

CHAPTER I

Eco and popular culture

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Since the beginning of his long and most distinguished career, Umberto Eco has demonstrated an equal devotion to the high canon of Western literature and to popular, mass-produced and mass-consumed, artifacts. Within Eco's large corpus of published works, however, it is possible to chart different as well as evolving evaluations of the aesthetic merit of both popular and high cultural artifacts. Because such evaluations belong to a corpus that spans from the 1950s to the present, they necessarily reflect the larger epistemological changes that ensued when the resistance to commercialized mass culture on the part of an elitist, aristocratic strand of modern art theory gave way to a postmodernist blurring of the divide between different types of discourses. Yet, it is also crucial to remember that, from his earlier publications onwards, Eco has approached the cultural field as a vast domain of symbolic production where high- and lowbrow arts not only coexist, but also are both complementary and sometimes interchangeable. This holistic understanding of the cultural field explains Eco's earlier praise of selected popular works amidst a plethora of negative evaluations, as well as his later fictional practice of citations and replays that shapes his work as best-selling novelist of *The Name of the Rose* (1980), followed by *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), *Baudolino* (2000), and *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004). Nevertheless, even in a type of writing that might appear as a capitulation to Kitsch art, Eco does not relinquish a desire to innovate upon the already said. By so doing, Eco's fictional works testify to the relative nature of aesthetic merits, standards of taste, cultural levels, and especially the critical categories of modernism and postmodernism that derive from them.

Among the many impressive traits of Eco's extensive bibliography are an almost equal number of publications on lofty subjects when compared to his works on mass-culture forms of communication. Among Eco's works from the late 1950s to the 1970s, one finds scholarly examinations

of medieval and contemporary aesthetics – *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (1956), *The Open Work* (1962), and *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (1965) – alongside a significant corpus of studies on various forms of popular culture either authored, edited, or co-edited by Eco: *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals: Mass Communications and Theories of Mass Culture* (1964); *The Bond Affair* (1965); *The Absent Structure* (1968); *The Culture Industry* (1969); *The Forms of Content* (1971); *Home Customs: Evidences and Mysteries of Italian Ideology* (1973); *The Superman of the Masses: Rhetoric and Ideology in the Popular Novel* (1976); *From the Periphery of the Empire: Chronicles from a New Middle Ages* (1977); *The Reader in the Story: Interpretative Cooperation in Narrative Texts* (1979); and *Invernizio, Serao, Liala* (1979), to mention just the most important ones. Among Eco's monographs, *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* – partially translated as *Apocalypse Postponed* – is especially significant. Tracking Eco's many publications on cultural studies is difficult in English, since so many of the translations are incomplete or combine works from many Italian originals.¹

Published just two years after *The Open Work*, a work widely acknowledged as a most comprehensive treatment of modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* could be considered an archive of Eco's various discussions of mass-produced and popular art forms. His essays range from comic strips, music, radio and television programs to popular literary genres, such as science fiction, film noir, and gothic. With *The Superman of the Masses*, Eco turns his attention to popular novels authored by best-selling writers from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries: William Beckford, Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail, Emilio Salgari, Luigi Natoli, Dino Segre (a.k.a. "Pitigrilli"), and Ian Fleming, among others. As in the case of his monographs, Eco's edited volumes also bear witness to his commitment to the serious study of popular forms of communication. In the introduction to the volume *The Culture Industry*, he explains that while the Italian reading public was familiar with Marshall McLuhan and Herbert Marcuse's discussions of the mass media of the 1950s, much of the theoretical work produced in the United States remained little known. To fill this gap, his volume assembles a cast of cultural theorists, ranging from Daniel Bell and Dwight MacDonald to Clement Greenberg, Edward Shils, Leo Lowenthal, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Robert K. Merton. Yet, Eco also hastens to add that in Italy, theoretical pronouncements about popular culture and mass communications have tended to prevail over the studies of the concrete and specific structures, forms, and

contents of popular forms of communication. According to Eco, this has had a series of negative ramifications, producing a wealth of abstract theory resting upon an inadequate base of empirical research. The volume on James Bond novels, *The Bond Affair*, even though published in Italian five years before *The Culture Industry*, is a valiant attempt to correct such empirical weakness. It anthologizes essays that examine the genesis and structure of the Bond novels, the social and ideological models that they promote, and their impact on the reading and, in the case of cinematic adaptations, viewing public. Eco's own essay on James Bond, now available in English in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979), was his most widely read work until the publication of his best-selling novel.

