Italian Semiotics of Memory: Genealogies and Current Perspectives*

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Summary. The article gives an overview of the development – in Italian semiotic research of the last fifteen years – of a semiotics of memory, as a specific subfield of a semiotics of culture. After a brief account of how memory has usually been defined in the different semiotic traditions (generative, interpretive and, above all, cultural), and after a focus on Eco's theorisation on memory (and its parallels with Aleida Assmann), the article presents some recent semiotic studies on the subject in Italy – mainly, but not exclusively, in the context of a research centre at the University of Bologna (TraMe), dedicated since 2009 to the study of memory from a semiotic and interdisciplinary perspective. Memory (especially cultural memory) has also been a relevant field of investigation for several Italian semiotic scholars that have explored different aspects related to a semiotic approach to cultural memory.

Keywords. Cultural memory, Umberto Eco, semiotics of memory, Aleida Assmann, cultural semiotics

Zusammenfassung. Der Artikel bietet einen Überblick über die Entwicklung einer Semiotik des Gedächtnisses in den letzten fünfzehn Jahren innerhalb der italienischen semiotischen Forschung. Dieses spezifische Teilgebiet gehört zur Kultursemiotik. Zunächst werden verschiedene semiotische Traditionen (generativ, interpretativ und vor allem kulturell) in Bezug auf das Verständnis von Erinnerung kurz umrissen. Dabei wird insbesondere auf Ecos Theoretisierung der Erinnerung und deren Parallelen zu Aleida Assmann eingegangen. Im Anschluss präsentiert der Artikel einige neuere semiotische Studien zu diesem Thema, die hauptsächlich, aber nicht ausschließlich, im Kontext eines Forschungszentrums an der Universität Bologna (TraMe) durchgeführt wurden. Seit 2009 widmet sich dieses Zentrum dem Studium der Erinnerung aus semiotischer und interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Erinnerung und Gedächtnis, insbesondere das kulturelle Gedächtnis, sind auch ein relevantes Untersuchungsfeld für mehrere italienische Semiotiker:innen, die verschiedene Aspekte eines semiotischen Ansatzes für das kulturelle Gedächtnis erforscht haben.

1. A new (but old) field of study

For semiotics, memory is an anomalous object. On the one hand, it could be argued that it represents a subject that perfectly, almost inevitably, fits its scientific horizon. If we accept Lotman's assumption that memory is just another name for culture[1], a semiotics of memory (at least with respect to some of its senses) coincides completely with a semiotics of culture. On the other hand, any attempt to reconstruct the development of a semiotics of memory inevitably corresponds to an operation of tracking down something that has been in some sense 'repressed', in the psychoanalytic sense: memory is a key in semiotics, but its presence and role is to some extent often implicit and 'silent'. With the exception of some authors – and perhaps due to a certain co-extensiveness of the processes of memory with the processes of semiosis in general – memory has sometimes been neglected in semiotic studies, or at least has been left in the background, as something that is not explained (in the sense of 'taken for granted').[2]

More generally, it could be argued that any act of enunciation or interpretation has something to do with memory in some sense, since any semiotic code or system is an intersubjectively stable – albeit dynamic – form. Indeed, the relative stability of semiotic systems is guaranteed by the possibility that they are 'durable', that is, that they can persist over time.[3] This, of course, includes first and foremost natural language (and all languages in general), which is to be regarded as a primary system of shared memory[4], persistent over time while being subject to ceaseless change and transformation: natural language is memory and could not exist without (the possibility of) a collective memory. On the one hand, natural language (and any semiotic language) is in part a memory, both as a structure that enables relative stability in the transmission of textual processes and ensures their interpretability (languages ensure not only communication but also, to some extent, diachronic transmission), and as a system in which each synchronic stage retains some memory of the preceding diachronic stages, even within the evolution and continuous change of languages.[5] On the other hand, the converse is also true: memory can be considered as a language (at least as a sum of languages: of different semiotic systems and substances), with its own 'syntagmatics' (the grammars that regulate the production of a valid memorable or memored 'statement'[6], in other words the 'discourse of memory') and a 'paradigmatics' (repertoires of narrative motifs, discursive configurations, parts of encyclopedia[7] that make up the system of memory that can be actualised in processes).

In other words, there is no memory without semiotics and vice versa: memory needs languages and semiotic systems to be shared and shaped,

and no communication system can prescind from the possibility of a collective (and intersubjective) memorisation. There is no semiosis beyond the possibility of saving and storing (but also selecting and erasing) meanings in order to transmit them.

However, even though many 'fathers of semiotics' have dealt extensively with the study of memory – not only Lotman and the Tartu School, but also, among others, Umberto Eco himself, who has repeatedly returned to the functioning of memory from a semiotic point of view, as I will show in the rest of this essay –, memory (both as a cultural and as a cognitive process, whose levels should be closely interwoven in a semiotic epistemology) has hardly constituted an independent topic in semiotics or represented a field that has been studied in its full depth. As Cristina Demaria has rightly pointed out in a work (Demaria 2006) that can be considered seminal for the future development of memory semiotics in Italy:

> One could almost say that cultural semiotics and sociosemiotics have actually always been concerned with memory in their investigation of the processes of signification in a given culture and the ways in which the social dimension itself is auto-represented and constructed. Yet, only in rare cases have they selected and addressed it as a specific object of study (Demaria 2006: 13, my translation).

Thus, assuming that this operation makes any sense at all, it is not easy to clearly identify a point in time that marks the emergence of a semiotics of memory, whether as a branch of general semiotics or as a subfield of cultural semiotics.[8] Nor would it be correct to speak of a sudden encounter with an object of study that had previously been neglected in the semiotic field. If anything, the reason why we speak of a semiotics of memory today lies in the fact that in recent years (cultural) memory has been rediscovered as an exciting field for theoretical investigation from a semiotic (and narrative) perspective. And indeed, in the last decade, semiotic research (especially Italian) has increasingly dealt with topics and issues closely related to memory.[9] If, on the one hand, the development of a consolidated branch of research on memory must be associated with a more general, renewed interest in the subject (as evidenced by the development of new theoretical fields such as Memory Studies)[10], on the other hand, these recent research interests find their place in an already well-defined and established theoretical and disciplinary horizon, that of the sciences of the systems and processes of signification. Indeed, semiotic research finds fertile ground in the field of memory, where it implants and continues the same theoretical concerns (e.g., about the processes of production, exchange, and transmission of meanings) that have animated the scientific project of modern semiotics since its inception. In this direction, several Italian semioticians have focused their studies on the main themes of cultural memory in an entirely new way, examining in particular texts, spaces, and practices that express, represent, transmit, and finally textualise shared memories.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the Italian semiotic debate of recent years on the subject of memory, paying particular attention to a research group at the University of Bologna, called *TraMe*, that has recently been especially active in this field. Indeed, thanks to the Italian semiotician Patrizia Violi and a number of collaborators who have established a special research centre on this topic, a kind of *Bologna School* of semiotics of memory has emerged and developed. *TraMe*, however, was not the only place in Italy where interest in a semiotic theorisation of (especially cultural) memory was sparked. Other important works on related topics were published by Valentina Pisanty, Franciscu Sedda, Ugo Volli and Isabella Pezzini, among others.[11]

However, before summarising recent developments and approaches, it is useful to briefly return to some 'sources' of semiotic memory research in Italy, in order to sketch a genealogy and present some key concepts from which Italian semiotics of memory has drawn inspiration. Particular attention will be paid to Umberto Eco's reflections on memory, which play a central role both in his semiotic theory and in the subsequent development of Italian memory semiotics.

2. On some (recent) origins of contemporary Italian semiotics of memory

I have already pointed out how difficult it can be to identify in semiotic disciplines a precise point in time or a particular body of work from which memory was explicitly recognised as a full-fledged object of interest in semiotics. Apart from Lotman and the School of Tartu (and, as I will show below, Umberto Eco), few semioticians have specifically and comprehensively studied memory. The main reason for this is that memory – both as the e p i s t e m i c   b a c k b o n e of any cultural system and as a particular d i s - c u r s i v e   g e n r e[12] – has always inevitably been in the background of most semiotic inquiry. But what kind of memory has semiotics traditionally studied? In what sense of the term "memory" is semiotics interested? In fact, "memory" is a polysemous term that subsumes diverse and multiple processes and phenomena that are studied and addressed differently by a variety of disciplines. The term "memory" has different meanings when studied by a philosopher, a neurobiologist, a cognitive scientist, a psychologist, a historian, a sociologist, an anthropologist, an archaeologist, and so on.

