



The universe of action depicted by the cinema is already a universe of signs.

— UMBERTO ECO, “SULLE ARTICOLAZIONI DEL CODICE CINEMATOGRAFICO”¹

IPERSIGNIFICATO: UMBERTO ECO AND FILM

A literary and cultural giant whose influence can be seen in many aspects of our rapidly evolving media, Umberto Eco (1932 – 2016) produced a critical oeuvre that remains important to the study of cinema. Throughout decades of interdisciplinary writing, Eco seamlessly moved between academic work, semiotic analysis, acclaimed novels, and more informal cultural commentary, leaving indelible marks on each area. Eco once explained his approach as concerned “with the problems of language, communication, organization of the systems of signs that we use to describe the world and to tell it to one another,” acknowledging the relationship between his own work and the field of semiotics.² A tracing of Eco’s theories inevitably recounts the history of cinema and reveals

a mutual development. The film series at the National Gallery of Art illustrates the inextricable link between his work and its subject matter, as the cinema itself was informed and challenged by his theoretical approach while also enriched by his contributions.

Although his direct encounters with filmmaking were fleeting — among them a near screenwriting collaboration with Michelangelo Antonioni — Eco was, among many other innovative roles, a founding father of film semiotics, a discipline propelled forward in a series of memorable debates at the Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema in Pesaro from 1965 to 1967. These discussions, which also featured Pier Paolo Pasolini, Christian Metz, and Roland Barthes, among others, inaugurated a new chapter of theoretical and critical perspectives on the nature and development of a film language and, in retrospect, offered a new approach by which to study the works emerging during that decade and beyond.

Eco was also a prolific and vigorous commentator on works of popular culture, rigorously treating them as cultural artifacts whose narrative structures, aesthetic components, and semiotic elements warranted insightful study. His work on these topics is fundamentally engaged in the dynamics of cultural expression, and his pronounced involvement in the field of semiology is informed — certainly in his observations on film — by an inquisitiveness toward modes of cultural communication. In this light, cinema is a code with a “triple articulation,” as Eco argued, resulting in a “heightened expressiveness” in the transition from written or spoken word

to cinematic language; if language is traditionally a pragmatic solution through which meaning is inevitably impoverished, the moving image allows us to reclaim some of that meaning, a result the writer would refer to as *ipersignificato*.³

The films presented in the Gallery’s series distill Eco’s work and map his critical footsteps, following a loose chronology that illustrates the development of the theory and practice of filmmaking over the past century, while noting the progressive awareness of what a language of film has the potential to be. As a result, the selection does not adhere to any one type of relationship with Eco, instead offering varying links to the writer and his work; some of the films act as important contextual pieces, as is the case with *Teorema*, while others represent case studies with an added personal connection, such as *Casablanca* and *Stagecoach*. His influential theory of the open work is at the center of the series, providing a frame of reference for the other films while scrutinizing cinematic language as part of a larger aesthetic question. Finally, the trajectory arrives at a self-reflexive moment, in which the culture created by cinema becomes an active entity in and of itself, encapsulating Eco’s later interest in postmodern aesthetics.

If we can't manage to get ahold of it, that doesn't mean that there's no code at all, but rather that it still has to be found.

— UMBERTO ECO, “ARTICULATIONS OF THE CINEMATIC CODE”⁴

The inception and first developments of semiotics in cinema were marked by a central problematic of language. Evolving from the groundwork laid out by linguistics — certainly in its application of the tools forged by Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure — the discipline in the late 1960s was in need of an academic and theoretical independence. Seeking to identify a series of codes and languages inherent to the cinematic medium was essential to the perception of film as a truly distinct mode of expression. Eco urged an understanding of film that moved away from the parameters of the word, considering semiotics to be “neither a province nor a byproduct of linguistics,” and allowing the image to become the primary focus of discussion.⁵

Of even greater influence, however, was Eco’s position on the signifying qualities of the captured image. The debate on cinematic articulation underlined a tension between the naturalism and arbitrariness of iconic signs, and by definition the film frame, and the meanings images carry based on cultural conventions. This friction was at the center of an extended dialogue between the two polarized voices of Eco and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pasolini, as both theorist and artist, firmly believed cinema to be the “written language of reality,”⁶ a direct record of the real world that, in capturing the language of action via images and sound, is able to express reality like no medium before it. Life itself, according to Pasolini, is a continuous, living film, and cinema’s role is to reproduce it without mimicking it, therefore obliging us “to broaden our notion of language.”⁷

This position invited much skepticism. Eco offered the most rigorous response, refuting Pasolini’s arguments while acknowledging the general appeal of his notions. In “Articulations of the Cinematic Code,” a transcript of ideas outlined at the Pesaro conventions, Eco’s vision comes to the forefront in his critique of Pasolini’s theory.⁸ Rejecting the view of film as unburdened from cultural convention, the writer underlines the very richness that is a result of cinema’s freedom from translating such a reality as Pasolini suggests. Eco notes that the universe that the cinema depicts “is already a universe of signs,” and, far from transcribing an analogous, spontaneous reality, the cinema generates instead a codified language of culturally obtained meanings that has strong implications for the real world. If Pasolini equates the language of film to that of reality, Eco argues for cinema’s own complex construction that operates within an amplified system of meaning; in the semiotic debate of articulation, his proposition of a triple articulation in this sense endows the medium with poetic signifying qualities.⁹

As Eco continued to expand on cinema’s semiotic traits, he praised Federico Fellini as a director who “lived to redeem the cinema from what is external to it.” The external, in the eyes of Eco, is precisely what Pasolini embraced — reality. As perhaps the utmost exponent of hyperrealism on film, Fellini and his oeuvre seem to negate the restrictions imposed on the material world, instead lending form to and exalting that which is internalized and, in the process, generating an “art of memory.” This memory, then, is precisely what Eco celebrates in his dissection of Fellini’s role in the cinematic landscape.¹⁰

Amarcord (1973), in this regard, marks the pinnacle of Fellini's exploration of his personal history, and it is no surprise that Eco elects the film, which puts the "reconstruction and invention of memory" at the forefront, as a synthesis of the director's work as a whole. More of a loose reminiscence than any grounded re-creation of Fellini's youth, *Amarcord* serves as something of an artist statement for the later portion of his career, a work whose form is molded by the very process of its creation, one which evades any external convention or pretext and is instead driven solely by the saturated and distorted fragments of memory, which, in becoming cinematic signs, take on a new life entirely.¹¹

The pairing of *Amarcord* with *Teorema* (1968), a product of Pasolini's artistic stance of the time released shortly after the Pesaro conventions, presents a theoretical dichotomy reflected in the tone of the films. *Teorema* has a bold social perspective, but it embodies an artistic philosophy manifested in the film's concern with layered consciousness and realities, constantly shaking any objective or subjective gaze we might seek within its frames.

If everything seems so casual, it is precisely because nothing is.

— UMBERTO ECO, *THE OPEN WORK* ¹²

Eco's career as a semiotician formally began with the publication of *The Absent Structure* in 1968, but his previous writings on aesthetics and textual interpretation informed his theories. Of the work that emerged out of this prior academic period, *The Open Work* is undoubtedly the seminal text.

Originally appearing in 1962, *Opera Aperta* underwent various revisions and editions and, in the process, became central to "the continuing contemporary debate on literature, art, and culture in general," as the introduction to the 1989 edition underlines.¹³ The interpretative potential of a work of art becomes the basis for Eco's theory, which attempts to distinguish between tradition and modernity, convention and ambiguity, and to identify true innovation in works of art as a form of "openness."

In terms of its cinematic articulation, Eco discusses the role of the moving image with reference to a principal dichotomy; on one end are works of utter innovation attained through ambiguity, and at the other end are works that achieve a completeness within a closed system of interpretation. Every work of art, Eco notes, has a degree of openness determined by the nature of an audience. However, works that also have openness built into their structure inhabit a different category altogether, and invite a participation from the audience that is essential to their completion. The particular brand of openness seen in Michelangelo Antonioni's films illustrates a crucial chapter of *The Open Work*.¹⁴ Eco often referenced and observed Antonioni's output in his writing, and here the director's early work provides an example that Eco sees as dis-

tinguishing him from most of his peers. *L'Avventura* (1960) in particular, which Eco presents as a central example of formal deconstruction in film, holds a pivotal role for the sudden shift it brought to the syntax of cinematic language, perhaps even more so because such a shift was accepted, at least in part, by a general viewing public.¹⁵ In line with the schism portrayed between classical and experimental art, and placed alongside such works as the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, *L'Avventura*'s openness relies on a special kind of organization, Eco argues, whereby conventional narrative is either subverted or rejected in lieu of spatial and temporal voids. In translating the psychological alienation of his characters into a formal alienation, Antonioni enacts a "decantation of the dramatic action" where the appearance of randomness and chance, suggested by a lack of strict causality in the film's movements, veils a carefully willed tracing of unresolved expectations.¹⁶

As a counterpart, Eco refers to the Aristotelian craft of John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). Acknowledging that "the open work is only one expression [...] of a culture whose innumerable demands can be satisfied in many different ways," Eco points to instances where traditional narrative structures incorporated by contemporary uses are "perfectly valid." Ford's film is presented as the embodiment of art that "confirms conventional views of the world" in a culture that was beginning to accommodate the modern work that "implicitly denies them."¹⁷

Works are created by works, texts are created by texts and all together they speak to and with one another independently of the intentions of their authors. A cult movie is the proof that, as literature comes from literature, cinema also comes from cinema.

— UMBERTO ECO, "CASABLANCA: CULT MOVIES AND INTERTEXTUAL COLLAGE"¹⁸

Postmodern culture has a fundamental self-awareness of its artistic output, an inwardness of gaze stemming from a need to confront and reiterate the knowledge it possesses. This notion of cultural repetition characterizes a large part of Eco's theories in the late twentieth century, when much of his writing turned to a less theoretical and more informal type of observation. "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Postmodern Aesthetics," a title from 1985, contains many of the ideas that formed around the aesthetics of seriality, and presents, alongside a host of cinematic references, a process of cultural reiteration that marks a radical departure from the modern idea of art that had distinguished the prior decades.¹⁹

Reiteration would become synonymous with a large part of contemporary culture as we understand it. Eco, however, stresses the fact that this seriality, in a broader sense, has firm roots in the eternal archetypes that shape our approach to storytelling. A sense of heightened intertextuality, then, informs

the writer's analysis of Michael Curtiz's classic, *Casablanca* (1941), and its lasting, universal success. What distinguishes Curtiz's film from the postmodern aesthetics Eco describes, however, and what makes it truly of interest, is its lack of self-awareness and structure, which suggests no irony in its application of previous tropes. Crucially, it predates the era of meta-cinematic quotation. In a series of essays dedicated to the cult status of the film, Eco credits its embodiment of a full range of known and established topoi as the foundation for the prolonged and intense appeal the picture continues to generate. Though careful not to praise it as a particular aesthetic achievement, Eco presents *Casablanca* as the rare phenomenon whereby the world created by the film — a world of collaged existing ideas — becomes greater than the artifact itself, a synthesis of a collective imagination which recognizes itself in the images and relationships portrayed and canonizes them in the process. As a result, individual threads are elevated into an anthology of drama, rather than any distinct aesthetic vision. Eco is able to call the film a "hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly" in one moment and "a stroke of genius" in the next precisely because of its composition.

The film's essence, he would argue, lies outside of the picture itself, within a cult aura generated by the viewing public and the forces which promoted its existence, in spite of its famously disoriented production: "something has spoken in place of the director." In the trajectory of cinematic language, Eco underlines *Casablanca* as a historic event, a signifier of an age which holds the truths of what the medium would even-

tually evolve into, and, simultaneously, "a dance of eternal myths" that came to the surface free from authorial intention and, much like Fellini, the external. This alone, according to Eco, is "a phenomenon worthy of awe."²⁰

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Notes

- 1 Umberto Eco, "Sulle Articolazioni del Codice Cinematografico," in *Per una nuova critica: I convegni Pesaresi, 1965–1967*, Nuovocinema/Pesaro 33 (Venice, 1989), 401.
- 2 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego, 1986), x.
- 3 Eco uses this term — which translates to "hypermeaning" — in a way that is analogous with hyperspace to convey that which transcends our Euclidian parameters of geometry and, here, the barriers and limitations of communication. Eco, "Sulle Articolazioni del Codice Cinematografico," 409.
- 4 Umberto Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 2 (Berkeley, 1985), 592.
- 5 Umberto Eco, "On the Contribution of Film to Semiotics," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2, issue 1 (1977): 231.
- 6 Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Written Language of Reality," in *Heretical Empiricism*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington, 1988), 197–222.
- 7 Oswald Stack and Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Bloomington, 1969), 29.
- 8 Eco in Nichols, 590–606.
- 9 Eco in Nichols, 604.
- 10 Umberto Eco, "Thoth, Fellini and the Pharaoh," in *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*, by Peter E. Bondanella (New York, 1993).
- 11 Eco describes this process as the continuous translation of "words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions." Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, 1979), 71.
- 12 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 117.
- 13 David Robey, introduction to *The Open Work*, viii.
- 14 Eco, *The Open Work*, 115–121.
- 15 Eco, *The Open Work*, 115–121.
- 16 Eco, *The Open Work*, 115–121.
- 17 Robey, xi.
- 18 Umberto Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage," *SubStance* 14, no. 2, issue 47 (1985): 4.
- 19 Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Postmodern Aesthetics," *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 161–184.
- 20 Umberto Eco, "Casablanca, or, the Cliches Are Having a Ball," in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon (Boston, 1994), 260–264.

