

# Between fiction and reality: Transforming the semiotic object<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The contrast between real and fictional characters in our thinking needs further elaboration. In this commentary on Eco's look at the ontology of the semiotic object, I suggest that human semiotic construction entails constant modulation of the relationship between the states of the real and fictional characters in irreversible time. Literary characters are examples of crystallized fictions which function as semiotic anchors in the fluid construction — by the readers — of their understandings of the world. Literary characters are thus fictions that are real in their functions — while the actual reality of meaning-making consists of ever new fictions of fluid (transitory) nature. Eco's ontological look at the contrast of the semiotic object with perceptual objects (*Gegenstände*) in Alexius Meinong's theorizing needs to be complemented by the semiotic subject. Cultural mythologies of human societies set the stage for such invention and maintenance of such dynamic unity of fictionally real and realistically fictional characters.

The army was going into battle. The soldiers — half of them with automatic rifles in their hands — with their bodies naked from the waists up — took up positions and

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Umberto Eco's article *On the ontology of fictional characters: A semiotic approach* in the present issue.

[...] began to sing pious songs for 10, 15, or 20 minutes. Then the time-keeper blew a whistle. On this sign, the troops began marching forward in a long line, shouting on the top of their voices: 'James Bond! James Bond! James Bond!<sup>2</sup> [...] The stone commanders led them and the line commanders ensured that the front line was maintained. Each stone commander carried a stone wrapped in cloth, which he threw at the enemy, at each time calling to each company and leading spirit, 'Ching Poh, Franko, or Wrong Element, take up your position, command your people!' This stone marked the limit past which the enemy bullets could not penetrate, thus creating a protective zone. The Holy Spirit soldiers were briefed not to cross this limit. Only when the stone grenade commanders had thrown their stones even further could the Holy Spirit troops advance again. Behind the stone commanders came the controllers, who sprinkled holy water and prayed. Each controller carried about five litres of holy water in a vessel with a small cup. The holy water was supposed to confuse the foe and stop him hitting his targets. Not until the stone commander gave the order did the Holy Spirit soldiers begin delivering the number of shots ordered by Lakwena. If the time-keeper blew his whistle again, the soldiers slowly retreated in the manner planned beforehand. (Behrend 1999: 59–60)

This obviously bizarre scene of an army moving into a battle is a scene from Uganda sometime in 1986–87 when Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Armed Forces (HSAF) attempted to liberate the country from violence and corruption, marching to take over the control of the capital Kampala. Yet the army in action was largely invisible and the use of stone grenades and holy water as weapons oddly out of touch — or so it seems to us — with the thundering realities of AK-47s fired indiscriminately after the singing of hymns ended.

The battle script as described above is closer to a religious procession than to a military tactic<sup>3</sup>. The latter was not needed for the real

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<sup>2</sup> The chief technician called himself James Bond.

<sup>3</sup> The HSAF campaign was framed by a religious belief system that prohibited killing living beings — humans or snakes. Deeply embedded in the conversion to Christianity in the form of a syncretic religious system it needed to find a solution to the problem — how to kill under the belief system of "do not kill!" The solution was to delegate all the uncertainties of the real living (and dying) to the fate control of the spirit soldiers.

soldiers whose fate was completely determined by their invisible spirit co-fighters. At the maximum of Alice Lakwena's campaign HSAF had 10,000 real fighters, together with 140,000 others — the spirits who were involved in the fight. The spirit fighters — fictions as determinate for the HSAF soldiers as Anna Karenina is in the hands of readers — explain it all: both the win and the loss, the killing of the enemy and getting killed oneself. The pervasiveness of such explanations parallels the omniscipous<sup>4</sup> use of language in fortune telling (Aphek, Tobin 1990). Fictional characters have real consequences for human living and dying on the battlefields — not just for the queries of the minds of the readers of sophisticated novels. They can be created on the spot — when needed — and maintained (or abandoned) if needed further, or not.

Or maybe the heroic realities of battlefields are such as they are made up to be theatrical fictions — united into scenes that are played out in reality (Turner 1982). After all, the history of warfare gives us many examples of ritualizing the military encounters: from colorful uniforms of the fighting armies of the past, to the conventions of how prisoners of war and civilians are to be treated in a military conflict. Even local conflicts — duels or their contemporary transformations in the form of court battles — are frameworks that rely on fictions as their anchor points. Such fictions, however, are situated within the existing social order, the hierarchical set-up of power relations that may be countered by local social conduct patterns. These patterns are built upon hyper-generalized value signs (e.g. “honor”, “justice”, “loyalty”):

The duel was characteristic of a socially strategic type of behavior which [...] hemmed around with formalized ritual [...] even though it breached the central ruler's and the state's monopoly of violence. It raised above the masses those who belonged to certain social strata; in the first place the nobles and the officer corps, and then the fighting

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<sup>4</sup> *Omniscopus*= all-viewing. When the fortune-teller tells the client “you will have difficulties but you will overcome these” all possible scenarios for the future are covered.

fraternities and their middle-class students and their Old Boys — in short, the stratum of those entitled to demand satisfaction. Through it, they submitted to the constraint of a special norm which made the formalized use of violence, possibly with lethal consequences, *a duty for individual people under certain circumstances*. (Elias 1996: 65; added emphasis)

Socially normative situations such as duels, public executions or Shariah stoning of the norm-breakers, etc. are all constructed social dramas that create the illusion of reality to the otherwise un-real objects. Social power holders set the stage for the legitimate and illegitimate violence and thus the killing of people or animals becomes a semiotic object. In other terms — the making of the semiotic object is based on the construction of non-existing objects through social actions.

### **The reality of non-existing objects**

Eco (2009) relies upon the philosophical and psychological heritage of the “Graz School” of Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) in his construction of the semiotic object. The relevant contributions of Meinong and his students have been blissfully forgotten in psychology of our times but retained in philosophy (Albertazzi *et al.* 2001) — especially after the recognition that Meinong’s ideas have had substantive role to play in Bertrand Russell’s philosophy of mathematics. The “Graz tradition” was unique in the history of psychology and philosophy in Europe by its focus on the contrast between existing and non-existing objects (Bozzi 1996; Findlay 1963; Mally 1904; Meinong 1899; Modenato 1996; for an overview see Rollinger 2008). All mathematical objects are non-existing objects. There are no geometric forms like triangle or square in the real life, even as there are myriads of triangular and quadratic objects that are real and from which these geometric notions could be abstracted. At the same time there are objects we can talk about — “a round triangle” — which cannot be imagined as existent.

Yet *as we can talk about such objects* they are imaginable, even with the result of finding them to be impossible.

While the “Graz tradition” was focused on the ontology of the non-existing objects, it failed to set these objects into a scheme that looked at their transformation. As he was pondering on the notion of “a golden mountain”, Meinong did not address the issue of under what circumstances would such non-existing object — or any other of their kinds — emerge in the meaning-making processes of their inventors. This is also not crucial for Eco who uses the examples of already fixed literary characters — Anna Karenina or Sherlock Holmes — rather than covers the torturous process of the life of the writer who is creating such characters. While both Meinong and Eco show the complexity of the *being* of objects — non-existing and semiotic — they prefer to overlook the question of the *becoming* of these objects.

## From non-existing objects to semiotic objects

Non-existing objects can exist as the result of semiosis. Meinong’s conceptualization of non-existing objects is of direct relevance for Eco’s (2009: 83) creation of semiotic objects. Most of the creations of our minds (any abstraction) are non-existing objects. They are created by active agents, persons or social institutions, in their quest for some stability in the otherwise overwhelmingly dynamic world. They become real as they are made up as fictions: real as semiotic organizers of our living — and dying.

The semiotic object is

[...] every device by which an expression conveys a set of properties as its content [...] all expressions which convey as their proper content whatever we are used to call the meaning of the signified of the expression: the idea of an animal, of a place, of a thing, of a feeling, of an action, of a natural law like universal gravitation, of a mathematical entity, *et cetera*. (Eco 2009: 88–89)

These properties are *interpreted* by recipients — other expressions — and the series of interrelated interpretations are shared and collectively recorded. The interpretation process might begin from a perceived field — yet move quickly beyond it. Meinong's example of the meaning of the blue sky (Meinong 1899: 238) is a good example of semiosis where the meaning constructed “gets loose” from the perceived object<sup>5</sup> and moves to establish its own form as a semiotic object. The homogeneous field of the sky fills the experiencer's visual field in full, and leads to construction of holistic meaning that — as the language term “the blue sky” (“*Himmelsbläue*”) itself — looks as if it is like a point, and yet signifies a field of no discernible boundaries. The unclouded blue sky has no limits<sup>6</sup>!

Furthermore, even points are indefinite — as long as the time of their emergence is considered:

A punctiform object in time has no parts [...] If we rap the surface of a table with the point of a pencil, the ‘tap’ is perfectly perceptible and distinct against the background of the usual noises around us, but it is impossible to distinguish between the moment at which it starts and at which it ends: in the ‘tap’ the beginning and the end coincide. This very important property can be captured by a paradox: *when the punctiform event happens it has already happened.* (Bozzi 1996: 297)

This paradox bears upon Eco's blind spot — while emphasizing the fluctuations between the fictional and real characters, their ontology, he takes no interest in the processes by which these characters are created. Signs are not given but constructed means for communication. And Umberto Eco is himself the master of such construction as

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<sup>5</sup> Meinong (1899: 237) calls these *Wahrnehmungsflüchtige Gegenstände* — objects that, when being in front of the perceiver (Modenato 1996: 95) lead to apprehension that transcends the perceived object and creates a semiotic object in its place.

<sup>6</sup> More precisely, its limit is ever infinite — as the notion of the horizon is a boundary that always moves away together with the horizon-maker's efforts to move towards it (Smith 1999)

writing fiction entails the creation of an analogue of a distorted mirror. When we observe ourselves in it, our feeling is a playful double, where

[...] on the one hand, we enjoy the hallucinatory characteristics of the medium. We therefore decide (for the sake of playing) to accept that we have three eyes or an enormous stomach or very short legs, just as we accept a fairy tale. In reality, we give ourselves a sort of pragmatic holiday: we accept that the mirror, which usually tells the truth, is lying [...] The game is a complex one: on the one hand, I behave as if I were standing in front of a plane mirror telling the truth, and I find that it gives back an 'unreal' image (that which I am not). If I accept this image, I am helping, one could say, the mirror to lie. The pleasure that this game gives me is not of totally semiotic nature but of aesthetic nature. (Eco 1984: 217–218)

It is clear from games like that — helping the mirror lie, or doing the same to politicians while reading daily newspapers or accepting television images as if these were lies-that-are-real — *there is no interpretation of a semiotic object without the interpreter, that is, the semiotic subject*. It is the active intentional person — the author in case of fiction, or the reader (or non-reader) of that fiction who are reconstructing any messages. They even create an interpretation out of nothing — or almost so — as indicate psychologists' uses of inkblots as projective techniques and fortune-tellers stories based on palm lines. In some ways, the whole world a person lives in is a distorted mirror — and if it is not, the person positions oneself so that it seems to be. The reliance on cosmetics — from makeup to cosmetic surgery — indicates the need to change one's own form when we have to face a plain mirror.

### **Transforming semiotic objects: growth of generalization**

Semiotic objects are constructed by the meaning-maker who both expresses and interprets the meanings one lives with. Karl Bühler's

Organon Model (Fig. 1) is here in action within Umberto Eco's *Umwelt*.

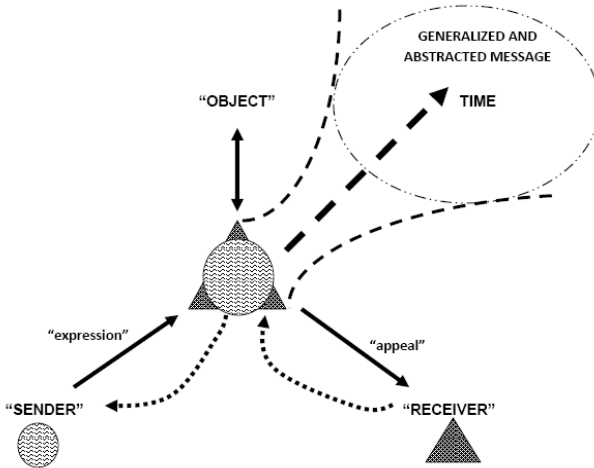


Figure 1. The Organon Model (Bühler 1990) modified to depict abstracting generalization of the message in the communication process (solid lines and components in quotation marks are the original components in Bühler's model)

The uncertainty of the communicative messages (depicted by overlapping circle and triangle in the middle) leads to abstractive generalization. The semiotic object — similarly to Meinong's "escaping perceptual object" (which becomes "homeless") — moves in the third dimension, towards ever greater abstraction of generalized feelings (*generalized and abstracted message* in Figure 1). It is through such over-generalized meanings, once constructed, that make the difference between a reader who feels devastated by the undoubtable act of Anna Karenina's demise, and a reader who would treat the event as yet one more tally in the frequency count of suicide cases in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. So when Eco correctly focuses on the immutability of the fictional characters —



[...] unlike all the other semiotic objects, which are culturally subject to revisions, and perhaps only similar to mathematical entities, they will never change and will remain the actors of what they did once and forever — and it is because of the incorrigibility of their deeds that we can dare to say that it is true that they were or did this and that. (Eco 2009: 93)

— it is the semiotic subjects, the users of the fictional characters in their own lives, who change. They change as they *are participant observers* in the fixed lives of the fictional characters due to the authors' subjecting the characters to public scrutiny. Any author has to perform the exhibitionist act by bringing the private encounters with the invented characters to the public domain. Some decide at times against it — authors burning their own just finished manuscripts are known in literature.

But once the fictional characters survive the “going public” they become indispensable precisely as they cannot change. Eco points that out eloquently,

The charm of the great tragedies comes from the fact that their heroes, instead of escaping an atrocious fate, fall into the *abyss that they have dug with their own hands because they do not know what expects them* — and we, who see clearly where they are blindly going, cannot stop them. (Eco 2009: [95]; added emphasis)

Yet it is not the hands of the heroes themselves but their makers — writers, Hollywood film makers, etc — through which the characters are made to act so that they fall into the abyss and by it keep us, the spectators, vicariously thrilled. The author may be accused by a reader for *letting* a certain character die or act in an undesirable (to the reader) a way, to which the author's easy defense is that the character *did it by herself*. For the author the characters that become fictional in the end (in the novel) may have reality of one's imagination when the novel is being written. Once the novel is finished the characters are destined to become fixed. As Eco points out, “Fictional characters live in an incomplete, handicapped world” (Eco 2009: 96)

The reality of life, ending in death, sets the stage for such move into the handicapped world. The finishing of a novel for an author may be equivalent to the death — the imaginary real characters now become fixed in the finished text. Publication of a book is in a way the funeral ceremony for the characters for its author and a new life for the semiotic subjects. The myriad of interpretations of Hamlet would continue as long as our education systems include him in our worlds. The fate of characters in fiction is a process similar to what happens with real people after their death — they become fixed as ghosts, spirits, or forefathers of social upheavals. Napoleon existed as a real person until he died and ever since he has been a ghost moving through the European minds, used for various meaning-making purposes. A miscarried foetus who had no chance to become a person, may be seen as a real person with all “baby things” (Layne 2000). We all become fixed as fictional characters — like Anna Karenina. Cemeteries and memorials are a living testimony of such transformation that sometimes evokes real and reverberating social turmoils<sup>7</sup>.

Yet the fixed characters of novels, in contrast to their readers, are not only “twice born” (in the mind of the author, and after delivery to public), they are also “twice dead”. First, they die for the author when the book is published. But the second death is more conspicuous — the fading away of the fixed fictional characters from our playgrounds of meaning-making sends them into the oblivion. Eco is in a good fortune being able to use the image of Anna Karenina — but would have had little success making his argument with the help of Dumov — Anna Karenina’s peer in the pantheon of fictional characters whom Chehov created as a doctor who tragically died saving the life of a child<sup>8</sup>. Dumov was widely impactful in the cultural communication a century ago, yet in our 21<sup>st</sup> century he has passed away. Anna Kare-

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<sup>7</sup> Raudsepp, M., and Wagner, W. *The essentially other — Representational processes that divide groups*. Paper at Workshop “Trust and Distrust in Inter-Group Conflict and Communication”, Napoli, June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Ellina Polonskaya and Eleonora Magomedova for finding Dumov for me — a naïve psychologist — from among the many dead fictional characters in the Russian literature.

nina, Raskolnikov, and Hamlet continue to be card-carrying members in this Club of the Glorified.

The fictional characters still do not change even there — in their fixed worlds. They are destined to live and die in their immutable “handicapped worlds”. They are sacrificed from the beginning in that role — for the sake of the real people who always move towards the fictional roles, yet purposefully refuse to become fixed in these. The author moves on to write another novel, rather than reiterate the one just finished. It is only in the case of canonical texts relevant for religious systems where “the true faith” is followed by their constructors. In the social sciences we start treating the searches for understandings by famous thinkers, which were actually tentative efforts usually phrased in vague terms, as if these words are final and immutable. The disciples of such famous scientists — whom they turn into fictional characters *by the fame they attribute to them* — are the grave-diggers for the very ideas they revere and propagate as the “truths of the grand masters”. The authors made famous by their followers may become gloriously fictional characters in science, through fixing their ideas even in their real lifetimes. Some even enjoy it.

### **The importance of moving through boundaries: the subject really matters**

Intentionality is being born through the tension between the semiotic subject and the semiotic object. This look at the role of semiosis gives a renewed impetus for the philosophical perspective of Franz Brentano who posited the central feature of intentionality to be inherently present in human action (Rollinger 2008). The communication between goal-oriented persons who re-construct the message (see Figure 1 above) leads to the hyper-generalization of the highest level of willful agency (“why do you want X?” — “*Because I want X*”). This is the result of constructing the semiotic object out of a real (“why do you want this ice cream?”) or of the non-existing (“why do you want to be famous?”) one.

Such semiotic construction of intentionality entails crossing boundaries that limit the object of desire from the growing intention for it. If any X a person wants were instantly available, the semiotic object X (or *wanting X*) could not emerge. Only if there is, at the moment, inaccessibility of X, would statements of wanting X be possible. The use of semiotic means — turned into symbolic resources (Zittoun 2006) — includes fixed literary characters like Hamlet, Anna Karenina, and others. Their stories, similarly to other myths — serve as mutually shared focal points in relation to which the person's intentions in the given setting are being re-conceptualized. “Am I like Raskolnikov?” or “I do not end up in the shoes of Anna Karenina” are symbolic tools used to regulate the relating to the social boundaries. Inventing prayers is another (Del Río; Alvaréz 2007). Thus, persons need fictive characters for the flexibility of one's meaning-making. These characters become solid islands in one's own personal world in relation to which they organize their own movement through the life. If by some miracle these characters were to become unfixed — Hamlet would be re-born and finds a solution to his doubts, and marries Ophelia, or Raskolnikov finishes his studies and becomes a respected professional (Eco 2009: 95) — their functional use for the readers would vanish. We do not really want this<sup>9</sup>.

### **Conclusion: The fate of the living**

Umberto Eco is a fiction. Whereas it may well be true that there exists a human being carrying in his luggage some identity document specifying this name and linking it with a photo image that remotely matches the appearance of the person who gave a talk in the main hall of Tartu University on May 6th, 2009, and it may also be true that some other real person on the same day gave him a piece of paper

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<sup>9</sup> However, new forms of television that allow for wishful re-writing of the scripts of next series of the soap operas based on viewer consensus would be an interesting real-life experiment here.

specifying that now he is not just a person with a name but a new *doctor honoris causa* of that university — through all these meaning-making moves we are creating fictions-in-the-real. Recurrent symbolic acts of marking time — birthday congratulations — are of similar kind. The day of our birth is a coincidence — but accentuating it by rituals at some intervals creates the fictional character of the person being 5, 15, 50 or 150 years old — and guiding the person to “feel one’s age” (or deny it). The semiotic object is possible only through the collaboration by the semiotic subject — the meaning-making organism. Umberto Eco’s eloquent fictions — about others and about himself — are a testimony to the restless eagerness of the inquisitive human minds who create beautiful and horrifying fictional worlds — and inhabit them.

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### **Между фикцией и реальностью: трансформация семиотического объекта**

Противоречие между реальными и вымышленными героями в нашем восприятии нуждается в дальнейшей разработке. В моем комментарии к наблюдениям Эко над онтологией семиотического объекта я полагаю, что человеческое семиотическое толкование влечет за собой постоянную модуляцию отношений между сферами реальных и вымышленных персонажей в необратимом времени. Примеры литературных персонажей являются теми кристаллизующимися фикциями, которые функционируют для читателей как семиотический якорь в зыбкой конструкции их понимания мира. Литературные персонажи являются, таким образом, фикциями, которые реальны в их функциях, — в то время как фактическая реальность смыслообразования состоит из все новых и новых фикций текущей (изменчивой) природы. Онтологическое видение Эко

контраста между семиотическим объектом и перцептивными объектами (*Gegenstände*) в рамках теории Алексиуса Мейнонга нуждается в привнесении семиотического субъекта. Культурные мифологии человеческих сообществ подготовили почву для таких изобретений и поддержали динамическое единство фиктивно реальных и реально вымышленных персонажей.

### **Väljamõeldise ja reaalsuse vahel: semiootilise objekti muutumine**

Erinevus reaalsete ja väljamõeldud isikute vahel meie mõtlemises vajab täpsemat määratlust. Käesolevas kommentaaris Eco käsitlusele semiootilise objekti ontoloogiast väidan, et inim mõtlemise semiootiline ehitus eeldab tegelaskuju reaalse ja väljamõeldud oleku vahelise suhte katkematu muutumist pöördumatus ajas. Kirjanduslikud kangelased on näide kristalliseerunud väljamõeldistest, mis funktsioneerivad semiootiliste ankrutena maailmast arusaamise konstrueerimise voolavas protsessis (lugeja poolt). Kirjanduslikud kangelased on seega väljamõeldised, mis on oma funktsioonidelt reaalsed, samas kui tähendusloome tegelik reaalsus koosneb üha uutest voolava (ehk pidevalt muutuva) loomusega väljamõeldistest. Eco Alexius Meinongi teoorial põhinevat ontoloogilist arusaama semiootilise ja tajuobjekti (*Gegenstände*) erisusest tuleks täiendada semiootilise subjekti mõistega. Taolist väljamõeldist võimaldavad ning väljamõeldislikult reaalsete ja realistlikult väljamõeldud tegelaskujude dünaamilise ühtsuse säilitamise eest seisavad ühiskondade kultuurilised mütoloogiad.