UMBERTO ECO: Module Programme 2003/04

Probably the most influential intellectual in Italy, and the best known living Italian writer in the world at large, Umberto Eco’s extraordinary career has embraced three main interests: semiotic theory, cultural criticism, and the novel. Semiotic theory, the general theory of signs, lies partly in the area of philosophy and partly in that of linguistics. It has been the foundation of all of Eco’s writings, by providing the theoretical framework within which his activity as a cultural critic is conducted, as well as the main themes of his three novels. The close connection between theory and practice, the way in which high-level conceptual issues inspire and guide his analysis of the contemporary world as well as his fictional creations, is the most remarkable feature of Eco’s remarkably coherent and wide-ranging work.

The course will provide a general introduction to Eco’s semiotic theory, a survey of his cultural criticism, in journalistic and book form, and the close study of his first two novels, *Il nome della rosa* and *Il pendolo di Foucault*. The aim will be a detailed understanding of Eco’s work as a whole, and to show the relevance of his theory to the analysis of contemporary culture, both high and low, and to the academic discipline of literary criticism.

**Autumn Term**
wk 1 Introduction: some key concepts and issues
wk 2 The Open Work
wk 3 Mass-media
wk 4 Structuralism and semiotics: theory
wk 5 ditto
wk 6 ditto
wk 7 Cultural criticism and analysis: James Bond
wk 8 Cultural criticism and analysis: other examples
wk 9 Eco as journalist
wk 10 Reflections on *The Name of the Rose*

**Spring Term**
wks 1-4 *Il nome della rosa*
wks 5-8 *Il pendolo di Foucault*
wks 9-10 Retrospect and revision

SET TEXTS
- A selection of Eco’s non-literary work, chosen in relation to the novels.
- *Il nome della rosa*
- *Il pendolo di Foucault*

FURTHER READING

Assessed Essays and Examination

- Autumn Term essay on a choice from the selection of non-literary work (1-4).
- Lent Term essay on either of the two set novels (5-8).

1. Discuss critically Eco's concept of the "open work", giving examples of how it can be applied.
2. Consider how Eco's work as a journalist reflects his theoretical interest in semiotics.
3. What is semiotic about Eco's treatment of the James Bond novels?
4. Illustrate and discuss Eco's views on the mass media.
5. How far do you agree with Eco's view of Il nome della rosa as shown in his own reflections on the novel.
6. ‘Mi sono comportato da ostinato, inseguendo una parvenza di ordine, quando dovevo sapere bene che non vi è un ordine nell'universo.’ What is the significance of this confession by William of Baskerville?
7. 'La certezza che non vi era nulla da capire, questo dovrebbe essere la mia pace e il mio trionfo.' Discuss the significance of this statement in Il pendolo di Foucault.
8. Compare and contrast the role of the narrator in Il nome della rosa and Il pendolo di Foucault.

Essays on Autumn Term work are due by 4 pm on Tuesday 13 January 2004. Essays on Spring Term work are due by 4 pm on Thursday 18 March 2004. Please see the Department's Final Year Handbook for the University's rules on late submission of work. Essays must be submitted to Mrs Whyte's office (Room 70). They must be on paper and in duplicate: word-processing is strongly recommended, but we cannot accept essays in electronic form. When handing in essays, students must also sign a submission form for this piece of work, declaring that this is all their own work (please see the Final Year Handbook for the University's rules on plagiarism). Copies of this form are available in Room 70. Students should obtain a receipt for their essays.

3-hour paper with 3 questions in the final examination, one to be answered on each of the two novels, plus one on the non-literary work or on Eco's work as a whole.

UMBERTO ECO (b. 1932): MAIN WORKS

1. Il problema estetico in San Tommaso (1956) The aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas
2. Opera aperta (1962) The Open Work
3. Diario minimo (1963)
4. Apocalittici e integrati (1964)
5. La struttura assente (1968)
6. Il costume di casa (1973)
7. Il segno (1973)
9. Come si fa una tesi di laurea (1977)
10. Dalla periferia dell'impero (1977)
11. Il superuomo di massa (1978)
12. Lector in fabula (1979)
14. The role of the reader (1981)
15. The Sign of Three (1983)
19. Sugli specchi e altri saggi (1985)
20. Trent'anni di costume (1985)
23. I limiti dell'interpretazione (1990) The Limits of Interpretation
24. Interpretation and overinterpretation (1992)
25. Il secondo diario minimo (1992)
27. How to travel with a salmon and other essays (1994)
29. L’isola del giorno prima (1994) The island of the day before
30. Serendipities (1999)
32. Sulla letteratura (2002)

