

# Umberto Eco's Model of Communication

The writings of Italian philosopher Umberto Eco crisscross studies of the Middle Ages, a wide range of issues bearing upon interpretation in its most general sense, as well as cultural criticism and best selling novels. Early in his career in the 1950s and 1960s, Eco wrote extensively on Medieval aesthetics and avant-grade artistic practices. He also wrote cultural criticism in a parodic mode for journals of the Italian avant-garde and regularly contributed articles on contemporary events to mainstream publications. My focus in this cyberlecture is, however, an idea that has been a constant in Eco's work – the limits of decoding and how to model them. In order to set up the problem in terms of his introduction of an element of what he called “guerrilla decoding” in his model of communication in *A Theory of Semiotics*, it is useful to provide an overview of his career that highlights how at various stages in his intellectual development, he conceived of limits and constraints in his reflections on interpretation.

## The Limits of Openness

*The Open Work*, originally published in 1962, raised issues to which Eco has repeatedly returned. Eco used examples from avant-garde music, literature and painting to theorize the concept of openness. The openness of a work is tangible. It is an intentional element of an artist's production of a work delivered to the performer in the manner of a “construction kit.” The interpreter or performer participates in completing an unfinished work. At issue for Eco are works and not random components open to indiscriminate actualizations. Performances of open works will neither be the same nor “gratuitously different.” The openness of the work is presented as a field of

relations with specific structural limits and formal tendencies. An open work exploits ambiguity, which arises from formal innovations and contraventions of existing values and conventions; disorder arises in relation to the existing order which the work rejects, but the disorder of the new work is organized while at once avoiding a collapse into chaos and incomprehensibility, and a relapse into the predictability of classical forms. Eco remarked: "This tendency toward disorder, characteristic of the poetics of openness, must be understood as a tendency toward controlled disorder, toward a circumscribed potential, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by the germ of formativity present in any form that wants to remain open to the free choice of the addressee." ((*The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 65.)) Eco's influential conception of openness is still used today by cybercultural theorists such as Espen J. Aarseth as a foundational point for the development of a cyborg aesthetics of cybertexts, although Aarseth ultimately finds Eco's openness to be too restricted, too much clouded by rash anti-formalist pronouncements, and in the end self-subverting, a quality that infects Eco's later works as well as makes them less relevant for the study of cybertextuality. ((Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997, pp. 51-3.))

In *The Role of the Reader* and later in the essays in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Eco revisited the question of openness as an extreme example of how texts produce their model readers. An open text creates a model reader whose interpretive project is purposefully directed by the text's structural strategy, whereas closed texts have a poorly defined model reader whose interpretive choices are free from constraints. Superman comics and Ian Fleming's James Bond novels are examples of closed texts. The empirical author is manifested in a text as a style or idiolect. Eco displaced the question of the author's intentions onto the text. The text has an intention about which its model reader makes conjectures. The task of

an empirical reader is both to make conjectures about the text's model reader and to interpret the model author coinciding with the text's intention. There are three intentions at issue in interpretation: those of the author, the text, and the reader. In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco added that texts produce two model readers: a naive one attuned to semantic content, and a second who critically and metalinguistically describes, explicates, and enjoys the clues the text employs to attract such a reader. By means of a semiotic modelization of the hermeneutic circle which essentially repopulates textual interpretation, Eco advances a sober alternative to intentionalist interpretation and the structuralist "death of the author," in addition to warding off the radical freedom and ingenuity of a deconstructive reader of texts.

*The Open Work*, *The Role of the Reader*, and *The Limits of Interpretation* all address the problem of the reception of artistic works and literary and theoretical texts. They mark an important transition in Eco's writing from pre-semiotic to structural and semiotic specifications of the dialectic of openness and the various pressures that guide and restrict interpreters. Eco progressively introduces concepts whose purpose is to protect openness against unlimited drift and arbitrary uses of texts. He consistently turns to the Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis to critically reveal the pragmatic limits it places upon free interpretive play and how it transcends the will of any individual in the building up of a transcendental community of researchers who would be, in the long run, in agreement about the meaning of a text.