Eco's works from the late 1970s onwards continue to prove his commitment to examining all forms of cultural production, to devoting attention to the many symbolic expressions of our collective lives. Once again in Eco's intellectual development, treatments of high-culture subjects, ranging from reception theory or the philosophy of language (*The Reader in the Story*, 1979; *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 1984) to past and present forms of hermeneutics (*The Limits of Interpretation*, 1990; *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 1992), coexist with the analyses of mass and lowbrow forms of communications contained in a number of anthologies in Italy and subsequently translated under such titles as *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), *Misreadings* (1993), and *How to Travel with a Salmon* (1994). Non-Italian critics have rightly praised Eco's comprehensive approach to the field of cultural production as a pioneering contribution to introducing cultural studies methodologies into Italian scholarly and cultural debate.² Thanks both to Eco's own publications and to his pivotal role as an editor for major Italian publishers (thereby helping to select those works that deserved Italian translation), in the 1960s and 1970s, Eco's contributions to this field justly rank him among the key figures of contemporary thought (e.g., Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson) who have produced what is now an intellectual discipline.

Eco is neither an apocalyptic intellectual who rejects all forms of contemporary culture and despises everything that is not highbrow in nature, nor is he an integrated intellectual who uncritically praises all forms of mass culture and equates comic strips to Shakespeare in terms of importance. Eco's approach to human culture is therefore holistic. Nevertheless, his extensive works encourage the establishment of critical criteria to define cultural artifacts from either high- or lowbrow culture so that

the contemporary critic may distinguish between popular and high art with some precision. In short, Eco's bibliography straddles what Andreas Huyssen calls the "Great Divide"³ and therefore documents the different positions on popular culture taken by two very different twentieth-century views on the subject: modern art theory, on the one hand, with its emphasis on originality, novelty, and innovation; and postmodern aesthetics, on the other hand, that champions repetition, iteration, intertextual citation, and replay.

Eco's publications between *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* (1964) and *Invernizio, Serao, Liala* (1979) reflect a predominantly modernist approach to culture. They offer what might be termed a very "apocalyptic" view of popular art forms, defining them as products of a bourgeois, capitalist-driven culture that seeks to provide the public with imaginary resolutions to real, social contradictions. The works examined by Eco fall broadly within two categories: popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels; and various forms of mass communication widespread in twentieth-century culture, such as cartoons, songs, television, and films. The first group of works is discussed in great detail in *The Superman of the Masses* and in *Invernizio, Serao, Liala*. Both studies approach their subject from the framework of the sociology of culture and seek to unveil the ideologies that inform popular fiction. Eco's assumption is generally that these ideologies are conservative and support the status quo. *The Superman of the Masses* focuses on the genre of the *feuilleton* and its developments. Eco believes that the *feuilleton*, first produced in the 1830s when Emile de Girardin added an appendix containing serialized novels to a magazine, initially embodied a democratic vision of life. This democratic ideology reveals itself in the many representations of various forms of injustice perpetrated against the poor and the oppressed that one finds in such popular novels as Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Montecristo* or Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris*. However, the representation of social injustice in popular literature – for Eco a commendable ideological stance – often unfortunately goes hand in hand with the resolution of injustice by the figure of a superman. Various embodied in characters such as Balzac's Vautrin, Dumas' Montecristo, or Sue's Rodolphe, the superman intervenes on behalf of the poor and the oppressed by being an enlightened reformer and a generous benefactor. However, according to Eco, the superman is an essentially consolatory figure whose sphere of action remains highly localized and circumscribed. More importantly, the reformism of the superman serves as an antidote for revolution. As a result, this kind of pseudorevolutionary literature actually ultimately

preserves and reaffirms the social injustice that it pretends to attack, leaving the larger social fabric and its conditions of exploitation unchanged. In Eco's words, "The basis of Sue's ideology is this: to try to discover what we can do for the humble (by means of brotherly collaboration between classes) while leaving the present structure of society unchanged."⁴