SOME KEY ISSUES AND CONCEPTS

- Medieval aesthetics and Catholicism
- Avant-garde – the “open work”
- Mass-media and kitsch
- Structuralism and semiotics
- Impegno / commitment
- Intellectuals and universities
- Reading and interpretation
- Crisis, order, disorder

Selection of the works by/on Eco in the University Library

Interpretation and overinterpretation Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose; edited by Stefan Collini 1992 801.9-ECO
The limits of interpretation 1990 801.9-ECO
The open work Umberto Eco; translated by Anna Cancogni; with an introduction by David Robey 1989 700.1-ECO
The aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas Umberto Eco; translated by Hugh Bredin 1988 111.85-ECO
Travels in hyperreality essays; translated from the Italian by William Weaver 1987 853.914-ECO
Art and beauty in the middle ages 1986 111.85-ECO
Sugli specchi e altri saggi 1985 853.914-ECO
The role of the reader explorations in the semiotics of texts 1985 801.9-ECO
Reflections on The name of the rose Umberto Eco; translated from the Italian by William Weaver 1985 853.914-ECO
Semiotics and the philosophy of language 1984 412-ECO
The role of the reader explorations in the semiotics of texts 1979 801.9-ECO
Lector in fabula la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi 1979 08.3-ECO
A theory of semiotics 1976 412-ECO
Trattato di semiotica generale 1975 412-ECO
Costume di casa 1973 945-ECO
Apocalittici e integrati 1973 301.243-ECO
Struttura assente 1968 149.94-ECO
Opera aperta 1967 901-ECO
The Bond affair translated by R.A.Downie Buono Oreste Del 1966 BULMERSHE 820.9-FLE
ECO'S SEMIOTIC THEORY

Semiotics is the general theory of signs: it includes all forms of social, cultural and intellectual life, insofar as all of these can be viewed as systems of signs. Its task is to develop a single, comprehensive conceptual framework within which all these sign systems may be studied (the 'imperialist' view of semiotics).

But the theory does not claim to represent the essential nature of things, given E's principle of the incomprehensibility of the modern world. Its status is methodological rather than ontological: it is a provisional, hypothetical construction; the ultimate truth, the structure behind all structures, always eludes our intellectual grasp.

Unlimited semiosis (C.S.Peirce): the meaning of any sign can only be seen as another sign, and so on ad infinitum. Meaning as an infinite regress within a closed sphere; there is no direct connection between signs and the 'real' world of things that they are used to refer to. A concept essential to the constitution of semiotics as an academic discipline, because it frees the study of signs from involvement with the study of their referents. But it avoids the connotations of stability and organization that the concept of structure carries with it: meaning as a process rather than an entity.

E is not denying that signs refer to the real world or that the world exists. But signs are systems or grids that pre-exist any use we may make of them; they do not reflect reality, rather we impose them on reality. At the same time they are also ultimately and indirectly the products of reality and history. History influences signs through ideology.

Encyclopaedia is E's preferred term for the vast collection of signs that constitutes our knowledge of the world. Preferred to the structuralist concept of code, which represents this knowledge as a set of one-to-one equivalences between signifiers and signified set in a linear structure. The encyclopaedia is like a net, a rhizome or a labyrinth, a vast aggregation of signs among which an infinite variety of connections can be made.

Abduction is the mental process that makes any kind of understanding possible. It involves tracing out one of all the possible paths that can be taken through the encyclopaedia. The example par excellence is the act of criminal detection. Just as the detective finds the author of a crime by postulating certain connections between human actions and events, so the assign meaning to a sign by postulating connections between that sign and others. Sometimes these connections are standardized (overcoded), sometimes they are not. But the fundamental principle is that all forms of communication, interpretation, understanding are by their nature tentative and hypothetical acts. Contrast the structuralist code model, according to which interpretation is simply a matter of establishing the one-to-one equivalences of signifier and signified.

Art has a special function in this view of the world of signs. As in Opera aperta, E argues that it produces an essential effect of ambiguity through the contravention of conventions of expression. The result of this is to focus attention first on the structure of the work itself, then on the relation between the signs in the work and reality, thus generating a renovated perception of the world. This characteristically structuralist argument replaces E's earlier view that the 'open' work produces a form of knowledge about the modern world.

Mass communications. Semiotics can enable us to see how messages can manipulate and distort our knowledge of the world, so that it becomes a form of 'social criticism' - semiotic guerrilla warfare.