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## Text and Meaning in Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*

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### Abstract

Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* deals with the making of art. Open work has two constituents: a) multiplicity of meanings and the participation of audience. Artists generate the work of art allowing the audience to fabricate numerous meanings. Work of art as an open work is contingent and the openness toward meaning determines its contingency. A work of art may be open from the audience point of view because interpretation is encompassing and occurs at various levels of human perception. Thus we perceive meanings in a work of art with various perspectives. Eco explains open work as an artwork in process or dynamic progress without any fixed conclusion/ending or meaning. He underlines the necessity in differentiating the association between the work of art and its creator. This paper is an attempt to interpretively read Umberto Eco's concept of open work, meaning and information.

**Keywords:** *art, representations, meaning, multiplicity*

## Text and Meaning in Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*

Dr P Prayer Elmo Raj

Aesthetic theories deal with ideas like “completeness” and “openness” with regard to a work of art. These notions relate to the response to the work of art in a given condition. Therefore we tend to think it as the concluding point of the work of the creator in his/her endeavour to communicate to the audience. However, “The addressee is bound to enter into an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on his unique capacity for sensitive reception of the piece” (Eco 3). The author composes the work of art and completes it with a desire to be realized by the audience. The author responds to his own work of art by providing his own credentials with a culture but allows multiplicity of perspectives when presented to the audience. Thus the work of art adds aesthetic validity with multiplicity of perspectives. Consequently a work of art is a “corn-piece and *closed* form in its uniqueness *as a* balanced organic whole. While at the same time constituting *an open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity” (Eco 4).

Every realization of the work of art is an interpretation and performance of it because when the work of art is received it takes novel perspective for itself. The work of art is in a constant state of flux allowing multiplicity of meanings with the change of time. Thus the work of art is unfinished and uncertain; the author completes his work and hands it over to audience. The progress of the method is related to the interpretative subjectivity of the work of art. Open work relates in a procedure of making an artwork rather than the completion of the work of art. This intention of the author establishes and determines the process and progress of the making of art. Eco overtly necessitates such an artistic inspiration of open work and believes it as an indispensable difference between modern and traditional art. Multiplicity of meaning and the participation of the audience in the composition of a work of art are reciprocal. While interpretations mark the participation of the audience, the artist transfers his/her artistic significance from a particular communication to an audience's interpretation of meanings. This transfer also insists an altered way of making a work of art, different from the traditional aesthetic practice that aim to create single meaning. Thus open work is methodical and it resolves the process of making a work of art and not the aesthetic significance.

Meaning is central to open work. Meaning is not message or content but an indispensable eminence that all works share and which endows them with aesthetic emotions. Eco differentiates between two kinds of openness: contemplative openness and structural openness. Contemplative openness is the psychic communication between the audience and the work of art without much importance on structural

modifications. Structural openness engages the physical exploits of the audience and the structural modification of the work art through the responses and feedback of the audience. Eco refers James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as an example of contemplative openness and Mallarme's *Livre* as an instance of structural openness because the audience are challenged to create a sequence for the slack pages of Mallarme. Joyce portrays the ontological and the existential condition of her contemporary context in *Finnegans Wake*. Her book "is moulded into a curve that bends back on itself, like the Einsteinian universe" (Eco 10). The work is limited and open at the same time. Every episode in the book opens up strings of possibilities to connect with all other words in the text making it a wealthy cosmos. However Joyce aims the book to involve the entirety spatially and temporally. Eco maintains that the "principal tool for all this all-pervading ambiguity is the pun, the *calembour*, by which two, three, or even tend different etymological roots are combined in such a way that a single word can set up a knot of different sub meanings, each of which in turn coincides and interrelates with other local allusions, which are themselves "open" to new configurations and probabilities of interpretation" (Eco 10). The audience of *Finnegan Wake* is not resolved to place themselves purposefully among an unlimited relationships, have a choice for themselves to register they perspective and to attempt to employ various facets to multiply the meanings.