A semiotic view does not necessarily advocate one or the other of these theoretical understandings of the concept; however, the difference of a semiotic perspective is that it argues for an interpretation of the memory phenomenon as a 'semiotic fact', i.e., as something having to do with the production, interpretation, and transmission of meanings that are supposed to be durable over time, transferable and preservable through various forms of inscription in more or less permanent carriers. A convincing formulation of this theoretical position is proposed by Patrizia Violi, who responds to the same question ("what kind of memory is semiotics interested in?") in these words:

> How can semiotics say anything definite about memory, a subject that has always been researched and studied by a wide variety of disciplines, from psychology to history to philosophy itself? I would say that the most important feature of a semiotic approach is to consider memory not as a faculty of the mind, but rather as the result of that faculty (Violi 2015b: 263, my translation).

What is the result of the memory? Violi speaks here of the "externalised signs of memory"[13] or, in other words, of the "texts"[14] through which memory is expressed and through which it manifests itself in various media, supports, discourses, and spaces, but which, in a certain sense, also guarantee its permanence and transmissibility.[15] Thus, the memory studied by semiotics is first and foremost the so-called "cultural memory" as it has been defined (in very similar terms) by Jan Assmann:

> Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent. They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. External objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory. Our memory, which we possess as beings equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with "things", outward symbols (Jan Assmann 2008: 111).

The similarity between the positions advocated by Violi and Jan Assmann (whose works, incidentally, were also inspired by the theory of Jurij Lotman) should not be surprising.[16] In fact, there is a strong connection between the intellectual tradition of the study of collective and cultural memory of the 20th century and most of the culturological schools of thought of semiotics. These similarities can already be seen in the pioneering definition of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1941, 1950), who was the first to thoroughly and originally explore the collective dimension of memory, incidentally at a time when memory was being intensively researched but rather with a strong focus on its individual aspects (from Bergson's memory theory and vitalism to Freud's psychoanalytic approach, which is mainly a theory of memory). Halbwachs, a student of Durkheim, introduces the notion of "social framework of memory" focusing on the cultural, structural, and semiotic aspects of memory, emphasising the supraindividual and intersubjective qualities of memory, which in his writings is thought of as a truly semiotic system/language that, like a primary model system according to Lotman, shapes and generates individual memories (the meaning of which is ultimately acquired exclusively within the "social system" of memory).[17]

However, is semiotics of memory exclusively interested in memory in its "social" dimension? An interesting comparative concept comes, for example, from the outstanding work on memory, remembering, and forgetting by Paul Ricœur (2000), who, starting from a phenomenological theory of remembering, examines the relationship between individual and social

memory. This monumental book by this great hermeneutic thinker focuses on the idea of representation and explicitly invokes a semiotic theory capable of examining the discourses and representations of memory, which is constantly reshaped by narratives and raises similar yet different questions.

Certainly, recent semiotic research on memory has privileged a line of research that has many parallels with some of the key concepts in the study of cultural memory, viewing memory as both a system (language and semiotic structure) and a process (texts produced within a discursive grammar). In general, it could be said that recent semiotic studies of memory can be located at the intersection of three main theoretical coordinates, three macroconcepts that correspond to so many possible semiotic approaches to the study of memory (although they are more often combined): Lotman's idea of Semiosphere, Eco's notion of Encyclopedia, and the Greimasian Theory of Narrativity. These three key concepts denote three different (not exclusive, but complementary) forms of semiotic engagement with memory: as culture (Lotman), as a basic mechanism of semiosis (Eco), as a (collective form of) narrative (Greimas).

While Eco's and Lotman's theories tend to insist on the "systemic" aspects of memory (although Lotman's research is always also characterised by a marked interest in the analysis of specific case studies), the semiotic notion of narrativity can be applied to the study of memory processes along with its analytical methods for identifying narrative structures and discursive and enunciative strategies. This means that a semiotic approach that combines the systemic and processual dimensions of memory can prove useful in offering an analytical perspective and method for analysing the "external manifestation" (texts, discourses, spaces, practices) of cultural memory.

3. The place of memory in Umberto Eco's semiotic theory: the model of Encyclopedia

Since the aim of this article is to illustrate the development of a semiotics of memory in Italy, I will focus primarily on one of the aforementioned approaches, namely Umberto Eco's theoretical views on memory. Indeed, Eco's theory has strongly influenced recent advances in Italian semiotics of memory and, as I will show, initiated its development. In addition, the article repeatedly refers to the work of Lotman and Greimas, which are other important sources of recent memory semiotics. In these pages, I will not attempt to explore the entirety of Eco's work in order to trace the development of his thought on memory (which would be an enormous task and would risk diverting my discourse from the goal of this article)[18], but I will instead draw attention to some aspects of his theory that have influenced later memory scholars, looking in particular at his recent writings.

Indeed, memory has always been a central theme and pervasive concern in Eco's theorising, overt in some places, more hidden in others. If one

goes through Eco's *oeuvre* as a whole, his constant interest in the mechanisms of individual and collective memory becomes a visible feature. This is true of both his philosophical and literary work: novels such as *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004) – but also, to a lesser extent, *The Foucault Pendulum* (1988) and *The Name of the Rose* (1980) – contain countless references to the way we try to remember and forget, to the role of memory in our interpretation of the world, to the cultural character of individual memories. Many of his literary works are about characters who get lost in the labyrinth of their memories or delve into the depths of the encyclopedia. In *The Mysterious Flame*, Yambo has lost his autobiographical memory, but still remembers what he has studied and read (his semantic memory) and is forced to rummage through the material objects and books of his childhood to recover his own memory.[19] But it is not just about Yambo: many of Eco's characters embark on a journey through their personal memories (which, however, are always "made of culture"). The fates of Jacopo Belbo, one of the main characters in *Foucault's Pendulum*, are above all fates of memory, of his private and forgotten memories. By the end of the novel, Belbo's past life (and his forgetting) becomes key, and it almost seems as if all of Belbo's obsessions are merely mechanisms to cope with the repression of forgotten memories of his youth. Similarly, memory metaphors are prevalent in all of his other novels: what else represents the monastery's library in *The Name of the Rose* or Belbo's computer, which can search through thousands of texts at incredible speed[20], if not a figurative translation of his most popular concept of Encyclopedia?

All these examples from Eco's fictional worlds testify to his constant attraction to the major philosophical questions related to memory[21], but his theoretical writings, on the other hand, contain an implicit (but articulated) theory of semiotic memory that runs through his theoretical production, even if it is subject to several reformulations and rearrangements. Thus, if it is true that memory is not one of the most obvious research topics in Eco's work, one could at the same time say that memory is always central in his reflections.

A theory of memory and culture as memory is contained in the most original and influential concept of his semiotic theory, that of the Encyclopedia, which I have already anticipated. Eco introduces the concept of Encyclopedia in his *Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1975) by criticising the models that propose a "dictionary-like" account of meaning, according to which the meaning of a concept can be broken down into its "analytic components", that is, into a collection of semantic primitives. He contrasts this componential approach with the Encyclopedia model, in which the meaning of each "cultural unit" is defined by its connections to other cultural units that do not necessarily belong to the verbal language and interpret and translate the first cultural unit. A very illustrative example to explain this is provided by Eco himself: In a dictionary model, the meaning of the term "dog" would be determined only by some semantic features such as /animal/ + /mammal/ + /vertebrate/, while the fact that a dog barks or is domesticated is consid-

ered part of the knowledge about the world and not a necessary property of the language. Encyclopedic models reintroduce this knowledge about the world into the representation of meaning, but most importantly, they abolish the tree hierarchy (the most typical representation of the dictionary model) in favour of a dynamic structure of interconnected terms belonging to different semiotic languages (in this model, verbal language no longer takes precedence over other languages, since nodes can also exist in non-verbal form).[22] In this way, at the risk of oversimplifying the subject, the Encyclopedia recalls the idea of the memory of an everlasting, boundless collective mind.

This model, as is well known, contains assumptions based on Peirce's pragmatism and, in particular, on his famous notion of Interpretant:

> A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign (Peirce C.P.: 2.228).

