

## Fiction and Truth, Picture and Lie

### Summary

The aim of the present paper is not to consider the full notion of the word 'lie' and its different usages. I will, instead, analyse it from a theoretical point of view, trying to find out what a lie is, proceeding from a phenomenon where the possibility of lying seems to be the most doubtful – a pictorial lie. We can ask whether a picture can convey a lie, and under which conditions it could be possible. Under which conditions can we recognise it, meaning, how can we be sure that the picture is actually lying?

Proceeding from a semiotic point of view, it is tempting to base the following on Umberto Eco's much too well-known statement:

'Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be *taken* as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it. Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all. I think that the definition of a "theory of the lie" should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for general semiotics.'<sup>1</sup>

It is remarkable that, whereas the question of truth has been among the central problems of philosophy, the questions of falsehood and the lie have not received similar attention. The same can be admitted, regardless of Eco's provocative statement, about semiotics.

Eco's aim was, naturally, an extremely exaggerated opposition to analytical philoso-

phy. On the other hand, it is interesting to examine what he conceived as a *lie*, and to which *truth* he was opposed. He did not specify any of these notions but, in a more roundabout way, we can focus attention on the following.

Regarding the theories of truth, Eco seems to proceed primarily from the Aristotelian correspondence theory of truth ('To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.' – *Metaphysica*, 4.1011b25), or even from an intuitive criterion of truth. A falsehood is always more indefinite, and it can discernibly be based on binary logic: if a proposition corresponds to a fact, it is truthful; if it does not, it is false. However Eco does not make a difference between *false* and *lie* (an untruthful statement made to someone else with the intention of deceiving).

In such a way, the proposition *is false* can be defined only through the proposition *is truthful*, or, it can be defined as a negation: *is not true*; and truth, in its turn, can be defined through reference. If the sentence *the snow is red* is false, the snow can be of any other colour except red. At the same time, in the case of false negative sentences, the lie has a single value. If the sentence *a rose is not a flower* is false, then a rose is exactly a flower.

Among different conceptions of truth, Eco selects the correspondence theory of truth, which requires the possibility of sensing the external world, the reality within certain limits, and together with that, the analysability of reference. He does it to show that semiotics is not interested in reference, or at least,

1 U. Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 7.

according to Eco's thinking, it should not be interested in it. In his theory, Eco is actually not interested in questions of truth and falsehood and their applicability in semiotics. He is interested in separating the research object of semiotics from the really existing world and, together with that, from our individual experiences. Still, in admitting the possible existence of a lie, semiotics maintains the problem of reference and relations with reality.

At the same time, Eco is clearly mistaken at one point, and this proposition contradicts his main aim of excluding the problem of reference from semiotics: 'If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all.'

There exist sentences and other semiotic sign processes where we cannot assert for sure that they are true or false. We could mention not truth-apt questions and commands known in different theories of truth (*Where do you go? Give it to me!*).

Regarding other sign processes, we can mention pictorial representation, where there still exist, to a certain extent, the possibilities of expressing and recognising a lie.<sup>2</sup>

But primarily, we can include here natural signification – symptoms and indexical signs in the form *if p then q* – where the determination of true/false exists outside signification, or, only the interpretation can be true or false. At the same time, iconic signs can, to some extent, be used in lying – e.g. camouflage – but this requires simultaneous acts of natural and conventional signification.

In textual semiotics, the question of true/false is interwoven with fiction. A text is fictional when it presents fictional, non-real circumstances in such a way that suggests to us that they are real. At first glance, the difference between fiction and fact seems to be very clear-cut. Contrary to a fictional text, a

factual text (a historical text, memoirs) has been precisely located in space and time and it presents events that have really occurred. But, very often, it has been pointed out that the difference between fact and fiction is complicated. First, the author of a factual narrative may, either intentionally or unintentionally, make mistakes. In this case, we are dealing with a lie, and the presented narrative does not turn into a fictional text. And a work of literature can well present only facts, yet still remain a fictional work.

