

From Eco to Bolter: what remains of mass culture in the digital age

Sergio Brancato ¹

¹ University of Napoli "Federico II", Italy; sergio.brancato@unina.it

Abstract: Sixty years after its publication, what remains of relevance in what could be considered one of the great fetish books of Italian culture? Returning to reflect on an epoch-making text such as *Apocalyptic and Integrated* only makes sense if we frame it from the point of view of today, rereading it to grasp the terms and nature of its inevitable transcendence, its restitution of the climate of a historical time from which we are now separated - albeit in the perception of a proximity that makes it inescapable in order to understand ourselves, since today Umberto Eco's work is essentially the measure of that distance: the thesis of this contribution is that, especially in a national context, *Apocalyptic and Integrated* is not simply located in a historical elsewhere, but rather that it represents its boundary. Through the comparison with authors and schools of mediology, from Marshall McLuhan to Edgar Morin to Jay David Bolter, the article aims at reconstructing the dynamics of the conflict that Eco has contributed to make active in the framework of the paradigmatic changes between mass culture and the digital turn.

Keywords: mediology; mass culture; digital.



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After sixty years and the transit from one century to the next, returning to reflect on an epoch-making book such as *Apocalyptic and the Integrated* only makes sense if we frame that text from the point of view of today, rereading it to grasp the terms and nature of its inevitable transcendence, its restitution of the climate of a historical time from which we are now separated - albeit in the perception of a proximity that makes it inescapable in order to understand ourselves, since today Umberto Eco's work is essentially the measure of that distance. It is well understood that this type of operation must be carried out for every critical recovery: but the thesis that is proposed here is that Eco's work, especially in the national sphere of reference, is not simply located in a historical elsewhere, but rather that it represents its boundary. For a long time, the Alexandrian scholar's 'disorganic' yet coherent book - made up of a collection of essays that, by the author's own admission, came from different origins and aimed at different ends - represented in Italy the point of reference for several generations of scholars committed to reformulating cultural taxonomies in the face of an evident acceleration in the dynamics of change in society. It is no coincidence that the text was published by Bompiani in 1964, exactly at the end of the phenomenon that historians define as the economic boom, the five-year period between 1958 and 1963, the national expression of what for Hobsbawm, on a more general level, is 'a

kind of Golden Age', the years that recorded the most 'extraordinary economic growth and social transformation, which probably modified human society more profoundly than any other period of similar brevity' (Hobsbawm, 1995: 18).

Especially for those who were not yet born or were too young to remember that period, an anamnesis of what Italian culture was in the 1960s is necessary: the end of the war and the Fascist dictatorship had opened up the geopolitical field to new scenarios and conflicts, although not entirely unprecedented, starting with the balance between the Catholic tradition and the most representative Communist party in the West, a dynamic equilibrium on which the structural revival of industrialisation linked to the needs of Reconstruction and the transnational logic of the post-war economy hinged (Crainz, 1996). Within the framework of this dialectic, the Italian cultural ecosystem oscillated between conservative instances and the impulses of a modernisation urged by both the country's industrial redevelopment process and the changing media system, which tended to override the principle of national identity through the proposal of a radically innovative *modus vivendi*. To be clear: it is not that Italy had not experienced mass communications, as confirmed by the articulate studies on the cultural industry produced especially in the aftermath of the 1980s (Colombo, 1998; Forgacs 1992; Forgacs, Gundle, 2007). On the other hand, the most evident limitation of the system-country is linked to the theoretical dimension, too often lingering in philosophically obsolete perspectives, incapable of escaping the difficult relationship with the processes of industrial modernity that invest both the plane of productive relations, relating to models of work organisation, and that of social relations, i.e. the production of cultures and imagery in the sphere of everyday life: what in 1962 Edgar Morin defines - in another essential book and certainly known to Eco since it was translated by Il Mulino in 1963 - as the 'spirit of time' (Morin, 2028).

If we look at the corpus of essays dedicated in Italy to the industrialisation of aesthetic forms from the perspective of historical studies, we will note that while in the rest of the western world these topics had been touched upon since the dawn of the short century, here the subject - apart from a few very rare exceptions such as, for example, Ricciotto Canudo's early 20th-century reflections on cinema (Brancato, 2001) - tends to elude the debate or to invest it only within a very narrow ideological perimeter, mostly hinging on the axioms of Catholic pedagogy as well as on the post-Marxist theoretics of the Frankfurt School. Albeit, in the latter case, in an apocalyptic approach that refers more to the side of Adorno and his epigones (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1966; Marcuse, 1967) than to the hermeneutic problematicity of that part of the Frankfurt School devoted to a more complex reading of the phenomena taking place in the first half of the 20th century (Benjamin, 1966). In other words, while scholars such as Simmel, Lukács, Arnheim or Warburg and - with the emergence of the post-war generations of intellectuals - up to Morin and Barthes drew a cartography of mass culture capable of containing or in any case dealing with its destabilising energy in relation to the traditional architectures of society, in Italy the dynamics of removal and stigmatisation were triggered by a cultural system deeply uncomfortable with the processes of affirmation of industrial modernity (Pireddu and Serra, 2012). □ Umberto Eco belongs to that spectrum of two/three generations that emerged around the end of the Second World War, the new intellectual elite grappling with the consequences of the conflict and the

problematic management of Reconstruction. As soon as he graduated, he joined RAI thanks to its director Filiberto Guala, a Catholic manager open to understanding the innovations taking place, becoming with other contemporaries such as Gianfranco Bettetini or Romolo Runcini - all future academics in the field of humanities and social sciences - one of the so-called 'young corsairs' who brought the ferments of the new era to the refounded state radio and television company. As an intellectual capable of combining pure research and the pragmatics of the media system, Eco was certainly not unfamiliar with the international debate that was revolutionising the relationship between academia and mass culture in those years. And in fact, *Apocalypitics* and the integrated registers its impact precisely because it eschews the 'genre' of apocalyptic critique, but without overflowing into the adverse field of the integrated. Important is the passage in the first chapter of the volume - the only one really dedicated to the theoretical dimension of the theme - in which Eco poses the problem of positioning within the framework of the conflicts of cultures that reformulate the experience of late modernity: 'The pamphlets against mass culture must therefore be read and studied as documents to be included in a balanced research, taking into account, however, the misunderstandings that not infrequently underlie them' (Eco, 1964: 31). Diplomatically, Eco defines as 'equivocal' the founding elements of that authentic clash of worlds that we glimpse in filigree behind the mass seductions of the culture industry now of its greatest historical affirmation. In reality, he is fully aware that the war between tradition and innovation has already registered its final outcome: the 19th and above all the 20th century are in fact the centuries of mass culture, that is of what Morin always defines as 'the first universal culture of the species', an 'evolutionary' culture that asserts itself because it is the only one functional to the model of social organisation that emerged from that diriment event that historians call the Industrial Revolution. In the wake of innovators of socio-culturological thought such as Innis or Katz and Lazarsfeld, who are well known to him, Eco defuses the crude theories of polemicists such as Dwight Macdonald, who in 1960 had in fact published a booklet entitled *Masscult and Midcult*, which Eco himself vaguely quoted (Eco, 1964: 77-79), in which the old-fashioned theme of cultural 'levels' (high, medium, low) derived from the Adornian analysis of mass culture as a corruptive process of collective consciousness as a psychiatric form of domination, and which assigns to the 'class of the educated' the mission of establishing the statutes of legitimacy of cultural practices based on the authority of the tradition that that same class has produced and perpetuated (Macdonald, 1997). In a horizon that tends to reconcile with difficulty the thrusts between opposing identities, Eco assumes for himself the not insignificant responsibility of searching for a third position, placing himself on the borderline between dominant ideologies. He attempts to identify cultural objects that, investigated primarily through the tools and above all the philosophical perspectives of semiotics, can restore meaning to mass-produced and serialised products that pay the price of not being recognised as bearers of widespread social values. This is not, it must be said, a new operation, to the point that in the delayed Italian translation of the mediologist Marshall McLuhan's first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, published in 1951 and reaching us more than thirty years later, there are those who identify a strategy aimed at 'facilitating cultural positions presented as original and that are instead substantially borrowed' (from Roberto Faenza's introduction to McLuhan, 1984: 7). While not sharing the vaguely

dietrological flavour of this reading, there are in fact some similarities between McLuhan's book and Eco's. Both proceed by thematic tessellations, identifying interstitial spaces of critical exercise, dissecting apparently spurious and marginal objects in search of their 'making machine' with the constituent logics of industrial and mass society. But it is also true that the approach of the Canadian intellectual is different from that of the younger Italian scholar, and their backgrounds are certainly different, although they are finally united by a shared interest in disciplinary fields linked to philosophy, aesthetics, and the history of art and literature. Rather than a sort of plagiarism, however, Eco's shared McLuhanian solution of proceeding by analytical fragments is probably due to the difficulty - taken for granted by both - of identifying a 'theory of the whole' for the complex and viral corpus of mass culture, a unifying method capable of holding together the boundless yet functional structural inhomogeneity of the media system. Here we come to the problem of any analytical approach characterised by being a frontier exploration when the problem of a paradigm shift is posed with respect to a whole. In our case, the whole is constituted by the cultural habitat in which we are immersed: to recall one of McLuhan's apt metaphors, typical of his peculiar apodictic style, it can be said that fish know nothing about water - they are not aware of it - because they do not know alternative parameters that allow them to perceive the element in which they live (McLuhan, Fiore, 1995). This image illustrates better than many in-depth arguments the condition in which the thinkers of a new world, whose reality principle was built on unprecedented relations between technology and culture, found themselves operating.

The epistemological tension of the operation carried out by Eco goes in the same direction as that of scholars such as, precisely, the aforementioned McLuhan, Katz and Lazarsfeld, Morin, Barthes, but also Habermas and Havelock, who - although often quite distant from each other in terms of disciplinary and methodological identity - are united by the need to renew the relationship between society and culture through an understanding of the profound mechanisms that regulate its laws and change itself. To return to the privileged object of this reflection, paraphrasing a definition by Eco we could say that there are fetish-concepts as well as fetish-books. The twentieth century, to give just one example, has often hinged its production of meaning around the massive bulk of the four volumes of Marx's *Capital* (and then Engels and then Kautsky), published in 1867 and the origin of a long wave that has influenced the course of human history as little as any other: in addition to economics and politics, much of the debate surrounding mass communications and theories of mass culture can be traced back to the impact that this authentic totem had on the framework of modern thought, although for culturologists the text by Marx that may be most useful is another, and that is the first volume of the *Fundamental lines of the Critique of Political Economy*, better known as the *Grundrisse*, in which the German philosopher outlines his theory of the commodity cycle, a theory that sees in the role of orientator of consumption (including cultural consumption) not the productive elite but the masses (Marx, 1976). A key to interpreting cultural phenomena, this one, which pervades and animates, albeit subtly, Eco's book as well. In the sphere of cultural studies - a label within which we collect a subject as heterogeneous as it is fluid - one of the best-known fetish books in Italy, but not only, also by virtue of its

concise and apodictic title, is precisely Apocalyptic and Integrated. The work - we repeat - immediately met with great as well as problematic public success, dividing the critics - *ça va sans dire* - exactly in the categories announced in the title (chosen somewhat at random by the publisher, Eco recalls in the many subsequent reprints) although the author's intent, as we have attempted to justify here, probably goes in another direction. Because of the work of elaboration progressively conducted by Eco on the pages of newspapers and magazines, through articles in which he deals with objects substantially foreign to the cultural sensibility of previous generations of scholars - the detective novel, comics, pop music and others - when Apocalyptic and the Integrated aroused scandal and surprise among Italian intellectuals. At this point in our reconstruction, the question we cannot help but ask ourselves is: why? Leaving aside the contributions of the foreign authors we have quoted so far; it is not that the book constitutes an absolute novelty: the heresy of which it is the bearer (and in many ways the originator) has already been circulating for some time in the halls of academia and journalistic information.

Since the early 1950s, an Elio Vittorini still a member of the PCI has been handling the same subject matter in the pages of 'Il Politecnico' with a secular and innovative spirit, while Gianni Rodari has been hosting in the pages of 'Il Pioniere', a periodical linked to the PCI and aimed at younger readers, some comic strips that would attract the irate and frankly surrealistic strides of Palmiro Togliatti and Nilde Iotti. Eco himself imposed on Bompiani, already in the first reprints of the volume, due to the extreme and unusual public success garnered not by a novel but by an essay, the annotated selection of the articles that had greeted the first edition. In those writings, regardless of the cultural and political matrix that animates them, the tone chosen by critics is mostly one of execration or, less often, of good-natured sufficiency. Why bother Kant to analyse comics and Rita Pavone, wonders Pietro Citati, for example (the singer Rita Pavone was in those years an obsession especially of left-wing intellectuals, who who knows why they identified her as the most deterrent icon of consumerism). Along these lines, Citati represents the classic intellectual who embraces the elitism of European conservative thought, rejecting the contamination between high and low, aristocratic and popular, which characterises mass culture understood not as a new industrial folklore but as a concept tout court of culture in the age of the masses. And yet, the Italian intellectual is in 1964, the year of the first publication of Apocalyptic and Integrated, already grappling with the culture industry: Pasolini is already making films, Calvino is trying his hand at pop music, Giorgio Monicelli is directing the 'Urania' series for which he coined the neologism science fiction. Eco himself, as already mentioned, was one of Filiberto Guala's young corsairs in the great cultural factory of Rai-Radiotelevisione Italiana. If one had to attribute a precise merit to Eco's work on mass culture, it would be the contribution it made to unveiling a dynamic already underway, relating to the profound renewal of the relationship between intellectuals and society within a historical time in which the culture industry has not only already won the war of artistic processes in the age of the factory, but on the other hand is already beginning to glimpse the descending phase of its own parabola. Therefore, as argued at the beginning of this contribution, it makes sense to return today, sixty years after its first publication, to debate on Eco's book: that is, to reflect on Apocalyptic and Integrated not in a celebratory and museifying manner, as is too

often done with the classics of thought and art, but instead in the context of the process of de-massification that invests society and cultural processes in today's network age, generating new historical subjectivities and calling into question the very assumptions of that fundamental and, at the same time, usefully disorganising book. The point of arrival of the wave movement caused by Apocalyptic and Integrative brings us to a present in which the tone of the 1960s debate on mass culture resounds in our ears like the echo of a world that has disappeared or is in the process of disappearing, similar to a new Mitteleuropa of common sense, since it refers to an era that has passed because it is no longer representative of a social model, of a complex universe of inter-human relations. If the media have always performed the function of producing - through the pragmatics of communicative exchange - the social bond and its functions (first and foremost, the determination of the principle of reality derived from the collective invention of the imaginary), then looking around we realise how much that society functioned on a basis that was markedly different from the current one, starting from the nature of the body-to-body connections on which each community is founded (Abruzzese, 2023). In our time, reflection on Eco cannot but take place because the order of the conflicts of cultures taking place has radically changed, passing a point of no return. Contrary to the persistence of a certain historiography of ideas that is still strongly rooted in the Anglo-Saxon world and that still continues to reason in a rather conventional way about the limits of modernity and the pernicious effects of mass culture (Lasch, 2022), some scholars have taken on for themselves the task of the post-war generations and are rethinking the characters of our relationship with techno-cultural processes. Among these, the American mediologist Jay David Bolter, already known in Italy for an essay published with Richard Grusin on the idea of re-mediation, explicitly derived from McLuhan, for whom 'inside every new medium there is an old one' (Bolter, Grusin, 2003), has emerged in recent years.

With his most recent essay entitled *Digital Plenitude*, Bolter attempts to orient himself in the complex media ecosystem of what is now commonly referred to as the 'digital age', a time so new that it calls for new methodologies of investigation and a renewed lexicon. In this regard, Bolter coined the neologism plenitude, with which he refers to the constant immersive condition that characterises the platform society, a media paradigm that radically rewrites the conditions of everyday life through the characteristics of social interaction. In the new habitat of the Net, culture tends to be configured around the concepts of ubiquity, de-gerarchisation and variety in the coexistence of differences. In this new communicative ecosystem, the relations between production and consumption of aesthetic forms and commodities in general are rewritten by the profound reorganisation that sees us all assume the functions and competences traditionally separated in the old framework of industrial and mass society: at the same time, in the daily exercise of the Web, each of us takes on the roles of producer, distributor, user and finally 'critic'.

Thanks to this resematisation of social roles, the value system of industrial capitalism appears obsolete and, overall, no longer applicable. In this sense, Bolter argues that: 'The condition of media culture today is characterised by plenitude: a universe of products (websites, video games, books, films, radio and television programmes, magazines and so on) and practices (the making of all these products and remixing, sharing and subjecting them to critique) so vast, varied and dynamic that it is not intelligible as a whole. The plenitude easily accommodates, indeed

swallows up the contradictory forces of high and popular culture, old and new media, conservative and radical political ideas. It is not only the size of the data universe that makes it a plenitude, but also its complexity in relation to the human capacity to access and assimilate it' (Bolter, 2020: 35-36). If 1964 in *Apocalypitics and the Integrated* was the year that marked the end of the economic boom and - through the twilight splendour of the television triumph - prefigured the post-industrial reality, digital technologies today accelerate the conceptual decline of elite culture, thus rendering the polemics that at the time accompanied Eco's book - but not the book itself, which indeed appears central to the reconstruction of the road that has led us here - completely inapt. The same distinction between apocalyptic and integrated intellectuals definitively enters crisis along with the paradigm of the factory and the model of society it implied: between the alienation of intellectual labour analysed by Eco and the 'fullness' of symbolic exchange illustrated by Bolter, the line of that boundary between worlds and epochs from which we started is traced.

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