

Anna Maria Lorusso

(University of Bologna)

The force of false and the weakness of truth

1) Starting point: Eco, The force of false

The theme of *the false* is one of Umberto Eco's longstanding concerns. Initially, it appears in his work as the problem of the *lie* – as in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), where his minimal definition of the sign is famously “something which can be used to lie.” Later, during the 1980s, this concern evolves into a focus on *falsification* (notably in his 1987 essay “Fakes and Forgeries,” to which I will return), and finally, in *On Literature* (2002), it is rearticulated in terms of *fictionality*.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is a discernible *fil rouge* running through this evolution – an increasingly complex engagement with the ambiguous territory between *falsehood and fiction, reality and narrative invention*. Theoretically, these dimensions are distinct and separate. In practice, however, they often converge – and it is precisely in this convergence that the critical problem lies.

As I have already observed in one of my previous works:

“If in lying, the false is a *potentiality* of semiosis and embedded in the structure of the sign, in falsification it becomes a *strategic and intentional product* of communicative exchange, while in fictionality it turns into a kind of *resource for certainties* – with an almost oxymoronic effect that becomes even more explicit at the narrative level.” one *Rivista di Estetica*:

It is this link between *falsehood and certainty* that I find most intriguing today.

To a certain extent, one could argue that Eco has long advocated this idea: that through the act of invention, we are able to construct alternative worlds that paradoxically provide us with a sense of reassurance.

In his early work on the false (from the 1970s and 1980s), this invention took the form of successful forgeries – objects so well-crafted they could endure across centuries and even survive their exposure as fakes. In *On Literature*, the invention becomes literary: Eco turns his attention to the “false” of narrative fiction, and emphasizes that literature provides us with unmodifiable stories – stories that are, in a way, non-negotiable. The fact that Madame Bovary dies under a train, he reminds us, is irrefutable; it cannot be undone. No matter how much we may wish to rewrite her fate, literature confronts us with the impossibility of altering it.

Narrative fiction, then, paradoxically offers both the frustration of limits and the comfort of certainties. It shows us the fixedness of certain events, offering an aesthetic experience that echoes the real's own intransigence – but in a contained and intelligible form. In doing so, fiction becomes a privileged space where we encounter the power of the false not to deceive, but to structure belief, shape memory, and offer meaning.

In this movement – from forgeries to literature – a theoretical leap of considerable magnitude becomes evident. Forgeries and historical fakes possess, or at least claim to possess, a direct *connection to reality*; they present themselves as accounts of the real. In contrast, literary fakes do not make such claims – they refer explicitly to imaginary worlds.

My current working hypothesis is that contemporary perceptions of “reality” now encompass fictional worlds, with no meaningful sense of heterogeneity remaining. The distinction between reality and fiction, once foundational, has become practically inconsequential.

Before pursuing this further, however, it is necessary to address a more fundamental question: why is falsehood so central in Eco's thought? It is evident that fakes and forgeries can endure over time, escape detection, and evade critical scrutiny. Moreover, some fakes are recognized as such and yet continue to exert influence—as in the notorious case of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This leads us to a pressing and paradoxical question: how is this possible?

2) Eco's answer

Indeed, the primary element to be considered is that of *cultural codes*, which serve to determine the recognition of phenomena as either true or false, historical or fictional, and so forth.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the issue pertains to the *regimes of truth*, that is to say, the circumstances under which statements – irrespective of the rigorous scrutiny – are deemed to be true.

Eco's written work is as follows:

“Given two sentences as [Napoleon died at Sant’Helena on May 5 1821] and [Ulysses reconquered the kingdom by killing all the Proci] it is irrelevant to a code theory to know that historically speaking, the former is true and the latter is false. This does not merely mean, as Carnap would say, that the analysis of intentions must precede the verification of their extensions. From the point of view of a code theory, what matters is that (a) in our culture there exist codes such as that through which the first sentence is understood, is studied in schools and connotes ‘historical Truth’; (b) in classical Greek society there existed codes such as that through which the second sentence was

understood, was studied in school and connoted ‘historical truth’. the fact that for us the second sentence connotes ‘legend’ is semiotically analogous to the fact that it could yet be proven in some future civilization, on the basis of as yet unknown (or false) documents, that Napoleon died in a different place on a different day (or that he never existed). Semiotics is mainly concerned with signs as social forces.” (Eco 1976: 65.)

For Eco, the concepts of falsifying and authenticating did not have the same meaning in the Middle Ages, as they have in contemporary culture, where what is handed down, vox populi, news, needs verification and documentary evidence. For the Middle Ages, the only reference is to the Holy Scriptures. Any form of textual “production” (even ad hoc) that can demonstrate the Scriptures is considered legitimate.

A second element to consider is the variety of *types of fakes*. To fully grasp the impact of a fake, we must first understand what kind of fake we are dealing with. Eco’s reflections here appear to be rooted in pragmatic considerations: What is the purpose behind creating a fake? In what discursive context is it produced, and what are its communicative goals?

