relationship between language structures and ideological structures, which, if taken to extremes, can lead, according to Eco, to the claim that syntactic structure itself is the ideological grid that forces us to *see the world in a certain way*, the result being, however, that it is not possible in this way to explain certain phenomena, such as the presence of opposing “ideologies” and different modes of organizing the world within the same society.

**4** Original text from *Le forme del contenuto*: “[ogni conoscenza è] già strutturata in campi semantici, sistemi di unità culturali e quindi sistemi di valori” (1971: 147).

the message takes shape, or for what political and economic reasons; it is interested instead in knowing in what sense that new element of code can be called “ideological” (1971: 148, author’s trans.) Eco gives marked emphasis to the demystifying role that semiotics can have, given that its force is based on its capacity to supply the meta-semiotic judgments required to “show how the relationship between a particular use of language and a particular semantic system are crystallized historically” (1971: 152, my translation).<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Code-switching

Over the next few years, Eco focused mainly on two areas of analysis. On the one hand, he considered the structure of the semantic system that enables, through a network of codes and sub-codes, each semantic unit and each meaning (understood as cultural unit) to become comprehensible and shareable within a given culture and society. On the other, he examined the dynamics that produce change within the code itself, through a complex play of sign production.

In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976a), the analysis of ideology is one of the key examples Eco uses in the discussion of the complex interaction between the “theory of codes” and the “theory of sign production,” which make up the two sections of the book. In fact, some of the concepts developed in the first part of the book prove useful in explaining ideological phenomena and discourse.

Working on the contradictoriness, partiality, and incompleteness of codes, with regard to which the interpreter must “advance interpretive hypotheses that work as a more comprehensive, tentative and prospective form of codification” (1976a: 129), Eco became involved in an investigation of ideology. Faced with complex texts, new contexts, and circumstances, often in which extra-semiotic elements are also at play, the interpreter must activate a process that cannot be described as “simple” decoding, but more like full-blown interpretation. A process of abduction based on inferences, mentions, and presuppositions is the linchpin of textual interpretation, which, “like every other interpretation of uncoded contexts and circumstances, represents the first step of a metalinguistic operation destined to enrich a code” and constitutes the most evident instance

---

<sup>5</sup> Original text from *Le forme del contenuto*: “alla semiotica non interessa sapere come il messaggio nasca né per quali ragioni politiche ed economiche; interessa invece sapere in che senso quel nuovo elemento di codice può essere chiamato ‘ideologico’” (1971: 148); “[la semiotica può] mostrare come il rapporto tra un determinato uso della lingua e un sistema semantico particolare si sia storicamente cristallizzato” (1971: 152).

of *production of a sign function* (1976a: 132). Concrete acts of interpretation are embryonic processes of “overcoding” or “undercoding,”<sup>6</sup> which contribute to modifying the codes themselves. Such modifications may involve “code-changing,” as occurs in aesthetic discourse (1976a: 261–276), or “code switching” in both rhetorical and ideological discourses.

Rhetorical discourse and ideological discourse are in fact treated simultaneously with discussion about the nature of ideologies proceeding hand in hand with rhetorical considerations.<sup>7</sup> Classical rhetoric distinguishes between *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*; of these three parts it is only the first two that are involved in the discussion on ideology.<sup>8</sup> Distinguishing in fact between ideological *inventio* and ideological *dispositio*, there are, on the one hand, statements that attribute a certain property to a sememe, “while concealing or ignoring other contradictory properties that are equally predictable to that sememe” (1976a: 292–293); and, on the other, “an argument which, while explicitly choosing one possible circumstantial selection as its main premise, does not make clear that there exists a contradictory premise or an apparently complementary premise which leads to contradictory conclusions” (1976a: 293). Ideological manipulation is based, then, on the fact that ideological arguments do not take account or deliberately ignore, the contradictoriness of the semantic space to which they refer. There may also be non-ideological statements and arguments, which occur when the various possibilities of the semantic field are considered. Every semantic system, continues Eco, represents a partial interpretation of the world, but in ideology this partiality is not put into discussion when new factual judgments or observations arise. Ideology is thus “a partial and disconnected world vision” that disregards “the multiple interconnections of the semantic universe” by concealing “the pragmatic reasons for which certain signs (with all their various interpretations) were produced” (1976a: 297).