### Eco's Model of Communication

*A Theory of Semiotics* lays the groundwork for a general semiotic theory embracing all cultural communication processes and a theory of codes governing the signification systems that make these and other potential processes possible. The theory of codes borrows concepts from Hjelmslev

and Peirce and reveals their respective general features by converting the correlation of expression and content into the correspondence of a sign-vehicle and meaning, and enlisting the interpretant in order to dispense with the metaphysical concept of the referent. This generalization enables Eco to establish the correspondence the code makes between sign-vehicles and cultural units, which are defined differentially, and to delineate their segmentation in a semantic field consisting of denotative (non-extensional) and connotative markers. Cultural units are further generalized into sememes embedded in a network of positions and oppositions within semantic fields to which sign-vehicles refer. The full compositional analysis which emerges enables Eco to model both the syntactic markers possessed by a sign-vehicle and to indicate with encyclopedic complexity its sememe's tree-like array of denotative and connotative markers and the contextual and circumstantial selections which instruct any decoder possessing such competence. Faced with the problem of "infinite semantic recursivity" which emerges because the analysis of sememes produces more sememes to be analyzed, Eco does not appeal to Peirce's idea of a transcendental community of knowers who would be in agreement but, instead, admits the instability and temporality of the compositional tree and acknowledges the vast network of subcodes of which codes consist. Eco's analysis is limited to the "immediate semantic environment" of given sememes, thus making competence more like a dictionary rather than an encyclopedia. The issue of openness is raised through the problem of the addressee's extra-coding or undercoding of a message.

Eco reworks the standard communication model by expanding the message as a text subject on the side of the addresser to presuppositional influences (private biases, orienting circumstances, ambiguities relating to the encoding of expression and content planes, the influence of subcodes, suppositions of shared knowledge) and for the addressee to 'aberrant' presuppositions (private biases, deviating circumstances, aleatory

connotations and interpretive failures, as well as the appeal to subcodes and the actual depth of the addressee's knowledge), all of which are further subject to uncoded external influences.

John Fiske has made use of Eco's sense of aberrant decoding in understanding narrowcast (as opposed to broadcast) codes whose features are specialist, intellectual, and status-oriented (exclusive), and which deliver enrichment, or at least present signs of its promise. Communication reached by convention and use sometimes rubs up against the differing subcultural experiences of senders and receivers. Fiske's first example is blue jeans worn by a young man attending a job interview as an index of his social status, but decoded by the prospective employer, of a different social status, as a sign of resistance to convention, perhaps even as a connotation of rebellion. As Fiske explains: "Aberrant decoding results, then, when different codes are used in the encoding and decoding of the message." ((John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Second Edition, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 78.)) He continues: "This is encoding [by the young man] that fails to recognize that people of different cultural or subcultural experience will read the message differently, and that in so doing they will not necessarily be blameworthy." Aberrant decoding is the exception in narrowcast codes, but the rule in broadcast codes since the range of subcultural experiences is simply too great to guarantee any univocity of meaning.

Fiske's second example of how a message encoded in one culture and decoded in another entails aberrant decoding is equally interesting: prehistoric cave painting of animals were thought to depict living creatures but "our love of living animals and distaste for dead bodies has led us into an aberrant decoding" since, as Fiske attempts to demonstrate by a series of tracings, the cave drawings appear strikingly similar to what we see as dead animals laying on their sides.

Aberrant decoding, especially of the second kind, is much less semiotically interesting than an active, subversive form of decoding. Even the first example of clashing sub-codes pales against the image of a guerrilla decoder. Of course, any model needs to account in some manner for multiple readings of texts. But Eco retains an element of revolutionary semiotic resistance against the intentional bombardment of addressees with messages eliciting their acquiescence in the tactical freedom of decoding born of a change in the circumstances which permit an addressee to reinvent the message's content without changing its expression form. ((I do not intend to take up Eco's theory of sign production that constitutes the second half of *A Theory of Semiotics*. However, suffice to say that it commences with a study of the types of labor presupposed in the processes which shape expression in correlation with content. Eco appeals to Peirce in order to solve the recurring problem of reference arising from mentioning and treats perceived objects as semiotic entities constituted as such on the basis of 'previous semiotic processes'. But this appeal also necessitates a critique of iconism because of the naive assumptions governing the so-called similitude of iconic signs and their objects. Eco's typology of modes of sign production takes into account four parameters: physical labor (acts of recognition, ostension, replication and invention); type-token distinctions at work in each act; the expression continuum which is shaped (according to motivated or arbitrarily selected material); and modes of articulation (coded, overcoded, or undercoded combinatorial units).)) It requires a certain amount textual excavation to get at this notion in Eco. Buried in the final footnote of the theory of codes, the first half of the book, is Eco's reference to semiotic 'guerilla warfare', which is additionally contained by brackets as if its openness was truly 'revolutionary'. It is worth quoting at length:

*In an era in which mass communication often appears as the manifestation of a domination which makes sure of social control by planning the sending*

