

# Educating Openness: Umberto Eco's Poetics of Openness as a Pedagogical Value

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## ABSTRACT

The poetics of openness, as formulated by Umberto Eco in his pre-semiotic work *The Open Work* (1962), has already been useful and applicable to cultural studies and textual analysis. I propose that this poetics of openness be applied to critical educational practices as well. In this article, I argue that a poetics of openness when coupled with active 'on the ground' "critical public pedagogics" can provide a flexible framework for approaching the education of interpretation. Through this framework, a text or sign system is understood as 'closed' if it elicits univocal meanings: expecting a predetermined response from a generic/average reader. A text is 'open' when it fosters a plurality of interpretative possibilities that actively engage the "existential credentials" of the interpreter. Aesthetic openness is part of adopting a semiotic perspective toward educational processes. A theory of *model reader* pedagogically helps protect against the kind of radical constructivism this interpretative approach can seem to foster. Openness is not presented as a system or methodology of education, but as a pedagogical value: encouraging both educators and students to bring a perspective of critical openness to all the sign systems and discourses they engage with.

Too often a piece of art is approached with the notion that its entire meaning and significance exist solely within itself. This approach is what I remember of reading Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson poems in high school English class. The poem was presented as a conglomerated mass of metaphors and similes, rhyme scheme and allegory, that we were told formed a (*secret*) code. We were rarely expected to rely on our own experiences and ideas in our interpretation. No, the poem already had a solution. With this approach,

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I must first thank my first sociology professor, Rita Isola, who, years ago, fostered and encouraged the ideas that form this essay. Thank you to Marion Benkaiouche and Michael Ling for your continuing intellectual support and guidance, and for always "hearing me out." This work is dedicated to Umberto Eco (1932–2016): our teacher.

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knowledge was not something to enter into a relationship with, but rather, something *hidden* beneath the surface of the text. Thus, we pupils were nothing but humble sleuths trained to detect simple poetic devices, who, if surreptitious enough to piece these together and “crack the code,” were rewarded with the prize of validation. Needless to say, this process resulted in bored teenagers and what might have been a good poem had I discovered it elsewhere, being reduced to a riddle.

This type of analysis rests on the antiquated conviction that the piece of art must be understood exactly as the artist created it—that, when the pencil is set down, so is the work. By subscribing to this iron-fist notion of authorial intention in education, we are ignoring the complex social and historical relationship between author and addressee, but also teacher and student, observer and observed.

The poetics of openness, as formulated by Umberto Eco in his 1962 book *Opera Aperta (The Open Work)*, has already been useful and applicable to cultural studies and textual analysis. I propose that this poetics of openness be explored for its (critical) pedagogical significance. As many have pointed out (Ellsworth 1989, 2005; Sandlin and Milam 2008), much scholarship in critical pedagogy has remained largely theoretical: critiqued for perpetuating “highly abstract and utopian ideals that reinforce repressive myths and perpetuate hegemonic relations” (Ellsworth 1989, 298). In this essay, I argue that Eco’s poetics of openness when coupled with active ‘on the ground’ “critical public pedagogics”—such as culture jamming (cf. Sandlin and Milam 2008)—can provide a flexible framework for approaching the education of interpretation.

Through this framework, a text or sign system is understood as ‘closed’ if it elicits univocal meanings: expecting a predetermined response from a generic/average reader. However, a work is ‘open’ when it fosters a *plurality* of interpretative possibilities that actively engage the “existential credentials” of the interpreter. Such a poetics of openness is part of adopting a semiotic perspective toward educational processes and thus can be understood as part of the growing edu-semiotic research movement (see Noth 2010; Semetsky [ed.] 2010, 2017; Stables and Semetsky 2014; Campbell 2017b; Semetsky and Campbell 2018). It recognizes that meaning is always something *discovered* through the action of interpretative semiosis; that it is in a work’s dynamism, its *openness*, that we locate its aesthetic value: through the merging of a text’s “possible worlds” with our own collective and personal life-worlds. We will also address how a theory of *model reader* (Eco 1990, 1994) pedagogically helps protect against the kind of radical constructivism and student-centered pedagogy this interpretative approach can (if not properly treated) foster.

I am offering this poetics of openness not as a method of education, but as a value to be fostered by educators and learners, encouraging both educators and students to bring a perspective of *critical openness* to all the texts—taken in Eco’s broadest understanding, as being synonymous with any unit of meaning (or sememe), no matter how minute or global<sup>1</sup>—they engage with. What I am proposing is in part a critical public pedagogy, one that encompasses art appreciation and reflexive engagement with pop culture. This is not analogous to encouraging an artistic elitism, or about providing students with the “right” interpretation. For as we shall see, this is not a simple binary of open and closed; for even texts that are constructed with closed intentions can breed interpretative openness. In fact, such an approach rejects the commodification of knowledge in formal education that pioneering scholars like Ivan Illich (1971) anticipated and warned against, and instead fosters the values of plurality: celebrating the intrinsic openness of the interpretative process. In line with critical pedagogue Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), such interpretative approaches are not concerned with an end result of interpretation—a distinct *product* of knowledge—but rather represent a form of continual engagement by the “learning self in the making” (2).

In this discussion, I will begin by reviewing the central elements of Eco’s poetics of openness as it is conventionally applied to aesthetics, historicism, and a critique of the mass culture industries and interpretation generally (all elements of Eco’s original study). I will conclude by deliberating on some educational perspectives and tools that could help realize this value of semiotic openness in educational practice by aligning these early pre-semiotic ideas of Eco’s with his later (post-1990) interpretative semiotic theories.

### Examples of the Open Work

We have witnessed an aesthetic transformation over the latter half of the twentieth century, where the freedom to ‘read’ a multiplicity of interpretations from an art object, a text, or experience generally, has become a cultural value, even at times a rite of passage. Contained within this aesthetic orientation is a dialectic of open and closed texts (e.g., Eco [1962] 1989, 1979). In the way Eco ([1962] 1989) describes it, a ‘closed work’ is something that has limited channels of interchange between the channels of artist and addressee. In this sense the closed work encourages a limited or reduced *field of interpretation*. These two actors

1. See my chapter “Exploring the Textual Woods: Umberto Eco’s Growing Concept of Text” (Campbell 2017a), where I explore Eco’s (1979) notion that a sign is a textual matrix and offer a more technical/theoretical account of semiotic openness.

are viewed as autonomous, static components that either do not interact at all, or do so, but only minimally. Semioticians love the analogy of a traffic light to describe a closed system because a traffic light is very fixed in terms of the ways it can be interpreted. Its interpretation is solidified; reduced almost (but not quite) to the function of a signal. And even if this cultural convention stops being fixed in the mind of some imaginative (or deluded) driver, then the object merely stops functioning as a traffic sign. This is to say, it is no longer functioning within the same semiotic/textual system.

