



The Narration Process in Eco's Understanding of Fiction and Reality

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Abstract

The present paper shall aim to demonstrate that a narration process is a semiotic tool, which, among other tasks, serves to execute a process of signification. My effort shall range from factual “stories” and “retold stories” to fictional ones. This is so because semiotics treats various “realities”, from which some may be realistically occurring, while others may represent imaginative “facts” invented by authors. One of the differences between the two, as Eco has also pointed out, is the factor of “time”, which is both semiotically and philosophically relevant. The purpose of this text is also to demonstrate that narration can be conceived of in multiple sorts of “times”, out of which only one we can physically live (above all, as one of the differences between artistic creation and real-time narration). A “fictive reality” relates to artistic creativities that are an object to their semiotic shaping and interpretation. In conclusion, one can state that interpretative semiotics is competent for this vision and relevant for the method's future development.

Keywords: semiotics; narration, Eco, time, semiosis, fiction, reality

Introduction

The present text attempts to demonstrate a semiotic distinction between “fiction” and “reality”, regarded as an integral part of the process of narrating. I will focus on some of Eco's theoretical works [especially (Eco, 1994b, 1994a)]. Let us number some reasons why such a distinction and narration as a process are semiotically relevant.

First, each “message” understood semiotically or communicationally is transmitted to the receiver in multiple shapes or forms. I mean the following: the message gets transformed, changed, i.e., encoded into another shape, form, or a way of its human understanding. Such kind of changeability may frequently not apply to messages' human shaping only but to other “tools” or “objects belonging to other scientific fields [such as explained, for instance, in

“classical” communication theories; see: (Shannon & Weaver, 1948)]. As should be evident, my goal shall be to enhance an interpretation process emerging from such changeability (mainly shaped by humans) to interpret artistic creations. I shall, therefore, attempt to demonstrate that it depends on us [such as explained in (Jakobson, 1983)] what sort of meaning one should “render” out of such messages. The aim, therefore, is twofold: either communicational or semiotic. Communicational because it considers processes based on specific models, and semiotic because one extracts other meanings besides the obvious one. Otherwise, the message’s form, in the “destination” part, shall depend on its encoding method. Alternatively, in other words, one should decide its intentionality (or put it: it will depend on what one would encode it for). If this thesis holds, semiotics can decide on either messages’ equivocal signs, which must be transformed into another shape, or on its unequivocal ones [see, for instance: (Eco, 1976)]. I am interested in the proportion of the “material” transmitted.

Second, if the transmitted messages are unequivocal, they avoid precision in their capacity to signify, producing multilayered meanings that can be viewed from various perspectives. One should be confident, however, that the mentioned “imprecision” also involves artistic expressivities, among other related matters. It is so because one cannot define the “beauty” component and “aesthetics” if it is only viewed in an exact proportion of the material transmitted on both sides of the communicational channel. Art is considered the opposite because of its uniqueness in form and content, producing different capacities of the signs transmitted (preferably to the audience) to show their meaning(s).

Hence, in this “imprecision”, I see artistic expressivities derive or emerge. It should be remarked, however, that except for the artistic expressions and creativities, this also holds for other spheres of the humanities (precisely speaking, in such instances when communication must be intermediated by other tools, which do not necessarily entail communication processes which in turn, express an exactitude in terms of their functions). This assertion presumably holds for an interpretative sort of semiotics. The term “interpretative”, as hopefully shall be seen further in the text, renders the situation complex and needs further explication. If the above theories hold, one asks: What do these have to do with the process of narration? We pose this question, as artistic creativities, in most cases, rely on their status of being narrated, told, or retold. Let us now explain this hypothesis.

2. Narration as a semiotic tool for signifying

Starting even from the periods of “classical theories”, such as Russian Formalism, for instance [see: (Beker, 1991)], semiotics’ eligibility to focus on imagined “actions”, “stories”, or even creations became more apparent and applicable. On the other hand, it is also true that this would become possible even with earlier theories that enhanced the signification process. However, one must not oppose the fact that “narration” as a procedure relies on a series of discussions primarily initiated during the mentioned period (the early and late structural semiotics). My focus naturally cannot focus on the term “narration” only on the one hand. However, it can also focus on its conception as foreseen by Umberto Eco, one of the most prominent philosophers and semioticians of the previous century. A logical question follows: Why, precisely, Eco’s contribution?