Accordingly, in the case of fiction, we cannot talk directly about the truth in the same sense as in the correspondence theory of the truth, but we can talk about truthfulness. For example, Michael Riffaterre's fictional truth<sup>3</sup> more or less coincides with the coherence theory of truth in philosophy. The truthfulness of a proposition lies in its belonging to some suitably defined set of propositions, which has to be conflictless, coherent etc. Since we perceive the world through our system of beliefs, we can test the truthfulness of these beliefs only against other beliefs. Their truthfulness is confirmed by their mutual agreement and a lack of conflicts. We cannot step out of our system of beliefs to check how well it corresponds to the real world. Here, it seems to me that the most suitable way of determining falsity and the pictorial lie is also through the coherence theory of truth.

Proceeding from the coherence theory of truth, a proposition is false if it reveals an obvious conflict with a suitably defined set

2 E.g. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. 5th ed. London: Phaidon, 1977, pp. 58ff.

3 M. Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*. Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990.

of propositions that embodies it. Such a definition that neglects direct attention to the referent of the external world fits quite well with the ambitions of Eco-like semiotics. After a slight rewording, it can be extended to other semiotic phenomena: the truthfulness or falsity of reference is revealed by its belonging to the system of semiotic conventions that are valid in a given culture and are consistent and harmonious. An obvious conflict with these conventions indicates the possibility of an intentional lie. In the following section of my paper, I will still maintain that the definition of a lie is a contextual act and it is not always possible to carry it out unambiguously.

Let us return to E. H. Gombrich's idea that pictures cannot lie. The question of whether a pictorial representation can lie has been considered to be one of the tests of the language similarity of pictorial representation. If we can prove that a picture can express a lie, if we can lie when drawing, it can be treated as a comparable means of signification, a semiotic system as, for example, a natural language. If not, we are dealing with a method of signification that uses natural signification and forms neither a unified system nor the invariant nor, using Peircean terms, types.

Works of Socialist Realism seem to offer good examples of the possibility of lies. The Soviet time and the lie seem to form such a tight-fitting couple that, nowadays, one feels that their mutual relationship is not even worth serious analysis. We all know that official texts lied, that histories and life-stories were falsified, that even the seemingly most truthful means of expression – the press photo – lied and, starting from primary school-age, everybody had to learn how to move about in the labyrinths of different half-truths and lies.

I would offer six roughly divided classes of pictorial images; we can, naturally, find numerous intermediate subclasses:

- (1) An abstract image without a title (i.e., there are no recognisable objects, for example, a form of ornamentation).
- (2) An abstract image with a title.
- (3) A realistic image representing a more or less recognisable object without a title.
- (4) A realistic image representing a more or less recognisable object with a title.
- (5) A scheme, map or diagram.
- (6) A pictorial text or a combination of a pictorial image and a text.

The first class – a pure abstract image – can represent neither truth nor falsity. Based on other classes, we can define five forms of false images:

First, falsity resulting from the lack of logic of the pictorial image. A certain pictorial competence is required to recognise it, as linguistic competence is necessary to recognise a false linguistic proposition; usually, the spatial relations (proportions), or the lack of logic (colours or some other features) do not correspond to our everyday experience. To recognise this, we do not need any accompanying text to the image.

Second, a direct conflict between the image and its title (in the case of a work of art, this may be intentional, meant to add value to the work).

Third, an intentional lie caused by the historical and cultural context of the image (e. g. Socialist Realism). In this case, the relation between the image and its title proves to be false, too, but to recognise this one definitely has to know the historical background.

Fourth, an intentional forgery, where the reason could be both commercial and ideological.

Fifth, ambivalence in the interpretation of

the image of misinterpretation. For example, a yellow oval may represent a lemon, or it may simply be a stain of paint. This is valid in the border area between abstract and realist images and here we cannot talk about lies.

In summary, we can again outline some conclusions about lying:

(1) A lie cannot be a symptom, an indexical sign; lying in any case presupposes unmotivated signification and the breaking of a rule.

(2) Lying is a conscious and intentional act; but a false proposition/signification can also be a result of a mistake, a lack of knowledge or poor language skills mainly caused by ignorance of the semiotic system.

*Proof-read by Richard Adang*