This semiotic notion of openness is based on the realization that we perceive and communicate our reality through dynamic systems of signs that are directly conditioned by our acquired experiences (both personal and sociocultural) and our genetic/biological makeup. By signs we do not simply mean “signs that signify their objects based on convention” (which Charles Peirce associated with symbols specifically) but anything that stands for something *other than* itself. Peirce frequently described his triadic sign model through the criterion of openness, saying: “a sign is something by knowing which we know something more” (CP 8.332). This fundamental principle in Peirce’s semiotics is already present within *The Open Work*, in which the role of the addressee is always present in this open stream of communication. As described by Eco ([1962] 1989, 3): “As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to the artist’s patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning that is purely his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations, and prejudices.”

According to many literary theorists often associated with reader-response theories, works actually gain their “aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which they can be viewed and understood” (Eco 1979, 49). To better understand the psychological disposition toward an openness of communication it can be helpful to use extreme examples: let’s think of the interpretative pleasures one can receive from reading a train schedule (the kind found in any train station, telling you what times trains are arriving and departing), in which the content in the specific context of a train station elicits a strongly coded and singular unequivocal reading. If this object is removed from its familiar setting (say placed on the wall of a studio or as part of an art exhibit), certainly the time table gains some enriched meaning through the increase in possible interpretations it now entertains. Although this *defamiliarization* (to borrow a term from the Russian formalists) in itself does not constitute a work of art, at least we are now faced with more than one interpretative path. At the very least we are wondering, “What the f\$&@ is this train table doing here!?”

Eco describes that the apex of this aesthetics of openness can be found in the world of music, as the channels of *composer-performer-listener* are interacting and communicating with one another to a greater (or at least more obvious) extent than the channels of *writer-reader*. Even if a piece is entirely composed and planned to the smallest detail, the performers' interpretation, and even the location/environment of the performance, inevitably filters, plays with, and reacts to the ideas of the composer. Eco ([1962] 1989, 1–4) points to the *indeterminate music* movement of the 1950s for examples of this aesthetic. Indeterminate music can be understood as music that leaves at least some of its elements unscripted and open to chance. The piece as the composer writes it is not complete; she presents only the basic materials while the remaining details are fleshed out by the environment and context the music is performed in as well as by the performers themselves. The composition is in flux, what Eco calls “works in motion.” Eco ([1962] 1989, 1) finds an excellent example of the work in motion in Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI*. In the piece, Stockhausen provides a sheet of small musical cells, which the performer is free to play in any order for any amount of time. The narrative structure of the piece is thus a dynamic creation of the performer in a specific time and space.

Eco's focus is on composers who come from the European concert music tradition, such as Stockhausen, Berio, and Boulez. Although the compositions examined provide fine examples of this conception of the work in motion, I think Eco fails to address a superior example of this aesthetic, that is, improvised music and more specifically jazz. A jazz composition is never fully complete; it is a harmonic and melodic sketch, a ground for further development, interpretation, and musical dialogue. Ornette Coleman's “Lonely Women” is arguably more open in conception and expression than Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI*. The former is a group improvisation around a simple melodic framework; beside this melodic outline, the improvisation has the potential to venture into endless abstractions or melt into complete simplicity. Each time the piece is performed by any of Coleman's groups, the individual personalities and styles of the performers as well as the venue, audience, and even the historical moment all synthesize and influence the formation of the piece.

These examples of jazz and indeterminate music provide examples of the extreme embodiment of this poetics of openness, useful for the student or educator who may not be comfortable with formal aesthetic considerations. But this notion of openness certainly has broader implications. It is about recognizing that the work of art (generally) is not a structurally pure entity with the rigidity of a crystal, as Levi Strauss insisted, endowed with precise and objective

properties.<sup>2</sup> Through realizing the infinite *recursivity* of semiotic processes—verified by a theory of unlimited semiosis (see Eco 1979, chap. 7)—such as reading a text, we realize that the cooperation of (‘real’) empirical addressees with their unique textual competence and cultural background is a necessary feature in the actualization of any text. This is to say that openness, to greater or lesser degrees, is a structural feature of aesthetic texts *in general*, which always call out for a possible interpreter. As Eco (1979, 5) says: “So-called open-texts are only the extreme and most provocative exploitation—for poetic purposes—of a principle which rules both the generation and interpretation of texts in general.”

### The Closed Interpretation as Kitsch

My first music history professor once tried to summarize for our class the aesthetic differences between the Enlightenment and the Romantic eras. He pointed to a chair at the front of the lecture theater with a jacket draped over it: “If I were an Enlightenment scholar, I would look at this chair and talk about the various ways we can perceive it . . . the beautiful symmetry of the combined image . . . how the sunlight enhances the angles through the concentration and absence of light . . . if I were a Romantic scholar I would stab myself and throw myself upon the chair and slowly and dramatically bleed to death.” What this (probably badly paraphrased) anecdote demonstrates tongue-in-cheek is how cultural customs and aesthetics inevitably mold collective interpretation. Milan Kundera argues in his book of essays *Testaments Betrayed* (1995) that modern society still connects strongly to a Romantic nineteenth-century aesthetic. Devising a simple analogy, Kundera describes the development of the European novel and the parallel development of European music as separated, “like two halves of a football game” (1995, 59). Being children of “the second half,” we still have an affinity for the inner emotional experience ingrained in the Romantic aesthetic—the tragedy of joy and sorrow and passion. As I’ve seen with my own music history students and myself, this aesthetic preference can often make us unable to relate to art before the European Enlightenment. We are so often left feeling alienated by the early European novel like Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, or even the mathematical precision inherent to a Bach fugue. Even such an erudite and venerable figure like Vladimir Nabokov cannot accept *Don Quixote*’s unbearable objectivity, calling it “overvalued, naïve, repetitive, and full of unbearable and implausi-

2. Claude Levi Strauss originally made these comments in response to the newly translated French addition of Eco’s *Opera Aperta*. For Eco’s counterobjection, see the introduction in Eco (1979, 3).

ble cruelty” (Nabokov, cited in Kundera 1995, 60). In a similar dichotomy, any piece from Chopin’s *Nocturnes* is instantly recognizable as being ‘melodic,’ in the sense that it fulfills our preconceived expectations of what constitutes something melodic: a defined melodic peak followed by stark valleys, flowing scalar runs, exaggerated use of dynamics and expression, and so on. A Bach fugue with its calculated extractions of one single kernel of motif does not fulfill this expectation to the same extent. These early works seem so totally measured and impersonal that we hastily label them as being devoid of emotional substance, because they do not *gush forth from the heart*. This binding emotional response provides an obvious (and relatable) instance of interpretation being limited due to historicism. By assigning strong emotional connotations to music or literature, we severely limit its potential interpretative fertility and thus our own aesthetic pleasure.