First, as I have also written elsewhere [see: (Hoxha, 2022)], Eco’s contribution represents a “double discourse” in the metaphoric sense of the word: he wrote novels on the one hand, but he founded a semiotic theory, on the other. Not only can one see applied matters of the semiotic method in his work, but one can also find essential semiotic “functions” accompanied by issues of interpretative semiotics (as such can be exemplified by later developmental stages of the semiotic method). This assertion must not, in any case, overcome other theoreticians who have contributed to the narrativity as a method in semiotics (some of whom shall have a due place in this text).

Second, the “intrusion” of the essential semiotic functions, as described in Eco, is also fundamental for the process of narration. It is so because of the over-coding function [see, for instance (Eco, 1975)] that artistic expression might contain. This means that, except for the already encoded message, there is a probability that it may be encoded once more (or more times, after all) to reach the desired meaning. The term “meaning” here, one must remark, is dubious, as it not only depends on the “real author” [see: (Eco, 1979, 1984, 1994b) but on the reader, as well [(Eco, 1989)]. This is because of the interpretative capacities of semiotics. If one, for instance, changes, or intentionally induces or deduces another undisclosed meaning, it is due, as we may suggest, to the “interpretant” and ‘abduction’ notions, as described by Peirce [see: (Peirce, 1960)].

Finally, all of the abovementioned entails textual analysis or using the text as a semiotic notion. The present text, however, shall consider its wholeness as an entity [in the sense that, for instance, Barthes foresaw it; see:(Barthes, 1992)] as a differing component because of its constituent parts. The reason is simple: narration occurs as a matter of a “flowing event”, which, in its inner comprehension, holds the component of “time”. Therefore, the following lines of this text shall focus on the mentioned component.

3. The “time” component in the narration process

In terms of narrating or creating a “narrated story”, one describes either “real” or “imagined” events. The events in question, in turn, are an integral part of the author’s experience, or even “imagined worlds”, or as Eco puts it, “possible worlds” [see: (Eco, 1994b)]. In other words, there is more than one possibility of enhancing narration in artistic expression. One of the most significant factors constituting the narration process is “time” itself. It can be viewed from multiple aspects, and I shall mention the linguistic and philosophical ones here.

The linguistic conceptualisation of the “time” factor entails its normativity. Consequently, therefore, there must exist a “special” way of narrating a story in the context of achieving artistry in whichever sort of its comprehending or formal structure. I mean the following: even a sort of art that does not explicitly narrate contains the narrative component if seen by the eyes of a semiotician. It is so, as semiotics contains tools to render an artwork semiotic: either by way of analysing its components (or fragmenting it) or by way of an “intrusion” of an inter-text (middle text, explicative text), to render such an explication visible. Before I elaborate on matters such as “contextual circumstances” as Eco frequently expressed himself [see: (Eco, 1968, 1994b)], let me explicitly refer to the components of the “time” factor in the sense that I mentioned above.

Most of the events described, in whichever sort of artistry, are retold, as we mentioned above. This is due to what the writer has experienced. The “experience” notion, as a psychological entity above all other related fields, is an integral part of the author’s inner (innate, biological, emotional, etc.) ability of the one who creates artwork. Usually, therefore, such an ability or capacity is “special” in the mentioned respect, as opposed to the “social reality”. The notion of such reality in semiotics, in turn, should be considered hypothetical, or in other words, not homogeneous but heterogeneous. In my view, it is here that one renders matters semiotic. The reason is simple: the “real” reality must oppose the author’s intentionality [among other matters, also a widely discussed matter in Eco; see, for instance:(Eco, 1984)]. This last assertion renders our object of discussion twofold: either ontological or epistemological. Both ways of viewing the problems are semiotically relevant. Let me number some necessary philosophical matters concerning the mentioned factor.

3.1. The “time” concept complexity: Is it a part of the narration theory or a philosophical discourse

Measuring time and its determination in various scientific and professional categories is vital to human existence. This theoretical unit, on global grounds, is philosophical and holds significant importance in the field of artistic expression. Differing from the physical conception of time, i.e., the one that concerns the rigorous and mathematical sciences), in the case of the artistic fields (the various ones), except its physical and philosophical determination, it also has a psychological importance, - as well as a communicative one, - by which it overcomes the limits of its exactness. We cannot say anything concerning the concept of time if all of this is not accompanied by a series of theoretical reflections, which, in the cases of concrete artistic expression, gets established as an indispensable element. After all, adding the philosophical component in the frames of this specific component under discussion is also Eco's preoccupation, either in his explication of the "narration component" or its pure philosophical reference related to its semiotic comprehension.

The prototypical differences and similarities (depending on the approach) among the various artistic expressions, taken simply by the synchronic aspect of research (or even by a diachronic one, which would concern a researcher who would be concerned with the origin, etymology, or the historiography of the artistic existence), represent a possibility of incorporating a wide range of interpretations, and various structures of the time shapes and forms divided concretely into their deep and surface structures, for instance, [as otherwise explicated in: (Chomsky, 2002)]. This can be proved by the fact that it is possible to decompose abstractions into concrete issues according to linguistic, philosophical and semiotic models. This is the only way to have the analytic elements, for instance, the factor of "time. Such elements can have the possibility of synthesis in the "openness of the artwork" in the level of reading and micro-reading. Eco's expectations from the readers are to concretise any artistic text formally.

Suppose we are to express the objectivity of daily events relative to human activities. In that case, it leads us to the anthropocentric approach of G. W. Hegel, which was characterised as objective absolutism [see: (Hegel & Knox, 1998)]. The radical changes in the various philosophical interpretations started with John Locke in the era of positivism. From that time, the elements of irrationalism had been included—for instance, "the hidden structure" and communication among structures; concretely, among "the semiotic systems"—were as well philosophically studied and approached. Some questions emerge at this point: How far do the scientific limits of semiotics go? Is it true that only the overcoming of binary oppositions leads us to the process of interpretation, or does semiotics originate from philosophy only, psychology and biology, or any other related discipline? Naturally, we pose this question hypothetically, as this text does not aim to set any limits to the semiotic discipline, as much as it aims to show the importance of the "time" that is strongly related to the process of narration and interpretation of whichever sort of artwork.

Heidegger, otherwise, has remarked that "the human being is an ontological being limited by its temporality. (Heidegger 1988) [The translation and paraphrasing are mine]. In other words, the post-Hegelian philosophy turns back to the human being (ontology, in other words) and its subjectivity [see, among other related issues: (Deely, 2009)].

Here is the opinion of another scholar, we shall call him a psycholinguist: "Leaving of traces", says S. Freud, "is a basis for the development of psychic growth's signs of the human being; and further, this enables him to think about the history of writing, as well as about its existence [(Derrida, 1978), paraphrasing is mine]. In addition, Derrida (1978), quoting Freud, sees the absence of traces, based on which the origin of the human artistic expression would be determined as an element that leads towards pathology, or as he says, "the incapability of the spiritual, physical and sexual dimensions is compressed by repression" (p.197) [paraphrasing and italics are mine]. We have purposely introduced Freud's opinion through Derrida's book to conclude that the origin of writing as an epistemological element is also dependent on the time

factor as one of the decisive elements concerning the process of its creation. If in the frames of this discourse, time discourse, we turn back to Eco's theory, we may ask: is it not then confirmed that the text, inter-text, and meta-text do not refer to one time only, when the activity is not accomplished yet, in a given work of art as an object of analysis? Is it not true that the character's momentary psychological and emotional condition in various stories, especially in the modern and post-modern literary creation, can sometimes turn us back in the past and then, again, try to lead us to the future? This is a philosophical concept of the time category because it treats the relation between seeming and reality, a problem to which Eco has dedicated many pages of his theoretical and narrative contributions.

3.2. Time and the various artistic expressions in the process of semiosis

Since art is a highly individualistic and emotional expression of an "ontological being" [referring to Heidegger (1988)], its possibility of emerging into the surface structure through the deep structure, according to linguists such as John Lyons and Noam Chomsky, can also be seen through the significant concept of time, or according to Heidegger's philosophical conceptualisation, through its "temporality". However, this process does not occur only through a philosophical determination of time; it may also occur through its psychoanalytic and linguistic determination. These should be regarded as various analytical levels that finally have to decompose. Each element as such, each remote unit, as Arthur Schopenhauer would say, repeats itself endlessly. The fundamental importance of these "repetitions of artistic categories" is determining the changeability, the similarity, and their gradual development to the point of a new repetition. If the mentioned supposition is true, does the usability of a complex "temporality" or time reference contribute to the mentioned goal in Eco's narrative works? If one dialogue between William and Adso is repeated in "The Name of the Rose" (1980), it does not mean that it happens at any other time, even if we talk of grammatical tense. The phenomenon mentioned in Eco's works has twofold significance: one which refers to a formal flow of time in the frames of his artistic writing or one which refers to an essential theoretical component of the plot aspect of the story.