---

**6** Overcoding takes place when, on the basis of a previous rule, an additional rule is proposed for a particular application of the general rule. Typical examples of overcoding are rhetorical, stylistic or grammatical rules, even though overcoded rules occasionally fluctuate between the codes on the threshold between convention and innovation. Undercoding, on the other hand, proceeds from inexistent (or unknown) codes to potential and general ones. The movement between overcoding and undercoding substantiates the activity of sign production to such a degree that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether what is involved is overcoding or undercoding. In these ambiguous cases, Eco uses the more generic expression “extra-coding.” See Eco (1976a: 133).

**7** Eco seeks to demonstrate that discussion about the nature of “ideologies” falls under the control of a semiotically oriented rhetoric, taking his cue from authors like Genette (1966–1972), Todorov (1967), and Barthes (1970). See Eco (1976a: 276).

**8** The *elocutio* is the strict pertinence of rhetoric, because it concerns the “embellishment” of discourse by means of rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy. See Eco (1976a: 276).

### 2.3 The threshold of social practice

Ideological manipulation tends to greatly oversimplify the complexity of the semantic space, concealing all those properties and premises that compromise the coherence and linearity of its claims and reasoning. There is also a non-ideological persuasive discourse that, according to Eco, responds to two requirements: on the one hand, it must take account of the social group that gives expression to it, “but it must at the same time acknowledge on what grounds (i.e., according to which premises) the values are preferred and to what extent they are mutually exclusive” (1976a: 296).

The importance of this theoretical step should be quite clear. Values can be considered discrete entities in opposition to others only if they are rendered in absolute terms, while a comprehensive critical analysis would instead make evident their fuzzy boundaries and blurred definitions. The very fact that some of those values are in opposition to others depends on prior decisions that probably do not only concern ideological discourses, but any type of discourse. In fact, the choice of premises and of the points of view from which to render pertinent the continuum of values comes before any analysis, not only that which deliberately seeks to conceal alternative paths for political or, more generally, for extra-semiotic ends.

Eco also acknowledges that traditionally ideology has been associated not only with ideas of concealment and mystification, but also with positive associations. Marxism, for instance, views ideology as “an intellectual and political ‘weapon’ serving the social purpose of active modification of the world” (1976a: 297, note). The positive sense of ideology introduced by Marx is regarded by Eco as a good example of how explicitly outlined alternative paths to the (pre)chosen one can be analyzed, evaluated, and rejected before elaborating a political discourse strictly directed towards clarifying which goals and objectives to pursue. In his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), Marx laid out the premises of his discourse, considered the opposing ideology and then proceeded with his own reasoning. The partiality of his point of view is not concealed, just as the opposing positions are not hidden.

What seems to stem from this does not concern a difference between ideological discourse and persuasive discourse in general; it is not merely a question of distinguishing, within persuasive discourse, what is ideological and what is not on the basis of concealment, conscious or otherwise, of premises. Instead, it is a matter of concentrating on the coherence that should exist between explicitly described discourse, established priorities and the ensuing practice.

Semiotics, according to Eco, can contribute towards making explicit the practical motivations leading to the conception of a given ideological path; it can, furthermore, analyze the different choices; it can undermine an ideology by



showing its relativity with respect to an opposing ideology; and finally, it can demonstrate (through a survey of the contradictory format of the semantic universe, getting back toward its sources as far as is possible by moving along the branches of the content systems and across the various code shiftings and concretions of different sign-functions) how much broader than most ideologies have recognized is the format of the semantic universe. (Eco 1976a: 298)

Despite all this, semiotics cannot bring about wholesale change or improvement in the world, that is, it cannot change the material basis of life: though it is “a form of social criticism, and therefore one among the many forms of social practice” (1976a: 298), it is not capable of ascertaining the practical validity of a particular semantic organization. Although it can contribute to the analysis of the various choices, it does not help us to choose between them or to transform the state of the world.

It is clear that in any case no change can be pursued without those states of the world being organized and explicitly named. And in this, semiotics can reveal, “by showing the hidden interconnections of a given cultural system, the ways in which the labor of sign production can respect or betray the complexity of such a cultural network” (1976a: 297). But the actors of the changes, together with the various empirical subjects, do not fall within its competence.

Social practice is considered the final insurmountable threshold that acts as a boundary for both ideological analysis as well as for semiotic analysis in general. If the concrete mental processes and beliefs of the addresser and addressee constitute a limit from the point of view of what can be analyzed in a discipline that studies communication, social practice represents an insurmountable threshold because social dynamics are not based *only* on statements, arguments, and sign systems.

### 3 Encyclopedia and intersubjectivity

The Revised Semantic Model in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976a) continued to envisage semantic expansion associated with a dictionary-based conception of terms, but was, at the same time, more receptive to pragmatic contexts and circumstances and other encyclopedic indicators. This led to a “quantitative” as well as a “qualitative” expansion of the structuralist concept of code. It concerns a shift towards the concept of the encyclopedia, which “marks the transition from the code conceived as a *rule* to establish signification and interpretation, to a *system* of possible inferences, where a certain degree of choice and interpretative freedom can be accommodated” (Violi 1998: 25). The shift from code to encyclopedia marks the shift from a static concept of decoding to a dynamic concept of abduction. By bringing together semantics and pragmatics, this



concept avoids the impasse provoked by the clash between the rigor of a dictionary that dismisses situational meaning, and the supposedly unlimited wealth of meanings generated by the plethora of possible uses one can identify for each term (See also Bianchi and Gieri 2009).

The Encyclopedia is presented by Eco in *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio* as the “the inventory of all possible interpretations,” the “library of all libraries” and “global competence” (1984: 109, my translation).<sup>9</sup> Thus conceived, the Encyclopedia cannot be known in its entirety, and it is at the same time unrepresentable given that it necessarily embraces contradictory interpretations and contrasting segmentations of the continuum. The only model that can account for it is a rhizomatic structure in which every point of the network of connections can and must be connected with every other (see Deleuze and Guattari 1976).

When the Encyclopedia is considered not so much from the general semiotic point of view but from a socio-semiotic point of view, it appears as a repertoire of possible interpretations from which the addressee of the sign selects the most appropriate, revealing in this process, different and partial degrees of possession of the whole Encyclopedia. In every interpretative activity the interpreter is required to know the portion of encyclopedia necessary to understand a given text. The interpreter’s competence is partial and conditioned by various factors, above all those stemming from the culture of reference.

Precisely because it is anchored in culture and reflecting its internal structures, the Encyclopedia, which is based on an interpretant-structured semantics, emerges as a regulatory hypothesis that explains partial semiotic competence and tries to account for the complexity of semiosis. Partial Encyclopedias, though belonging to groups, classes, and ethnic groups must be considered as divisions or fragments of the Global Encyclopedia. This means that they are of interest to semiotics for those aspects that become common property, insofar as they form a repertoire of the social and cultural knowledge established at a given historic time by a particular social group.

From the point of view of a study of ideology Eco’s theory does not change, even though the concept of the Encyclopedia makes the previously outlined threshold of individuality (see Section 2.1) clearer and more motivated. As Violi (1998) argues, one invariable feature of Eco’s theory is the *shared aspect* of experience and not what differentiates it. The individual’s interpretative creativity, articulated exclusively through the abductive process, only interests us if it leads to the enrichment, transformation, and historic crystallization of the

---

<sup>9</sup> This particular passage, as well as others examined by the author, are not included in the English edition of 1984, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*. The original text reads as follows, “l’insieme di tutte le interpretazioni,” the “libreria delle librerie” and the “competenza globale.”

Encyclopedia, it only interests us if the individual becomes a cultural subject. In this perspective, the subject becomes an integral part of local encyclopedias, and is endowed with competences that delimit individual knowledge, while the individual can only be understood as a set of intersubjectively negotiated, established, and necessary limited competences.

