

# The Last Forty Years of Italian Popular Culture

# The Last Forty Years of Italian Popular Culture:

*“Andare al Popolo”*

Edited by

Enrico Minardi and Paolo Desogus

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## PREFACE

### WHEN IT OPENS, IT MAKES *POP* THE ESSAYS

ENRICO MINARDI

Where did the original idea for this book come from? A few years ago, at the school where I am working, I was asked to create a new class to pump up our enrollments. Because my specialty—at least since I have worked at this institution—has become French and Italian, I naturally thought of something capable of attracting a large interest among the student body. There was probably no specific event igniting the tinder. It was rather the mere fact of residing in the US for quite a few years that had instilled in me an interest in this category—Pop—, so wrongfully neglected in my country of origin. In fact, compared to Italy, pop culture is, in the US, the only culture available to the general public on a daily basis. Furthermore, I had also realized that, in my country of adoption, this general interest had generated a large mass of scholarship—often of excellent quality—that had increasingly raised my attention and busied my time. In other words, I was able to understand the academic viability of pop culture and—forgive the pun—its cultural dignity. A course on French and Italian pop culture could therefore be a good idea for a successful class, as it was indeed the case.

Additionally, while researching to prepare my course, I realized the scarcity of existing scholarship on Italian pop culture in English, compared to the existing scholarship on different epochs and fields of Italian history and culture. A sign, if needed, of pop culture's ambiguous standing among scholars of the humanities in Italy. Furthermore, I also had to struggle with this issue on a different level: any time I needed to present an Italian related topic to my English-speaking class, this scarcity of documentation in English (of either first or secondary sources) was (and still is) a real problem.

Another fundamental question regarding pop culture is, of course, being able to put it within the right hermeneutic frame. In other words, the very first question I had to ask myself concerned how to be able to fully express

and communicate the cultural value of pop cultural artifacts. It is in fact self-evident that any subject belonging to a bygone era (for instance, the Renaissance) contains way more motives of interest and is therefore more worthy of study than, let's say, a song by a pop star of twenty years ago. Moreover, as I hinted above, any subject traditionally belonging to the field of humanities enjoys a status of full acknowledgement by the world of Italian academia, while pop culture is still viewed as something new, shyly showing itself on the big stage. If many scholars disregard it as a subject worthy of any serious consideration, others may still feel some uncertainty as far as what pliers will provide the strongest grip. In an undergraduate class, one can neglect to answer this question, at least to some extent, and allow oneself a slight lack of rigor. This is naturally not the case with a book.

In summary, the original need I meant to fulfill with the present volume of studies concerned the quantity, or, better, the lack of scholarship on Italian pop culture in English. The second question that—first confusedly, then gradually with an increased awareness—I asked myself while teaching concerned the methodology, and how to address pop-culture-related subjects from an effective hermeneutic standpoint.

Ironically enough, I was aware that Italy had given birth to two among the most important theorists who had contributed to the rise of pop culture's dignity and respect within academia: Antonio Gramsci and Umberto Eco. Living in two very different epochs, the former had regarded pop culture as an indispensable instrument available to any ideology to impose its cultural hegemony on the social stage. The latter, in the wake of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), had precociously started applying his very rigorous semiotic system to interpret and decode many common popular artifacts of various kinds. Not being a specialist of either Gramsci or Eco, I had to seek external help if I intended to get to grips with my endeavor. With no surprise, my old friend Paolo Desogus came to my mind almost instantly. Very well-versed in both authors, he had just published two important books on Pier Paolo Pasolini in which he had been able to showcase his philological knowledge of the Sardinian thinker (who had exerted a fundamental influence on the Friulan poet). Moreover, I was perfectly aware of Paolo's rather deep and extended knowledge of Umberto Eco's semiotic theory (which he had worked on and researched for years by then). Therefore, when asked if he wanted to share my risky endeavor, he gladly jumped aboard my shaky boat, firmly holding the rudder toward the far away shore.

The sail has been long, but we have at last safely reached the shore.

We have been able to gather several essays covering a large and diverse variety of topics, which is not conflicting at all with our original plan. What

is in fact pop culture? What cultural artifacts, events, manifestations, can be considered as “pop”? What do they need to have to be “pop”? These are very hard and maybe impossible, to answer: heterogeneity is certainly a quality of category we can hardly circumscribe. We must thus conclude that pop culture likes rather to include than exclude, and the above-mentioned variety is rather a sign of liveliness and richness than of confusion and shallowness. However, I will leave the stage to my co-editor and his essay on “On Popular Culture and Counter-culture in Umberto Eco” to show and explain how we have chosen to tackle the pop culture phenomenon in our book. Just one last caveat before transitioning to the description of each essay. The title carries the specification of the “Last Forty Years of Italian Popular Culture” which probably sets a too ambitious time-frame. Yes, we did not want our book to be on the seventies. The seventies are in fact a very complex historical epoch in Italy, and much has already been written and researched about this decade (even in the field of pop culture). However, as a clear-cut separation between the “before” and “after”, the seventies were too abstract, just because many of the cultural icons of the eighties (and even later) had already started to be around in the previous decade. This is the reason why some of the essays in the present collection encompass several decades and do not strictly focus on the time-period we have pointed out in the title.

