

Umberto Eco and John Deely: What they shared

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The semiotic development [...] has occurred within the synchronic framework established as the life time of participants, as that framework nears the inevitable “diachronic turn” where the present author ceases to belong to the living population, which alone defines the nongeometrical reality of “synchrony” as an open-ended “new beginning” which, perforce, will occupy subsequently and diachronically its own “slice of time”.

John Deely (2015: 31)

The list is the origin of culture. [...] What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order – not always, but often. And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries. [...] We have a limit, a very discouraging, humiliating limit: death. That’s why we like all the things that we assume have no limits and, therefore, no end. It’s a way of escaping thoughts about death. We like lists because we don’t want to die.

Umberto Eco (2009)¹

At a certain moment, the multicellular organisms of vertebrate animals will give up. Despite the fact that, for a semiotic system, the end is not a (strict) rule for interpretation can go on and on and on. For Umberto Eco, the former happened on 19 February, 2016; for John Deely, on 7 January, 2017 (they were born on 5 January, 1932 and 26 April, 1942, respectively.)

Eco and Deely, for every contemporary semiotician, remain teachers. To survey, even briefly, their work in its entirety, would be an extremely daunting task. This account, thus, will be dedicated to a restricted facet of their mutual relations, making observations on what the two leading semioticians shared.

¹ From an interview with Umberto Eco by Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris in *Spiegel*, 11 November, 2009.

Having known both Eco and Deely personally, and witnessed, in 2009, one of the rare conversations between them after 1989 that was also to remain their last, as well as having recently written short essays on both (Kull 2016, 2017; also Copley *et al.* 2017), I was compelled to study the interrelationships between these two giants in semiotics. What Eco and Deely share in their views on semiotics – this should be important to discover, because this may disclose something about the development of the whole field of semiotics. Below are some notes on the findings.

0. Their meetings

Both Eco and Deely travelled much, and potentially could have met many times. Actually, however, their meetings were rare, but some of these could be recalled and reconstructed. Here is a list.

(1)

Their first meeting could have occurred during the American Society for Semiotics meeting in Bloomington in October 1979. Eero Tarasti (2015: 426) recalls: “I remember the dinner at Memorial Union, with the presence of Umberto Eco, John Deely, Brooke Williams, Beatriz Garza Cuarón and many others, hosted by the legendary Dean of the University, Herman B. Wells”.

(2)

The two semioticians met again and taught together in Bloomington in 1983. Myrdene Anderson (2011: 25) has described this event: “First as a student, and then as a beginning professor, it never dawned on me that I might actually meet a whole transdisciplinary bevy of capital-S Semioticians, let alone the midwife of them all, Thomas A. Sebeok, as happened at the 1983 International Summer Institute of Semiotic and Structural Studies (ISISSS ‘83), just down the road from Purdue, at Indiana University. [...] Besides attending all of Tom’s seminars at ISISSS ‘83, I was drawn to the lectures by John Deely (team-teaching with Umberto Eco that summer a series of lectures on the ‘Historiographical Foundations of Semiotics’)”.

Jørgen Dines Johansen, who also attended the lectures, writes: “Next in scope was the course by Umberto Eco and John Deely, *Historical Foundations of Semiotics*, starting with Greek semiotics (Pythagoras) of the 6th century B.C. and finishing with the birth of structural linguistics (Saussure). The ground covered by this course was, although negligible compared to the four and a half billion years covered by Sebeok, still considerable. Since Eco and Deely divided the course between them in such a way that Eco covered two thousand years and Deely the rest, it became the key joke of the

Institute that Sebeok covered four and a half billion years, Eco two thousand years, but Deely only six centuries” (Johansen 1985: 275).

Deely mentions the course in a list of references (Deely 2015: 105): “Eco, Umberto, and John Deely. 1983. May 30 – June 24. “Historiographical Foundations of Semiotics”, course taught at ISISSS ‘83 (Indiana University, Bloomington campus). Complete cassette tapes of the lectures exist but have never been transcribed.”

Later, Myrdene Anderson has added:² “This returns my thoughts to 1983. [...] They shared responsibility for one ‘course’, but in fact didn’t bother to collaborate in the project. And no, I am not offhand aware of their works/ideas coming into appropriate alignment then or since. ... which is either or both of odd and overdetermined!!” Indeed.