Eco believes that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the popular democratic novel undergoes an additional process of degradation. Novelists such as Ponson du Terrail, Montepin, Richepin, and Richebourg – extremely popular then but infrequently read today – might represent the evils and problems of society, but they do so only to add a touch of color to their fiction. Such novels focus primarily no longer on the larger socio-historical fabric of society but now concentrate their narrative energies upon the private sphere where bourgeois dramas take place. The earlier figure of the superman endures, but its intervention is now limited to the resolution of domestic affairs. This last phase of the popular novel, located by Eco between the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, reflects an even more conservative ideology. In such popular works as Pierre Souvestre's *Fantomas* series or Maurice Leblanc's cycle of stories featuring the gentleman criminal Arsène Lupin, the narratives look beyond the bourgeois sphere, but their ampler social outlook strives towards the promotion of imperialistic, racial, and even anti-Semitic ideologies, as Eco argues in *The Superman of the Masses*. The examinations of popular art forms contained in *Invernizio*, *Serao*, *Liala* lead Eco to analogous conclusions, even though his focus is on popular novels written by Italian women. The best-known and most successful of these writers, Carolina Invernizio, transforms the superman figure into a society of females whose role is that of guaranteeing the order of the bourgeois family and the sanctuary of a middle-class domesticity that is being threatened and/or violated. The result, however, is a further strengthening of the status quo and of a social order that, as it has been amply documented by sociologists and historians, was confining women to the domestic and private spheres of life.

Eco believes that in the course of the twentieth century, the novel's popular appeal as a genre diminishes. Narrative migrates into the newer media of films, television, songs, and cartoons. The analysis of these new forms is at the center of *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals*. Once again, however, Eco's analysis reveals that the conservative ideology bolstering the status quo of the nineteenth-century popular novel has an impact upon new media of the subsequent century. Thus, popular comic strips such as *Steve Canyon* and *Dennis the Menace* exemplify a resurgence

of the Manichean logic of late bourgeois society: discipline and order are associated with friendship; war is linked with just conflict; the metropolis becomes associated with prestigious achievement; and the desirable women are linked to a lack of sensuality. Eco examines other examples of cartoons – mostly American – that he faults: *Little Orphan Annie* for its support of the nationalistic ideology of the McCarthy era; *Terry and the Pirates* for its association with the rhetoric of militarism; and *Joe Palooka* for its promotion of the political and moral conservatism of American society. Even Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* does not escape Eco's criticism, since he believes its satire of American culture is only superficial. In reality, the strip betrays a deep faith in the system that is even more damaging since it is concealed in a structure of deception. Of course, Eco rarely admits that his critique of popular American culture reflects his own leftist ideology, one colored (if not dominated) by Marxist values and a common disrespect for American popular culture often found among European intellectuals. Eco's corrosive critique also analyzes Italian popular music, and his evaluation of some of it reaches the same negative conclusions. The lyrics of Rita Pavone, a popular Italian singer, voice social discontent and express the outrage and anarchy of the young, but ultimately Eco believes her songs focus on sentimental matters that neutralize the potential for change in superficial, non-dangerous forms of protest. As for mainstream cinema and television, Eco cites the medieval debate between Suger and St. Bernard over the translation of the Biblical doctrine into visual images as an early expression of the perennial conflict between integrated and apocalyptic thinkers. Suger approved of art as an illustration of doctrine (a medieval form of an "integrated" intellectual praising popular culture), while St. Bernard (an apocalyptic figure who rejected all visual pandering to the masses) wanted no such lowering of standards. Eco argues that cinema and television, as iconic mediums, impair the viewer's analytical ability and are therefore more permeable to ideological coding than traditional fictional narrative. Eco believes that the culture industry exploits such ideologically loaded coding to foster the subjection of consumers into a critical acceptance of the values and beliefs of the hegemonic culture these consumers inhabit.