Let us see some examples: if the artistic expression of a writer in a phrase, sentence or even in a fragment of a text has not yet reached the due target of his/ her purpose or better narrative and analytical process (this, in turn being the "pre-expressive" phase of his writing which will occur in the future), the writer (composer, figurative artist, film director, etc.), will reach it in the next repetition, thus using new elements which contribute to his intentions (such as the inter-text, paraphrasing, stylistic figures, etc.). These are the "repetitions" of the artistic categories. Within each of them, we have added new elements. We are re-emphasising this because, in terms of Eco's work, specifically in terms of analysing his "double discourse" (as mentioned earlier in this text) - both as a theoretician or as a writer - gradually, through changeable repetitions according to semiotic models new elements are being added so that we come to the semantic features, which would give the final picture of both a theory or a narrative text. I intend, in conclusion, in the frames of this kind of metaphoric reference to emphasise that Eco's theoretical and methodological viewpoints are highly applicable and are noticeable in the eyes of a semiotician in his narrative works of art. This vision suggests that such theoretical propositions are also integral parts of the semiotic way of comprehending narration and text theory. After all, they represent interpretative semiotics, or in other words, meaning units that are readable and interpretable.

Returning to the concept of time, performative arts are also measured by time since they must be dramaturgically determined. These are the phases of development of events that make reliability based on the "time" component. For instance, do the fragment, the monologue, and the dialogue, as elements of various kinds of arts, contribute to the speed of the time flow within their various developmental stages? For example, epic poetry expresses an event that occurred in the past. In addition, such artistic writing contains more lines and pages: the narration was

more prolonged than in other similar art creations. Describing the events and actions in its frames was traditional, even in the sense of time. In the eras of Modern and Post-modern literature (or other arts as well), however, the inter-text (the “middle” text) intervenes with a story that happened in an utterly different conceptualisation of time in comparison with the general flow of events.

“Time parallelism”, used as a technique or a strategy, is, above all, a philosophical discourse, as it concerns realistic and chronological time [see: (Benveniste, 1975)], as well as other sorts of “times” used for fictional purposes. In conclusion, it is to state that a theoretician like Eco can make such a distinction. In addition, one should note that the questions he poses are, for instance, of the following kind—what is the difference between that kind of time, the grammatical tense or the virtual or the fictive time?

Notwithstanding the above facts, another reason for emphasising the concept of time exists. Time parallelism is an element of narrative significance because only through such an element, among other related issues, are we able to create different stories (in the time context), as well as narrative units which would be an integral part of a work of art, intended in the context we are attempting to explicate. The ability to discover and decompose such structures and units is a procedure towards achieving a semiotic comprehension of the “poetics of open work” [see:(Eco, 1989)].

Conclusion

This text, as I hope to have been able to show, was to demonstrate that both “fiction” and “reality” in terms of the narrating process specifically (but in semiotics, generally), are interwoven, or in a “sense” unified, for the sake of signification and semiosis. We name “semiosis” the process itself, which unites determined components [such as, for instance, in Peirce: see: (Peirce, 1960)]. It means not only that semiotics need to semiotize a determined “semiotic object” [see: (Greimas, 1973)], but such “objects” need to run through a process whose aim finally is signification. Consequently, one asks: Is such sort of process “real”, or does it belong to any “imagined” strategies of an artwork? The answer is hypothetical and based on epistemic grounds, as semiotics treats both imagined facts (by the author) or one’s experience, which undoubtedly relies upon our social reality and surroundings. In conclusion, one issue at least can we document today: subjectively created “objectified” [see: (Bourdieu, 1982)] realities are part of a narration tool for semiotic purposes; therefore, artistic realities, as well.

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