Emanuela Patti (“Popular Culture in the Digital Age”) leads the reader on a fascinating exploration of some of the most prominent products and figures of the Italian digital media world, all aptly presented as “brands”. This category alludes to the forms of identification and circulation of these new cultural icons in our trans-mediatic world. They include the brand Gomorrah, the brand Chiara Ferragni, and the brand Winxs Club. Inspired by a recent book, with the first brand the author alludes to the 2006 best-selling investigative book by Roberto Saviano, and the spin-off products it has created. It specifically inquires as to how meanings (in this case, the traditional figure of the “intellettuale impegnato”) are produced in the digital age. With the second one, she examines the popular digital fashion icon, who has emerged as a role-model for young women looking at ways to shape their identities as a form of self-determination and self-empowerment. Lastly, she explains how “Winxs Club”, originally an anime, later underwent a transformation into a captivating form of digital storytelling able to expand throughout the whole globe. Targeting especially teen girls, this last brand has become a source of inspiration as far as issues of genre and diversity are concerned, therefore representing a perfect example of how to address the category of “otherness” in our digital age.



In “Us and Them or We Are *Not* What We Eat. Meat Consumption and Islamophobia in Contemporary Italian Culture and Politics”, Lorenzo Mari shows the relation between a cultural habit (eating meat and its ideological meaning in our Islamophobic age) and some recent cultural products, the short-story “Salsicce” (Sausages) by the writer of Somali and Italian descent Igiaba Scego (2013), and the hybrid essay “La santa crociata del porco” (The Holy Crusade of the Pork Meat) by Wolf Bukovski (2017). In the first, the author analyzes pork consumption as a clear sign of identity (with a nationalistic inflection) conflicting with the religious and ethnic identity of the story’s character. This contradiction problematizes the question of identity beyond the clear-cut binary categories of white/black, Christian/Islamic, etc. In the second section, Mari evokes the political implication of the Italian pork-related eating habits as a form of (post)modern fascism and provides some original suggestions on how Marxist ideology can contribute to this criticism.

In “The Language of the People. Comedy and Tragedy in the last 40 Years of Italian Theater”, Silvia De Min shows how particularly successful and popular comedians have been able, in recent years, to successfully transition from theater to television, in search of a greater “popularity”. Starting with Dario Fo (the founding figure of this trend in the seventies), the author analyzes the work of some prominent figures such as Beppe Grillo, Marco Paolini, and Ascanio Celestini. She demonstrates that, despite their “popularity” (also reflected in the themes adopted and their acting style), their products reflect an autoreferentiality and ultimately fail to reach the “people”. Instead—and paradoxically enough—the modern form of tragedy staged and performed at the Venice Biennale in 2018 by the theater group company Anagor with their play “Oresteia. Agamennone. Schiavi. Conversio.” represents a true form of popular modern theater.

In “Montalbano The Champion of Trust”, Valentina Sturli considers the best-selling series by Andrea Camilleri dedicated to Inspector Montalbano since 1994. She addresses in particular the very reason for its popularity, trying to explain how its fame has spread so easily throughout the whole spectrum of Italian society. She goes through the entire series, analyzing the features characterizing the inspector’s behavior, his personality and relations with both recurrent and occasional characters. She is therefore able to prove that the affection the readers (and the audience of the 1999 TV series as well) have shown for this figure resides mostly in himself being an exemplary icon of upstanding social behavior as a state official. By Italian standards, these features greatly contradict the traditional state-citizen interaction, a source of recurrent complaints and dissatisfaction.

“Italian *Commedia Musicale*. Capitalizing on Memory and Nostalgia” by Raffaele Furno represents an impelling investigation of the work and collaboration of the duo of writer-directors Piero Garinei and Sandro Giovannini between 1955 and 1976 at the Sistina theater in Rome. “Importers” of the comedy musical genre in Italy, the author interprets their endeavor as a relevant contribution to the cultural and political transformation of the country. The three case studies he examines are the pre-feminist play “Buonanotte Bettina” (1956) centered around female sexual desire. The second play is the immensely successful “Rugantino”, opening in 1962 and often reprised afterwards. Focusing on the eponym character, the story tells of the redemption of the typical Roman character (from slacker and petty, to virtuous and good-hearted) with underlying political implications (even reaching present times). The third play instead tackles a religious subject, the story of a young priest entrusted by God with the task of saving the world (“Aggiungi un posto a tavola”, 1975).

“Dissolving the People. The Role of Popular Singing Competitions in Italy from the Fifties until Now” by Nicola Giosmin is a perfect example of my emphasis on the difficulty of respecting the set time-frame, especially when the theme is something as ingrained in Italian culture as singing competitions. In his essay, Giosmin mostly analyzes the main Italian singing event, the Sanremo Festival, which had promoted the Italian canzone since 1951. Carefully reconstructing all the stages of its transformation, the author shows how something supposedly celebrating what is at the very heart of Italian pop culture, such as the singing tradition, becomes over time an autoreferential event abstracted from popular imagination. Furthermore, Sanremo’s hooking up with reality shows in the 2000s has alienated the audience even further.

In “On Mina, Celentano and *Le Migliori*: Popular Cultural Icons in Contemporary Italy”, Rachel Haworth focuses on the last record (*Le Migliori* 2016) of arguably the two most famous Italian music stars: Mina and Celentano. In her examination, she adopts a very specific standpoint: an analysis of the two videoclips made for the two singles “Amami, amami” and “A un passo da te”. She conducts her analysis by employing the concept of iconicity. Functioning as a cultural symbol and a conduit for ideas about genre, values and national identity, this concept helps the author to interpret the two videos as projecting images about Italy and its future as a country that is diverse and multicultural but still holding on to a strong sense of community. The absence of both icons from the clips, is a sign of the iconic status they have achieved, which is sufficient to convey the above-referenced message about Italy.

Olga Campofreda (“The Death of *Uomo Ragno*: Italian Subcultures and Consumerism in the Early Nineties as Told in 883’s Lyrics”) brings her attention to one of the most successful pop records of the nineties, *Hanno ucciso l’uomo ragno* (1992) by the duo Pezzali-Repetto known as 883. Easily dismissed as bubblegum music characterized by catchy melodies and memorable (but empty) lyrics, she succeeds instead in digging out and explaining its cultural value and underlying radical messages. Putting the lyrics in the perspective of the deep societal crisis experienced by Italy during that epoch, in Campofreda’s reading, the Repetto-Pezzali musical achievement represents the swansong of the sixties and seventies’ youth rebellion against the coming of age as an acceptance of a consumerist society and a bourgeois lifestyle. This message is also evident in 883’s second album (*Nord Sud Est Ovest*), where Campofreda examines, among others, the cover interpreted as conveying the counter-culture classic idea of traveling as an act of freedom and open-mindedness. In other words, she concludes, 883 gave pop an interesting cultural turn at a time when commercial music was not yet supposed to deal with any “high” themes.

Paolo Prato (“Santa Claus is Coming to Italy. Updating the Debate on Americanization”) tackles the theme of Americanization of the country from the standpoint of Italians’ most beloved religious festivity, Christmas. Like other authors in this book, he also uses the concept of brand to define the Santa Claus–Father Christmas role in our consumerist and globalized societies, characterized by the so-called pseudo/non-places. Furthermore, Prato also reconstructs the spreading of *Babbo Natale* throughout the last century in the context of the fast-spreading American cultural influence. To show how the American Christmas craze has shaped Italian traditions, Prato concludes with a thorough analysis of Christmas songs and movies (the so-called *cinepanettoni*).

In “A Popular Counter-culture: The Example of the Italian *Festa dell’Unità*”, Jessy Simonini reconstructs the history and cultural significance of one of the most beloved popular gatherings in Italy since the end of WWII, the *Festival dell’Unità*. This festival was an annual event organized by the Italian Communist Party for its members and sympathizers in all regions and locations where the Party held strong approval (it still exists but under a different identity and format). Based on serious and thorough archival research, Simonini tackles his subject from two standpoints. First of all, the Party’s political strategy, examined throughout its changes in leadership and national weight; and secondly, the Festival’s cultural role in the country. In particular, the author presents the latter as an important factor of modernization because many events organized at the Festival (which he duly recalls) sparked passionate debates and promoted viewpoints not

necessarily aligned with the Party’s viewpoint. Lastly, Simonini examines the main filmic and literary representations of the Festival.

Francesco Rizzo, in “Zanardi Superhero in the Post-ideological Age” discusses the most relevant character (Zanardi) created by the artist who has supposedly inaugurated the modern Italian comic, Andrea Pazienza. Appearing at the beginning of the eighties, in Rizzo’s interpretation, Zanardi represents the post-ideological hero because he puts his individual pleasure and interest above all. The author then examines some of Zanardi’s stories, stressing his rather manipulative interaction with the other two members of his gang, Petrilli and Colasanti. Zanardi’s achievements epitomize therefore (maybe in a parodic manner as well) the behavior of the average postmodern citizen, singled-out in the mass-society as egotistic and in pursuit of rather narcissistic forms of gratification. The essay also contains the reproduction of several tables from the referenced stories, easing the readers’ task.

Lastly, I would like to thank Olga Campofreda and Samuel Thomas for the help they provided me with when reviewing the essays.

## CHAPTER ONE

# FROM POPULAR CULTURE TO CULTURE OF OPPOSITION IN ECO'S CRITICAL WORK

PAOLO DESOGUS

There was a time when—even in the Italian critical debate—the developments of Marxist criticism seemed very similar to those of structuralism, so that the two critical approaches could be seen almost merging into one. This is different from what happened in other countries, such as in France, where the results of that close theoretical discussion didn't lead toward any alliance, instead bringing up more clashes than agreements between the two groups. Nonetheless, beyond all the accusations presented from both sides—the Marxists accused of historical determinism and the structuralists addressed as ideologists of capital—we can find the most interesting moments of this debate in the attempts at convergence made by the representatives of each approach: by analyzing these dynamics, we can understand the separation between theory and praxis, between cultural criticism and political activism, all aspects which emerged in the eighties, but were already very present in the debate of the previous twenty years.

In this regard, it is interesting to consider the discussion between Umberto Eco and Rossana Rossanda—who was in charge of the cultural approach in the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano)—around an article<sup>1</sup> published by the former on *Rinascita* in 1963. Eco's contribution, published in two parts, found the support of Mario Spinella, who had been notified about it by Palmiro Togliatti, founder and director of the review. The secretary of the Communist party always distinguished himself as very open and interested in the new cultural debates, in Italy and in Europe, and by that time he was aiming to stimulate new approaches on the subject within the intellectual members of the PCI. The signs of the crisis of the year 1956 were still evident and the attempts at gaining more autonomy from the soviet position had been too weak until that moment, the party not being capable

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<sup>1</sup> Recently the essay has been republished in C. Crapis and G. Crapis, 2016.

of dealing with the transformations that society was facing in the present. Contrary to Stalin's predictions, western capitalism was far from collapsing, in terms of economy as well as culture. There was the need for a new approach, a different angle: more open to methodologies and philosophies that were not strictly related to Marxism.