The whole series of ideological presuppositions that form part of every individual's system of expectations do not therefore concern semiotic analysis. These systems only acquire semiotic significance if they are shared by a sufficiently large group of individuals. Furthermore, such analysis does not concern either the conflicts within the mechanisms of signification, nor the logic whereby it is possible to share a certain portion of knowledge. The subject is just a member of a cultural group within which that subject has "taken shape" by relating to other subjects within social and cultural constructions. Semiotic analysis, what's more, is not even concerned with everything pertaining to the social dynamics between groups and the differences to be found within the marginal and non-dominant paradigms. What ensues from this is an intersubjectivity that can be further developed only by making reference to the interaction between subjects (and not between individuals), in a continual process of interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

## 4 Interpretative semiotics

### 4.1 The pragmatic activity of the reader

An organic theory of textual interpretation was first presented by Eco in *Lector in fabula* (1979a), though he was at pains to point out that the problem of interpretation, of its freedom and its aberrations, recurs throughout all his previous work; the semantic model in encyclopedic form implies a theoretical model capable of accounting for the multiplicity and variability of interpretations of every kind of text. Developing and extending the Peircian principle of unlimited semiosis, which accounts for a flux of interpretations through the triadic process of a perpetual chain of interpretants, Eco moves on to explain the process of the reception of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Patrizia Violi (1998: 25–38) suggests the following organizational division of the descriptive levels of the encyclopedia: the *global encyclopedia*, the *encyclopedia as situated knowledge*, *encyclopedic competence*, and *semantic competence*. While the first two are clearly explained by Eco himself, encyclopedic competence and semantic competence belong to that sphere of "singular individuality" in which we could introduce the sphere of ideological presuppositions that is so important for explaining the individual vision of the world and the competence required for an individual to belong to a group. See also Violi (1997).

text, where the reader is required to perform abductive tasks of varying complexity. This is a logical and pragmatic view of interpretation, through which reading in general is defined as a process of cooperation between reader and text.

If each text, in its actualization, is the expansion of a sememe then it requires semiotic activity on the part of the reader to become actualized. This pragmatic activity is the focus of analysis. The reader's activity is considered central by Eco not only because it enables understanding, but mainly because it is *constitutive of the text itself*, given that it is only through this cooperative activity that the text acquires meaning.

For this reason, Eco says, the reader's pragmatic activity is foreseen and regulated by the text. Once again, however, it is not an empirical reader that Eco refers to but a "textual strategy," the set of operations that a text foresees for its actualization. It is the Model Reader that forms, together with the Model Author, a communicative schema that explains the production/interpretation of a text without taking the author and the various empirical readers into consideration. The Model Reader is thus inscribed within and foreseen by the text itself, and essentially coincides with the various segments of knowledge required by the text: the identification of codes and sub-codes; the actualization of the narrative structures of the fabula; the topic and the frames; and the recognition of ideological structures. The surface-level text is in fact a structure shot through with the unsaid, with presuppositions that must be understood and incorporated by the Reader on the basis of the varying complex encyclopedic competence required by the text itself.

The position of ideological systems within the Encyclopedia can now be clarified further. The process that had been generically identified as "overcoding" (see Section 2.2.) is now re-read in correlation with the concept of cooperation. Two complementary paths of analysis follow from this position, that it is necessary to "see, on a case by case basis, to what extent a text envisages a Model Reader equipped with a given ideological competence," but "it must also be seen how the ideological competence of the reader (whether envisaged by the text or not) intervenes in the processes of actualization of the deepest semantic levels, especially those considered to be actantial structures and ideological structures" (1979a: 84, my translation).<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> This particular passage, discussed at some length in this essay, is not present in such an explicit form in the English translation of the *Lector*. Nonetheless, on p. 22 of *The Role of the Reader*, there is a section entitled "Ideological overcoding" in which Eco summarizes his point of view on ideology and cooperation. The original Italian follows, "vedere (caso per caso) in che misura un testo prevede un Lettore Modello partecipe di una data competenza ideologica"; "si tratta anche di vedere come la competenza ideologica del lettore (prevista o meno che sia dal testo) interviene nei processi di attualizzazione dei livelli semantici più profondi, in particolare quelli considerati strutture attanziali e strutture ideologiche" (1979a: 84).

The dual nature of ideological analysis is based on the principle that each text possesses, simultaneously, an actantial structure and its own system of values and ideological presuppositions that, in order to emerge, must also take account of the conscious or unconscious ideology of the reader/addressee. Actantial structures and ideological structures (both at the level of encyclopedic competence and at that of textual actualization) are closely correlated and when an actantial framework is invested with value judgments and the roles convey axiological oppositions, the text displays its ideology in the “watermark.”

In this system, the competence of the Model Reader intervenes to direct the interpretation and the ideological indications that may be identified even if they had not been envisaged by the text. Eco, in 1971, talks of the possibility of “aberrant decoding” when the ideological leanings of the addressee function as a code switch and lead to the text being actualized in a different, perhaps even opposite way, to the predicted outcome. This is possible because, as Eco explains in *Lector*, the reader can decide, through his cooperative attitude to follow a non-linear strategy, “where to expand and where to block the process of unlimited interpretability” (1979a: 87, my translation)<sup>12</sup> Eco further clarifies his views by stating:

Frames and sememic representations are both based on processes of unlimited semiosis, and as such they call for the responsibility of the addressee. Since the semantic encyclopedia is in itself potentially infinite, semiosis is unlimited, and, from the extreme periphery of a given sememe, the center of any other could be reached, and vice versa. (Eco 1979b: 24)

The issue of the individual’s competence remains unchanged within the semiotic framework of interpretative dynamics, as was pointed out in the previous paragraph, even if in this case the question of the possibility of understanding what distinguishes the ideological from the non-ideological loses theoretical value. It seems evident that Eco’s conception hypothesizes the existence of an ideological framework in every text or complex message which carries an implicit and expandable argumentation. The problem then, is not so much that of re-proposing, at the level of interpretative semiotics, the possibility of identifying non-ideological statements and arguments (a requirement that might only interest a general semiotics), but rather that of identifying the possibility of “aberrant decoding,” a concept that evolves, together with an overall revision of the theory of codes, within the reflections on the *limits of interpretation*.

---

<sup>12</sup> Original Italian from *Lector in fabula*: “il lettore deve decidere dove ampliare e dove bloccare il processo di interpretabilità illimitata” (Eco 1979a: 87).

## 4.2 Use and interpretation

The notion of the Encyclopedia implies a fair amount of freedom, since transformations are certainly possible in a system open to change and subject to constant metamorphosis. On the other hand, such a notion also offers a regulating principle for the interpretative act, it provides criteria to evaluate different types of decoding or, as Eco stated a few years later, it provides the parameters to distinguish interpretations from other possible uses, no matter how legitimate, of the same text. In *Lector in fabula*, such a regulating principle is enacted by the Model Reader who not only limits the freedom of the empirical reader, but also reduces the field of cooperation as well as the possibility of “free readings.” Later, in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), Eco takes a further step in identifying criteria to limit the possible interpretations of a text, and maintains that the most radical results obtained by some critical and philosophical movements made it necessary for us to emphasize the power implicit in the encyclopedia to limit the possibility of infinite interpretations. Eco re-stated the necessity of some kind of regulation of interpretative hermeneutics while preserving flexibility in interpretation. He emphasized the need for a constant dialectic between the reader’s initiative and the fidelity to the text at a time when most scholars seemed to privilege the role of the reader or the *intentio lectoris*. Most importantly, Eco deemed problematic and even questionable the tendency, present in most deconstructionist thought, to regard the text as being generated solely by the initiative of the reader, in so doing stretching and multiplying the possible reading paths in order to underscore the inconsistency of more traditional approaches to literary criticism. Furthermore, he sought to challenge the position that all readings of a text were equally acceptable.

A key figure and point of reference for the American school of deconstruction was Jacques Derrida. In two of his works in particular, *Of grammatology* and *Writing and difference* Derrida, Eco maintains, “wants to establish a practice (which is philosophical more than critical) for challenging those texts that look as though dominated by the idea of a definite, final, and authorized meaning” (Eco 1990: 33). What Derrida challenges is an interpretative practice rather than an actual text or texts, and what is at stake is the refusal to acknowledge the existence of a critical meta-language that might have a different status from that of the language that is under analysis. According to Eco, the core of Derrida’s theory is the notion of the impossibility of a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, and the necessity to acknowledge the infinite possibility for both the signifier and the signified to be submitted to a never ending process aimed at the creation of signification. In short, Eco concludes, Derrida “wants to show the *power* of language and its ability to say more than it literally pretend to say” (Eco 1990: 33).