Eco takes two Peircean concepts – interpretation and unlimited semiosis – and adapts them to make them the basis of his Encyclopedia model. Although he does not explicitly mention it in the first formulations of the concept, this model is not only about interpretation and meaning production, but also about memory. To understand this, it is enough to consider another important influence that helped Eco shape the concept and give it a clear structure, even visually: Ross M. Quillian and his model of semantic memory (Quillian 1968), which thanks to Eco will become known among semioticians as Model Q (Eco 1975, English translation: 122–125). In Eco's description, Model Q

> is based on a mass of nodes interconnected by various types of associative links. […] As can be seen, this model anticipates the definition of every sign, thanks to the interconnection with the universe of all other signs that function as interpretants, each of these ready to become the sign, each of these ready to become the sign interpreted by all the others; the model, in all its complexity is based on a process of *unlimited semiosis* (Eco 1975, English translation: 122).

Quillian, who wanted to find the representational structure of semantic memory, provided Eco with the first "visual image" with which he sought to represent the interconnected and anti-hierarchical structure of the Encyclopedia. After all, it is an infinite semantic memory in the broadest sense that is contained in Eco's Encyclopedia: the immeasurable memory of a limitless collective brain that records everything that has ever been said and interpreted in every semiotic form and language, and "plays" with these memories by ceaselessly searching and interconnecting them. It is significant that Eco received this important inspiration for describing the Encyclopedia not from a linguist or a philosopher of language, but from a cognitive

psychologist who was trying to study how memory works. This shows once again the central importance of memory in his model of the Encyclopedia.

In later writings, Eco revises and reconsiders this concept. In the Italian version of *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (Eco 1984), following a Borgesian imagery, he intriguingly describes the Encyclopedia as

> the sum of all interpretations ever made, objectively conceivable as the library of all libraries, library meaning also the archive of all nonverbal information somehow registered, from prehistoric cave paintings to film archives" (Eco 1984: 109, my translation).[23]

In this new definition, the Encyclopedia encompasses and registers all meanings ever produced and interpreted in all possible formats, interconnected and "connectable" in a labyrinthine structure that constantly generates new meanings and interpretations. The map of interconnected nodes of Model Q is now complemented by the idea of the rhizome borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari (1976, 1980), which explains the self-contradictory and non-coherent structure (a poly-structure?) of the Encyclopedia. However, to understand the extent to which the Encyclopedia is a model that explains cultural memory and its functioning, it is necessary to take into account the more recent reconceptualisations of this notion proposed by Eco in 1997 and especially in 2007, where he introduces different dimensions of the Encyclopedia and draws a distinction between a Maximal Encyclopedia, which is a "hypothetical compendium of all the knowledge available to a given culture" (Eco 2007: 49), the "Median Encyclopedias", which are "the contents of a given culture" (*ivi*: 73), i.e., the knowledge shared approximately by all members of a community in a given time, and the "Specialized Encyclopedias", which are accessible to members of some specialised communities (e.g., scientific communities).[24] It is important to emphasise that Eco points out that the existence of a Median Encyclopedia does not mean that every member of the community has the same type and amount of knowledge, but that the knowledge contained in the Median Encyclopedia is virtually "shareable" and accessible to all members of that community.

Thus, a simple equivalence between Encyclopedia and cultural memory would not be entirely correct; Maximal Encyclopedia would be something more than a collective memory: rather, it is the global semantic (or better, semiotic) space into which cultures are immersed and of which they are made. Maximal Encyclopedia is what a culture's collective memory produces, but it is immensely more extensive than that. In Eco's words, it is a "postulate" (though its existence should be considered real) that is never accessible in all its v i r t u a l   i m m e n s i t y, but only through "local representations" (Eco 1984: 43, English translation) (Fig. 1).[25]

Fig. 1. Umberto Eco formulates his idea of Encyclopedia as the endless semantic memory of a culture: a "library of all libraries". The image is the answer of the AI image generator Midjourney to the input "Library of Babel".

4.   The Encyclopedia as a model for collective memory?

To understand this point, it may be useful to compare this idea with another prominent theory of cultural memory proposed by Aleida Assmann, which is very much in line with Eco's model (Assmann 1999).[26] Assmann contrasts the idea of memory as *ars* (a technology for storing information) with the idea of memory as *vis* (a living and transformative force). In her vision, cultural memory is a dialectic between (active and passive) remembering and forgetting. On the side of forgetting, the active form corresponds, for example, to voluntary material destruction, censorship, taboos, and waste, while the passive forms of forgetting are represented, for example, by what is neglected, disregarded, scattered in forgotten repositories, or ignored as meaningless relics.[27] On the side of remembering, she instead identifies two figures, the *Canon* and the *Archive*, as an active and passive form of

remembering, respectively. While the Archive is the result of a passive accumulation and storage of information, the Canon is a process of active selection: a working memory *versus* the reference memory of archives. An *Archival* versus a *Functional Memory*, to use Assmann's terminology. There are certainly many points of contact between Eco's and Assmann's models: Functional Memory described by Assmann seems to function in terms of "local parts and sections" of a Median Encyclopedia, while the Archival Memory, which stores everything beyond its meaning or importance, looks like a Maximal Encyclopedia in which everything is registered, regardless of its usefulness, veracity, or relevance (on this, see also Salerno 2020).[28] However, what makes Eco's Encyclopedia more interesting from a semiotic point of view is the fact that it not only reveals the mechanisms of storage, recording, and reuse of memories, but also introduces the idea of interpretation, which is precisely what determines the ceaseless production of new information and the recombination of the semantic space of the Encyclopedia through unlimited semiosis. The advantage of the Encyclopedia is that it explains the dynamics and functioning of cultural systems as open structures whose constituent feature is the fact that it stores information (not in material form, Eco speaks of meaning) and interprets it incessantly in an unlimited semiosis. Thus, one could say that all information circulating today is related in some way to all information that has ever circulated: Every new meaning is created through the semiotic reprocessing of previous encounters, which are never erased and constitute the potential reservoir for new semiotic inventions.

On the one hand, the Encyclopedia (in its Maximal version) is much more than the collective archived memories of a culture: it encompasses the entire culture in all its possible past (and potentially alternative) existences, a "semantic metaverse" in which everything a culture has ever produced and known in terms of meanings can be connected to everything else, a self-contradictory structure in which all cultural entities, meanings, and interpretations ever socially expressed coexist: "We never know where it stops; the fact is that it also potentially contains what it actually (today) no longer contains" (Eco 2007: 88). This rhizomatic semantic space is thus not simply the archival memory of a culture, in which the forgotten and unnoticed are also preserved, but it is the "archive of all archives" that transcends a single given, historically situated cultural system and contains, above all, the mechanism that enables the making of new connections and the generation of new meanings, i.e., interpretation. On the other hand, the Median Encyclopedia represents the current and active state of the Encyclopedia in a cultural system (a Functional Memory, in Assmann's terms): rather than a local part of the Maximal Encyclopedia, it should probably be considered as a particular (and temporary) "state of existence" of the Encyclopedia in a particular time, with a particular condition of accessibility, but which can be locally cut and criss-crossed in an unceasing dynamic.

The other concept to which the Encyclopedia is often compared is, as I have already anticipated, Jurij Lotman's Semiosphere, another important

theoretical model that takes into account the dynamics of memory in a cultural system.[29] Of course, the two concepts are closely related, and both express similar views about the functioning of cultures, and both share a compatible epistemological vision that might be called "dynamic structuralism" (both Eco and Lotman attempt to go beyond structuralism in different ways).[30] The links between the two thinkers are very close, and Eco was very interested in and certainly influenced by Lotman's theories on typologies and models of cultures, and vice versa. Indeed, Eco himself did much to popularise Lotman's works in Italy and to make him known in Italian semiotic and intellectual circles: he encouraged Italian publishers to translate his writings (Eco dedicated a preface to some of them) and invited him to conferences in Italy.[31] Despite the many similarities between the concepts of the Encyclopedia and the Semiosphere, it is Eco himself who highlights some differences. In Eco 2017, he notes that Lotman's concept of the Semiosphere seems to identify with the "territory of a culture that has established rules to distinguish a Median Encyclopedia from the Specialized Encyclopedias" (Eco 2007: 73, note 39), which is then a subset of the Encyclopedia as he describes it. If one adopts this reading proposed by Eco, a Semiosphere would be something quite different from the Maximal Encyclopedia, since the former describes the topology of a cultural system in a given time (and indeed it has boundaries, can connect with other semiospheres, has a centre and a periphery).[32] In other words, on the one hand, the Encyclopedia shows how the processes of semiosis take hold and leave traces that can be used and interpreted later, so that they can become memory, while Lotman aims to describe a topological model of culture that implies memory (in which culture is memory).