It was also necessary to overcome the schemes inherited from the *post-resistenza* by leaving behind the excess of trust in neorealism, whose vital energies at that point seemed quite consumed after the emotional impact of the *Liberazione* and the discovery of the working-class and subaltern Italy that Fascism attempted to hide in the shadows. The fast process of industrialization had concretely modified the social composition of the country. Italy was changing, as well as the art-related sensibilities and the demand for culture: Antonioni and Fellini's cinema was bringing up new aesthetic and political issues, whereas in the literary context was emerging a new experimental approach, without which the *neoavanguardia of Gruppo 63* would not have been born.

In this context, the people in charge of the cultural issues within the PCI agreed on the fact that— “in order to give new energies to Marxist criticism”<sup>2</sup>—the group of communist intellectuals had to deal with those social sciences that were already quite popular in academia all over Europe and in the United States, and—thanks to scholars such as Umberto Eco— had been introduced in the Italian cultural debate, as well. During the X PCI National Congress new ideas were introduced aiming to reshape a younger image for the party (among those, the reorganization of the centers of studies and the press). *Rinascita*, for instance, which started as a monthly issue, was turned into a weekly review in 1962 with the aim of following more closely the “battle of ideas” in the modern Italian context, increasingly complex and fecund with aspects not yet considered in depth. The involvement of Umberto Eco is the result of these political and social issues. Although he was far from the model of *intellettuale organico*, he was the kind of intellectual the PCI wanted to engage with in order to enlarge and renew its field of interests. Despite his young age (Eco is only thirty-one at this time) his studies had captured the attention of people outside of academia. His intellectual flexibility was evident from the early work *Opera aperta* (1962), the writings of *Diario minimo* (1963) and his prominent role within the Gruppo 63; Eco combined together the theoretical aspect, on one side, and the educational aspect on the other, the philosophical interest and the intellectual entertainment, high culture and mass culture. The interest in Eco's work was also due to the absorption—only apparently contradictory—

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<sup>2</sup> Mario Alicata in Vittoria 2014, 311.

in the products of the *avanguardia* as well as in forms of expressions neglected by the scientific analysis, such as comics, advertising, pop music, and mass literature. In addition to this, Eco was also quite familiar with the Marxist critical approach; openly against the philosophical thought of Frankfurt and partially also against György Lukács's work, he had studied in depth Marx, Engels and Bloch, and even Gramsci, whom he would be explicitly referring to in some writings on the sociology of literature and popular culture.

The publication of Eco's article generated two reactions. The first, concerning the proposal for a revision of the Marxist position related to the latest development of the cultural industry. Thanks to the *miracolo economico*, the spread of consumerism, the growth of the publishing industry and the media, mass culture was increasingly finding its space in Italy as well; for this reason the young semiologist affirmed the importance of considering it as a subject of studies and research, which was essential for those who aimed to understand the directions and the potential of the new forms of expression. The study of what people like, the trends, and the new cultural models constitute for Eco a necessary premise in order to gain a real understanding of the anthropological mutations within the Italian society, in which the working class was also included (Eco 1973b, 1977, 1986).

This assumption represents the reason for the criticism against Italian Marxists, incapable, according to Eco, of accepting the social changes and, consequently, considering the products coming from the mass society as a subject of research and investigation. Italian Marxists were lacking the ability to recognize a certain cultural dignity in the new forms of entertainment, studying them as a source from which more specific information about the working class could be obtained. Their "secret wish—as Eco writes—is that the newly regenerated working-class people would read hermetic poets, but due to some unfortunate events they keep on being treated as an underdeveloped group." (Eco 1963, 69). The Marxist attitude seems to the semiologist quite paternalistic, snobbish and having a certain disdain toward the new cultural expressions, that could be instead considered as a subject of studies not only for those who are specialists in aesthetic philosophy and sociology, but also for those representatives looking for potentially progressive subjects in their political discourse.

The second consequence of Eco's article concerns instead the critical, theoretical and artistic modalities implemented by the *avanguardia*, defended by Eco in opposition to the artistic movements and the engagement of the *dopoguerra*, in his view too much dependent on the directions given by the PCI. Both the positions recognize in art a social

value. Eco never stated that the aesthetic element is autonomous and disconnected from the historical process, instead he supports the idea that the *avanguardia* should take advantage of this connection by using the language and the elements of the mass culture in order to overturn its message. As it emerges, especially in the following years, and specifically in *Apocalittici e Integrati*, the different positions of Eco and the Marxists are based mainly on the political effectiveness of the *avanguardia*'s art and the way it could re-elaborate the cultural models of the industry. If Communist voluntarism—a drive not grounded in history—pampers this praxis, for Eco it is instead an important factor of the counter-culture. It allows in fact for the elaboration of a break through the hegemonic culture itself.

We can see at this point two forms of engagement that are also quite incompatible with each other: according to the Marxists, it was impossible to think of a change in the relation between capital and work without the elaboration of a new vision of the world, given and supported by the role of culture in society, specifically among those intellectuals who were already involved in the role of mediators between the lower classes, the working class and the institutions. For the Marxists, finding an alternative to capitalism is essential, whereas Eco considers the possibility of changing things from the inside, through a deconstructive work made by writers and intellectuals, free from bonds of any sort, as well as strict indications given by the party.

It is hard to state to what extent Eco's contributions on *Rinascita* and the new kind of engagement described by him in other writings actually shaped the structuralist debate, especially considering the tendencies already present by then. In those years, Saussure, Jakobson and Hjelmslev were providing an alternative methodology to the dialectic supported by historicism, a category of thinking that, first with Croce and later with the Marxists, became very popular in Italian culture. Despite many attempts, Eco's ideas were crosscurrent, although they were not powerful enough to spread the dialogue between Marxists and structuralists within the Italian debate.

We also have to consider Eco's position. His essay on *Rinascita* was not appealing, first because he accused the PCI—a party especially supported by the working class and lower-class people—of snobbery and elitism, and secondly for his theoretical approach. Even though part of the PCI was persuaded by Eco's ideas—especially those who at the beginning were quite diffident toward mass culture—there was a big obstacle in the way that Eco reconducted Marxism from a philosophical system, a general vision of the world and its transformation processes, to a mere theory, a methodology of



research to be found beside other theoretical models, such as structuralism. Answering this debate in *Rinascita*, Louis Althusserl—whose position never opened to structuralism—considered these kinds of methodological hybridization as a concession to neo-capitalist culture, therefore they had to be censored without hesitation.

Because of all these obstacles, the debate between Eco and the PCI continues without reaching a mutual position. A round table follows the answers written by Rossanda and Althusserl, eventually published in *Rinascita*. Among the participants were Edoardo Sanguineti, Giansiro Ferrata, Gianfranco Venè and Tullio Aymone. This time the focus is not on Eco's eclectic methodology but on the form of the engagement. The round table questions the consequences of the new methodologies and their effectiveness in the cultural processes. Vene's questioning concerns in particular Eco's reference to counter-culture under which his theory falls. The concept sounds vague: both the opposition's object and subject remain in fact unclear. In particular it is not clear how mass culture can be turned into an instrument able to transform reality. Eco's position almost increases the separation between theory and praxis, followed by the separation of culture and political activism, that Eco himself had aimed to reduce from the beginning.

What stands out is the absence of any reference to Gramsci, more precisely to his political writings, interested in the fulfillment of the hegemony of the subaltern classes through a conciliation between theory and praxis, culture and political activism, intellectuals and common people. Gramsci's presence remains in the shadows for the whole process of the debate, although a reference to his work could have been useful in order to create a mutual space for those issues related to political and cultural engagement. In Eco's writings the interest in Gramsci will emerge later on, in the second half of the seventies, and just related to topics concerning popular culture. All the issues related to power and the effectiveness of a certain vision of the world explored in the *Quaderni* will not find much space in Eco's theoretical work.

The confrontation between Eco and the PCI doesn't really come to an agreement, both sides being very defensive about their own ideas. However, for Eco the question around theory and praxis becomes a personal field of investigation to be solved independently of the debate engaged in with the Marxists. The fact that the essay published in *Rinascita* is not included in the collection of his early works, indicates the temporary nature of the results achieved by the scholar at that time. Eco will keep on investigating the subject in the course of his career, especially when he faces the issue of "culture of opposition" within semiotic studies.

The problem concerning the effect of criticism on reality emerges again in the writings about mass culture as well as in the notes around the foundations of semiotics. Eco is aware that this issue enlarges the field of investigation to a dialectical confrontation between sign and reality, meaning and ideology, text and criticism, structuralism and Marxism. Therefore, it becomes extremely relevant to match a theoretical analysis with that of cultural phenomena through essays, interventions, participations not only in specialized reviews, but also in newspapers, weekly issues and other periodicals whose main areas of interest include television and comics. In addition to those writings specifically focused on the foundations of signs and semiosis, Eco engages in an investigation on cultural phenomena only comparable to the work done by Roland Barthes in France.

Since the essays collected in *Struttura assente*, Eco's approach to structuralism is original and heterodox. The scholar not only criticizes the concept of "ur-structure", that according to Levi-Strauss would transcend historical phenomena, but he also discusses the idea of structure as methodological construction, free from ontological elements. Eco goes so far as to question the synchrony's Saussurien principle, restoring semiosis' historical and dynamic nature (Eco 1968). In his point of view, the *semema*—in other words, the scope of significance including the semantic elements referring to a semiotic concretion detached from its textual realization—can be recognized on the basis of the antecedent production of signs, deep-seated within the cultural processes.<sup>3</sup> Every expression stands over a cultural accumulation with its own history, as a product of complex trajectories of meanings coming from the past; these very trajectories shape the global semantic system beyond the production of each sign.

In *Trattato di semiotica generale* this system takes the aspect of the "encyclopedia", "the library of the libraries", the storage of all existing semiotic productions as well as a code for those that will be produced in the future. According to this theory, the meaning is described as a rhizomatic totality continuously in transformation, organized according to a holistic model where every element is potentially interconnected to the other. The *Divine Comedy*, a painting, a song, a film, an advertising billboard, a mural are part of this enormous and unstable system: they are signs with a specific textual unity of their own, but at the same time they refer to other elements in the encyclopedic whole, through which an addressee can be predisposed. The semantic encyclopedic system grows thanks to this continuous process

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<sup>3</sup> "[T]he structural and synchronic analysis asks for an historical one" (Eco 1976, 109).

of references and concrete textual productions; in this way, new unities of meaning are produced, brand new interconnections that contribute in increasing the semiotic potential.

In this way Eco not only defines the field where the signifying processes take place, he also describes their relation to the communication process. Every textual unity, either as simple as a street sign or as complex as a novel or film, implies a process that depends on a concrete context of communication, a context that is material and historical and involves the addressees and their own interpretational skills. Eco studies the way signs are produced inspired by some pages of Marx's *Capital*; through this approach he aims to give back to semiosis its materialistic basis. The meaning is an act of producing, a praxis, a process that involves not only semiotic entities, but also different forms of "work": physical work, psychic work, cultural and ideological work. Each text is therefore a concrete product and its existence can be verified thanks to the forms of work that shaped it and made it possible (Eco 1976, 151-156).

Semiosis takes back its material nature, its connection to a cultural and concrete reality to which belong the protagonists of the acts of communication. It is extremely important to identify production with interpretation. Each sign's production is a form of interpretation, as it refers to the encyclopedic whole and turns it into expression and content. Similarly, each act of interpretation is a form of production, since, in order to go back to the meaning of each element of a textual unity, the addressee has to complete an act of decoding, by using the available meanings.

At this point it is relevant to point out that, as a cultural product, each combination of signs lays on a network of semantic possibilities, sometimes not immediately visible, that can't reduce that combination to the addressor's intentions. Somehow each sign has its own life. It contributes to building up a context, fix ideas and concepts independently of the addresser. It is basically the expression of a vision of the world circulating within the semiosis, that contributes to shaping the general meaning.

In regard to this matter, it is also very interesting to consider the pages on ideology taken directly from Engels, who describes it as a form of false consciousness. Semiotics is here shown as a practice of demystification for those ramifications of the meaning that are not immediately visible to the act of reception, and for this reason they contribute to transmitting beliefs and generating ideologies. The use of semiotics in the analysis of cultural products not only explains the way a code works—from the expression to its content—but also tries to describe its semiotic mechanism by showing the encyclopedic interconnections and the rhetorical manipulations that shape even an apparently simple text.

This theoretical work shows a certain continuity with the discussion between Eco and the PCI. The criticism to ideology suggested in *Forme del contenuto* (1971) and *Segno* (1973) and later also in *Trattato* is one of the most advanced moments of the research on “culture of opposition”, a matter that constituted the core of the debate in 1963 and takes its place in a series of theories concerning the role of the attendee in the communication process. Semiotics becomes at this point the subject of opposition that can turn into practical criticism:

Semiotics is not only a theory but, a continuous praxis. It is so because: 1) the semantic system changes and semiotics cannot but only partially describe it reacting to concrete communicative events. 2) Semiotic analysis modifies the system it contributes to clarify. 3) Social praxis cannot but express itself as semiosis. Signs are therefore a social force and do not limit themselves to mirror the social forces. (Eco 1973, 159)

From this position follows the analysis on cultural processes and practices of opposition against the dominant culture. In the age of mass culture the battle against false beliefs and ideological manipulations doesn't have to be fought at its source but at the place where it arrives (Eco 1973a, 297).

According to Eco, control over the places of cultural production—such as newspapers and television channels—is not as relevant as the power of the user, the consumer of the message, who could potentially establish a form of counter-power. Considering that the act of reception is a form of sign production and it implies certain work for attendees of the message, a possible form of opposition from the bottom could be the use of different codes of interpretation in place of those suggested by the message itself. A text can be used for aims that are different from those it was initially produced for; in this case, the meaning of the message could be overturned, demystified, turned into an instrument of parody and criticism. Eco calls this process “semiological guerrilla” and it takes to the extreme the relationship between the addresser and the attendee. The principle that lies behind this concept is called “interpretazione aberrante”<sup>4</sup> that is an interpretation that violates and manipulates the message by using it for different aims from those it had been initially produced for. The idea is to create problems in the communication process by breaking the attendee's

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<sup>4</sup> The premises to semiological guerrilla can be found in one of the earliest semiotic studies on mass communication, whose focus was on differences in interpretation within television spectators. See Eco, *Per un'indagine semiologica sul messaggio televisivo*. A research study done in collaboration with Paolo Fabbri, Pierpaolo Giglioli, Franco Lumachi, Tullio Seppilli and Gilberto Tinacci-Mannelli.

consensus, that is the passive acceptance of the codification rules determined at the source.

Semiological guerrilla is the most advanced stage as well as the most problematic in regard to the "culture of opposition" on which Eco had been reflecting since the sixties. The idea of further evaluating the role of the addressee, once relegated to just a passive function, is an achievement that rewards his critical ability and his creativity, although there is the risk of allowing just a very marginal form of opposition, as it might be confined to an individual activity. Furthermore, it assumes the existence of a certain kind of public, an enlightened, educated and conscious public able to operate critically. Although very interesting in a theoretical perspective, semiological guerrilla has the risk of representing an elitist form of *contestazione*, far from being accessible to the people. In addition to this, there is also another issue that anticipates some post-structuralist ideas concerning the separation of cultural and political activity, already discussed in the sixties. Eco's position might be interpreted as a mere cultural game, or a form of cultural deconstruction activated on a symbolic level, with the conviction that somehow a transformation will follow on the reality level.

Eco seems quite conscious of this risk. From the second half of the seventies he tries to distance himself from the theoretical approaches that generated the so-called *pensiero debole*, according to which there wouldn't be facts but interpretations. Despite this, we don't have to forget that for a while Eco considered this position, suggested by the decision to exclude from the theoretical analysis the semiotic importance of reality, adhering to Roland Barthes' position according to which it was necessary to "kill the referent" in order to avoid neo-positivism's deviations. In the seventies, as above-mentioned, Eco steps away from those theoretical issues that could lead his research toward *pensiero debole*. The distance from the anti-referential approach starts being evident in *Trattato*. In this work Eco considers of extreme importance the work of Charles S. Peirce on the sign: under his influence he will not only abandon his earliest positions, but he will also recognize in the referent the primary source of semiosis.

The pages about the sign's production also are particularly relevant: here we find some thoughts on political praxis, directly connected to Marxism, and interpreted by Eco as a way of putting together semiosis and reality. As already mentioned, semiotics could be a key factor in order to criticize the contradictions of the false consciousness.

In addition to these thoughts there is a reconsideration of the practice of semiological guerrilla, whose limitations he recognizes in the excess of trust toward the spontaneous movements generated at the bottom. This thought

is shared in the aftermath of the Italian so-called *movimento del '77*, during which a significant part of the opposition attacked the PCI with the accusation of being unable to present itself as a real revolutionary force. Eco, who was among the main protagonists of the *movimento*, considers spontaneous actions to be as ineffective as the refusal of any form of political centralization, like the one represented by the PCI.

This is not a way of reconsidering previous positions. Even if during this phase we can recognize a certain convergence between Eco's studies and Antonio Gramsci's philosophy (founder of the PCI and its main theoretical reference) the relationship with Italian Marxism is limited to the critic of the ideology. In the essays collected in *Superuomo di massa*, Eco goes back to popular culture, and specifically to the consumer novel. As critical tools, he uses Gramsci's analytical and theoretical approach along with the instruments provided by semiotics and narratology.

This combination does not lead to a semiotic analysis on the topic of hegemony. The most political Gramsci of the *Quaderni* number nine and thirteen (dedicated to *Risorgimento* and Machiavelli) is not included in Eco's studies. Even the most discussed *quaderno* on intellectuals does not find any space within the scholar's writings. In Eco the idea of the autonomy of the intellectual is very strong, a concept that, on the other hand, is totally absent in Gramsci. For the latter, the intellectual is always related to a specific vision of the world and the political thoughts of a certain social group; for the former, instead, the intellectual is free due to his critical consciousness and his knowledge. The two positions are in opposition, even in conflict, and it is even more evident if we consider that according to Gramsci the intellectual also has the responsibility of building up the ideology, whereas for Eco his function should mainly be deconstructing, demystifying and revealing the false consciousness.

Despite the contrast with Gramsci, the main result coming from this revision of the culture of opposition is the beginning of a new reflection, perhaps even more problematic than in the past, but definitely connected to the work of the sixties.

The issue concerning the relationship between culture and politics still constitutes for Eco an important subject even in the eighties, the so-called years of *riflusso* and the crisis of the engaged and intellectual protagonist of many debates in the years of the Italian *dopoguerra*. The idea of semiotics as a continuous practice acquires an ethical and pedagogical trait with the aim of animating the culture of opposition. The semiological guerrilla that used to imagine the possibility of overturning the message through the so-called *interpretazione aberrante* leaves the room to the education to reception and the critical use of semiotics in order to defend the cultural user

from ideological manipulations. The role of the attendee remains active and his aim is that of educating and refining his critical attitude, his ability in defending himself from a reality dominated by communication.

Although after the big success in fiction literature with *Il Nome della Rosa*, Eco's profile becomes more institutional, the scholar keeps on working on semiotics as a theory founded on criticism. The main goal of his intellectual activity remains the act of demystifying, revealing and recognizing hidden connections so as to reveal the presence of the false consciousness in the signifying processes. The study of semiosis is never an innocent act: analyzing cultural products means showing clearly their communicative strategies and, in so doing, recognizing the totality of the fossilized contents, the stereotypes, the ideological elements, and the beliefs supported by them. There's no real difference between description and criticism: showing the mechanism behind any form of text also means revealing the vision of the world hidden from its addressees.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## POPULAR CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

### EMANUELA PATTI

#### 1. Introduction

One of the defining phenomena of most contemporary cultures and societies is the increasing penetration of social media and artificial intelligence in our lives. Blogs, apps, social gaming, microblogs, and last but not least social networks, have created new dynamics of social interaction, including the disintermediation from traditional stakeholders and people's direct participation in the public arena of cultural, political and social activities to the subversion of the top-down model of broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Virtually everyone who has access to these digital platforms can express their opinions, creativity and social interaction in the form of texts, images, and audiovisual materials, as well as do shopping, share traveling and accommodation services, order food, locate themselves in space, keep and share records about their health, and so on. The digital convergence of old and new media has taken postmodern cultural and social practices of hybridization between high culture and popular culture to the next level, overcoming class distinctions in unprecedented ways. "Folk culture(s)", "subculture(s)", "mass culture(s)" and "postmodernism" converge on the same media and overlap in different ways. In this respect, as I argue in this chapter, "digital popular culture(s)" seem to encompass all the definitions previously given to "popular culture": they are cultures made by the people for themselves, as they gather communities with similar interests; but, they can become mass phenomena, when they reach popularity with or without the collaboration of mass media. Moreover, they "remediate" stories, cultural models, ideologies and lifestyles from other media cultures such as

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<sup>1</sup> According to the "Digital in 2018 report", 34 million people in Italy are active on social networks. The most used social network is *YouTube* (21 million), followed by *Facebook* (20.4 million), *WhatsApp* (20 million), *Facebook Messenger* (13.3 million), *Instagram* (11.2 million), *Twitter* (7.8 million), *Skype* (7.1 million) and *LinkedIn* (6.1 million).

newspapers, movies, television, radio, advertising, comics, as well as rature, theatre, fine arts of the past and the present (Bolter and Grusin 1999).

The premise of this volume offers a unique opportunity to reflect on how popular culture has evolved from mass media to digital media in Italy. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci's reflections on the cultural industry's products and how their expressive forms convey ideological content and embedded world views still prove to be relevant to understand the relationship between Italian culture, politics and society today. Gramsci defines "folk culture" as an "*agglomerato indigesto*" ["unbearable conglomerate"] of fragments of all the world views which have succeeded in history (*Notebook 27*). At the same time, he argues that "folk culture" expresses some creative and progressive instances which can contribute to inform national culture. His concept of "hegemony", which means the intellectual and moral leadership of the dominant groups in society, well summarizes this double perspective, when it describes "popular culture" as a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the culture of the elites and/or mass media and the culture of the "people" emerging from below. In this perspective, his analysis of popular narrative fiction in the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates how characters and stories can convey ideological models for the society. For example, he identifies the origins of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* in serial literature—a typical example is Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Montecristo* (1846), whose protagonist Edmondo Dantès becomes a model of justice for the people (*Notebook 8*). Gramsci's interpretative theory later influenced Umberto Eco who successfully combined the Gramscian methodology with his own semiotic approach to cinema, comics, advertising, and journalism. In *Il superuomo di massa* (1976), for example, Eco explores how the two power forces, mass media, on the one hand, and the need for popular justice emerging from the masses, on the other, are negotiated in some serial literature, novels, movies, and other arts. Eco argues that, through its heroes, serial literature is proven to well represent the populist and pre-Marxist reformism of the 19th century.

The Internet, new media and digital technologies have introduced a new cultural dominant which requires a re-assessment of Gramsci's interpretative theory and methodology, as well as of Eco's semiotic approach, in relation to our contemporary social and techno-cultural scenario. From a media perspective, if Gramsci's reflections on culture mainly revolved around literature, on the one hand, and *lived cultures*, on the other, with a special focus on the relationship between class and power, and Eco reformulated them through semiotics in the context of mass media culture, we clearly need to rethink how their methodology can be adapted "when old and new media collide" in the digital age of convergence culture

(Jenkins 2006). Italian society has also significantly changed from Gramsci's times. Various waves of immigration have made it more diverse, although cultural integration has been difficult. Italians are generally more educated—but not significantly more than in Eco's times<sup>2</sup>—and they have been exposed to decades of mass culture. We are facing old and new emancipatory challenges, considering that Italian society is still considerably retrograde in terms of sexism, racism, and supporting civil rights. Scholars in cultural studies have taken Gramsci and Eco's theories beyond Gramsci's focus on class and power to include gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and ultimately identity as a composite mix of all these categories. Today, the convergence culture of the digital age raises new methodological questions.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will first examine how popular culture has evolved from mass media to digital media and how bottom-up practices have significantly shifted attention from the figure of the "*superuomo di massa*" to "empowered self-made celebrities". I will then address how the construction of *meanings*, the formation of *identities*, and issues of *otherness* have morphed in the new media scenario, by drawing upon three significant case studies: the "brand Gomorra"; the "brand Chiara Ferragni"; and finally, the "brand The Winx Club".<sup>4</sup> I will draw upon these case studies to address, respectively, the construction of *meanings*, *identities* and *otherness*, although each of them could be used to address and discuss any of the other two categories. Understandably, popular culture in the age of digital convergence cannot be exhausted in these practices, as mass culture, digital culture and high culture do not intersect for every single Italian in different ways. Yet, these case studies are particularly representative of three originally different cultural fields (literature, fashion, animation), Italian provenance areas (Naples, Milan, Marche), and target audiences; most significantly, they have been successful in the "digital glocalisation"

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<sup>2</sup> See the data about people who attained a tertiary education in Italy in the last 30 years in comparison with other countries. <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as David Forgacs, Robert Lumley, Robert Dombroski, Dino Cervigni, Norma Bouchard, Beverly Allen, Mary Russo, Michele Cometa, and Graziella Parati have significantly advanced this field in Italian Studies. The scholarship produced on mass culture by Stephen Gundle and David Forgacs has also been invaluable, for example in *Mass Culture and Italian Society. From Fascism to the Cold War* (2007), which has also been investigated by other Italianists in cinema and literary fiction, from the *cinapanettone* to Elena Ferrante.

<sup>4</sup> The term "brand" is not used here with any specific connotation, but to emphasize that, whether the final purpose is commerce, strong popular brands today share similar communication strategies.

(Sigismondi 2012) of their brand. In the conclusion, I will highlight why this concept has become so crucial in people's social representation in digital media and what future critical perspectives this presents for the humanities.

## 2. "Popular culture" from mass media to digital convergence

In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015), John Storey aptly remarks that "popular culture" combines two complicated words, "popular" and "culture", which, in their association, have taken different meanings over time. A mindful discussion about this topic thus requires, first, a definition of this conceptual category. In his 1983 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams suggested three broad definitions of "culture". First, "culture" can be used to refer to "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (90). In this respect, great philosophers, great poets and great artists play a significant role in the development of a society. Second, "culture" can be used to indicate "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (Williams 1983, 90). This definition refers not only to intellectual or aesthetic productions, but also literacy, festivals, cultural habits, youth subcultures, and sport. In a nutshell, this is what we can also call *lived cultures* in most urban societies. Third, "culture" can be used to suggest "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (90) which contribute to the production of meaning—what the structuralists and post-structuralists call "signifying practices". According to Williams, "popular" has instead at least four meanings: "well-liked by many people", "inferior kinds of work", "work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people", and "culture actually made by the people for themselves" (237).

In line with these interpretations of "popular", a first definition of "popular culture", as suggested by John Storey, is "culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people" (Storey 2015, 5). A second way to define "popular culture" is in terms of a "residual category" with a certain pejorative connotation: "popular culture" is "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (5). In other words, popular culture refers to those texts and practices "that fail to meet the standards to qualify as high culture" (5-6). A third definition of "popular culture" is "mass culture" which developed with the rise of publishing and broadcasting (radio, cinema, television) in the 19th and 20th centuries. It results from people's exposure to the same cultural products, values and lifestyles. In this perspective, "mass culture" has been considered by some intellectuals