While Eco's discussions strive towards the unveiling of the ideology behind forms of cultural production, his approach to the field of mass media and popular forms of communication proceeds from the assumption that political categories cannot be divorced from aesthetic ones. As he often comments in *The Open Work*, strict homologies exist between the formal structures of the text and the world from which these structures have sprung forth:

In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which...contemporary culture views reality. The closed, single conception in a world by a medieval artist reflected the conception of the cosmos as a hierarchy of fixed, pre-ordained orders. The work as a pedagogical vehicle, as a monocentric and necessary apparatus (incorporating a rigid internal pattern of meter and rhymes) simply reflects the syllogistic system, a logic of necessity, a deductive consciousness by means of which reality could be made manifest step by step without unforeseen interruptions. (Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 13)

It comes as no surprise, then, that the acritical acceptance of the socio-political structures that Eco traces in various popular art forms is expressed not only at the level of content, but also of style, where the lack of social innovation translates itself in a repetition of formulae, schemes, and conventional expressions. In other words, the redundancy of content in support of dominant ideologies repeats itself in a redundancy of form. This idea constitutes the core of Eco's definition of Kitsch that he treats at length in a long chapter, "The Structure of Bad Taste," that was originally published in the Italian version of *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* but which appears in English as a chapter in *The Open Work*. In this essay, Eco describes Kitsch as a typical phenomenon of popular culture, unabashedly poaching the innovating procedures developed by high art in order to sell them as authentic expressions: "We could say that the term Kitsch can be applied to any object that (a) appears already consumed; (b) reaches the masses, or the average customer, because it is already consumed; and (c) will quickly be reconsumed, because the use to which it has already been put by a large number of consumers has hastened its erosion" (Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 197). The 1965 essay "Narrative Structures in Fleming" – a work that appeared first in *The Bond Affair* and was then widely distributed in English by its appearance in *The Role of the Reader* – illustrates perfectly the strict nexus that Eco establishes between conventional stylistic and semantic effects, on the one hand, and a conservative political ideology encoded in such conventional effects, on the other. Basing his argument on Fleming's first novel, *Casino Royale* (1953), and not really extending his analysis beyond that single novel to the entire collection of novels featuring Bond or to the many films adapted from Fleming's works, Eco argues that Ian Fleming's 007 series contains a set of binary oppositions of characters and value systems corresponding to the schemata of an hegemonic social and political order. The series' style epitomizes the practice of a *bricoleur*: an author who creates texts as collages by way of the repetition of previously existing literary

stylemes in a “clever montage of déjà vu” (Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 163). It is an interesting reflection of Eco’s intellectual integrity that years later, after having written a number of best-selling novels himself, Eco retracts much of his negative opinion of Fleming’s prose style in the prestigious Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1992 to 1993, comparing Fleming to Manzoni and seeing stylistic traits in the first Bond novel that were praised by the Russian Formalists (Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 70, 84). His change of heart probably also contains an admission that his own cultural theory from this period was colored by political ideologies even though he did not acknowledge this to be the case.

Some scholarly evaluations of Eco’s discussions of popular culture have argued that Eco himself was not immune to the theory of the “culture industry” developed by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School.⁵ Obeying the reifying logic of a capitalist economy, the culture industry, according to this line of thinking, reproduces dominant ideological beliefs in fictions whose formulaic and conciliatory structures offer the public imaginary resolutions to the contradictions of their daily lives. The only works that supposedly escape the grips of the culture industry are the artifacts of modernity and avant-gardism, such as Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, according to a famous essay by Theodor Adorno who argues that the work’s formal open-endedness and fragmentation also embodies a negative critique (or “negative dialectics”) of industrial capitalism and its suffocating institutions.⁶ In spite of this criticism of Eco’s position, originality and innovation are precisely the chief traits that Eco locates in the “high” works of modernism and the avant-garde. He cites with approval the poetry of Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Montale; the novels of Proust, Kafka, and Joyce; and the music composed by Pousseur, Stockhausen, Berio, and Boulez. In all of these works, originality and innovation question the already known and therefore are values that Eco sees as coterminous with social change. In Eco’s words, “So the avant-garde musician rejects the tonal system not only because it alienates him to a conventional system of musical laws, but also because it alienates him to a social ethics and to a given version of the world. . . . By rejecting a musical model, the avant-garde musician actually rejects (more or less consciously) a social model.”⁷