A revealing example to illustrate the difference between Eco, Lotman, and Assmann is provided by themselves: the museum as a metaphor of memory. For Lotman, the museum is the visual image of the Semiosphere itself: a space in which various texts, objects, paintings, statues, signs, and visitors with their own "semiotic world" exist simultaneously and interact in mutual translation and generation of new meanings (Lotman 1985: 213–214). This example illustrates once again the absolute coincidence of memory and culture in Lotman: culture is based on memory, but also produces it by selecting, translating, and incorporating its past texts into new structures of meaning in the present. In Assmann, the metaphor of the museum is used to explain the distinction between Functional and Archival Memory: museums store items and objects in their repositories (Archival Memory), and only a part of them is exhibited and "actualized in the present" in the museum's collections and exhibitions, which are open to the public. This is the difference between the Canon, through which a past is made present (Functional Memory), and an Archive, in which the past remains past.

It is noteworthy that the image of the museum is also used by Eco, in a way that, on the one hand, summarises the two examples of Lotman and Assmann and, on the other hand, illustrates the difference of Eco's view from the other two. The museum is used along with the library and the

archive to illustrate a crucial aspect of the Encyclopedia's functioning that Eco introduced in 2007: the notion of l a t e n c y, which, along with the other paired notion of f i l t e r i n g, is one of the most interesting developments of the model and further specifies its functioning in relation to cultural memory. The figure of the museum as a "collection of all possible things" (Eco 2007: 25) – just like the library as a collection of all existing volumes – becomes for Eco a metaphor for the mechanisms not only of remembering but also of forgetting that regulate the Encyclopedia, similar to the Canon/Archive model proposed by Aleida Assmann, but with some differences. Similar to Assmann, Eco also attaches special importance to the mechanisms of forgetting and the role of forgetting in the production of a memory (as already argued by Assmann, Lotman, Todorov, Ricœur). Eco, however, focuses primarily on the structural processes of the Encyclopedia through which the immense wealth of its information is managed. As might be expected, this is done through an impersonal mechanism of filtering: the information contained in the Encyclopedia is continuously filtered in the Median Encyclopedia, retaining only what is deemed important and forgetting all details that would cause an overload of collective memory. In this context, Eco recalled Borges's (1944) short story about *Funes El Memorioso*, who developed a prodigious memory after falling off a horse: he was condemned to remember every experience of his life, no matter how small, and was completely incapable of forgetting them and leading a normal life. Similarly, society must forget and filter information in order to evolve. The function of cultural memory is precisely to filter what needs to be remembered and omit what is deemed unnecessary:

> It omits an infinite amount of information that the collective has suppressed because it was no longer considered useful or relevant. For example, it provides valuable details about the course of the Battle of Waterloo, but does not mention the names of all those involved-and so on and so forth (Eco 2007: 85).

Eco cautions, however, against viewing filtering as the result of a voluntary act: Rather, it is "an impersonal process that arises from a kind of inertia" (*ivi*: 86).[33]

What is forgotten, however, is neither erased nor lost forever, and this aspect is explained by Eco in terms of "latency", the mechanism by which some of the excess information, to use his term, is "deeply-frozen" until the experts (moving through a Specialized Encyclopedia) can "unfreeze" what is useful. Eco adds that latency is represented by the model of the library and museums, which are "containers" in which information can be stored, even when it is not available to the public, and made available again (by transferring it from the Specialized Encyclopedia to the Median Encyclopedia).

As can be seen, the version of the Encyclopedia included in Eco 2007 is the one that moves more decisively toward understanding the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting, testifying to Umberto Eco's interest in these topics, which was growing during this period.[34] But Eco had been

thinking about these aspects of memory for many years (and probably throughout his life). To name just a few other important writings (from his extensive body of work), in 1988[35] he had published the article *An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget it?* in which he demonstrates that it is impossible to develop a technique of forgetting that functions as a reversal of an *Ars Memoriae*, since any mnemonic is basically a semiotics based on "making the absent present", whereas an *Ars Oblivionalis* would have to make the present absent, which is impossible. These considerations are developed along with his numerous works on the *Artes Memoriae* in Eco 2007, as can be seen. In 1991 he gave a lecture at the Biblioteca Braidense in Milan (later published in 2006) in which he proposes to distinguish three different types of memory: the organic memory of our human brain, made of flesh and blood; a mineral memory, which developed with the invention of writing, when the first supports were clay tablets, or architectures and monuments, from the pyramids to the obelisks of the cathedrals, which were used as supports for writing, and then the vegetable memory, that is, the memory of books. Eco says that the vegetable memory of the book implies a kind of personal, if "absent" dialogue with the author of the book, while before the inscriptions, for example of an obelisk, one does not wonder who the author is. These different forms of memory thus imply different forms of dialogue and relationship with the past. One of his most touching reflections on memory is contained in a short documentary by Davide Ferrario and Vincenzo Trione, shown for the first time at the Biennale di Venezia 2015, in which Eco summarises his views on memory: "When we as humans say I, we mean our memory. We are memory and memory is our soul".[36]

After this brief overview, it is undeniable that Eco shows a recurring interest in the themes of memory, but is this enough to speak of an articulated semiotic theory of memory? Certainly Eco's theories contribute to describing some general mechanisms of cultural memory, but Eco does not seem interested in defining a precise theoretical framework to study its "processuality" (for example, how are specific and local parts of the Encyclopedia activated and what is the result?).[37] Nevertheless, Eco's positions have strongly influenced the consolidation of a collective reflection on the possibility of talking about memory from a semiotic point of view, as I will show in the next sections.

5.   From Eco to a "School of Bologna" of semiotics of memory: the birth of the research centre TraMe

In 2006, at the suggestion of Umberto Eco and Patrizia Violi, doctoral students in the semiotic disciplines of the doctoral cycle XXI were assigned a collective research project on memory. As I have shown, in those years memory was at the centre of the research interests of Umberto Eco, who was about to publish the book *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* (Eco 2007), the first chapter of which proposed a partial reformulation of his concept of

Encyclopedia and of his ideas about the functioning of the semantic spaces that structure a culture. A two-week seminar was held by Eco himself as an inaugural event for the academic activities of the doctoral students. The most important advances in the presentation of the concept of the Encyclopedia (later incorporated in Eco 2007, as I have shown in the previous section) were initiated by his recent reflections on the functioning of memory and, in particular, by the ideas of f i l t e r i n g and l a t e n c y. All the dissertations of the doctoral students in this cycle dealt with the topic of memory and its possible "semiotiation". They all covered very different topics and subjects, but the thread that connected all these works was the fact that they were strongly influenced by a kind of "Eco's imprint".[38]

This theoretical imprint is clearly evident in a joint paper by the same group of PhD students: during the same period, under the attentive supervision of Patrizia Violi, Anna Maria Lorusso, and Claudio Paolucci, they wrote a joint article that was, in a sense, the culmination of all the seminars, workshops, and intense discussions that took place within this group on the theoretical possibilities of studying memory from a semiotic point of view. The article was programmatically entitled *Memoria culturale e processi interpretativi. Uno sguardo semiotico* [Cultural memory and interpretative processes. A semiotic view] (Violi et al. 2008) and was published in a special issue of the scientific journal *Chora. Laboratorio di attualità, scrittura e cultura filosofica*. The special issue was entirely dedicated to the theme "Memory without trace, traces without memory" and included, among others, contributions by philosophers such as Carlo Sini and Rossella Fabbrichesi, as well as other exciting articles such as an interview with Umberto Eco (on the relationship between individual and cultural memory, starting from some comments in the novel *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*)[39] and another with Paolo Rossi, a renowned historian who has long studied the links between memory and science in the epistemological framework of intellectual history.[40]

This joint article should not only be understood as a fixed point of all the research and discussions of this group in those years, but it represents above all a milestone in the process of constituting a structured semiotic research group within the University of Bologna dedicated to the study of memory through a semiotic approach. In a way, this article could be read as a kind of programmatic manifesto for a semiotics of memory. Moreover, rather than limiting itself to the formulation of a theoretical proposal, it strives to outline an attempt at the empirical application of the concepts discussed in the first part, through the analysis of a specific case study: the aesthetic choices made in heritage conservation practices as different ways of "codifying" and producing an externalised memory (in particular, the cases studied are different examples of restorations of monumental historic architecture).[41] I will return to this particular case study in the next section when I illustrate some different applications of recent semiotics of memory. In what follows, I will instead focus on the two main assumptions that structured the proposed theoretical approach and influenced the subsequent

development of this research group. These two basic assumptions, introduced as a starting point for rethinking memory *sub specie semioticae*, are e x t e r n a l i s a t i o n and, again, f i l t e r i n g.