Mallarme's *Livre* is an immense and influential work that comprises the aim of his actions and the *telos* of the world. Eco maintains that "The *Livre* was conceived as a mobile apparatus, not just in the mobile and "open" sense of a composition such as *Un coup de des*, where grammar, syntax and typesetting introduced a plurality of elements, polymorphous in their indeterminate relation to each other" (Eco 12). Mallarme's effort was utopian and was fabricated with more unsettling desires and resourcefulness that it leaves the work unfinished. The work might have turned into an uncertainly mystical and obscure embodiment of a debauched sensitivity that reached creativity. It is here the similarity between *Livre* attain importance just as the audience would have sequenced the pages of the book in a various different ways, the audience of the *Wake* deciphers different outlines of meaning in Joyce's language. In *Livre* fabric of form is open but in the case of *Wake* it is the semantic content. However in both case the audience is significantly positioned in the same place because there is a certain freedom in mobility among multiplicity of varied interpretations.

The catholic in Dante allows his poetry to elucidate to his audience one of the unresolved mysteries of Christian doctrine, the nature of the Trinity. While acknowledging the views of existent theological views he utilizes poetic techniques that administers to "express not just the concept they are supposed to convey, but also the feeling of blissful contemplation that accompanies its comprehension—thus fusing referential and emotional value into an in dissociable formal whole" (Eco 79). Eco maintains that with the entire astuteness Dante's poem is closed in their referential aspect. However Joyce's works are ambiguous and demands to be comprehended. Dante's Trinity mirrors the Florentine world view but Joyce symbolizes the ambiguous character and the polyvalence allowing multiple interpretations mirroring the history.

Both Dante and Joyce is an “ensemble of denotative and connotative meanings fuse with an ensemble of physical linguistic properties to reproduce an organic form” (Bondanella 28). Both the texts are open as they allow repeated readings with fresh aesthetic pleasure. Dante’s text proclaims a univocal message and Joyce’s text provides plurivocal message allowing openness of information.

Eco does not distinguish between semantic and material openness. However the two forms of openness influence the audience’s experience of a work of art in different ways. The artist views the reader as positioned statically transacting with various meanings of the work of art but the reader experiences variations in the semantic and material openness. The material artefact of the work of art is the boundary that unites the various meanings of the work of art and the intention of the artist. The configuration of the boundary in fabricating the meanings of the work of art allows the artist to examine the material openness and its association to the proposed meanings. Nevertheless to assume that the audience and the author participate in the same page, in the reception of meaning makes the process interactive. The physical participation of the audience shapes the manner in which the meanings are evoked. Consequently the work is in a state of progress and it assists itself openly and consciously into motion and acknowledges the tendency of the aesthetics that forms the backdrop to performance. Thus “these poetic systems recognize “openness” as the fundamental possibility of the contemporary artist or consumer. The aesthetic theoretician in his turn, will see a confirmation of his own institutions in these practical manifestations: they constitute the ultimate realization of a receptive mode which can function at many different levels of intensity” (Eco 22).

Contemplative open work is different from that of the traditional closed work. Both fashions physical alterations in the work art that are invisible for the audience. Nevertheless it demands the alteration of the artist depending whether the work of art is open or closed. Multiple meanings necessitates purposeful ambiguity through “the contravention of conventions of expression” (OW xxiv) work of art. Communication stipulates a set of symbols to articulate ideas to other and decipher from others. This process allows the audience to delve into an examination of unknown meanings leading to the psychological engagement with the work of art.

Eco points out two kinds of messages in open work: univocal message and plurivocal message. These two kinds of messages are deciphered with their correlate aesthetic values. Both forms of messages are open and incite fresh and richer enjoyment. If the artist settles on having one meaning the artist focuses on singular meaning of communication but the mode of delivery can be through different outlets. The plurivocal communication is integrated through an openness that forms the foundation to all artistic forms. Moreover “plurivocality is so much a characteristic of the forms that give it substance that their aesthetic value can no longer be appreciated and explained apart from it” (Eco 42). It is unfeasible to understand and realize an “atonal” configuration without a choice, an openness to “the fixed grammar, the closure, of tonal music and that its validity depends on the degree of its success in doing so” (Eco 42). In an open work the artist veils the ambiguity in simple forms to

make the audience realise the hidden meaning. However the meaning is obvious and deciphers an improved deeper meaning each time. Open work using plurivocal message discloses the ambiguities. The artist ponders on positioning the symbols in order to split-up from predictable usages. The audience of a plurivocal message is anticipated to survey different meanings through wonder. The artist is supposed to be watchful about using ambiguity as a method. However ambiguity generates wonder in the psyche of the audience evolving several possibilities of varied interpretations and it could become mere clamour if carried out to intensely. Within a univocal message and plurivocal message the layers of meaning inclines on conditional chance and the ability of the audience.

Eco uses Norbert Wiener's concept of information to establish the interrelation between ambiguity and information. Wiener elaborates order as fundamental in the composition of information. The informative substance of any message is allowed by the degree of its configuration because information is "a measure of order, the measure of disorder, that is to say, entropy, must be its opposite. Which means that the information of a message depends on its ability to elude, however temporarily, the equiprobability, the uniformity. The elemental disorder toward which all natural events seem destined, and to organize according to a particular order" (Eco 50). The configuration paves way for the message to be lucid with a probability of prediction. To decrease the noise which intimidates the appropriate delivery of information and to preserve the helpfulness there must be a recurrence of information. Eco is concerned with ambiguity with information in a work of art: "The more one respects the laws of probability (the pre-established principles that guide the organization of a message and are reiterated via the repetition of foreseeable elements), the clearer and less ambiguous its meaning will be. Conversely, the more improbable, ambiguous, unpredictable, and disordered the structure, the greater the information—here understood as potential, as the inception of possible order" (Eco 93).

Unlike Wiener's model Eco's idea of information is contrariwise to predictability and proportional to ambiguity because it thwarts the prediction of meaning. For Eco redundancy is a method to augment the dependability of information and prediction is combined by redundancy as a method to diminish discernment of information. The use of common words is redundant because it is common, banal and unattractive. When information is released it does not mediate meaning. While Wiener configures meaning autonomously severing from the exterior association to the receiver, Eco unites the existence of meaning to the manner of comprehension by the receiver. Prediction and attention are interrelated depending on the receiver's discernment. If the information is redundant the receiver predicts the message and considers it unimportant. Redundancy diminishes information based on how it is employed through a degree of openness in the work of art. The limits of entropy in disarray are the informative correspondent of white noise. The audience do not decipher meaning arbitrarily but differentiate it in opposition through completely inundated information. Repetitive ideas consider the significance of the audience by convincing to understand meaning in a certain way. Repetition, thus, becomes a guide by leading

the audience from nous of disorder to interpretation without ignoring the poetic qualities. Engaging critically with allows Eco to arrive at his own definition of information: “From the point of view of communication, I have information when (1) I have been able to establish an order (that is, a code) as a system of probability with an original disorder; and when (2) within this new system, I introduce—through the elaboration of a message that violates the rules of the code-elements of disorder in dialectical tension with the order that supports them (the message challenge the code)” (Eco 58). Information is initially deciphered by the reader using a system of probability. The original disarray averts information from being discharged by redundancy. When the information is perceived by the reader meaning is configured by the association of the information. If the association of information allows deciphering unclear it would lead to different interpretations and generate multiple meanings. If the association of information is constricted the audience will represent fewer meanings from the information. The audience to attain a field of meanings, the information of a fresh configuration should be decipherable within an ascertained code. The uncertainty induced by the fresh configuration will allow the audience to different layers of meaning in a work of art. Therefore open work is fabricated by the dialectical tension between the order and the uncertainty. The artist should manage this tension with an “organized disorder in a system to increase its capacity to convey information” (Eco 60).

In conclusion the commonality between the multiplicity of meaning and audience participation in the creation of a work of art is the choice of the artist to leave the configuration of the elements open allowing not a uni-linear and definitive order but a possibility of multiple orders. “Meaning is an infinite regress within a closed sphere, a sort of parallel universe related in various ways to the ‘real’ world but not directly connected to it; there is no immediate contact between the world of signs and the world of the things they refer to” (Eco xxii). Meanings are instigated by the artist and the work of art expresses the meaning. Meanings eventually exist in the interpretation of the audience as it is considered as open work. Consequently the work of art is a collaborative work where the artist encourages the audience to participate in the creation of a work of art leaving it open. The artist fixes multiple levels of meanings in the work of art allowing the audience to have their subjective perspectives thus making it contingent and the act of interpretation is where the audience actively partake to deliberate various ways in which an artist configures the work of art.

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