It is along this path that Derrida encounters Peirce who, according to the French philosopher, went a long way in the direction of what has been called “deconstruction” with his idea of the movement of sense from sign to sign towards an infinite semiosis. Such indefiniteness is the criterion that allows one to recognize the very presence of a sign system. As Peirce states in his classic definition of a sign, when “the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least” (CP 2.303). The sign thus functions merely because it generates an interpretant that itself becomes a sign. In this way, meaning moves incessantly without there being any possibility of interrupting the process.

Umberto Eco’s critique of Derrida’s reading of Peirce begins from a different understanding of “the infinite possibility of interpretation.” Peirce recognized the fact that in the semiotic process we can never know the Dynamical Object as such but can only know it through the Immediate Object. Yet, the Dynamical Object, even though not present in the moment of interpretation, is still the motor of the semiotic process, a process that, by moving from interpretant to interpretant, leads us inevitably to the conclusion, no matter how transitory, of a final logical interpretant, the *Habit*. The formation of this habit as a disposition to action stops or rather, momentarily appeases the never-ending process of interpretation.

Eco agrees with the pragmatic rule that the meaning of any proposition consists of nothing other than the possible practical effects implicated within it. Eco also maintains that the decision to stop or continue the process of interpretation cannot be taken by one interpreter arbitrarily, as Derrida suggests, but must be undertaken by an entire interpretative community, “from the moment in which the community is pulled to agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective, at least an *intersubjective* meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community” (Eco 1990: 40).

It is this distinction between interpretations that are acceptable to a vast segment of the community and not merely to individual ones, that Derrida disregards entirely but that, for Eco, is the primary function of the Encyclopedia. As soon as a text is inserted into a historical, social, and cultural context, the local Encyclopedia that enables us to comprehend the text itself places limits on our conjectures, on the inferential walks or interpretative abductions that can be sustained.<sup>13</sup> In principle, our interpretations may, as Peirce says, be infinite, but in order to continue being regarded as “interpretations,” they must respect the *intentio operis*, otherwise they are subjective and unjustified, mere “uses” of the text.

---

<sup>13</sup> For more about this aspect of Eco’s thought, see Bianchi and Gieri (2009).

### 4.3 What limits for ideology?

Having outlined the general theory of the limits of interpretation, it is now possible to return to the topic of analysis with a few more tools. The next step is to try to see if there any limits to ideology in the two directions already indicated by Eco: on the part of the text's reader/addressee (who has a specific set of competences and beliefs), and on the part of the author, even if understood as a "textual strategy."

To what extent can someone else's discourse be regarded as ideologically conscious, that is to say, deliberately constructed to conceal premises that could compromise its coherence and used to pursue a particular goal? Are there criteria that can limit the search for ideology underlying the discourse of others? Is the role of the community as the intersubjective guarantor of acceptable interpretations, together with the insertion of the text within historic and social process and in a cultural context, sufficient criteria to define the ideological issues? And furthermore, what community is being referred to here?

Two possible spheres seem to overlap in these questions. On the one hand, the role and tasks of an addressee who invests a text with meaning (what Eco calls "semiotic interpretation") and on the other, the explanation of the reason why a text can produce certain interpretations ("semiotic interpretation"; see Eco 1990: 54).

The first sphere, that of "semiotic interpretation" deals with the dynamics of the addressee's and the addresser's ideological presuppositions which can, in the most fortunate cases, overlap entirely if the same vision of the world is shared. But when this does not happen and there is a conflict between two worlds, then the two agents involved refer to different paths and sections in the encyclopedia which are not mutually compatible.

It might be pointed out that misunderstandings over the ideological presuppositions of the addresser function with the same dynamics as "suspicious interpretation," described by Eco under the form of "hermetic semiosis" (see Eco 1992a: 45–66). In such cases, no account is taken of the limits that the text itself, as a strategy constituting the universe of its interpretations, imposes on the readings. In this sphere, there are two possible "suspicious" interpretations, in the first case a different value is attributed to the one intended by the addresser, and in the second, the addressee aligns his or her own presuppositions with those of the addresser, even when they do not coincide. This practice may therefore give rise not only to anti-economical and conspiracy-like readings, but also to areas of "normal" interpretation of particular aspects of discourse, as is the ideological one. Essentially, suspicious, non-economical interpretation also seems to be part of many evaluations of the ideological nature of other people's discourses.



This brings us to the second sphere, the one that principally concerns the relationship between each text and its shared interpretation (“semiotic interpretation”). Many interpretative practices that certainly cannot be called deconstructionist or hermetic stress that it is not possible to consider the act of reading without bringing to it a substantial set of ethical/aesthetic and ideological values. From this point of view it is not a question of asking which interpretations are acceptable to a community, but rather what kind of community can accept and produce those particular interpretations. The criteria of acceptability always takes into account the ideological system (understood as a vision of the world) of the ethical and political commitments, and not so much (or not only) of the “rights of the text,” which seems as an entity, to be less and less characterized by the rights shared by fairly broad communities.

The conflictual components within communities and the fragmentation of collective identities make it far more difficult to obtain a shared acknowledgment of the acceptability of every single interpretation. Moreover, the momentary halt of interpretation in the formation of ‘habits’ as criteria for identifying uses, implicit competences and the internal coherence of the text bring into play a competence and an “average knowledge” that perhaps can no longer be considered all that common.<sup>14</sup> The problem is to understand how to achieve agreement about the different interpretative habits, and how to describe the different cultural units in the Encyclopedia, which transmigrate and continue to form many conflicting meaning systems.

One theoretical indication might regard the processes of rendering pertinent and of content segmentation that determine the choice of given practices, entering into cultural processes and permitting the definition of new collectivities. With another concept of practice and another notion of the subject, it would be possible to bring different problems into focus, which do not concern the contents of thought, but the different ways of thinking, which are ultimately different ways of defining the world in which one acts (see Fabbri and Sbisà 1982).

In this sphere, the issues regarding the fracturing of discourse seem to give way to other concerns, given that any discourse becomes “interested” in various ways. Asking questions about ideology also means asking questions about what type of practice a discourse builds and what effects it has.

---

**14** With regards to “average knowledge,” see Violi (1998) and Section 3. It should also be stressed that some empirical studies in mass communication, especially of television programmes, display some uncertainty about the average competence that must be presupposed in the spectator. This indecision also impinges on the productive uncertainty of every new programme.

## 5 Pragmatic borders

With Eco, then, a more contemporary approach to the analysis of ideology began to take shape. One which was less concerned with the evaluation of the dynamics of ideological misinterpretations, a task that intellectuals must in any case carry out in their own social and cultural contexts,<sup>15</sup> and more interested in understanding how ideological meanings and/or values can be transmitted along with other types of values also present in texts, and the kinds of relations established between the former and the latter.

Pragmatic analysis became increasingly present in semiotic analysis, and as a consequence, in semiotic studies of ideology as well. This pragmatic perspective abandoned the greatly oversimplified models, schemas and distinctions conceived in the 1970s such as the distinctions between the denotative and the connotative, between what is ideological and what is not, between ideological discourse and persuasive discourse, and moved instead towards a study of ideology that came to use some of the tools of the pragmatics of communication. As Eco indicated in *The limits of interpretation*, “such phenomena as textual co-reference, topic, text coherence, reference to a set of knowledge idiolectally posited by a text as referring to a fictional world, conversational implicature” (1990: 212) would prove invaluable to semiotic analysis.

Thus, this pragmatic attention towards texts (in their various forms and dimensions) places particular emphasis on contextual components. The latter have always been central to the interests of sociologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists given that it is the sociocultural dimension that guarantees reciprocal understanding of the interacting parties. The basic knowledge shared by the speaker and the interlocutor during interaction is in fact contextual. Furthermore, discourse linguistics, which Benveniste (1966, 1974) thought of as the study of language actualized in discourse situations (in the sense of spoken utterances), inevitably has a strong pragmatic nature. But the pragmatic dimension of discourse has not only been considered central for interpersonal conversations and speech acts, but also for the analysis of any form of verbal communication, written or spoken, monologic or dialogic. Therefore it is also important for the dynamics involved in the reading of texts. What had been indicated as the pragmatic nature of the subject-agent also becomes pertinent in the acts of reading and interpretation, in which the point of view of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Eco's tireless cultural engagement is reflected in the many articles and short essays which, starting in the 1960s, he wrote for magazines and weekly newspapers and which were subsequently published in book form. These are an entirely personal way of reflecting critically on contemporary reality. See Eco (1963, 1973c, 1977b, 1983d, 1985c, 1992e, 1999c, and 2006a).

addressee (or of the reader) can become dominant, even while respecting the cultural context in which the text is situated.

The full articulation of the issues dealt with by Eco in the 1990s becomes quite clear especially through the distinction between semiotic interpretation and semiotic interpretation. What does change, however, is the general perspective of the theory.

In order to talk in terms of semiotic and semiotic efficacy, it is perhaps necessary to reformulate the whole question in another way. The question to ask, as has already been stressed, is not so much which interpretations can be accepted by a community, but which community can produce and accept particular interpretations. This is all the more urgent because, as even a superficial analysis of modern life will make clear, societies have long since ceased to have a “stable” social order, and therefore emphasis needs to shift towards the processes whereby a “stabilizing” agreement is reached between individuals and between groups. The stability of our societies does not seem to depend, in fact, on consensus about particular values or norms, but often on the lack of consensus over particular issues in which oppositions of principle are translated into political action.

It is precisely the creative, imaginative activities of individuals that permits the perpetuation of asymmetric social relations with respect to the organization of power (see, for example, the work of John Thompson, in particular 1984 and 1990). From this perspective, the construction of ideological visions appears to be a mediation and a fragmentation of already existing systems carried out by individuals, in a gradual process of re-composition of what may be shareable in a given social and cultural context.

Individual experience is therefore the key point of the whole issue. Individual experience consists *also* of creative and imaginative activities and for this reason is to be considered a fundamental variant. Although hard to formalize for the analysis of social determinations, it implies a creativity of interpretative and pragmatic acts, an “individual creative flow” forming the social contours of existence, a flow often indicated as the final frontier for any sociolinguistic or semiotic type of analysis.

## References

- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.  
 Barthes, Roland. 1964. Élément de sémiologie. *Communication* 4. 91–135.  
 Barthes, Roland. 1970. L’ancienne rhétorique. *Communications* 16. 172–223.  
 Barthes, Roland. 1973. *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris: Seuil.

- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Seuil.
- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Le grain de la voix*. Paris: Seuil.
- Barthes, Roland. 1982. *L'obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III*. Paris: Seuil.
- Barthes, Roland. 1984. *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critique IV*. Paris: Seuil.
- Benveniste, Emile. 1966. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Benveniste, Emile. 1974. *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*. Paris, Gallimard.
- Bianchi, Cinzia. 1995. *Su Ferruccio Rossi-Landi*. Naples: ESI.
- Bianchi, Cinzia & Manuela Gieri. 2009. Eco's semiotic theory. In P. Bondanella (ed.), *New essays on Umberto Eco*, 17–33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. 1976. *Rhizome*. Paris: Les Edition de Minuit.
- Deleuze & Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fabbri, Paolo & Marina Sbisà. 1982. Modelli (?) dell'analisi pragmatica. In D. Gambarara & A. D'Atri (eds.), *Ideologia, filosofia e linguistica*, 2 vols., 595–622. Rome: Bulzoni.
- Genette, Gérard. 1966–1972. *Figures I, II, III*. Paris: Seuil.
- Marrone, Gianfranco. 1994. *Il sistema di Barthes*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1931–1966. *The collected papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols., C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss & A. W. Burks (eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [Reference to Peirce's papers will be designated CP followed by volume and paragraph number.]
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1968. *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1972. *Semiotica e ideologia*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1974. Linguistics and economics. *Current Trends in Linguistics* 12(8). 1787–2017.
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1978. *Ideologia*, 2nd edn. Milan: Isedi.
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1985. *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio. 1992. *Between signs and non-signs*, S. Petrilli (ed.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Thompson, John. 1984. *Studies in the theory of ideology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, John. 1990. *Ideology and modern culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1967. *Littérature et signification*. Paris: Larousse.
- Violi, Patrizia. 1997. *Significato ed esperienza*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Violi, Patrizia. 1998. Individual and communal encyclopedias. In Norma Bouchard & Veronica Pravadelli (eds.), *Umberto Eco's alternative: The politics of culture and the ambiguities of interpretation*, 25–38. New York: Peter Lang.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, thought, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.