The concept of externalization was introduced earlier in this paper: The memory studied by semiotics is an externalized memory, that is, a memory that is "recorded" and transcribed in objects, spaces, or carriers of various kinds to enable its preservation and transmission to future generations (as well as communication within the present generation).[42] Although the emphasis seems to be on the materiality of memory, this idea of externalisation should not be understood as the process by which memory is "deposited" and stored in material carriers. Rather, this notion argues for a re-conceptualisation of externalised memory as a "system of cultural units" that must be codified, reinterpreted, and translated – in other words, animated through semiosis – in order to function as memory.[43] This conception of externalisation is also reminiscent of Leroi-Gourhan's idea when he speaks of the externalization of memory as the means by which a social memory is created through the projection of symbolic concatenations (Leroi-Gourhan 1970).[44] Exteriorisation, then, is here to be understood as synonymous with textualisation, where the text is not an inert material depository or memory store, but – according to the semiotic definition – both the basic unit of cultural systems and the model of their functioning.[45] As noted in the previous section, this position avoids any "substantialization" of collective/cultural memory, characterising it instead as an evolving process structured and animated by operations of interpretation, translation, and the continuous renegotiation of meanings.[46]

On the other hand, the view presented in this article aims to include also the larger "logic of culture" (to use the expression of Eco 1975) within which collective memories circulate and form the backbone of culture itself. In the framework outlined by this theoretical stance, memory becomes a homeostatic mechanism that governs (according to Lotman and Eco's conceptualisation) any cultural system, ensuring its permanence (but also its dynamism and constant possibility of mutation)[47] through strategies of transmission of knowledge and cultural schemas. These processes of self-regulation make it possible to transform an inactive stock of texts into a living memory.[48] The article then highlights the processes of "filtering"[49] that identify precisely this internal and impersonal mechanism of culture through which memory is ceaselessly stored, searched, selected, omitted, forgotten, and then reinterpreted, retranslated, and finally rewritten (re-produced). The processual and systemic levels overlap in the model presented in this article, in which intra- and intertextual, structural and interpretive paradigms are fused and interwoven.[50]

Less than a year after this publication, in 2009, Patrizia Violi and a group of colleagues and collaborators[51] founded TraMe, a research centre for the interdisciplinary study of cultural memory and trauma.[52] TraMe's research lines further develop some of the themes already discussed in the joint article mentioned above. Since its inception, the centre has taken a

semiotic approach and has been in constant dialogue and exchange with other disciplines working on similar topics (from cultural sociology to psychology, from cultural geography to history). The research areas that the centre aims to cover are diverse and include, as stated in the first version of the mission statement on the centre's old website[53], "the study of genres, representational practices, and sites of (individual and collective) memory in conflict and post-conflict situations, violence, and collective trauma".

This focus on conflict and post-conflict memories has already been discussed in the aforementioned book by Cristina Demaria (2006), *Semiotica e memoria. Analisi del post-conflitto* [Semiotics of memory. Analysis of post-conflict], which represents the first attempt to make cultural memory and post-conflict a specific object of semiotic studies, opening the ground in semiotics for this type of research.[54] She proposes case study analyses of the use and misuse of memory in conflict and post-conflict situations, focusing in particular on the discursive genre of testimony and on media representations of torture and violence.[55] Traumatic memories and cultural trauma are a specific topic that TraMe has always been interested in since its beginnings. It has dealt with testimonies and discourses of victims (Violi 2006; Demaria 2006; Lorusso 2009), with narrative translations in media, films and series (Demaria 2012, 2014; Salerno 2016; Lorusso 2017; Demaria and Violi 2020), with conflict and post-conflict cultures (Salerno 2012; Demaria 2020), but above all with sites of memory such as monuments, memorials and urban spaces in post-conflict contexts, as we will see in the next section. Indeed, an important part of TraMe's research is mainly dedicated to the strategies of narrative reappraisal of "troubled pasts" in cultures that have experienced collective tragedies and political violence, as well as to the "discursive spaces" (media, literature, art, heritage, etc.) and their texts, practices, spaces, and objects through which collective traumas are managed and described, in other words "semiotised".[56]

6. An important area of research: the spatiality of memory

In the last decade, memory semiotics has found fertile ground through the application of semiotic theories (both cultural and narrative) to a variety of objects. In the following sections, I will sketch a map of the main areas and objects of inquiry in which the semiotic method has proved fruitful. The new semiotics of memory has indeed proved to be very much alive: In Italy, the ongoing debate on topics related to memory is very fruitful and involves many scholars, not only from the TraMe research group, even if the core of this line of research can be traced back to it. It will be impossible to give a complete picture of the rich advances in Italian memory semiotics, and I will limit myself to showing links with some of the most important publications in the most active research areas.

One of the most interesting topics is the relationship between memory and space. Semiotics of memory has produced some of its most inter-

esting results when applied to the analysis of places and sites of memory, a topic that is also frequently addressed in contemporary Memory Studies and Critical Heritage Studies. The notion of narrative is frequently used in the latter two fields, and in ways that bear many analogies to the interests and methods of narrative semiotics. The idea that a memory site embodies and mediates a narrative is shared in much of memory research with the semiotic views that assume that significant organisation of space can be correlated with narrative processes (Marrone 2001). Following an already established research tradition on the semiotics of space (Greimas 1976; Hammad 2003)[57], the semiotic method proves particularly heuristic in its ability to unpack the "black box" of narrativity when analysing the spatial dimension of memory and to articulate more precisely the effects of meaning mediated by memory sites. Objects analysed in research in this area include museums, monuments, urban spaces, spatial practices and rituals of commemoration, everyday practices that deposit and reoccupy layers of memory in practiced spaces, etc.

The spatial dimension of memory is the focus of the book *Urbicidio, Il senso dei luoghi tra distruzioni e ricostruzioni in ex Jugoslavia* [Urbicide. The sense of place between destruction and reconstruction in ex Yugoslavia] (Mazzucchelli 2010), in which I analyse the processes of rewriting collective memory in some cities of the former Yugoslavia after its violent collapse in the 1990s, observing the changes in the urban palimpsests of Belgrade, Sarajevo and Mostar, where I consider the changes in these cities caused first by the destruction of the wars (which were animated by an "urbicidal logic" that targeted cities as landscapes of memory) and then by the reconstruction and restoration work that can be seen as a moment of reconfiguration of collective identities and strategies of collective self-representation (and representation of the Other).

A few years later, Patrizia Violi published a book that became one of the most important works in the field, summarising years of research on the subject. The book, entitled *Landscapes of Memory* (Violi 2014), focuses on what the author calls "trauma sites", that is, in her own words, those places

> that elaborate an existing trace and emerge in the place where atrocities and butcheries took place on a large scale; concentration, prison, and torture camps that were later transformed into museums and opened to the public (Violi 2014: 14).

Violi applies a semiotic perspective to the analysis of various trauma sites (the Cambodian Museum of Thuol Sleng, the Memorial Hall in Nanjing, sites commemorating victims of dictatorship in Chile and Argentina, the Ustica Museum in Bologna). These sites are considered not only as "material memory" (although their traces have an "indexical relation" to the events that took place there), but as mediators and active producers of memory that reshape their materiality, "indexically" linked to a collective traumatic event, in different ways and generate spatial narratives of it.

Apart from the differences in topics and foci, these two books share a common epistemological background and a similar approach, focusing on the spatial and narrative dimensions of memory and the materiality of places and sites of memory, which are analysed in terms of their semiotic and narrative strategies and processes of valorisation (and de-valorisation). A similar approach regarding spatiality as a "semiotic vehicle" for the processes of memory has been used by several researches that have focused in particular on issues related to the so-called "difficult heritage" (Macdonald 2009) and conflicting memories, from the analysis of monuments (Bellentani and Panico 2016; Panico 2018) to spaces of conflict between contested narratives (Mazzucchelli 2021), "terror sites" (Van der Laarse et al. eds. 2014; Demaria and Violi 2020; Mazzucchelli 2017a), and strategies of re-semanticising difficult heritage (Panico 2019; Mazzucchelli *forthcoming*). A forthcoming anthology by Patrizia Violi and Cristina Demaria will present a semiotic methodology for the analysis of memory spaces, collecting writings by various Italian semioticians (some of them belonging to TraMe) on the links between memory and spatiality (Demaria and Violi eds. *forthcoming*).[58] The new language of museums and the strategies for transforming memory into heritage and narratives about the past are analysed by Isabella Pezzini in an influential book published in 2011 entitled *Semiotica dei nuovi musei* [Semiotics of New Museums]. In it, Pezzini describes a method for analysing museums through an innovative reinterpretation of the classic categories of narratological and spatial analysis of generative semiotics.

7. The discursive genres of memory and the prevalence of a cultural semiotics approach "in the sign of Lotman"

As mentioned earlier, Jurij Lotman is a key figure in semiotic reflection on memory and in memory studies in general. Indeed, there has been a recent movement of rediscovery of Lotman's works within memory studies, although he was not completely unknown in the field.[59] Nevertheless, the recent publications of some of his writings, translated into English for the first time (Lotman and Tamm 2019), have created new conditions for memory studies to engage with cultural semiotics and rediscover its approaches. On the other hand, Lotman has also been re-read within semiotics to define a semiotics of memory. In this section, through a brief overview of some recent semiotic research, I will illustrate how certain themes and questions raised by Lotman (about the dynamics of cultural systems, the mechanisms of translation between and within cultures, the definition of events, the political mechanisms of forgetting, the regimes of temporality, the relationship between the discourse of history and memory, etc.) have positively influenced recent developments in the semiotics of memory. Another fruitful research direction in Italian memory semiotics concerns the different "discursive genres" of collective memory and the interactions with other discur-

sive domains[60], and very often these analyses have been carried out under the sign of a semiotics of memory and culture.

The relationship between history and memory (already explored in Jorge Lozano's seminal work on historical discourse, Lozano 1987) is at the heart of the research of Daniele Salerno, who has written significant pages on this topic, reflecting on the semiotic procedures by which something is defined as an "event".[61] The links between discourses of history and memory are more recently explored by Salerno in an article dealing with the narrative re-semantisations of Campo Fossoli (Salerno 2021) and, again in collaboration with Jorge Lozano, in a special issue of the journal *Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici* dedicated to "The Future, a Time of History" (Lozano and Salerno eds. 2020).[62]

Incidentally, memory research inspired by the work of the Estonian semiotician (and the principles of cultural semiotics) has always been one of the most productive. Franciscu Sedda is one of Lotman's most important followers in Italy and has also promoted the Italian translation of some of Lotman's unpublished writings. Sedda edited an anthology that begins with a long essay in which he emphasises the central role of memory in Lotman's theory. His research has consistently addressed questions about the construction processes of cultural memory, emphasising its role in the self-representation of collective identities in culture. In his main study, *Tradurre la tradizione* [Translating Tradition], analysing the role of a collective dance in Sardinian identity and culture, he proposes to rethink the usual concept of tradition through the lens of Lotman's notion of translation: tradition is not the mere repetition of a static past, but a dynamic moment of re-production and re-figuration of a past read through the present: an "invention between difference and repetition" (Sedda 2006: 2) in which the collective imagination plays the most important role.[63] Instead of the act of remembering, memory is then again thematised as the primary language of culture through which collective identities are fabricated and social meanings of intersecting temporal regimes are established.[64]

A comparable reinterpretation of the assumptions of cultural semiotics to recast memory in semiotic theory is proposed by Anna Maria Lorusso, an acute interpreter of the thought of Lotman and Eco. In her book *Cultural Semiotics* (2015), Lorusso illustrates the theoretical coordinates of a semiotics of memory by mixing classical references (in addition to Eco and Lotman, Bourdieu, Geertz, and Peirce, especially in relation to his theory of habits) and making interesting connections with some of the most important authors who have written on the subject: from Jan and Aleida Assmann, Halbwachs, Nora, and Ricœur to more recent contributions by Nünning (on the role of the memory narrative in the consolidation of national identities) and Rothberg (who is known for his concept of multidirectional memory). This combination of different but highly compatible positions leads Lorusso to formulate an original semiotic approach to memory, which she defines as "ecological" Memory.

> [It] is not located in objects or subjects, but circulates in dynamic and heteroge-
> neous configurations with multiple actors who are interconnected (Lorusso 2015:
> 104).

This Foucauldian emphasis on discursive formations and collective expressions prompts her approach to turn particularly to the cultural, social, and also political dimensions of memory, as she does in her analysis of the case study of the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo" (Lorusso 2015: 105), where she observes the development and stabilisation of the collective subjectivity of this political group (whose identity is based on a traumatic legacy and then on a narrative reconfiguration of the past) from its beginnings, when this group of relatives of victims spontaneously came together, to a political subject with its own agency. The progressive emergence of a subjectivity is associated by Lorusso with an increasing lexicalisation and grammaticalisation of its behaviour (which then turns into a text, as Lotman would have said).

 Another important and influential author active in the Italian field of semiotics of memory is Valentina Pisanty, who too has explored at length the connections between discourse of history and memory, mainly in relation with narratives (and counter-narratives) of Shoah. One of her most important works (Pisanty 1998) analyses and de-constructs the rhetoric strategies of Holocaust deniers. After revisiting the narrative of the Shoah, this time examining it from the perspective of its "abuses", she has recently published a thought-provoking book (Pisanty 2020) in which she critically reflects on the unexpected short-circuits between the dominant and mainstream discourse of Shoah commemoration and the xenophobic and neo-racist counter-narratives.[65] According to Pisanty, contemporary far-right racist discourse paradoxically feeds off the hegemonic cosmopolitan discourse of memory and human rights, adopting and distorting its rhetoric of victimisation and functioning as a quasi-resistance counter-narrative, an enantiomorphic image (to use Lotman's term) of a narrative based on the duty to remember and respect human rights.

8.   Future perspectives: a semiotic theory of memory or a theory of semiotic memory?

The different ways of dealing with memory pointed out in the previous pages have some common features (the theoretical consequences of which, however, remain to be discussed):

1.   Memory is a semiotic construct, observable in external manifestations that are coded, interpreted, translated, and narrated.
2.   Memory is dynamic and renegotiable: it is not a memory of the past, but always a discourse about the past. The past is always reconstructed, recombined, reinterpreted, translated.

3. Memory, although not a language, is a condition for the possibility of languages to function: It is a structuring and, in its local and historical actualisations, a structured semiotic system that can be analysed both at its systemic level (if not in its totality, at least limited to some of its local grammars and modelling acts) and in its processual dimension (the immaterial "acts of memory" expressed in texts, performed in practices, and embodied in spaces and materiality).

A wide horizon is still open and unexplored, and many challenges await the semiotics of memory. The list of open research topics yet to be explored can easily become long: the definition/construction processes of cultural heritage[66], the role of materiality in the various forms of externalisation of memory, the exploration of the various narrative genres and discursive domains of memory, the transformation of memory in the digital age[67], the aesthetic dimension of memory (including the mediation of the body in memory processes and the role of passions and emotions), the controversial and unresolved question of the relationship between individual and collective memories, etc.

In conclusion, some questions arise. Is memory semiotics an independent field, a 'specific semiotics', a subfield of cultural semiotics? What is the nature of its objects of inquiry? (Or better, is its existence tied to a class of 'memory objects'?) And most importantly, do we need to delineate a theoretical perimeter? If we follow Umberto Eco's suggestion to consider semiotics not as a discipline but as a field (Eco 1984), memory semiotics is a subfield of semiotics, since it encompasses a set of questions rather than identifying a class of 'objects' to which semiotic protocols and methods can be applied. And the main question, at least from a semiotic perspective, is probably not "How do we remember?" but rather "How do we recognise something as a memory?" i.e., how do some signs/texts convey 'marks' of being memorable (or 'memorated') or are interpreted as such? So it is about enunciation, but also about narrative and thematic roles (who remembers? Who narrates the memory?), but also about axiologies, epistemologies and deontologies (what is the right – true? – memory? Who can claim rights on memories? What should we remember and what should we forget?) and, above all, a narrative theme (and here, among all the usual and predictable questions, the most general might be: How do we time travel and jump back and forth between different time regimes in our everyday lives? How do the semiotic mediators we build for this purpose work?). To answer these questions, do we need a semiotic theory of memory, or do we need to re-conceptualise the semiotic features of memory?

Notes

*   I would like to thank Mario Panico, Patrizia Violi, and Anna Maria Lorusso for reading the first draft of this article and giving me suggestions and critical comments to improve the text. However, as usual, all errors and unintended omissions are my own.

1   This position is expressed in many places in Lotman's work (and in many of his writings in collaboration with Uspensky). The definition of culture as "the non-hereditary memory of the community" is found in Lotman and Uspensky 1978: 213–214.

2   It seems relevant to point out that there is no entry for memory in the Greimas and Courtés (1979) *Dictionary of Semiotics*.

3   On 'durability' of signs, see Zinna and Darrault-Harris eds. 2015.

4   Lotman and Uspensky (1975) used to refer to natural language as a primary modelling system.

5   What Greimas and Courtés considered processes of de- and re-semantisation (Greimas and Courtés 1979).

6   With the word statement I refer here to the basic element of a semiotic system, as the *énoncé* for Foucault.

7   I refer here to the concept of Umberto Eco, which is presented in detail further on in this article.

8   The distinction between a general and a specific semiotics goes back to Umberto Eco (1984), but is contested mainly by theorists who belong to the generative paradigm of semiotics, which sees itself as a general method for analysing the semantic articulation of any text, regardless of the substance of the textual manifestation.

9   Recent examples of theoretical contributions from Italian memory semiotics will be presented in detail below. Convincing theoretical approaches to a semiotics of memory were also proposed by Parret (2017) and Bouissac (2007). For a sociological perspective interested in a semiotic view, see Zerubavel (2004).

10   Memory studies should not be seen as an extension of cultural studies, but represents an original and stimulating approach in the current landscape of the humanities. For an overview, see Erll and Nünning 2008. For a disciplinary manifesto, Olick et al. 2017. For a theoretical proposal open to a possible dialogue with semiotics, Erll 2011.

11   See, in particular, Pisanty 1998, ed. 2006, 2012; Sedda 2002, 2003, 2006; Volli 2010, 2022; Pezzini 2011.

12   Following Marrone's proposals for a "semiotics of discourse" (Marrone 2001), the discourse of memory is one of the main objects of investigation of a semiotics of memory.

13   I will explain this notion in more detail in the following pages.

14   Of course, text must be understood here in its semiotic sense (Marrone 2014). Another textualist approach to the study of memory was proposed in Pozzato ed. 2010: memory is often used to refer to objective facts, while facts are constructed semiotically.

15   This approach obviously has many points of contact with the theory of "documentality" proposed by Maurizio Ferraris (2009), which describes the ontology of the

social world. For Ferraris, "social objects" are social actions inscribed and recorded on a support. This "iconological" model is criticised by Paolo Fabbri (2021), who contrasts it with a semiotic theory of traces. For a semiotic discussion of the notion of trace, see also Parret 2017; Mazzucchelli 2010; Violi 2014.

16 In this passage, the relationship becomes even clearer: "Cultural memory refers to one of the exterior dimensions of the human memory, which initially we tend to think of as purely internal – located within the brain of the individual, and a subject of encephalology, neurology, and psychology but not of historical cultural studies, the contents of this memory. However, the contents of this memory, the ways in which they are organized, and the length of time they last are for the most part not a matter of internal storage or control but of the external conditions imposed by society and cultural contexts" (Jan Assmann 2011: 5).

17 The semiotic significance of Halbwachs's concept of collective memory emerges clearly from his own words, where he remarks both the systemic (social frames) and "external" nature of memory: "Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs […]. There is no point in seeking where they [these memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them, upon condition, to be sure, that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking […]. It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (Halbwachs 1992: 38).

18 Moreover, other articles in this special issue delve into these authors in relation to recent developments in semiotics in Italy. See in particular Sorrentino's article on understanding Lotman's reception in Italian cultural semiotics, which is closely related to the field studied here.

19 Stefano Traini has recently proposed an interesting reading of this novel, namely as a narrative of Eco's theory of subjectivity as produced by the Encyclopedia, but also as a reappearance of that individual subject that in Eco's theoretical works is suppressed under the historical and cultural subject of the Encyclopedia (Traini 2021: 205).

20 Belbo is particularly fascinated by the incredible storage capacity of the computer, which makes the user forget what can be stored in this "externalised device".

21 Eco was also very fascinated by mnemonics and the *artes memoriae* (see, among other writings on this subject, Eco 2013).

22 This is how Eco explains the dissolution of semantic trees into an encyclopedic structure: "if we follow its inner logic, the tree of genera and species, however constructed, explodes into a swirl of accidents, into a nonhierarchizable network of *qualia*. As a result of internal tensions the dictionary dissolves of necessity into a potentially orderless and limitless galaxy of elements of knowledge of the world. It becomes, in other words, an encyclopedia, and it does so because it was already in fact an encyclopedia without knowing it" (Eco 2017: 36).

23 Oddly enough, this definition, which is very common in the Italian community of Eco scholars and gives a very vivid picture of this concept, is not included in the

English translation of this book (Eco 1984) and, to my knowledge, is hardly known in the Anglo-Saxon world of semiotics scholars.

24 The concepts of Median and Specialized Encyclopedia are the further development of some ideas already presented in Eco 1997, where Eco distinguishes between Nuclear Content (NC) and Molar Content (MC) to indicate different set of interpretants to represent the meaning of a term, e.g., an ordinary person will have some simplified ideas to explain what an atom is, unlike an atomic scientist who has access to more detailed information.

25 For a compatible reading, at least in some respects, of the parallels between Eco and Assmann, see Salerno 2020. Salerno also suggests a comparison with another pair of terms in Lotman: informative and creative memory. On this point, see also Tamm 2019.

26 On the global/local levels of Encyclopedia and their dynamics, see Paolucci 2010; Violi 2015a, 2017a.

27 This point is very similar to the difference between active and passive destruction described by Lotman and Uspensky (1975), who distinguish between forgetting as "involuntary forgetting" of some texts that once belonged to a particular semiosphere, and the forcible expulsion of texts from it through voluntary destruction as a form of imposed forgetting.

28 Salerno (2020) claims that Assmann's Functional Memory resembles Eco's idea of Local Encyclopedias. I agree with this interpretation and further suggest that Eco's notion of Median Encyclopedias (with their "local cutouts") should be considered closer to Assmann's idea of cultural (and then functional) memory.

29 See Sorrentino's article in this special issue for a detailed discussion of this topic. Some parallels between Encyclopedia and Semiosphere have also been suggested and discussed in Paolucci (2010), Lorusso (2015), Volli (2010), Violi (2017a), Salerno (2021).

30 See Paolucci 2010 on this point.

31 according to some voices, the first city Lotman visited in Italy outside the Iron Curtain was Palermo (where he had been invited to attend a conference of the *Italian Association of Semiotics*), others say Milan. See Belpoliti (2022) for an account of Lotman's conference at Palazzo Sormaini in Milan in 1987.

32 A similar opinion is held by Patrizia Violi, who states that "a semiosphere is never a global or maximal encyclopedia, it is always local. Moreover, a semiosphere is always organized around some centre" (Violi 2017a: 232).

33 In general, Eco insists on this impersonal property of forgetting, which is then an internal mechanism. While he suggests some examples of voluntary acts of memory erasure (such as *damnatio memoriae*), he does not believe that they effectively produce forgetting (on the impossibility of an *ars oblivionalis*, see also Eco 1988 and Mazzucchelli 2017b for a reading of this theme through Eco's other theories of the modes of sign production). In Lotman and Uspensky we find a stronger emphasis on the voluntary destruction of memory and collective memory as a battlefield on which fierce battles are fought (Lotman and Uspensky 1975).

34 During this period, Eco was deeply engaged with issues of cultural memory, as reflected in his decision to dedicate the lecture he was to give at the United Nations on October 21st, 2013, to the topic of collective memory. The title of the lecture was

On the Loss of Memory and illustrated the two ideas of filtering and latency that he later used to readjust some aspects of his Encyclopedia model.

35   However, the article was presented at a symposium on semiotics and memory at the Centre *for Semiotics and Linguistics* in Urbino in 1966, when Eco was already interested in the topic of memory and mnemonics (in a note of the article he declares to be indebted to the works of Paolo Rossi and Francis Yates on the art of memory (Rossi 1960; Yates 1966).