(3)

Eco and Deely would meet again in Bloomington in 1989. Dinda Gorrée recalls:³ “I saw them together in Summer 1989 during Eco’s grand lecture in Bloomington. Later at the Research Center and at home in Covenant Drive⁴”

(4)

They both attended the World Congress of Semiotics that took place in Dresden, Germany, from 6 to 11 October 1999. However, Eco appeared only for the day of his own lecture (Kull 2009). Eero Tarasti remembers that Deely: “[...] tried to get Eco to fund his projects in Dresden world congress but I do not know if he managed.”⁵ Deely also asked Eco what he thought of Poincaré.

(5)

The last meeting of Eco and Deely was in Tartu in May 2009. John Deely spent the whole term, from January to July 2009, at the University of Tartu, teaching a course at the Department of Semiotics. Umberto Eco visited Tartu in May 5–8, 2009. However, they only had one extensive discussion during a dinner held on Eco’s arrival (Fig. 1).

² Myrdene Anderson’s letter from 10 February, 2017.

³ Dinda Gorrée’s letter from 10 February, 2017.

⁴ 1104 Covenant Drive was Thomas A. Sebeok’s home in Bloomington.

⁵ Eero Tarasti’s letter from 11 February, 2017.



Figure 1. 5 May, 2009, Umberto Eco and John Deely in Tartu.

1. Deely on Eco

Deely loved repeating: revising and refining his writings, as well as the stories he told. In 1976, he wrote a review of Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* that had been published in the same year. The review, containing both praise as well as criticism, concluded: "If I have concentrated over-much on the critique of the alleged adequacy of the sign-function as a translation of the in fact more fundamental notion of *signum*, it is because I believe that nothing is more important in the long run than a proper clarification and laying of the foundations for the enterprises of semiotics" (Deely 1976: 183).

In 1997, Deely published a chapter in Rocco Capozzi's anthology *Reading Eco* (Deely 1997), that Michael Caesar (1999: 178) suggested was "the revised version of that [1976] article". If it is a revision, it was thoroughly re-worked, indeed. In yet another revision, this text appeared as the penultimate chapter of Deely's major book *Four Ages of Understanding* (Deely 2001: 688–733).

On the occasion of Eco's visit to Tartu in May 2009, Deely wrote another version of the text under the title: "Semiotics at the turn of the 21st century: Contextualizing the work of Umberto Eco within the history of philosophy in its turn to semiotics (An essay written for the occasion of Eco's 5–9 May 2009 visit to Tartu University)".⁶ Later,

⁶ Or, the bracketed part in another version: "(An essay derived from Chapter 17 of John Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001) for the occasion of Eco's 5–9 May 2009 visit to Tartu University)".

he planned to publish this as an article in *Sign Systems Studies* or as a booklet with Toronto University Press. The publication of this text about Eco was a topic raised by John also during our last Skype conversation on 12 August, 2016.

In another article which is a response to Stjernfelt 2006, Deely (2006) describes his view on Eco's *Kant and the Platypus* (1999). A certain disagreement between them still remains, and this concerns the question of what precisely is a sign.

Deely's comments on Eco have also been reflected on earlier. For instance, Helge Schalk (2000: 141; also 97 fn 118; 108 fn 148, etc.) comments on Deely's (1997: 96, 102, 109) critique of Eco: "This cultural theoretical orientation of Eco's semiotics has been criticized above all by John Deely who has seen in this a narrowing of semiotic research"⁷ (Schalk 2000: 141). Cristina Farronato (2003: 9, 22) also comments on Deely's (1997) words on Eco: "Some critics, John Deely, for example, have seen Eco's theory as reaching the boundary between modernity and postmodernity without quite crossing that boundary" (Farronato 2003: 9).

2. Eco on Deely

Eco's reflections on Deely are fewer, but as he was ten years older than the latter, the relationship between them could not be expected to have been quite symmetrical.

Explicit references to Deely are rare in Eco's publications,⁸ yet he credits him in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* as the person who has "kindly revised part of the chapters" (Eco 1984: ix). Eco also uses Deely's translation of Poinot (e.g., in Eco 2014: 321)⁹ and has written, regarding Deely: "John Deely has not only paid attention to the Second Scholasticism but also to the first one, and (while dealing with questions that are at the center stage of contemporary culture, and working across all the disciplines, both the humanities and the sciences) he has contributed to expand the knowledge of the Thomistic tradition beyond the confines of the Catholic world" (reproduced in Copley 2009: III).

During their joint lunches in Bloomington in 1983 Eco used to draw cartoons, at least two of which depicting Deely were published later (Deely 1988: 113; Copley 2009: 2, 392).

⁷ "Diese kulturtheoretische Ausrichtung der Ecoschen Semiotik hat vor allem John Deely kritisiert und hierin eine Verengung der semiotischen Forschung gesehen."

⁸ We can observe that Eco's published references to Thomas A. Sebeok's work are also infrequent, even though they were good friends, and his references to Juri Lotman's writings were not extensive, either.

⁹ Differently from Deely, Eco does not use the name 'Poinot', but almost always writes of John of Saint Thomas, instead (e.g., see Eco 2014).

3. What they shared

When they gave talks, we wanted to listen to them – a concise comment sums up the main reason: “It is well known that Eco is a gifted lecturer, at once serious, erudite, and very entertaining, and John Deely possesses exactly the same qualities” (Johansen 1985: 275). Their thoughts were profound and they wrote much, and their academic writings do not make for easy reading. However, neither of them seemed to found his own school, which may come as a little surprise.¹⁰

They both received a Catholic education: Eco studied with the Salesians of Don Bosco and Deely was educated at Chicago’s St. Thomas Aquinas Institute School of Philosophy in River Forest. Both moved from the Catholic faith to semiotics, while preserving deep respect for their teachers. Eco abandoned religion, but maintained a profound religious sensibility; Deely has confessed that he studied at the Aquinas Institute not because of his religious belief, and as a student, he would half secretly go to the city library for books on Darwinism and developed a lasting interest in evolution.

They were both medievalists whose extensive research on the history and interpretation of medieval semiotics was accompanied by their evaluation of this period for semiotics. It was very much due to their studies that semioticians developed a common ground in their viewpoints on the flourishing of semiotics in the Latin Age.

Also one of the fundamental ideas of Deely’s analysis of the grand history of semiotics derives from Eco, namely that a breaking point in the history of semiotic ideas is related to Augustine’s account of the sign. In his *Green Book*, Deely (2000: 22–23) writes: “[...] for our understanding of philosophy we need to take into account the single most astonishing fact that semiotic research of the 20th century has uncovered, namely, the fact unearthed by Umberto Eco and his team of intellectual archeologists at the University of Bologna that, before the work of Augustine at the very end of the 4th century AD, we find no trace of a general notion of sign in Greek philosophy. The fact is hard to believe. I remember the incredulity I felt on first hearing this report, and the years it took realize the impact such an anomaly must have on our reading of philosophy in its historical development.” The work Deely is pointing at is a study of animal signs as discussed in the Latin era by Eco, Lambertini, Marmo, and Tabarroni (1986).

Both Eco and Deely demonstrated that the meaningful part of philosophy has to become semiotics in the future, or even that semiotics is the only form of philosophy possible today. This is the main content of Deely’s *opus magnum*, his *Four Ages of Understanding* (Deely 2001), while Eco put it explicitly in a conversation: “In *Kant and the Platypus* I tried to demonstrate how many conundrums and problems of

¹⁰ As supposed by Paul Cogley, this may be because they had their feet in more than one camp – not only in semiotics.

analytical philosophy could be resolved in a semiotical way. [...] I have repeatedly said that semiotics is the only formal philosophy today.”¹¹

This also means that semiotics, as a doctrine, was understood by both of them as a special type of science, very different from physics. Deely’s (2013: 1403) formulation of this runs as follows:

The modern *enlightenment* notion of science as knowledge that could not be acquired without the use of instruments and experimentation (ideoscopic science) depends upon a critical control of *objectification* [my emphasis, K. K.] that is prior to and provides the framework for making experimentation possible in the first place (cenoscopic science). Semiotics, or the doctrine of signs, thus, is science in the cenoscopic sense.

Perhaps the main interest of semiotics for intellectual culture is that, by providing the only inherently interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective, semiotics offers a remedy or antidote for the increasing specialization that modern science requires in the academy. Specialists who come to study semiotics discover that their own discipline developed and established its boundaries only as a result of the action of signs. Semiotics, in a word, studies what every other discipline takes for granted.

