1. Introduction

What is the place of the ideal in the material world? And how, in particular, can a decidedly materialist philosophy account for ideal phenomena such as values, abstractions and meanings? In his essay ‘Dialectics of the Ideal’, Evald Ilyenkov attempts to give an answer to this age-old and profound philosophical question concerning the status of immaterial properties in the material world. Although Ilyenkov’s answer to this question is ingenious and in line with the recent developments in semiotics, as I will show, the way he casts the problem of the ideal may prove difficult to comprehend for present-day readers. Accordingly, in ‘Dialectics of the Ideal’ Ilyenkov repeatedly invokes expressions like ‘form of a thing’ and ‘form of a social human life-activity’: ‘The ideal form of a thing is a form of social human life-activity, which exists not in that life-activity, but, namely, as a form of the external thing, which represents, reflects another thing. Conversely, it is a form of a thing, but outside this thing, namely, as a form of human life-activity, in man, “inside man”’.2

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1. See p. 39.
2. See p. 68.
Expressions like this may confuse more than clarify, at least for readers not well-versed in Marxist philosophy. This applies also to the way Ilyenkov iterates his various characterisations of the ideal, giving it slightly different formulations page after page. To be sure, the way Ilyenkov circles around the ideal without arriving at any definition remains faithful to his conception of the ideal. If the ideal is, as Ilyenkov seeks to show, something that is in the process of continuous movement, being constantly born and reborn, made and remade, in the course of our different activities, then how could it be hypostatised, frozen into an object of definition? Maybe it can only be shown, pointed at and then carefully followed in its dialectical metamorphoses.

Instead of getting lost in the philosophical subtleties of the question of how to capture a phenomenon as volatile as the ideal, I shall take a short cut. The phenomena of meaning and meaning-making are perhaps the most familiar examples of the ideal. Ilyenkov himself draws heavily on Marx's analysis of the value-form in his attempt to pinpoint the concept of the ideal. Although he does not say that much about the phenomenon of meaning, this theme constantly recurs in his writings on the ideal. It therefore seems worthwhile taking up the theme of meaning, in order to question how the concept of the ideal relates to the study of signs and meanings: namely semiotics.

In this paper, I am going to discuss the concept of the ideal in relation to Umberto Eco's semiotic theory and his notion of the *encyclopedia*. By *encyclopedia*, Eco means the totality of knowledge generated by humans, which is the cognitive background of any act of understanding or meaning-making. This knowledge is stored in our artefacts, which, for Eco, appear as an 'enormous library composed of all books and encyclopedias – all papers and manuscripts, documents of all centuries, including the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians and the inscriptions in cuneiform'.3 This resembles the way Ilyenkov invokes the Hegelian vision of 'the whole grandiose materially established intellectual culture of the human race, in and through which this individual awakens to “self-consciousness”'.4 According to Ilyenkov, it 'confronts the individual' as

the thought of preceding generations realised [осуществленное] ('reified', 'objectified', 'alienated') in sensuously perceptible ‘matter’ – in language and in visually perceptible images, in books and statues, in wood and bronze, in the form of places of worship and instruments of labour, in the designs of machines and state buildings, in the patterns of scientific and moral systems, and so on and so forth.5

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4. See p. 52.
5. See p. 52.