For example, a historical fake involves a formally authentic document that conveys false information—such as a genuine confirmation of a privilege that was never actually granted. In contrast, a diplomatic fake consists of a forged confirmation of privileges that are presented as authentic. (Eco 1990, p. 222)

In addressing the criteria and mechanisms of falsification practices, the notion of *community* plays a crucial role. This emphasis is strongly influenced by Eco’s Peircean roots, which remain evident throughout his work up to *Kant and the Platypus* (1997). From Peirce, Eco adopts the centrality of interpretation and the idea of an endless chain of interpretive acts – what Peirce terms “unlimited semiosis” or the “flight of the interpretant.” Yet this potentially infinite process finds a provisional, but stable, resting point within the so-called *community of interpreters*. It is this community that, at least in the earlier phase of Eco’s theory, sets the boundaries of interpretation. After 1997, however, Eco relocates these boundaries in the reality from which interpretation begins.

Still, the category of “community” raises important questions: Who exactly constitutes this community? Is it simply any aggregation of individuals? A group of experts? Influential figures? The consensus of posterity, or a present-day collective? Beyond these uncertainties, another critical issue emerges: What kind of guarantees can a community provide in terms of truth-telling and in effectively exposing targeted acts of falsification?

In “The Force of the False” (*On Literature*, 2002), Eco demonstrates how false beliefs have often guided and shaped the course of history. Christopher Columbus, for instance, held an incorrect belief about the size of the Earth – yet it was precisely this error that motivated his voyage. Many medieval and fifteenth-century maps were imaginative and inaccurate, and the *Letter of Prester John* was a complete fabrication. Still, both the maps and the letter inspired exploration and ambitious undertakings in distant lands.

Some fakes, like the *Donation of Constantine*, had vast political consequences; others, like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – which Eco explores in *The Prague Cemetery* – continue to exert influence despite being long exposed as fabrications. In the case of the *Protocols*, we have known for a long time that they are false. And yet, they persist – because they express something that some individuals perceive as true, something close enough to their worldview that these texts are treated as if they were historical documents.

This is why, for Eco, the systems of belief within a given culture are so crucial: notions of truth and falsehood are not fixed, but shift over time. At certain historical moments, societies may lack the critical “sensitivity” to recognize a falsehood – as in the case of the *Donation of Constantine*. In other periods, that sensitivity may be more acute.

This idea is not far from what the Italian historian Adriano Prosperi (2025) has recently argued: that the perception of truth is historically contingent, shaped by the interpretive frameworks and cultural assumptions of a given era.

But for me, even though I fully agree with Eco on this point, there is something more: the *textual* dimension of the false. When the false is well-crafted at the textual level, it can be far more compelling than the true. This is ultimately what makes “narrative truth” so powerful—what Eco describes as the only form of truth that is, in a sense, unamendable. And we must take the consequences of this seriously.

Eco touches on this idea in “The Force of the False” when he discusses examples like the *Letter of Prester John* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Each of these fakes that have had world-moving effects shares key features: a strong narrative structure capable of constructing convincing worlds, or the power to confirm preexisting beliefs and ideological frameworks – as with the *Donation of Constantine* or the *Letter of Prester John*.

However, if this is the case, I believe we must recognize something that runs counter to centuries of Western epistemology: *truth is weak*. Or at least, it can be weaker than falsehood. Contrary to the Enlightenment ideal that truth inevitably prevails over time, the semiotic reality is more troubling—

truth, from a semiotic perspective, is fragile, demanding, and often less persuasive than a well-told lie.

3) The true is weak

Of course, I am being deliberately provocative – but only to put certain ideas on the table for discussion.

Truth is weak, I would argue, for several reasons:

- It can overturn common expectations. (Scientific revolutions, for example, often dismantle deeply held assumptions and paradigms, making truth feel disruptive rather than affirming.)
- It is often difficult to understand and reconstruct. (Historical and judicial truths require years of painstaking work, specialized knowledge, and methodological rigor.)
- It can be painful. (In the case of judicial findings or contested collective memories, truth may bring closure for some, but trauma and resentment for others.)
- It can be inconsistent. (Unlike coherent fabrications, truth often reflects the disorder of real experience—marked by contingency, contradiction, overlapping intentions, unequal forces, and asynchronous temporalities.)

If *truth is weak*, then *falsehood* – specifically *forgery*, not mere error – can be strong. And this strength is not accidental: it stems from the way falsehood operates semiotically.

- Because it is planned, a forgery is structured with a specific purpose in mind. It is often more coherent than reality—it all fits, it all adds up.
- Precisely because it is intentional, it can exploit existing fears, anxieties, and vulnerabilities with precision.
- It affirms preexisting certainties, reinforcing what its audience already believes or wants to believe.
- It is easily understandable. A well-crafted forgery is not just informative; it is communicative and performative. It seeks effect, and often achieves it.

From many points of view – epistemological, psychological, semiotic – there is no reason to assume that truth must be stronger than falsehood. In fact, a *good false* may very well be stronger, precisely because of how it is constructed, circulated, and received. It is a semiotic result.