Eco, on his part, commented on this topic:

It is not a science in the way physics is a science because it is not accumulative like science is. [...] So semiotics, I always say, is like medicine. [...] I think that semiotics is something like this – a confederation of disciplines, sometimes using different methods, even though I am always ready to criticize one method and in this sense, it has no limits.¹²

Following Peirce, they both treat pre-linguistic (cognitive) meaning-making as included in the semiotic realm. However, when describing the pre-animal level later, the distinctions they make do not appear to be elaborated.

Eco and Deely were followers of Peirce, yet they did not really adhere to a precisely Peircean typology of signs, nor were they slavish towards other of Peirce’s crucial points. Eco analysed the primary processes of recognition and creation of similarity, explicitly noting a deviation from Peirce: “[...] we must deliberate (even if it means going against Peirce [...]) the concept of likeness from the concept of comparison. [...] The icon is a phenomenon that founds all possible judgements of likeness, but it cannot be founded on likeness itself” (Eco 1999: 103). For Deely, sign typologies – as opposed

¹¹ From our conversation at Eco’s home in Milan, 15 January, 2012.

¹² From our conversation on 15 January, 2012.

to the realization of ‘relation’ in all signs – clearly remained outside the scope of his interest.¹³ “Semiotics is more than Peirce,” he said explicitly (Deely 2000: 13).

Both Eco and Deely used the concept of code, although there is also a big difference. For the early Eco, it is one of his major general concepts, which he would use to describe the scope of semiotics, and to work out its typology (Eco 1976). For Deely, using this concept was somewhat unprecedented and rare, and it does not occur in his main sources; even Sebeok, who was an

important semiotician for Deely, but seldom used ‘code’ in his later works. However, Deely (2001: 687) *inter alia* writes: “Peirce’s work itself in semiotics [...] cannot do without the addition of a theory of *codes* as the key to the action of signs [...]”.

As an anecdotal remark, William Boelhower (2000: 386) has observed: “It is an interesting coincidence that Charles Sanders Peirce, Umberto Eco, and before them John Poincaré use the example of sonship to explain what semiosis is. For Poincaré, “Near or far, a son is in the same way the son of his father” (Deely 1990, 45; Eco 1979, 36).” Indeed, a story about the son irrespective of the father’s knowledge has been one of Deely’s favourite examples to have been used in his lectures.

They liked books, books, books, liked to be surrounded by them in their home offices where they also used to write them, volume after volume. And they had great supporters (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).



Figure 2. 18 August, 2008, Umberto Eco and his wife Renate Ramge at their summer home in Monte Cerignone, Italy.



Figure 3. 2 May, 2009, John Deely and his wife Brooke Williams at Künimetsa, Estonia. (All photos by K. K.)

¹³ Deely’s book on *Logic as a Liberal Art* (1985) is a certain exception, as it provides an analysis of subspecies of sign, following the Peircean terms.

Surprisingly, to an extent they even looked alike. Eero Tarasti mentions¹⁴: “Physically they resembled each other so much that Deely said in many places he was taken for Eco (and vice versa!)” Myrdene Anderson adds¹⁵: “John was not only starstruck vis-à-vis Eco [in 1983], but convinced himself that he and Eco could pass as twins, with dark beards and so on.”

Initially, Eco and Deely were linked by, and met each other, via Thomas A. Sebeok and Bloomington. There is also an overlap in what they tell about Tartu (see Eco 1990, and Deely 2012). Could Tartu be their other meeting point?

Conclusion

Semiotics – the attempt to understand meaning-making – is not easy even for giants of semiotics. Umberto Eco and John Deely devoted their life to most persistently researching the sign and interpretation. They – with Thomas Sebeok, of course, who was important in bringing them together, as well as linking many others – gave the field of semiotics longevity. Their work revealed the importance of the achievements of scholars of the Medieval period for semiotics in general. They demonstrated that a large part of philosophy has to be turned into semiotics for a meaningful research. They were both confident that semiotics is a field that is necessary for universities to teach.

Our gratitude goes out to you, Umberto Eco and John Deely, our teachers.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Eero Tarasti’s letter from 11 February, 2017.

¹⁵ Myrdene Anderson’s letter from 10 February, 2017.

¹⁶ I thank also Myrdene Anderson, Paul Copley, Dinda Gorfée, Remo Gramigna, and Eero Tarasti, for additional information and helpful relevant comments.

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