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## Semiotics in Torino

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WORLD REPORT

## Semiotics in Torino, Italy

*By Massimo Leone*

Semiotics at the University of Torino has a glorious past, an industrious present, and a promising future. As regards the past, it was at the University of Torino that in 1954 Umberto Eco was awarded his doctoral degree ("laurea") in the Department of Philosophy upon discussing a thesis on the aesthetical question in Saint Thomas Aquinas. Later, Umberto Eco's name and fame was mostly associated with his research in semiotics at the University of Bologna, but probably his student years in Torino, and especially the teachings of his mentor Luigi Pareyson, played an important role in the genesis and the first developments of Umberto Eco's aesthetic and semiotic theory.

Furthermore, it was at the University of Torino that in 1970 D'Arco Silvio Avalle, a distinguished Italian philologist and semiotician, was appointed the first chair of semiotics ever in a faculty of letters in Italy (Umberto Eco had been appointed associate professor of semiotics at the Faculty of Architecture in the Polytechnic University of Milan in 1969).

Semiotics is still strongly present in the University of Torino. On the one hand, D'Arco Silvio Avalle's line of research has been continued for many years by Gian Paolo Caprettini, chair of semiotics from 1975 and currently Professor of Semiotics of Cinema and Television at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Music, and Performance, where assistant professors Alessandro Perissinotto and Andrea Valle also develop their research, in the fields of the semiotics of creative writing and music respectively.

On the other hand, it is the Department of Philosophy at the University of



Professors Volli, Ferraro, and Leone



A glimpse at Torino University's architecture

Torino that displays the most significant concentration of semiotic activities. Three tenured professors of semiotics teach and carry on research in this department: Prof. Ugo Volli, chair of semiotics, teaches textual semiotics and philosophy of communication and focuses on cross-fertilization between semiotics and philosophy and on the textual analysis of the Jewish tradition; Prof. Guido Ferraro teaches general semiotics, semiotics of advertisement, semiotics of consumption, and narratology and focuses on theories of narration and their applications in market communication; Prof. Massimo Leone teaches general semiotics and semiotics of culture and focuses on visual semiotics, semiotics of religion, and urban semiotics. The three of them are characterized by a non-sectarian approach to semiotics, equally open to receive and cultivate insights from Peirce's, Saussure's, and Lotman's semiotic traditions. The Torino research group in semiotics also includes: lecturer Laura Rolle, who specializes in semiotics of advertisement and is a member of a private think tank on communication trends; post-Doc Antonio Santangelo, who specializes in semiotics of audiovisual materials; post-Doc Federica Turco, who specializes in gender issues; post-Doc Roberto Mastroianni, who specializes in semiotics and hermeneutics; research assistant Marco de Maria, who specializes in semiotics of cinema; plus several PhD students and candidates.

Besides teaching their courses to students of the University of Torino, Volli, Ferraro, Leone, and the other members of the semiotic research group of Torino are engaged in carrying on a series of research activities, also involving PhD students and post-Doc researchers in semiotics. These activities include:

- 1) A series of symposia called "Incontri sul senso" ("Meetings on meaning"): prestigious semioticians from Italy, Europe, and around the world are invited to deliver conferences on their on-going research projects, present their latest books, or propose new interpretations of such or such semiotic tradition to an audience of academics, post-Doc researchers, PhD students, and undergraduate students who write their dissertation in semiotics;

2) A monthly seminar for post-Doc researchers, PhD students, and advanced undergraduate students in semiotics; the topic of the seminar changes every year, but usually consists in a thorough collective reading and interpretation of the complete works of a famous semiotician. In 2008-2009, for instance, all Greimas's works have been read and discussed by the seminar's participants;

3) A monthly seminar where PhD students present their on-going research projects to both their peers and to the professors of semiotics;

4) An annual roundtable, usually on a theoretical issue and involving both semioticians and non-semioticians;

5) The publication of Lexia, a semi-annual journal devoted to semiotic research, and available both on paper and on-line;

6) Research projects carried out through CIRCE (Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on Communication). In the last three years, the semioticians of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Torino have focused, in particular, on urban semiotics. A biannual project on this topic carried on with other predominantly semiotic research groups from other Italian Universities (Bergamo, Bologna, Palermo, Rome, and Sassari) has been financed by the Italian Ministry for Research. The main results of this project have been published both through a monographic issue of Lexia and in a dedicated website;

7) A summer school on semiotics, organized every early September in cooperation with the New Bulgarian University;

8) A series of lectures proposed by European colleagues through the many SOCRATES/ERASMUS learning agreements the University of Torino has signed with other major centres of semiotic research in Europe (Helsinki, Riga, Sofia, Tartu, Vilnius, etc.)

As regards the future of semiotics in Torino, it will depend on many contingent factors. However, members of the research group on semiotics in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Torino intend to

concentrate their energies on two goals:

1) Enhancing the cooperation with non-European centres for semiotic research; from this point of view, excellent ties of cooperation have been already established with universities in Africa, Asia, Australia, and in the Americas;

2) Enhancing the cooperation with private institutions working in the fields of communication and meaning management; from this point of view, a fruitful synergy has already come about with the city council of Torino, especially in relation to research on urban semiotics.

Torino is a well-kept secret. Traditionally excluded from the Italian Grand Tour, and commonly associated with a glorious tradition in both car industry (FIAT) and sport (Juventus, the 2006 Winter Olympics), it is also a city of history, culture, and leisure. Torino reveals itself to the lucky visitors as the embodiment of a rare equilibrium between Mediterranean and Central European cultural trends. Semioticians from around the world are more than welcome to visit us and participate in our activities.