*of messages, it remains possible (as an ideal semiotic ‘guerilla warfare’) to change the circumstances in the light of which the addressees will choose their own ways of interpretation. In opposition to a strategy of coding, which strives to render messages redundant in order to secure interpretation according to pre-established plans, one can trace a tactic of decoding where the message as expression form does not change but the addressee rediscovers his freedom of decoding. (5) ((A Theory of Semiotics, p. 150, note 27.))*

Tactical freedom in the matter of decoding on the content rather than the expression plane of the message is “revolutionary.” Essentially, Eco gives a semiotic description of Hall’s globally contrary, oppositional decoding. The use of the concept of tactics is also significant. Tactical wiliness and ingenuity is set against the strategy of mass bombardment, of serial messages aimed at producing a uniform decoding. Readers of De Certeau will recognize this turn to “transverse tactics” that elude the conformity-producing “technocratic strategies” of the workplace, for instance, or through television. Tactical consumption practices are described in a parallel way by De Certeau: “ a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called ‘consumption’ and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances) its poaching, its clandestine nature .” ((Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 31.)) The image of the guerrilla decoder is a powerful one for cultural studies because it opens, beyond the constraints of Eco’s focus on content, onto the actual refashioning of expression (grasping the message-text as a source for information-material). Dick Hebdige, for instance, astutely observed in his classic study of Mod subculture how innovation, discovery and spontaneous creation from “below” – tactical innovation in the decoding of content – was destroyed by the imposition of manufactured accessories

from “above” in the form of a strategic imposition of codes (this is ‘Mod style’) fashioned by the pop industry. Keeping with Hebdige for a moment, his treatment of the relation of borrowing and redefinition at the heart of cultural studies – active consumption involves appropriating the commodity; redefining its use and value; relocating its meaning in a new context (i.e. in the case of the Mods the scooter, porkpie hat, Hush Puppies) – is a guerrilla semiotic cultural analysis in which these objects are given new content as well as , especially in the case of certain modes of accessorization (multiple mirrors on the scooters), augmenting the message-expression plane. ((Dick Hebdige, “The Meaning of Mod,” *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. S. Hall and Tony Jefferson, New York: Holmes and Meiers, 1976, pp. 93.))

Consider, then, the nuts and bolts of Eco’s model. A sender makes reference to presupposed codes (and the circumstances orienting these) and selected subcodes in the formation of a message that flows through channel; this message is a source of information (expression) with contextual and circumstantial settings (settings that are coded according to cultural conventions or remain relatively uncoded or not yet coded such as biological constraints). The addressee receives the message and with reference to his or her own presupposed codes (and the actual circumstances, which may deviate from the presuppositions) and selected subcodes, the selection of which may be indicated by the context and circumstances, interprets the message text (content). Here, Eco adopts from Metz the redefinition of message as text as “the results of the coexistence of many codes (or, at least, many subcodes).” ((*A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 57.)) The structuralist disconnection of the message-text from authorial intention helps to underline Eco’s sense of the interpretive freedom found in certain kinds of decoding that eludes such a point of reference.



For Eco the message is a kind of “empty form to which may be attributed various possible senses,” ((*Ibid.*, p. 139.)) given the mutiplicity of codes, subcodes, contexts and circumstantial selectors that inform it: the message “he follows Marx” received by an anti-Communist may be literally decoded according to its ideological content that the sender is a follower of Marxism but loaded, all the same, for an anti-Communist addressee, with negative connotations (ideological biases forming an ‘aberrant’ presupposition). Messages are the source of different probable contents, depending on the richness of the possible choices; definitive interpretations reduce these multiple senses of a message.

Messages are texts: “a network of different messages dependent upon different codes” and subject to reinforcements (verbal messages reinforced by non-verbal gestures and proxemic behaviours) correlated with the same content. The message’s richness as a “source of information” is underlined by Eco while simultaneously, in keeping with his reading of openness, subject to “a network of constraints which allow certain optional results. Some of these can be considered as fertile inferences which enrich the original messages, others are mere ‘aberrations’.” ((*Ibid.*, p. 141.)) Eco defines aberrant decoding as a “betrayal of the sender’s intentions” but resists defining it negatively. He mentions the possibility that the addressee’s codes and subcodes and context produce an interpretation unforeseen by the sender. In such cases when the addressee cannot isolate the sender’s codes or successfully substitute his own codes or subcodes for them, the message becomes pure noise. It is at the level of subcodes and actual circumstances that the content of messages can be changed. And on this semiotic ground of the destiny of the received message Eco looks forward to the study of its “highly articulated pragmatics,” in other words, to much of what characterizes cultural studies.

“Acting on the circumstances” of message reception has been explored through the important trope of poaching in which the expression-message is redefined and recontextualized but most importantly actually reformulated. And it is to several studies of such practices that I turn in the following lecture.