36   From the documentary *Sulla Memoria*, by Davide Ferrario, 2015.

37   I owe this observation to Patrizia Violi (personal communication).

38   To give an idea of the variety of topics addressed in the theses, they range from the relationship between cognitive science and semiotics, applied to the mechanism of remembering a movie (Odoardi 2009), to the memory gaps of terrain vagues studied as a result of practices of meaning renegotiation (Granelli 2009). Some of the theses were later published in revised form (e.g., Mazzucchelli 2010; Salerno 2012).

39   To the question "In your opinion, what contribution could semiotics make to the study of memory?", Eco answers sardonically: "I knew it, but I can't remember". (Cappuccio and Paolucci eds. 2008: 6).

40   See in particular Rossi 1991.

41   This part about the preservation of cultural heritage as a practise of codification and invention of a memory, as well as the analyses, were written by myself and further developed in my later works.

42   See the reflections on the category of "posterity" proposed by Lorusso (Lorusso 2020).

43   This idea, of course, was strongly influenced by some recent approaches in cognitivism that mix phenomenology and pragmatism, such as the paradigm of the extended mind (Clarke and Chalmers 1998), distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995), etc. All these aspects have been introduced in the theory of semiotics and further developed by Claudio Paolucci (see Lobaccaro's article in this issue). A stimulating attempt to establish a dialogue between semiotics and cognitive science on these issues can be found in Fusaroli et al. (eds. 2011). An interesting cognitive semiotic approach to memory is proposed in Sönesson (2015). Another convincing proposal for convergence between semiotics and neuroscience by adopting biological and evolutionary models can be found in Bouissac (2007).

44   On this point, see in particular Mazzucchelli 2010: 19 (for the connection between Leroi-Gourhan's notion of externalised memory and the process of textualisation in semiotics) and Violi 2014: "externalized memory is none other than a semioticized memory, that is to say one textualized and set within a system with Expression and Content" (Violi 2014, English translation: 20).

45   For a semiotic definition of text, see Marrone 2014.

46   Eco's notion of Encyclopedia provides a model for dealing with these dynamic features of memory (see Lorusso 2013), but similar positions are unsurprisingly found in Lotman, who explains very well how the notion of text of memory takes into account the moment of interpretation and renegotiation. In a passage in his book (Lotman 1992: 25), he describes the text's dual relationship to memory and temporality: the text is like a still image artificially suspended between past and future, and the text conveys a "past" to its readers through a tension between the "direct memory" embodied in the text's internal structure and the "extra-textual memory"

to which it is connected. In this tension, the viewer is seen as playing an active role (as in Eco's theory of the model reader, 1979). Franciscu Sedda, in particular, has explored these ideas of Lotman in order to develop a semiotics of memory, especially the category of translation in Lotman's sense (Sedda 2012).

47 Lotman's (1992) idea of cultural explosion takes into account this aspect of dynamics, change and discontinuity of cultural systems.

48 Aleida Assmann would speak of memory as *vis* in contrast to memory as *ars*, as described in the previous sections.

49 See previous paragraph for this notion introduced by Eco.

50 This conception can be compared with a recent theoretical proposal by Daniele Salerno, in which he speaks of memory as both "form" and "movement" (Salerno 2021).

51 Just to mention some of them: Cristina Demaria, Anna Maria Lorusso, Claudio Paolucci, Daniele Salerno and myself. Later Mario Panico joins the group. Many other members of the group belong to other disciplines, like sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology and so on.

52 The name TraMe was chosen as an acronym for Trauma and Memory because much of the research is devoted to the study of traumatic and stressful memories and their symbolic reprocessing. However, the centre has always been interested in all facets of memory from a semiotic and interdisciplinary perspective.

53 The new website of the centre is at this address: https://centri.unibo.it/trame/it. TraMe is active in the Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies of the University of Bologna. It is probably worth noting too that the MA program in Semiotics, active in the same Department, offers a course on semiotics of memory. To my knowledge, this is the only chair in the world on this subject.

54 Demaria's book is not exclusively concerned with post-conflict memory, but redefines the terrain of semiotics for memory research by opening up a new line of research, albeit one already rooted in semiotic theory and discourse analysis. In particular, the introduction reviews the literature on semiotics, hermeneutics, and philosophy and develops an effective conceptual toolkit for the scholarly project of a renewed semiotics of memory. In these pages, Demaria sketches a kind of theoretical family tree that shows the kinship between the main thinkers of memory studies and culturological semiotics and promotes an interdisciplinary translation of concepts by relating the works of Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Paul Ricœur, Pierre Nora, Tzvedan Todorov, etc., to semiotic theories.

55 The texts analysed by Demaria included testimonies for the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in South Africa, the Valech report about the violences and tortures perpetrated in Chile during the Pinochet regime, the media representation of the Abu Ghraib tortures in relation to gender stereotypes.

56 Under this line of research, TraMe has conducted two European Commission- funded projects on this topic, *Memosur* (MSCA-IRSES) and *Speme* (MSCA-RISE), which explore how the difficult legacy of the past (in Latin America and Europe) should be preserved and transmitted to promote better awareness of the past, a culture of human rights, and post-conflict reconciliation processes. In general, TraMe has conducted research on the transmission of the trauma of the Argentine dictatorship (through the study of sites such as former detention centres, monu-

ments, parks, and memorial museums, as well as through the study of audiovisual materials) and on the forms of post-conflict witnessing and communication in the Colombian context. Two special issues of the semiotic journal *Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici* (founded by Umberto Eco) were directed and edited by members of TraMe (TraMe 2013; Van der Laarse et al. eds. 2014).

57   For an introduction, cf. Giannitrapani 2013.

58   A forthcoming special issue of the journal *Lexia*, edited by Mazzucchelli, Vitale and Leone, investigates the semiotics and politics of cultural memory in urban spaces. On this topic, see also Cervelli 2020.

59   Jan and Aleida Assmann have acknowledged Lotman's influence on their work; but other memory researchers, e.g. Astrid Erll (2011), had already introduced his thinking into the "canon" of memory research.

60   The semiotics of discourse and the processes of translation between different discursive domains has also been studied by sociosemiotics (Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001), but rarely in relation to collective memory.

61   Salerno (2018) is working in particular on the analysis of the case of the Ustica massacre and on the evolution of the media, juridical, and historical narratives of this event over time. For Lotman's ideas about the semiotic nature of the event see Tamm 2019.

62   This issue contains an unpublished writing of Lotman and marks the richness of Lotman's approaches to the semiotic study of memory.

63   In the words of Sedda, memory is "something present that unravels from the present, takes up the past and pushes us towards a certain future. It is not a deposit of relics, but an engine of experience anchored in the deep levels of the subject's body" (Sedda 2002: 2, my translation).

64   The aforementioned special edition of *Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici* (Lozano and Salerno eds. 2020) and the recent special edition of *E|C* (Giannitrapani and Lorusso 2020) take up this theme and update the reflections on the question of temporality in the context of collective memory, considering also the role of the processes of imagination and the conception of a future in the narrative definition of the past.

65   On the "abuses" and instrumentalisation of the Day of Commemoration of the Victims of the Shoah, see the thought-provoking book by semiotician Ugo Volli (2022).

66   Together with Francesco Mangiapane, I am currently working on a redefinition of a semiotic view on cultural heritage, through a series of seminars organised by *Circolo Semiologico Siciliano* and TraMe at *Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino*, on the topic *Ereditare. Semiotica del patrimonio* [Inheriting. Semiotics of heritage], (Palermo, April–December 2022) and a forthcoming book on the same topic, titled *Ereditare. Relazioni semiotiche tra cultura e territorio* [Inheriting. Semiotic relations between culture and territory] (Mangiapane and Mazzucchelli eds. *forthcoming*).

67   A forgotten semiotic contribution on memory and the digital revolution was Maldonado 2005. Among the many publications on this topic, I refer here to Paolucci 2013, Violi 2017b, and Treleani's work on digital archives (2017).

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Filmography

Sulla Memoria, dialogo con Umberto Eco (ITA 2015, directed by Davide Ferrario, with Vincenzo Trione).

Image source

Fig. 1. Umberto Eco formulates his idea of Encyclopedia as the endless semantic memory of a culture: a "library of all libraries". The image is the answer of the AI image generator Midjourney to the input "Library of Babel".

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