Furthermore, another observation by Eco should not be overlooked. Even when we are fully aware that something is fake – such as a perfect replica – we can still find it deeply satisfying, even preferable to the original. In *Travels in Hyperreality* (1975), reflecting on his visit to the historical replicas of Buena Park, California, Eco writes: “some statues reproduced in wax are more real because they are in color whereas the originals were in marble and hence all white and lifeless. They are a Dying Slave and a David of Michelangelo. The Dying Slave is a great hulk with an undershirt rolled up over his chest and a loincloth borrowed from a semi-nudist colony; the David is a rough type with black curls, slingshot, and a green leaf against his pink belly. The printed text informs us that the waxwork portrays the model as he must have been when Michelangelo copied him. Not far off is the Venus de Milo, leaning on an Ionic column against the background of a wall with figures painted in red. I say “leaning,” and in fact this polychrome unfortunate has arms. The legend explains: “Venus de Milo was brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown Greek sculptor, in approximately 200 B.C.”

It is evident that, in some cases, falsehood can be perceived as being preferable to reality and truth.

4) **Conclusive remarks**

If the false – better yet, the forgeries (not mere hoaxes or ordinary errors, but strategically crafted falsehoods) – are by nature strong, even stronger than the truth, then we must accept as a duty not only the task of interpretation (understood as the search for an adequate reading of meaning), but above all the task of unmasking and – if I may use a term usually reserved for science – demonstration. Eco’s semiotics has always maintained: I cannot determine which and how many interpretations are right, but I can identify *those that are wrong*.

I would propose reframing this as follows: I cannot determine which and how many interpretations are right, but I can identify *those that are strong* and evaluate why they are strong. This involves not only analyzing the textual “machine” but also assessing whether an interpretation is coherent, persuasive, aligned with the broader cultural framework, and so on. And whenever we detect this kind of alignment – this *reciprocal affordance* – a critical reader (the second level reader) is obligated to respond with critical suspicion.

The hermeneutic challenge lies in understanding why certain interpretations or narratives strike us as convincing – why we are inclined to trust them, even when we are unsure of their truth, or perhaps even when we know they are false. They simply “fit” with our mind, which is itself shaped by culture.

If to determine what is false is the task of a judge or a historian, to understand what is convincing – and why, regardless of its truth – is the task of semiotics.

Clearly, *trust* plays a central role here, and Eco was very explicit about this. Semioticians must concern themselves with *the dynamics of trust*, with *the circuits of belief*. (Once again, a Peircean legacy...)

“These fictional worlds clearly demonstrate how the judgment of truth is not linked to a judgment of reality, but how it feeds on a component of trust that, in reality, although differently dosed and conscious, is always present, not only in the fiction (if I believe in the “truth” of a diagnosis is it not perhaps because of trust rather than the effective competence regarding how correct that diagnosis might be?).

Eco writes: “We believe that, so far as the actual world is concerned, truth is the most important criterion, whereas we tend to think that fiction describes a worlds we have to take as it is, on trust. Even in the actual world, however, the principle of trust is as important as the principle of truth.” (Eco 1994, p. 88)

We should therefore reframe the question as follows: What is trust based on today, and what are its criteria?

In other writings on post-truth, I have argued that the problem with the contemporary episteme lies in the fact that the criterion of truth has become *projective and experiential* – in other words, emotional. It is no longer grounded in rational evaluation, but rather in emotional projection, through which individuals read, see, and listen.

This shift implies a transformation in the very criterion of trust. Knowledge has always depended on acts of epistemic trust – trust in sources, interlocutors, interpreters. But if the balance between truth and falsehood shifts, and if the false reveals its full power, then we must ask: How do the dynamics of trust change?

I believe the key criterion today becomes *reasonableness*. Truth, as Eco himself suggests, is often nothing more than the effect of a reasonable simulation. I would define a *reasonable simulation* as one that is coherent and capable of accounting for multiple aspects of the world to which it refers.

For this reason, the truths that appear most reliable, trustworthy, and indisputable often turn out to be *fictional truths* – precisely because they are coherent and appear (or pretend) to be explanatory.

This generates a kind of oxymoronic short-circuit, where fiction becomes truth, and reality itself is transformed into a space open to manipulation, reinterpretation, and potential reconfiguration.

It is particularly insightful to revisit Eco's chapter "Travels in Hyperreality" in light of today's AI-generated videos and images. What has changed?

The "total fake" whose Eco was speaking can now appear completely real – seamless, plausible, persuasive.

Hence, the semiotic task today is not only to understand the processes of trust and belief, but also to engage in practices of "revelation".

It is not true that truth imposes itself.

It does not self-manifest or reveal itself automatically, as Western culture – steeped in its religious heritage – has so often claimed.

Truth does not hide, but it is exhausting, uncomfortable, fragile, and constantly pursued by simpler, more seductive, and more accessible forgeries.

So, how can we trust something so difficult?

Perhaps the only viable path is through narrative and fiction – as Eco himself eventually suggested – by learning to recognize and rely on what we might call "right fictions."

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Lorusso, Anna Maria

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