Given Eco’s promotion of originality, novelty, and invention as anti-Kitsch in nature, it comes as no surprise that in an early elaboration of his semiotic theory contained in the last chapter of *The Absent Structure* (1968), he endorses politically empowering acts of “misreading,” the deciphering of messages on the basis of other, oppositional codes that might occur

during the moment of reception. As Eco puts it, to force closed semiotic systems into an open-ended process means to open the symbolic field to an understanding of culture not just as a space of passive consumption and silent acceptance but also as a pragmatic arena of resistance and conflict:

This is a “revolutionary” aspect of the semiological consciousness... where it appears impossible to alter the modality of emission or the form of the message, it remains possible (as in an ideal semiological guerrilla warfare) to change the circumstances according to which the readers will select their own interpretative codes... Against a technology of communication that seeks to promote redundant messages in order to ensure a pre-established reception, the possibility of a tactics of decoding capable of creating different circumstances for different types of decoding begins to take shape.⁸

Besides laying bare Eco's intent to integrate semiotics within a Marxist philosophical system, this quotation also sets the foundations upon which distinctions between high and low art rest. Indeed, a work allegedly created to foster the passivity of the consumer can be interpreted, in the moment of reception, in a way that might potentially alter its original effects and, with them, rigid taxonomic divisions between different forms of communication. Challenges to these taxonomies are not limited to *The Absent Structure* since often, amidst Eco's negative judgments, there remain areas where his understanding of popular versus high art forms tests clear boundaries and definitions. For example, in the preface to *The Culture Industry*, Eco ironically notes that many of the writers that he has anthologized are “enlightened intellectuals” who examine popular culture from the premise of high art and therefore view it as a degenerate form of expression. From this group, Eco singles out Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld precisely because their works have demythologized the notion that the culture industry is an omnipotent force, subjecting people to its control. While many passages of *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* seem hostile to popular culture, other key parts of the book – sections devoted to the myth of Superman, to a discussion of Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22*, and to Charles Schultz's famous cartoon *Peanuts*, as well as another often-cited 1975 essay first collected in *From the Periphery of the Empire* entitled “Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage” – show Eco's attitude to be more positive.

In his reading of the Superman myth, Eco takes a different stance vis-à-vis the consoling structures that popular artworks give the reader. After a modernist condemnation of redundancies and iterations of form and content on the grounds that such techniques promote an a-critical view of the

world, Eco then praises them for their promotion of an a-critical view of existence in the context of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe stories:

The attraction of the book, the sense of repose, of psychological extension... lies in the fact that plopped in an easy chair or in the seat of a train compartment, the reader continuously recovers, point by point, what he already knows, what he wants to know again: that is why he has purchased the book. He derives pleasure from the non-story (if indeed a story is a development of events which should bring us from the point of departure to a point of arrival where we would never have dreamed of arriving); the distraction consists in the refutation of a development of events, in a withdrawal from the tensions of past-present-future to the focus on an *instant*, which is loved because it is recurrent.⁹

Likewise, in the essay on Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*, Eco offers unexpected words of praise for a work that some critics would say might exemplify Kitsch. He repeatedly describes the film as a "textual syllabus" produced by the recycling of endless other works, but in spite of this, Eco does not find the redundancy of the "déjà vu" and the collage of a reifying *bricoleur* criticized elsewhere but, rather, something akin to a sublime experience: "When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly, we plumb Homeric profundity. Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion."¹⁰ In other words, Eco indicates here that the pleasure that we can derive from consolatory structure is not only a positive feeling, but also one that now seems to be divested of ideological implications. Eco's reading of Heller's *Catch 22* represents an even more drastic shift. Despite admitting that the novel, as a work of Kitsch, makes an unabashed use of pre-existing conventions, Eco writes that it corrosively critiques the systems of social control and relationships of property and, by so doing, indicts the state of anarchism and absurdity of contemporary life. In short, Eco is pointing to the fact that conventional, formulaic, and redundant works of Kitsch can have the same aesthetic, and – by implication – the same social effects as those produced by the avant-garde. In Eco's discussion of *Peanuts*, he advances the claim that even though the strip borrows from high art, it is not a product of Kitsch, but rather, something close to a "work of art," since it provides a novel perspective on the human condition of isolation and alienation brought about by capitalist, bourgeois society. Here again, the popular comes to occupy the privileged position of the avant-garde. Eco also believes that the avant-garde can borrow the reifying effects of Kitsch: