

Joohyun Yoo / Inheriting Eco Trip Report

I participated in Inheriting Eco, an international conference organised by the University of Bologna's Centro internazionale di Studi umanistici "Umberto Eco", where I presented my paper "The Reader of the Ugly: Re-reading Eco's On Ugliness through Cognitive Constraints." The conference was conceived not simply as a retrospective commemoration of Umberto Eco's work, but as an open work-conference aimed at renewing and extending his intellectual legacy across semiotics, philosophy, literary theory, aesthetics, and related fields. This made it an especially suitable venue for my paper, which contributed to the Semiotics area by placing Eco's concepts in dialogue with contemporary cognitive science.

My presentation re-examined Eco's On Ugliness through the question of how ugliness is interpreted under cognitive and affective constraints. I focused in particular on Eco's notions of the Model Reader and the Encyclopaedia, arguing that these can be fruitfully re-read alongside contemporary work on affective evaluation, aversive processing, salience, interoception, and cognitive control. The central claim of the talk was that responses to ugliness are neither reducible to purely biological disgust reactions nor to arbitrary cultural codes. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between embodied constraints and culturally structured interpretative repertoires. In this sense, Eco's semiotic framework remains highly productive for thinking about how affectively charged objects become meaningful to readers, viewers, and interpreters.

Beyond my own presentation, I attended sessions that explored Eco's legacy across semiotics, aesthetics, media, literature, and philosophy. These sessions helped situate my own work within a broader international conversation about the continued relevance of Eco's thought, especially his account of interpretation as structured by both encyclopaedic knowledge and readerly activity. The conference also provided opportunities for informal exchanges with researchers working on Eco, semiotics, aesthetics, and cognitive approaches to meaning, which broadened my understanding of how my research can be positioned between the humanities and cognitive neuroscience.

Overall, the conference was an important step in the development of my research and academic network. My participation supported the integration of my MSc studies in Computational and Cognitive Neuroscience at Eötvös Loránd University into an international interdisciplinary discussion, showing how computational and cognitive neuroscience can contribute to renewed engagement with Eco's intellectual legacy while also benefiting from the conceptual resources of semiotic theory.