Many scholars have tried to demonstrate (Kundera and Walter Benjamin among them) that this binding nineteenth-century romanticism has given rise to a very particular phenomenon in mass culture often referred to as *kitsch*. Kitsch is often characterized by an excessive use of easily packaged emotion passed off in the *guise of art*. It is charged with generalities, predetermined meaning, and redundancy. Essentially, kitsch attempts to provide the end result of art through the use of immediate effects—that is, without the difficulty or time required of careful hermeneutics. One of its most blatant features is the use of worn-out symbols to invoke excessive emotions of sentimentality, like a single red rose standing for unrequited love, or a torn nation flag blowing in the wind used to invoke feelings of nationalism. Kitsch can of course be much subtler, and even take the disguised form of simple textual mechanisms, such as a “panning out shot” in film, or a narrative arch in literature. While enjoying the latest summer blockbuster, kitsch can seem like a harmless and pleasurable indulgence, but to many, such as Kundera, it is more than just “junk art” (or *art de pacotille*) created in bad taste: it functions to suppress and rob art of its identity. Kitsch is made up of devices that are stolen from culture precisely because of their ability to elicit a controlled response in the interpreter. Eco ([1962] 1989, 183) explains: “Given the way in which it articulates itself, like any other artistic communication whose project is not that of involving the reader in an act of discovery but that of forcing him to register a particular effect (in the belief that therein lies aesthetic pleasure) . . . or as Hermann Broch puts it, ‘the elements of evil in the value system of art.’” With this understanding, kitsch is pure imitation; it masquerades itself as art in order to conceal its ‘real’ objectives. It is this parasitical nature that allows kitsch to be so easily co-opted for ideological and manipulative ends. According to Walter Benjamin (1968),

kitsch's principle difference from art is this utilitarian function; it "offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation" (Menninghaus 2009, 41). It destroys the necessary reflexive distance between observer and observed through the immediacy of effects. These devices, already precoded and conditioned by cultural practice, arrive at (or perhaps, *strike*) the interpreter with an efficiency of communication, a determined trajectory seeking a determined (closed) response. Such a device conveys a stable equivalence between form and content (signifier and signified), and it is this univocality of meaning that can make kitsch, when used carelessly, dangerously ideological. *Pedagogically*, the ability to recognize elements of kitsch in the works we engage with is crucial, as it is through the deciphering of kitsch that we render it harmless and rob it of its power over us.

Of course, the very comparison of art and kitsch suggests some criterion from which we can make a distinction. Unlike some members of the Frankfurt school, I don't believe that a strict delineation can be made, just as Eco insists that no strict delineation can be made between open and closed texts. In line with Eco's own aesthetic theories, I would rather like to suggest that these judgments lie in the dynamic act/process of aesthetic engagement; that is, it is the addressee's/learner's personal responsibility to continually address whether their interpretative possibilities are being further opened and expanded, or rather, closed and restrained. A definition of kitsch cannot be attributed solely to the intent of the sender, just as aesthetic openness itself cannot be attributed to authorial intent. This will be further elaborated in the conversation to come, but suffice it to say, ready-made effects (elements of kitsch) are operative in all works of art, and that the *openness potential* of/within aesthetic experience has to do with the way the learner is able (or unable) to form meaningful relationships to this experience. This relationship—this cognitive mediation—not the objective stimulus itself nor the subjective experience of the addressee, is what in the end determines elements of kitsch.<sup>3</sup>

Kitsch provides a bridge in this discussion: it highlights the tenuous relationship between a poetics of openness and the rise of mass media. Interestingly, kitsch in the twentieth century has grown up alongside this aesthetics of openness. At first glance, the mass culture industries have seemingly rejected this poetics of openness in favor of the "ready-made effects" of kitsch that can be sold to a "generic mass of consumers" (Eco [1962] 1989, 185). Yet closer observation

3. The reader is directed to Eco's ([1962] 1989, chap. 9) essay "The Structure of Bad Taste." Here Eco says: "At times, Kitsch is on the side of the message, at times on the side of the receiver's intention, and more often than not, on that of the sender who tries to palm his product off for something it is not" (214).



shows that this is not an outright rejection but rather a subversion, for it is through the observation of trends in the art world that the culture industries generate these effects: through absorbing elements of “high art.” One can see how the musical systems of Ligeti have been co-opted by Hollywood in horror films, or how impoverished renditions of what the Russian formalists call narrative *fabula* have been employed in advertising. Certainly this proliferation of mass media has resulted in a diminished role for art in modern times. With some notable exceptions, modern art has, at large, regressed into itself, becoming increasingly insular and metaphysical—that is, increasingly concerned with its own processes, and less and less culturally relevant.

### Mass Media, Communication Theory, and Language

What I have tried to show in the first part of this essay is that it is in a work’s dynamism, its openness,<sup>4</sup> that we find its aesthetic value and interpretive pleasure: through the merging of fictional “possible worlds” with our own collective and personal life-worlds. Surely we seek greater enjoyment from the multidimensional poem “Le Front aux Vitres” by Paul Eluard than we do from a traffic light.<sup>5</sup> The red traffic light conveys only one very simple direction in a very specific context, while the experience of reading the poem is an experience that grows richer with each additional reading—each time we uncover new significance and make new correlations. Its openness allows us to relate our entire acquired experiences to the poem, and as we change and develop throughout our lives, so does the way we relate to the work. Thus, the poem becomes something of a living entity in our minds. Likely, the way we react to and engage with the traffic light will remain fixed throughout our lives (one would hope!). To truly understand the implications of this (seemingly reductive) analogy of the traffic light and the poem (the open and closed work), we must first understand something about information theory and the study of communication.

### The Medium Is Not (Strictly) the Message

Let us begin with a bare-bones version of Jakobson’s (1960) model of the communicative act.<sup>6</sup> Although this model is for the most part outdated (and fraught

4. Or at least the openness we bring to a work, for one cannot deny that even works that attempt to dictate a univocal interpretation can be approached in such a way that a reader can reel life into their rigid structures. This is a point Eco ([1962] 1989) makes frequently in the book; see, e.g., the essay “Analysis of Poetics Language” (chap. 2).

5. This poem is an example Eco ([1962] 1989) uses in the book.

6. I must further insist that this is a reduced understanding of Jakobson’s model that is often proliferated in educational contexts, and not nearly as developed or nuanced as what is proposed in the cited text (1960).

with problems, especially in its application to pedagogy), understanding the separation of these components is still essential, for it is this sort of *information processing* account of cognition (and the familiar mind-machine analog) that still dominates much formal education (Cunningham 1992, 1998), quite regardless of however advanced and progressive educational research may think itself to be. The channel is generally understood as such:

The *source* creates a signal, which travels through a channel—and this signal is received and processed by the addressee through a receiver. This reduced model, however, ignores two crucial elements:

1. It ignores the codes that enable the addressee to process the message received, thus supposing the message as a preformed and static entity or product.
2. It does not demonstrate that as the signal travels through the channel, it is potentially disrupted by large or small amounts of outside disturbances, which information theorists have traditionally referred to as *noise*.

Let's start with the first point. Communication scholars, following the formidable influence of Marshall McLuhan, often overlook the importance of the addressee's interpretation of the message. Their grand claims regarding mass media are thus hegemonic; they see the power residing with the source and the people who control the source, failing to recognize the significance of the addressee's ability to receive and interpret information. This "overlooking" of the interpreter is well displayed in McLuhan's (1967, 26) belief that "all media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered." If we follow a more interpretative semiotic perspective, it becomes clear (somewhat contrary to McLuhan's famous aphorism) that it may be the medium that asserts the message, but ultimately the success of the message rests in the interpretation of the addressee. If the addressee fails to understand the way in which the message has been encoded by the source, or manipulates it through interpretation, the control the medium exerts is inconsequential.<sup>7</sup>

7. Due to space restraints, I cannot go into a detailed analysis of McLuhan's theories of media. For a fuller critique of the shortfalls of McLuhan's theories I direct the reader to Umberto Eco's lecture and article "Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare" ([1967] 1986, 135–45). Here Eco, always the aesthete, returns primacy to the consumer/interpreter in shaping the media that they consume.

It is undeniable that all communication mediums dictate content. The medium of radio certainly does prescribe certain limits on the people who utilize it. So too does music notation software. However, it may be an oversimplification to view such mediums as “wholly autonomous entities with ‘purposes’ (as opposed to functions) of their own” (Chandler 2002, 4) as suggested by McLuhan (e.g., McLuhan and Fiore 1967). The content of a message and its medium are in constant conversation. The power may shift at times in the direction of one or the other, but the process still must be looked at as *bricolage* rather than an outright domination.

Let’s move onto the issue of *noise*. Systems of communication, language being the most accessible for analysis, are vulnerable to corruption within high levels of noise. Eco ([1962] 1989, 50) explains: “[Languages] are organized systems governed by fixed laws of probability and likely to be disturbed either from within or from without by a certain amount of disorder, of communication consumption—that is to say, by a certain increase in entropy (meaning the loss of information) commonly known as noise.” The interreliance between ambiguity and communication appears to run contrary to the basic pragmatic functions of language. To ensure that a message is received and understood, it must be wrapped in high levels of redundancy—that is, we must send the same content in different reiterations in the same message. A popular linguistic formula (see Shannon 1950) suggests that the English language is 50 percent redundancy, meaning that only 50 percent of a given message conveys the specific content of the message. An obvious example of this is the telegraph message that attempts to convey only the bare bones of a message and thus is devoid of syntax and grammar. Repetition ensures that despite the presence of noise, our message is properly relayed. Paradoxically, this attempt to be completely and absolutely understood becomes stifling in an aesthetic context. “The very order which allows a message to be understood is also what makes it absolutely predictable—that is extremely banal” (Eco [1962] 1989, 52).

### Ambiguity and the Aesthetic Message

So, at least in a certain understanding, the clearer a piece of information is, the less meaningful is its content. This again illuminates the value and pleasure we receive from art that possesses a multiplicity of meaning. A Hallmark greeting card is very easy to understand, yet it tells us very little. It competes against a sea of other greeting cards, all with a very similar message, which must be understood by a wide array of people from diverse backgrounds. It is precisely because

of its reduced content that the card retains this clarity, and it is this clarity that allows it to fulfill its utilitarian function.

In fact, the ambiguity inherent in the aesthetic message—the tension between the externally and internally referential;<sup>8</sup> the ability “to call into the question the legitimacy of the code itself” (Eco 1979, 67)—is entirely necessary for language to transform and develop. Without the aesthetic dimension of language, it would not be possible to say anything not predetermined by the code, and thus only closed-circuit semiotic judgments would be possible, like those of Morse code. The open work evokes rather than proclaims.

Any work of art can be looked at as a message to be decoded by an addressee. But unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal message, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended . . . poetic language deliberately uses terms in a way that will radically alter their referential function. . . . It eliminates the possibility for a univocal decoding, it gives the addressee the feeling that the current code has been violated to such an extent that it can no longer help. . . . [The addressee is] thus forced to learn the code of the message from the message itself . . . ambiguity is not an accessory to the message it is its fundamental nature. (Eco [1962] 1989, 195)

Unlike the greeting card, or the traffic light, or elements of kitsch, the open work cannot dictate or propose a univocal message. Its very structure and motivation embrace disorder and do not fight noise. In this regard, the open work cannot so easily serve a utilitarian function like the road sign, and cannot be marketable in the same way as kitsch art, and similarly cannot be as easily graded or tested.

Many semioticians (following the lineage of Peirce and Bathkin) insist that interpretation (and the sign itself) is necessarily dialogical. Without getting into the theoretical underpinnings (cf. Campbell 2017a) behind this assertion, let me offer the following passage: “The original modality of being a sign is otherness and dialogue. In contrast with univocality, reiteration, and identity—which characterize signals—dialogue and otherness are the original, constitutive modalities of that which emerges as a sign in the proper sense. In other words, the sign exists and is characterized as a sign insofar as it is a response to, and in relation to, that which is other from itself” (Ponzio and Petrilli 2005, 382). A *pedagogy of openness* is necessarily a struggle against “the signalization” of com-

8. This *is* a pipe; this is *not* a pipe.

munication alluded to in the above quote. This is exemplified by the reductive model presented at the beginning of this section, where a fully formed and objectively defined message is transmitted by a source for immediate consumption by a receiver. This model reflects, generally, the inadequacy of code semiotics to account for the complicated nature of interpretation. Ignorant to such debates in semiotics, North American schools by and large still teach interpretation through the lens of signalization.<sup>9</sup> That is, they often reduce complex interpretative acts to simple procedures of decodification.

### Educational Application

I should clarify that I do not purport openness as a mere valuation—something synonymous with ‘the good’. Openness is an interpretative stance one can bring to various forms of communication. It is not a system or methodology in itself, but only one possible interpretative lens the student or educator can adopt. As mentioned, Eco asserts repeatedly that openness is a quality that exists to greater or lesser extents within the structures of texts themselves.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean to say works that exhibit closed qualities or intentions are of somehow lesser value artistically (in fact I would assert that often the opposite can be true). Rather, works that rely on this open collaboration between creator and reader stand as extreme embodiments of this process of openness. The examples both Eco and I use serve to elucidate the multifaceted dialogue involved in interpretation as they are embodied in concrete ‘works’. I recognize that using the concept of artistic ‘works’ as opposed to ‘processes’ has become problematic in recent educational and aesthetic scholarship, as it seems overtly situated in a Western/Eurocentric conception of art. I insist on using this terminology, not to undermine the various and distinct cultural and personal processes involved in experiencing and interpreting art, but as a way to distill a particular structural and experiential pattern that we can return to again and again for reflection.<sup>11</sup> The work of art represents only a beginning, a *terminus a quo*, of these complex processes that starts when the author sets down her pen.<sup>12</sup>

9. For more on the standardization of interpretation in formal education, see Apple (1996); Oliver and Gershman (1989).

10. See Eco ([1962] 1989, chap. 2) for an examination of how “every work of art can be said to be ‘open,’ how this openness manifests itself structurally, and to what extent structural differences entail different levels of openness” (24).

11. For a further account of this process, which I deem *mimetic learning*, see my essay “Toward a Pedagogy of Firstness” (Campbell 2018).

12. As one of the principal applications of this poetics of openness is aesthetic education, I would have liked to say a few more cautionary words on the dangers of dealing with this ineffable and translucent stuff called *the aesthetic*. The notion of the aesthetic is, like openness, often reduced to a mere valuation of goodness and can at times seem like an artificial construct—manipulating intelligent discourse, acting as an invis-

The very idea of the *open work* as Eco has pointed out is a sort of oxymoron, for a work is something finished, objectified, closed, and certainly many artistic forms do not even fit the concept of ‘work’ too closely. The very idea of work as it is used in this essay is a recognized construct—despite its artificiality, I think it proves to be a pedagogically useful one, as long as we recognize it for what it is. Apologetics aside, following are several concepts and approaches that the educator *can* use to foster a discourse of openness through their practice.

### Culture Jamming through Defamiliarization

As I stated in the introduction, the aesthetics of openness that I am proposing is not paramount to some sort of artistic elitism where students are pushed to disengage with pop culture and the world of mass art. Robert Scholes (1982, 14) elaborates: “Students need to acquire the interpretative codes of their culture, but they also need to see them as codes, so they can appreciate those texts that reshape accepted ideas and at the same time defend themselves against the manipulative exploitation of received opinion.” As Andy Warhol and his contemporaries understood, the immediacy of semiotic reactions implicit in mass communicative acts can be a powerful force. This force can be harmful and exploitative, as in the case of propaganda, but it can certainly be educational and introspective, depending on the interpretative approach adopted by the addressee. Warhol demonstrated this as he removed pieces of pop art from their familiar contexts in order to gain new insight into these objects and understand their broader societal implications. As I see it, this concept of ‘defamiliarizing’, as developed by the Russian formalists in the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>13</sup> is central to the various contemporary movements that attempt to engage and challenge the culture industries’ hegemony.

“Culture jamming” is a form of defamiliarization directly applied to counter passive consumerism and corporate hegemony. First and foremost, culture jamming, through the artful and political confrontation of daily consumer life, attempts to give a voice to the ideas and peoples that have been marginalized by the commercial values exercised by societies’ dominant power formations. It does this, in one sense, through *the emancipation of interpretation*: empowering groups of people with the freedom to interpret mass media and consum-

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ble norm. For me, aesthetics is all-encompassing and not intrinsically good or bad, but rather simply the various ways in which sensible experience is distributed through life.

13. Carlo Ginzberg (2001) presents an excellent history of this concept and its various iterations, both literary and cognitive.

erist messages in new and multifarious ways. A quick glance at the “about” page of Vancouver’s *Adbusters* magazine (<http://adbusters.org>) sheds lights on this important civil practice: “[We culture jammers are] concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces . . . dedicated to examining the relationship between human beings and their physical and mental environment. We want a world in which the economy and ecology resonate in balance. We try to coax people from spectator to participant in this quest. We want folks to get mad about corporate disinformation, injustices in the global economy, and any industry that pollutes our physical or mental commons.” I must stress that the target of these criticisms is not simply mass media in its many forms, but rather mass media that, as David Robey (who wrote the introduction to the English edition of *The Open Work*) states, “reaffirms the public’s sense of the essential rightness of the world in which they live” (Eco [1962] 1989, xvii–xviii). Who can say that we must only engage with entertainment of the highest caliber? The “average” consumer is present in all of us. Certainly everyone can admit, even those select cultural gatekeepers, to having the desire to consume works that elicit quick and immediate sensations (Bondandello 1997, 53). This rejection resides more directly in mass culture that is deceptively ideological and motivated. This is media that is “dishonest,” such as kitsch, which attempts to pass itself off as art to mask its utilitarian aims. As Bondandello (1997, 52) explains, these forms of media only become dangerous when they are used by “a manipulative power structure to obfuscate reality and to conceal the power relationships present within our contemporary world.” The elitist cultural criticism exemplified by Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt school does not bring one closer to pedagogical truths. An outright rejection of pop culture and its conventions can be just as damaging as passively consuming mass media.

Culture jamming is an active embodiment of the critical components of a dialectics of open/closed works. Just because a text is closed in its intentions (such as an advertisement) does not mean that the text cannot be read in an open way—that there are no learning opportunities to be gained through interpreting such a text. Sometimes culture jamming is entirely necessary to realize dormant meanings implicit within pop culture. The practice of culture jamming is purposely *defamiliarizing*,<sup>14</sup> so it can “open up” and reveal what Ellsworth (2005) has referred to as *pedagogical hinges*. These hinges are simply aspects of

14. Aspects of this *pedagogy of surprise*, exemplified by this defamiliarizing process, are explored under the guise of indexical learning and what I call a “pedagogy of novelty” in Campbell (2016).

learning spaces that are pedagogically transformative and that put “inside and outside, self and other, personal and social into relation” (Ellsworth 2005, 38). Sandlin and Milam (2008, 339) expand the connections between pedagogical hinges and culture jamming: “Pedagogy’s hinges create possibilities for both inside and outside—self and society—to be disrupted and refigured. We believe an important pedagogical moment—culture jamming’s pedagogical hinge—occurs when audience members as learners experience *de´tournement* (literally, a “turning around”). All of the pedagogical tactics used in culture jamming attempt to lead the learner to a moment of *détournement*, where she is no longer who she used to be, but rather is caught off guard by the possibility of becoming someone or something different.” To provide a rather blunt example: placing an ad for Nike shoes next to a photograph depicting the working conditions of an Indonesian sweatshop in a public space *can* potentially “open up” learning possibilities: calling students to consider the athletic-consumer lifestyle symbolized by the ad in relation to broader social forces that they participate with in various ways. It is not simply a matter of rejecting the intent of the advertising or accepting it, but rather an opportunity to relate *personally* (but also as a learning community) to the ad from different levels and perspectives. With this understanding, education is a process aimed not at instilling knowledge or molding learners to hold specific viewpoints (as in the Latin *educare*), but rather, a process of leading learners *out* of their established positions (*educere*): *leading out* so that one can experience the world through direct perceptual engagement rather than through representations or mental constructions (cf. Ingold 2017). Part of this engagement involves addressing how our interpretative processes themselves can be open or closed: do they continue the open flow of semiosis, or pragmatically and swiftly close thought and reflection? These practices of culture jamming help highlight that this dialectic of open/closed texts is a form of praxis that must go beyond mere recognition and proceed toward active confrontation and continual renewal.<sup>15</sup>

### Openness in Union with Critical Pedagogy

A poetics of openness builds upon the practice of culture jamming by emphasizing the interpretative and metaphoric undercurrent behind all communicative acts. This reflects the cognitive *opening potential* behind metaphoric thinking that Aristotle outlined in *On Rhetoric* (1991, 1412a11–12), where he defines

15. For a more thorough analysis of how culture jamming can function as a form of critical public pedagogy (with examples even from *Adbusters* magazine!), see Sandlin and Milam (2008).



metaphor generally through the criterion of iconicity, as the capacity to see resemblances even between things that are far apart. With this understanding, a closed metaphor is a metaphor that limits and reduces our thinking by not allowing us to explore and make new connections to our existing knowledge structures.<sup>16</sup> The closed metaphor rather forces an established course upon our thinking, controlling, and standardizing meaning-making. This closure can be (and often is) pragmatic (Eco 1984, chap. 3)—like the highly conventionalized meaning of traffic signs, or overcoded metaphors like “the leg of the table”—but, as we have seen with our brief study of kitsch, this closure can also be performed in the interest of ideology and dogma.

A poetics of openness—because it is just that, *a poetics*—does not conceptualize this closure from a wholly combative or critical perspective, as a force to be usurped or attacked. And in this lies its pedagogical strength: by approaching issues of critical pedagogy from an aesthetic standpoint,<sup>17</sup> the student has the capacity to rearrange qualitative possibilities and consider not only how texts may limit or reduce meaning but also how they *distribute sensible experience* (to borrow some coinage from Ranciere).<sup>18</sup> Anthropologist Michael Ling spoke to me about the interpretative praxis implied in a poetics of semiotic openness, emphasizing that:

although certain ideologies may attempt to close the interpretative *space of possibilities*, we nevertheless have the capacity to ‘read through’ or ‘read across’ (literally, dialogue) the limitations. I think this is significant as represented in how people have cognitively—and thereby in part, emotionally—survived oppressive sociopolitical regimes, by in effect, being able to engage that ‘*openness potential*’ even in the face of constraints and suppression of thought. See, for example, Josef Skvorecky’s essay “Red Music” on the importance of jazz under the anvil of two totalitarian regimes, Vaclav Havel’s appreciation for jazz and the experimental contemporary music of Frank Zappa, and the thread that runs through

16. For more on the metaphoric connectivity of sign systems, see Danesi’s (2013) excellent article from this journal.

17. As I was reminded by a helpful reviewer, critical pedagogy is a *polysemic* term; that is, it can have different and sometimes contradictory meanings. Thus, I should emphasize that the form of critical pedagogy I am drawing parallels with is not the simple neo-Marxist project of exposing dormant power relations, nor is it solely about addressing authoritative claims to knowledge in general. As explained in this section, it is rather a form of aesthetic criticism that is informed and sensitive to issues of class, race, gender, ideology, and oppression.

18. In “A Theory of Semiotics,” Eco (1979, 312) says that “semiotics helps us to analyze different ideological choices; it does not help us to choose.”

the film about East German surveillance of artists, “The Lives of Others” by Florian von Donnersmarck. (Personal correspondence)

In my own teaching practice and experiences as a student, I have repeatedly seen critical pedagogical approaches (lacking this aesthetic sensibility) fall short in their attempt to empower students and challenge issues of domination in the classroom. I have come to believe that this failure occurs largely because of the didactic ways in which issues around empowerment are often framed, ways that do little to question the inherent power imbalance between teacher-student (or student-text) relations. By focusing on the careful and meaningful art/practice of interpretation, students can begin to approach critical issues, not specifically as critiques on political domination and repression, but rather from an interpretative-aesthetic standpoint. Since a poetics of openness—being nothing other than *the* fundamental property of the action between signs, or semiosis<sup>19</sup>—is not a particular interpretative method, but fundamentally ontological in nature (i.e., a state of being and engaging with the world), students will be encouraged to seek out their own forms of emancipation and are not simply prodded (by the classroom environment) to follow a predetermined path of learning, which inevitably suggests a particular ideological underpinning.<sup>20</sup>

But why is critique necessary at all, and could the practice of criticism potentially work against this value of pedagogical openness? I would insist that to address differing aesthetic orientations and perspectives, a certain degree of critique *is* necessary. This is not critique in terms of deconstruction, nor about using the text for specific political uses, but rather in terms of *participatory aesthetic engagement*: finding new ways to “read across” the text. David Robey (cited in Eco [1962] 1989, xiv) explains the stance of critical engagement that Eco elaborates in *The Open Work*—most notably in an essay entitled “Form as Social Commitment” ([1962] 1989, chap. 6):

In one sense alienation is both necessary and desirable, in that we can say that we are alienated to something other than ourselves, and therefore lose full possession of ourselves, whenever we become involved in it. Losing possession of ourselves is not something to be lamented; it is simply part of the back-and-forth movement between self and the world that is

19. For the theoretical side of this poetics, see chap. 7 of Eco (1979) and my recent chapter (Campbell 2017a).

20. For more on some of the shortcomings of critical pedagogy, specifically its ingrained rationalist assumptions and how it can in practice proliferate the very relations it critiques, Ellsworth (1989) is still important and relevant.

the condition of a truly human existence. What we must do is accept our involvement in things other than ourselves, and at the same time assert our selfhood in the face of the world by actively seeking to understand it and transform it.

Asserting one's selfhood is the "critical" aspect of this form of "engagement," and the justification of my alignment with critical pedagogy. Without such assertions of self, there can be no meaningful learning engagement. Learners *must* present themselves in their learning encounters, for it is only through this presentation that they can (a) focus attention on the structures of the work/text itself, and (b) address how their perception reacts to and organizes these dynamic structures.<sup>21</sup> It is through attention to the ambiguity in the aesthetic message that our normal modes of schematization are called into question (Eco 2000, 223), and we are *led out* of our familiar positions. Just like the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary art that *The Open Work* is predicated upon, pedagogy too must not "channel . . . [learners'] responses in a particular direction" (Robey, in Eco [1962] 1989, x) but rather encourage dynamic forms of participatory engagement. With this poetics of openness—unlike with many descriptions of critical pedagogy, which assert a critical approach/method a priori—engagement *precedes* critique, but once engagement is established, a certain degree of critique is inevitable.

#### The Model Reader: Protector against Overinterpretation and Radical Constructivism

Openness as a pedagogical value is not equivalent to extreme student-centered approaches where any possible interpretation is valid and accepted. Scholes explains in *Semiotics and Interpretation* (1982, 14): "Leaving the reader 'free' to interpret is an impossibility. The free reader is simply at the mercy of the cultural codes that constitute each person as a reader, and of the manipulative features of the text, the classroom, and the whole reading situation as well." This ideal educational method should, through critical engagement (both intellectually and actively, i.e., through forms of culture jamming) address the underlying structures at work in the closed work. As discussed, closed works are texts that strive for a univocal reading by invoking predetermined responses through the use of ready-made effects. In this sense, they are "inflexible objects" that

21. "Where a form is realised there is a conscious operation on an amorphous material that has been brought under human control" (Eco [1962] 1989, xiv).

yearn to be read *a particular way*, “pulling the reader along a predetermined path” (Eco 1979, 8) of interpretation.

A well-organized text postulates an envisioned *model reader* who can activate the cultural codes that the author imparts in the text, both consciously and unconsciously. With this prerequisite knowledge, the model reader “can deal with the text interpretatively in the same way the author does generatively” (Eco 1994, 7). I must stress that this model reader is not the same as the empirical reader (who is simply you or me when we read a text) who instinctively relates the text to their prior knowledge and experiences. As Eco has said repeatedly, the model reader is a hypothetical construct: “a set of textual instructions displayed by the text’s linear manifestation precisely as a set of sentences or other signals” (Eco 1994, 16). Contrastingly, the closed text does not presuppose such a fully formed model reader, but in fact presupposes an *average one* in the same way advertising does (or for that matter, standardized testing) based on medium demographics. In this sense, these works are essentially speaking to everyone: “These texts that obsessively aim at arousing a more or less precise response on the part of a more or less empirical reader are in fact open to every aberrant decoding. A text so immoderately open will be called a closed one” (Eco 1979, 8).

Eco’s model reader is not simply a means of upholding the intention of the author. The empirical author certainly has intentions for the way her work is to be received, even if this intention includes involving the active participation of the reader.<sup>22</sup> But in Eco’s view the work takes on a life of its own, emitting its own intention (*intentio operis*), which is distinct from the authors, and it is this intention that we must use to guide us in the interpretative process.<sup>23</sup> However, if we refuse to give a privileged position to the author in interpreting her own work, we run the risk of arriving at the opposite extreme, where, as Todorov says jokingly, “a text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and

22. As Eco ([1962] 1989) suggests was Joyce’s intention in crafting *Finnegan’s Wake*.

23. See Eco (1992) for a further elaboration of the *intentio operis* and how it relates to and interacts with the reader’s intention (*intentio lectoris*), as well as the author’s intention (*intentio auctoris*). The following passage from these lectures is relevant in demonstrating Eco’s view that the reader’s interpretative efforts can be understood as a conjecture about the *intention lectoris*: “A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the ‘only right’ conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result. I am not ashamed to admit that I am so defining the old and still valid ‘hermeneutic circle’” (Eco 1992, 64).

the readers bring the sense” (Todorov, as cited in Eco 1994, 23–24). This overtly deconstructionist attitude toward interpretation even might seem to be advocated by a theory of unlimited semiosis, where *theoretically* semiosis is an infinite process by which “the torch of truth” (an expression Charles Peirce was fond of; see *CP* 1.339) is continually handed off from one sign to another. Envisioning a text’s model reader protects against this infinite recursivity, which Eco has coined hermetic drift; that is, “the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from a connection to another” (Eco 1990, 26–27). The model author is consistent with the approach to semantics proposed by Augustine (*De magistro*, CE 389), where the meaning of a word is not a platonic “dictionary-type” definition but rather a bundle of textual instructions for interpretation.<sup>24</sup> The text elicits a multiplicity of interpretative pathways but not *any* possible pathway. “Thus the competence of model readers is determined by the kind of genetic imprinting that the text has transmitted to them . . . created in and imprisoned in the text they enjoy as much freedom as the text is willing to grant them” (Pugliatti, as cited in Eco 1994, 16). I believe this concept of the model reader has the potential to be a useful pedagogical device. Having this analytical goal to strive for can only be beneficial in guiding the student through the interpretative process, even if such a notion does not empirically exist, or if reaching such a level of textual competence is not possible. By envisioning and constructing a given text’s model reader, we can gain insight into its underlying motivation and can perhaps through this process unveil a text’s relative openness and closeness. This is useful to protect against the apparent limitlessness of interpretation that this aesthetics of openness can seem to encourage. The conception of a model reader reminds the student that although personal engagement with a text is a right that should be encouraged, there is certainly a point when we are no longer interpreting a text but rather using it (Eco 1994, 10).

### Openness as a Model of Lifelong Learning

This aesthetics of openness informs not only our interpretative processes and engagement with texts but also presents us with a model of lifelong learning. The term “field of possibilities” coined by the composer Henri Pousseur provides a fitting analogy of this pedagogical orientation.<sup>25</sup> The notion of ‘field’ here is borrowed from contemporary physics and provides a “revised vision of the

24. For a fuller account of this semantic theory, see Eco (1984).

25. This analogy is explored by Eco ([1962] 1989) throughout the book.

classic relationship posited between cause and effect as a rigid, one directional system: now a complex interplay of motive forces is envisaged” (Eco [1962] 1989, 58). The term *possibilities* in this usage shows an increasing trend in modern science, art, and philosophy: “The discarding of a static, syllogistic view of order, a corresponding devolution of intellectual authority to personal decision, choice and social context” (Eco 1979, 8). One can see how this analogy can be applied to the development of an educational philosophy that is in accordance with the examples of openness that I have presented, where each reading of a text is only one possible path of interpretation and certainly not the ultimate one.

It is through fostering this poetics of openness whereby lifelong learners are created. Students who understand the power lurking behind every metaphor that expands their life-worlds consequently understand the power of imaginative learning. This kind of learning is not something unearthed and thus cannot be reduced to a *surface-substratum* metaphor, encapsulated well by that famous phrase of Bachelard, ironically adopted of the Althusserians: “There is no science . . . but of the hidden.” I am often dismayed how this search for “the hidden beneath the apparent” (Ranciere 2004, 49) is plaguing educational discourse. My main problem with this approach is that when one searches for something beneath the surface (whether that be the secret language of the body, Plato’s forms, an appeal to an essence or soul, a governing center outside of discourse, a god, the univocal *meaning* of a poem or story, etc.), a position of mastery is inevitably established. And suddenly we find ourselves thrust back into the dismal world of high school, with a teacher who knows “the code,” and a bunch of ignorant pupils grappling to find it. In short, such appeals work against the educational framework I have been elaborating. A pedagogy of openness must always try to operate not in terms of surface-substratum, but rather, as Ranciere says, in terms of “horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities” (2004, 49). The goal of such education is to continually reimagine the conceptual frameworks that allow us to conceive these statements and oppositions, those conditions that allow for a particular distribution of the sensible “that causes a painting or a piece of music to make an impression, that cause reality to appear transformative or inalterable” (Ranciere 2004, 49).

The fact that Eco ([1962] 1989, 24) says that “a work of art is never really ‘closed’ because even the most definitive exterior always encloses an infinity of possible ‘readings’” is precisely why texts constructed with closed intentions (like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a reoccurring example from *Opera Aperta*) should be read dynamically and openly. To reject these texts and the meaning to be discovered in them simply because of their author’s authoritarian strategies

for semiotic control is no different from critical pedagogy that exposes power structures but then does not go further to understand how these structures can be reimagined or “opened up” through the growth of collective semiosis.

As elaborated in the previous section, a pedagogy of openness is not about chasing authorial intention, but is rather about realizing a plurality of meanings inchoative within the structure of texts themselves—opening “fields of possibilities.” But these possibilities are only activated “locally” from certain empirical readers, with certain points of view at particular times in their life. Hence, the model reader proposed by the text is only ever achieved and brought to life in a certain “respect or capacity” (to use another Peircean turn of phrase). Eco explains that openness (and aesthetic experience generally) is not wholly subjective, nor objective, but rather activated in a relationship defined by the complementarity of observer and observed: “Neither Openness [of interpretative possibilities] nor [aesthetic] totality is inherent in the objective stimulus, which is in itself materially determined, or in the subject, who is in himself available to all sorts of openness and none; rather, they lie in the cognitive relationship that binds them, and in the course of which the object, consisting of stimuli organized according to a precise aesthetic intention, generates and directs various kinds of [aesthetic] openness” (Eco [1962] 1989, 39). Thus, this *field of possibilities* is dynamic and perpetually changing like the flow of semiosis itself, and thus it cannot be locked away in the idealist “casket of consciousness” (Deely 2009), nor in some reality “out there.” Openness—being validated by Eco in later years through Peircean semiotics (see Eco 1979, chap. 7)—is in fact “semiotic openness” and thus constitutes the mediating relation between a ‘real’ (i.e., a *mind-independent*) reality, and a *mind-dependent* cognitive process. As emphasized in later works—most notably *Kant and the Platypus* (2000, 1.11)—Eco advances what he calls a *minimal realism*: the understanding that there are many ways of segmenting the continuum of experience, but that there are also “grains of resistance” that motivate how and in what direction we make these cuts. In this sense, the text (/world) tells us (through *fallibilism*, how it pushes back against our interpretations) what readings it supports and which it does not.<sup>26</sup> What I thought was an open door will still break my nose if in fact it turns out to be a glass wall!

Openness, as I have tried to display it, is a value that I feel is absent from much formal education: in the classroom but also at the levels of administra-

26. Eco (2000, 53): “If the continuum has a grain . . . then we cannot say all that we want to say. Being may not be comparable to a one-way street but to a network of multilane freeways along which one can travel in *more than one direction*; but despite this some roads will nevertheless remain dead ends. There are things that cannot be done (or said).”

tion, policy, and curriculum. This is not a new educational method or a specific approach, for to prescribe this would be contrary to the type of education I am envisioning. To escape the clutches of standardization and the homogenization of learning, society must come to trust teachers in their ability to be flexible and not just display a blind adherence to method and curriculum. But also, and perhaps more importantly, we must trust students to question and engage with the texts and textual strategies that are set before them, and from this extrapolate to questioning the essential taken-for-grantedness of their lives and the societies that shape them; not from a place of blind expressionism, but from a place of reflexive and careful hermeneutic interpretation. This of course requires a massive societal swift, a great *de-acceleration* of schooling—of no longer thinking of schools as *learning environments* that produce desirable and profitable *learning outcomes* in the fast and certain march toward the future. This is a society that allows for the emergent space of the possible: “ready to trust people enough to free them of requirements of productivity . . . [to] allow them to be teachers and students” (Masschelein and Simons 2015, 93).

### Openness as Neo-Baroque (in Lieu of a Conclusion)

As Italo Calvino reminds us in his celebrated and uncompleted *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988)—echoing the sentiments of his younger friend Umberto Eco—art in the last century has engaged in a poetics of openness, a celebration of multiplicity, which is embodied in the forms of serial composition, free jazz, abstract painting, and (so-called) postmodernist literature. This runs somewhat contrary to the values of previous eras, such as the medieval system of hermeneutics, and the romantic individualism we’ve explored earlier. “Medieval literature tended to produce works expressing the sum of human knowledge in an order and form of stable compactness, as in *commedia*, where the multiform richness of language converges with the application of a systematic and unitary mode of thought. In contrast, the modern books that we love most are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of multiplicity of interpretive methods, modes of thought, and styles of expression” (Calvino 1988, 116). This celebration of openness points to interesting parallels between our postmodern age and the baroque aesthetic.<sup>27</sup> The classical Renaissance form tended to perceive art as having a definite interpretation: a single perspective from which the

27. This connection between the baroque aesthetic and a poetics of openness was, three decades after the publication of the open work, explored by Eco’s Bologna colleague Omar Calabrese in his 1992 book *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*. In the forward to this text, Eco himself further elaborates these connections.



entire work could be perceived and understood. Dante wrote extensive treatises explaining precisely how his works were meant to be read, down to minute details of the poetic forms he utilized and the allegorical references he wrestled into these forms. Renaissance painting searched for a single divine vantage point, which could be plotted mathematically, from which all detail and meaning could be actualized in a frame. Such efforts were no doubt the result of a deeply religious society that perceived reality as possessing a divine author whose intent was always present.

Contrastingly, baroque art attempted to dissolve such a “rigid, privileged, definite frontal view,” instead “inducing the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation” (Eco [1962] 1989, 38–39). The Bach fugue reveals this aesthetic: where a simple melodic figure embarks on a process of continuous metamorphosis, always in motion and never attainable in a definite solid state. This is a sentiment echoed by much modern science, which constantly reveals new knowledge to us about a universe that is charged with potentiality and in a state of continuous flux.

As masterful as Dante’s verse is, the aesthetic pleasure we receive from his work is not in our ability to recognize his rigorous adherence to a system of medieval hermeneutics. Similarly, the sense of validation that students receive from “figuring out” that an Emily Dickinson poem with the title and author removed is about a garden snake or some allegory about the beauty of nature is fleeting and shallow. Probably such pleasure is more a result of students’ drive for monetary success (of learning that is tethered to *productive* time) rather than a delight in aesthetics. Aesthetic pleasure is at the center of this dialogue of openness, for it is when our active participation is called upon in a work that we truly engage with it. As Borges’s famous title reminds us, we delight in the garden of forking paths—not the superhighway that gets us from one point to another as quickly possible, but the ability to linger, and wander, and explore.

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