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12 A Guide to the Neo- Television of the 1980s

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The following notes explain the differences between Neo-Television and Paleo-Television. They deal with the most sadistic American show, technical innovations, the behaviour of the Neo-TV viewer, and furthermore, they offer a word of prophecy.

Once upon a time there was Paleo-Television. It was produced in Rome or Milan for everyone. It spoke of the appointment of ministers and it saw to it that the public only learnt about harmless things, even if it meant telling it lies. With the multiplication of channels, privatisation and the arrival of new electronic devilies, we are now living in the era of Neo-Television. It was once possible to compile a small dictionary of Paleo-TV with the names of its protagonists and the titles of its programmes. With Neo-TV this wouldn't be possible, not just because the number of protagonists and programmes is infinite (and no one can remember or recognise them), but also because the same characters play different roles, depending on whether they are speaking on public or private channels. A small dictionary of Neo-TV cannot, therefore, be anything other than a review of new forms of behaviour, and a sketch of general outlines, tendencies and coming developments. Studies have already been carried out on the character of Neo-TV (for example, the recent research done at

Bologna University on television entertainment programmes on behalf of the Parliamentary Commission).¹ The small dictionary which follows does not attempt a résumé of research in the field, but casts an eye over the panorama that it has brought to light. It is a small dictionary of mutating television for a public of mutants.

The principal characteristic of Neo-TV is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas Paleo-TV talked about the external world, or pretended to, Neo-TV talks about itself and about the contact that it establishes with its own public. It does not matter what it says nor what it might be about (especially now, as the public, armed with remote control, decides when to let it speak and when to switch channels). Neo-TV, in order to survive this control, tries to hold viewers by saying to them: 'I am here, it's me, I am you'. The maximum amount of news that Neo-TV provides, whether it is dealing with missiles or with Stanley who has pushed over a wardrobe, is this: 'I am telling you (and that's the miracle of it) that you are watching me, if you don't believe me, try me by ringing this number and I'll answer'.

After a lot of doubts, finally one thing is certain: Neo-Television exists. It is true because it is certainly a television invention.

TV AND TRUTH

Experiments in the 1960s taught us that for many underdeveloped viewers the evening's viewing was taken as a continuum without distinctions between truth and fiction. The underdeveloped viewer believed that the event of the news programme were as fictional as those of a drama, or that drama was true like the weather forecast. The viewers learnt to distinguish between genres according to how characters looked at the camera.

LOOKING AND NOT LOOKING AT THE CAMERA

The viewer had learnt that whoever spoke looking directly at the camera (like the newsreader) was bound to be telling the truth; he spoke about something that had really happened. Instead, whoever did not look at the camera and spoke as if the camera watched him through a key-hole (as happens with actors), was a fictional character. Then there was the quiz- or variety show compete; he spoke the truth when he looked at the camera and announced the name of a guest, but also when he didn't do so - when he was putting a question to a competitor to which he knew the right answer. But in the same programme, the comic, and sometimes the presenter himself, would look at the camera and say something made-up, such as a joke or a story. Now it's all changed. On *Altra Domenica* on Neo-TV, Arbore would look at the camera, and it was obvious that he was making up stories. Certain interviewees on chat shows do not look at the camera, yet they are presumed to be sincere. When then can you assume that whoever is speaking wants to tell the truth?

THE 'HOLD-ALL' PROGRAMME

Just to confuse things, the 'hold-all' programme has arrived in which, maybe for several hours, a host talks, plays music, introduces a drama programme and perhaps a documentary or a debate, and even reads the news. At this point the overdeveloped viewer mixes up the genres. He suspects that the bombardment of Beirut is a show and that the audience of youngsters who are clapping on the Beppe Grillo show is made up of human beings.²

THE BOOM-MIKE

On Paleo-TV there was a cry of alarm which was a prelude to warning letters, sackings and the collapse of promising careers; it was: 'Boom-mike in shot'. The boom-mike was not allowed to be seen, and the same applied to its shadow (indeed, its

shadow was greatly feared). Television pathetically insisted on presenting itself as reality, and hence it had to hide artifice. Then the boom-mike made its appearance on the quiz show, on the news and on various experimental shows. Television no longer hides artifice; rather, the presence of the boom-mike assures (even when it's not the case) that the transmission is live. It is thus the presence of the boom-mike which now serves to hide artifice.

THE TV CAMERA

The TV cameras were also not meant to be seen. Now, they too are seen. By showing them the television is saying: 'I am here, and if I'm here, this means that in front of me, and in front of you, there's reality; i.e., TV filming. The proof is that if you say "hi" in front of the TV camera, they'll see you at home'. The disquieting fact is that if you see a TV camera on television it is certain not to be the one that is filming (unless there is a complex *mise-en-scène* using mirrors). Hence, every time the TV camera appears, it's lying.

THE TELEPHONE ON THE NEWS

Paleo-TV showed comedy characters who spoke on the telephone, and it gave information about real or supposed events taking place outside television. Neo-TV uses the 'phone to say: 'Here I am, connected on my inside to my own brain, and on my outside to you who are watching me at this moment'. The newsreader uses the telephone to talk to the producer; an intercom would do just as well, but the voice of the producer would be audible, whereas it must remain mysterious - the television speaking with its own secret, intimate recesses. But what the newscaster hears is true and crucial. He says: 'Wait, the newscast is coming', and justifies long seconds of waiting because the film must come from the right place at the right time.

THE PORTOBELLO TELEPHONE

The telephone on *Portobello* and similar programmes put television's big heart in touch with the public's big heart.³ It is the triumphant sign of direct access, it is unblithful and magical. You are us, you can come and become part of the show. The world which TV is telling you about is the relationship between us and you. The rest is silence.

THAT TV ANNOUNCER IS A WRECK

The woman TV announcer is one of the most touching developments of Paleo-TV. It made sense when there was only one TV and one channel: it reinforced television's role as domestic hearth. Like a hostess, the announcer took us by the hand during the voyage in the closed box to tell us what we would see and how we should see it. On account of this she was chosen from the petite bourgeoisie, was attractive but hardly sensual, and took the advice of a dress-maker who could titillate the basest instincts of the majority of the day; that is to say, of the viewers living in remote areas never previously exposed to the models of the dominant class. The announcer was, in her way of speaking and manner, at one with the programmes she presented, which were full of circus jugglers and comedians skilled in long pauses full of double entendres.

Now that there are dozens of TV channels, and you come across this one or that one by chance, the presenter is no longer needed. Now that television space costs money because it is sold to advertisers, the announcer constitutes a huge waste. Now that the TV stations use many American and Japanese programmes which move at high speeds, the appearance of the announcer lacerates, so to speak, television time monstrously, stretching it like a plastic-bag pulled beyond the limits of its elasticity. Now that the programmes inform the viewers about how the fashionable dress, the announcer with her pompon, her chemises à la Eva Braun and her necklines à la Red Cross, seems to come from another planet.

Certain private television stations try to get around the difficulty by having a slightly whorish announcer who seems to

invite the viewer to follow her into the screen as the midnight logo descends. But the compulsive viewer is not fooled and is already moving the thumb greedily in search of the latest soft-porn.

THE AUCTION PHONE

Private Neo-TV invented the auction. With the auction phone-in, the public seems to be setting the very pace of the show. In fact, the calls are all vetted, and there are grounds for suspecting that they use the gaps to make false calls to raise the bids. If only one viewer phoned, then the item would be sold at a very low price. It is not the auctioneer who induces the viewers to spend more, it's one viewer that induces another, or rather it's the telephone. The auctioneer is innocent.

APPLAUSE

On Paleo-TV applause had to seem to be real and spontaneous. The public in the studio applauded when a sign lit up, but the public in front of the screen had not to know. Evidently the public has learnt this and Neo-TV makes no such pretences; the presenter says: 'Now let's give him a good hand', the public in the studio claps, and those at home are happy because they know that the clapping is no longer artificial. It doesn't matter to the viewer whether it is spontaneous, but rather whether it's really television.

THE PROVINCES

Paleo-TV wanted to be a window that looked out from the most far-flung province onto the big wide world. Independent Neo-TV (starting from public television's *It's a Knock-Out*) points the TV cameras at the provinces, and shows the public of Piacenza the people of Piacenza - which has gathered together to listen to a Piacenza watchmaker's advertisement, while a Piacenza presenter makes coarse jokes about the 'tits' of a Piacenza

woman, who takes it all uncomplainingly so that she can be seen by the public of Piacenza while she wins a pressure-cooker. It's like looking through the telescope from the wrong end. Nothing like that boring 'Hamlet' stuff.

THE AUCTIONEER

The auctioneer is simultaneously salesman and actor. But an actor who tries to play the part of a salesman would not be convincing. The public knows salesmen as people who persuade them to buy a second-hand car, a roll of material or marmot's fat at the village fair. The auctioneer has to be handsome (or fat, or a flashy dresser) and speak like his viewers, i.e., with an accent and with the odd ungrammatical expression, and say 'Right!' and 'Nice little bargain', just like the people who really sell do. He must say: 'Eighteen carats, Signora Ida, do I make myself understood?' In fact, he doesn't have to; he needs only express the same amazement as the buyer in the presence of the goods. In his private life he is probably very upright and honest, but on the screen he must have a roguish air, otherwise the public won't trust him. Salesmen are like that.

THE PROMOTION OF BAD HABITS

Once upon a time there were swear words that were said at school, at work and in bed. You had to control your habits a bit in public then, and Paleo-TV (subject to censorship and designed for an ideal public, both meek and Catholic) spoke in a cleaned-up way. Independent television, instead, wants the public to recognise itself and to say: 'That's really us'. Thus, the comedian or presenter who asks a riddle when looking at a woman spectator's bottom, uses bad language and makes double entendres. Adults rediscover themselves - finally TV is like life. Children think that that must be the right way to behave in public - just as they always suspected. It's one of the few occasions in which Neo-TV tells the absolute truth.

THE MASOCHISTIC VIEWER

Neo-TV, especially the independent channels, exploits to the limit viewers' masochism. The presenter puts questions to meek housewives which should make them die of shame, and they play ball, between feigned (or genuine) blushes, and behave like little whores. This form of TV sadism has reached its height in America with a new game in Johnny Carson's extremely popular *Tonight Show*. Carson recounts the plot of some hypothetical drama, *à la* Dallas, in which idiotic, wretched, disfigured and perverted characters appear. While he speaks, the TV camera frames the face of a spectator, who, in the meanwhile, sees himself on a TV screen above his head. The spectator laughs with delight as he is depicted as a sodomite and child-exploiter, while a woman spectator enjoys being put in the shoes of a drug-addict or of a congenital mental defective. Men and women (that the camera has, in fact, already maliciously picked out on account of some physical defect or over-pronounced feature) laugh happily at feeling themselves exposed in front of millions of viewers. Anyway, they think, it's only a joke. But they really are being exposed.

BABEL'S FILM LIBRARY

The forty- and fifty-year-olds know what hard work and research went into recovering an old film by Duvivier in an out-of-the-way cinémathèque. Now the magic of the cinémathèque is over, Neo-TV gives us Totò, and early Ford and perhaps some Meliès all in one evening. We acquire a film culture. But for one old Ford, there are ten unwatchable, fourth-rate films. The old hands of the cinémathèque still know how to tell the difference but as a result they search the channels only for the films they have already seen. Thus their film-culture does not develop. The young identify every old film with the cinémathèque film so their culture regresses. Fortunately there are some papers which give some guidance. But how can one read the papers if one has to watch television?

THE RHYTHM

American TV, for which time is money, imposes a rhythm on all its programmes, a jazz-type rhythm. Italian Neo-TV mixes American material and home-made (or Third World, eg, Brazilian) material that has an archaic rhythm. Hence, the time of Neo-TV is an elastic time composed of snatches, accelerations and decelerations.

REMOTE CONTROL

Fortunately the viewer can impose his own rhythms by hysterically making choices with his remote control. Have you ever tried watching TV news on two public channels, switching in hiccup fashion from one to the other so that you always see the same item of news twice, and never the one you are waiting for? Or thrown a pie at the face just when the old mother is dying?

Or intercut the Starsky and Hutch gymkhana with a slow dialogue between Marco Polo and a buddhist priest? In this way we all create our own rhythms and watch TV in the same manner as when we listen to music pressing our hands over our ears; it's us who decides what will become of Beethoven's 'Fifth' or of 'Bella Giguglin'.⁴ Our TV evenings no longer tell us whole stories; it's all a 'trailer'. The dream of the historical avant-gardes come true.

THE VCR

With Paleo-TV there was little to see and it was all to bed before midnight. Neo-TV has dozens of channels and they are on late into the night. Appetite comes from eating. The VCR lets us see so many extra programmes - hired and bought films and programmes that were broadcast when we were not at home. How wonderful, one can now spend 48 hours a day in front of the TV, so there's no more need to come into contact with that remote fiction - the real world. Moreover, events can

be made to go backwards and forwards, in slow-motion and speeded up. Just think, watching Antonioni at Mazinga's rhythm.⁵ Now unreality is within everyone's grasp.

TELETEXT

It is now one of the new range of possibilities, but there are already others, and there will be yet more in number. One will read train timetables, stock exchange prices, and encyclopaedia entries on the TV. But when everything, absolutely everything, even the interventions of members of the board of directors, will be able to be read on the screen, who will need to know the times of trains or shows, or the weather forecast?

The screen will give information on an outside world where no one will go any more. The project for the new MITO, that is the Milan-Turin megapolis, is based in large part on contacts via the TV screen.

At this point, one can no longer see why it's necessary to improve the motorway or the railways since no one will need to go from Milan to Turin, or vice versa. The body becomes useless, and the eyes are all you need.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

One can buy electronic games, make them appear on the TV and the whole family can play at destroying Darth Vader's space fleet. But when - given that one has so many things to see already, including taped material?

In any case the galactic battle is no longer played in the bar between a coffee and a telephone call, but all day until you get spasms (because you know you only stop because someone is breathing down your neck, but at home you can carry on forever), and this will have the following effects: it will teach children to have optimal reflexes so that they will then be able to fly a supersonic fighter. It will get both adults and infants used to the idea that to make ten space-ships disintegrate is in fact nothing special - a missile-war will be reduced to a human scale. When we then really make war, we will be destroyed in a

split-second by the Russians, who are free from Battlestar Galactica. Because, I don't know whether you've tried it, but after playing for a couple of hours at night in a restless half-waking and half-sleeping state, you see flashing lights and the trails of tracer projectiles. The retina and the brain are pulped. It's like when a camera flash has flashed in your eyes. For a long time you see a dark spot in front of you. It's the beginning of the end.

Translated from an article in the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, 30 January, 1983, by Robert Lumley. With thanks to Zyg Barański for help with the notes and translation.

NOTES

- 1 Since 1975 a Parliamentary Commission has replaced the Government in exercising ultimate control over state broadcasting. Eco is referring here to research published in M. Wolf (ed.), *Contributi di studio. Tra informazione ed evasione: i programmi televisivi di intrattenimento* (Rome: RAI Verifica Programmi: Trasnessi, 1981).
- 2 Beppe Grillo is a madcap Genoese comic who has a show on a private TV station and specialises in political satire.
- 3 *Portobello* was an extremely popular show in which members of the audience put things up for sale. In 1983 it was hit by scandal when its presenter, Enzo Tortora, was arrested under suspicion of involvement in the Neapolitan camorra. On the 'caso Tortora', see R. Lumley's three articles in *The Italianist*, VI (1986); VII (1987); VIII (1988).
- 4 'Bella Gigugiù' is a popular song going back to the Risorgimento.
- 5 'Mazinga' is a Japanese sci-fi cartoon typical of a genre which has invaded Italian TV.

As well as helping to characterise the writings of a man who has himself become a significant feature of modern culture, this will, I hope, illustrate something about the nature and use of semiotics as an academic activity.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ECO'S SEMIOTICS

'Semiotics' and 'semiology' can be used interchangeably to stand for the general theory of signs or, as Eco would have it, of signification and communication; Eco himself began by preferring the latter term, but now, in accordance with a decision of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, has adopted the former, and I shall follow him in this respect. The special connection between semiotic theory and the study of the mass media is a point Eco has always insisted on. His first and most substantial work on the media, *Apocalittici e integrati* of 1964, opened for him the road to semiotic studies, he has said, by showing him the need for a unifying theoretical framework (Eco, 1977, p. xv). Such a theoretical framework, he has repeatedly argued, can only be provided by semiotics:

The study of mass communications proposes a unitary object inasmuch as it claims that the industrialization of communications changes not only the conditions for receiving and sending out messages but ... the very meaning of the message ... One can plan a unitary study of such phenomena only if the theories and analyses of mass communication are considered as one sector of a general semiotics. (Eco, 1976, p. 13; see also Eco, 1968, pp. 410-1)

What Eco means by a change in the 'very meaning of the message' is a question we shall return to later. The important point here is that for him the 'unitary study' of mass communications requires not a theory specific to the subject, but one of far wider scope, a general theory of signs. This in itself makes the relationship between the theory and the practical analysis a difficult one; it appears all the more difficult when we consider the distinctive features of this theory.

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Umberto Eco: Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Media

DAVID ROBey

INTRODUCTION

As a student and critic of the mass media, Umberto Eco displays a remarkable range and combination of qualities. He has produced, both as a journalist and at a more specialist level, a constant flow of acute, forceful and usually entertaining articles and essays on specific topics in broadcasting, publishing, advertising and related aspects of modern mass culture. At the same time, in his semiotic theory, he has developed an imposingly elaborate conceptual framework, within which the rest of his work is conducted. This combination of theory and practice is clearly a major source of strength, but, to a pragmatic English-speaking public, it is also an obvious source of difficulty; complex theoretical systems tend for us to be objects of suspicion in themselves, and still more when they are proposed as a guide to practical activity. I propose here to look at the nature of this combination (more closely than I was able in an earlier essay (Robey, 1984)), to examine Eco's work on the media in relation to his semiotic theory as a whole and the claims he makes for it, with a view to understanding better just how the theory affects the practice.

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One very general way of characterising Eco's semiotics as a whole is as the product of three broad tendencies: the urge to system, the insistence on commitment and the sense of instability. The urge to system can be seen most obviously in the 'imperialist' character of his semiotic theory, which claims to embrace the whole of cultural life in a single conceptual framework, insofar as the whole of cultural life can be seen as a system or systems of signs. Eco argued this point particularly strongly when, in the 1970s, he began to write in a major way for an English-speaking readership. 'The laws of communication are the laws of culture. Culture can be studied completely under a semiotic profile. Semiotics is a discipline which must be concerned with the whole of social life' (Eco, 1973a, p. 71). The principal aim of semiotic theory, as he states it in his major theoretical work to date, *A Theory of Semiotics* of 1976, is to explore the possibility of a 'unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication', and therefore to all aspects of social and cultural life. The purpose of his book is to extrapolate a 'research model' from the present field of semiotic studies, which can serve for 'suggesting such a unified approach and for 'tracing the limits of future semiotic research' (Eco, 1976, pp. 3, 8). 'Semiotics aims to become able to describe, to structure and to legitimate its entire field using a unified set of theoretical tools' (1973a, p. 60).

The foundation of this conception of semiotics is the principle of unlimited semiosis, which Eco has derived from the American philosopher C.S. Peirce. According to this principle, the meaning of any sign, both verbal and non-verbal, can only be seen as yet another sign or signs (its 'interpretant(s)' in Peirce's terminology), the meaning of which, in turn, can only be seen as yet another sign or signs, and so on *ad infinitum*. Meaning is an infinite regress in a closed sphere, a self-contained universe related in various ways to the 'real' world, but not directly connected with it. The principle guarantees the coherence and autonomy of semiotics as an academic discipline or science, because it allows signs to be studied independently of their referents, and thus without interference from other branches of knowledge (Eco, 1976, pp. 68-72). For readers of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* it is worth recalling that the principle of unlimited semiosis is apparently embodied in the novel's

title. This derives from the Latin hexameter with which the book ends: *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus* [the former rose survives in its name; bare names are what we have], a line which seems fairly clearly to assert the fundamental gap between the world of words, or signs, and the world of 'real' things (Eco, 1980, p. 503; 1984a, p. 7).

Eco's adherence to the principle of unlimited semiosis does not mean, however, that the subject of semiotics is unrelated or irrelevant to the world in which we live. It is on this point that we come to the second broad tendency of his work, the insistence on commitment - a major feature of all of Eco's writing, from his pre-semiotic *Opera aperta*, published in 1962, onwards. In the first place, while sign-systems are in a fundamental sense independent of the world, they are also related to it and reflect it through the medium of ideology. From the beginnings of his interest in semiotics, Eco argued against the inclination of the French structuralists, and notably Lévi-Strauss, to see the structures of sign-systems in universal, atemporal terms. The insistence that such structures are, by virtue of their relation to ideology, products of history has been a distinguishing feature of Eco's work, and of Italian semiotics in general (Robey, 1985); ideology, Eco suggests, is the 'final connotation of the totality of the connotations of the sign or context of signs' (Eco, 1968, p. 96).

Secondly, the relationship between signs, ideology and history is, for Eco, the basis for making of semiotics itself an instrument of intervention in the historical process. The aim of *A Theory of Semiotics* is to investigate the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to the world of signs, and the social function resides in its potential for analysing the relationship between sign-systems and ideology (1976, p. 3). A similar and more forceful point is put, with specific reference to the mass media, in *La struttura assente*, published in 1968 and Eco's first major semiotic work. Here the social task proposed for semiotics is to institute a 'tactics of decoding' which will counteract the ideological effects of the mass-communications industry, a form of 'semiotic guerrilla warfare', to use a phrase that Eco has been fond of repeating (Eco, 1968, p. 417). Not only were the media the starting-point of Eco's interest in semiotics, therefore, they also provided it

with its continuing justification. We shall see later more specifically what form this semiotic guerrilla warfare should take.

It will be evident that there is already considerable tension in the relationship in Eco's work between what I have called the urge to system and the insistence on commitment; the former leads away from historical reality, the latter back to it. The tension is made even greater by the third factor, the sense of instability. This too is a feature of all of Eco's work, both before and after his discovery of semiotics. The early *Opera aperta* is concerned with the kind of art that is typical of, and best suited to, the disordered world in which, according to Eco, we live. The 'open work' is so-called because it intentionally and systematically generates multiple interpretations, and thus a kind of knowledge analogous to the modern experience of the world, in which there is no possibility of stable, certain knowledge.

In Eco's first semiotic work, *La struttura assente*, the sense of instability takes the form principally of an argument in favour of 'methodological' rather than 'ontological' structuralism. Arguing against Lévi-Strauss in this respect as well, Eco maintained that the structural analysis of sign-systems cannot claim to identify objectively existing deep structures governing human culture; it can only, in a tentative and provisional way, postulate the existence of structures as a temporary means to understanding. The point of the title of this book is that the deep structure beneath all surface structures permanently and necessarily eludes our grasp.

Later, in *A Theory of Semiotics* and in the more recent *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* of 1984, the interest in structures and structuralism gives way to the concepts of 'encyclopaedia' and 'abduction', but the sense of instability remains as strong. The 'encyclopaedia' is the totality of knowledge or competence that enables people to use signs in order to communicate. Eco represents it through the images of a network, rhizome - a tangled clump of bulbs and tubers - or labyrinth, as a vast aggregation of units of meaning between which an infinite variety of connections can be made. 'Abduction', another term derived from C.S. Peirce, is the process of tracing out one of all the possible paths that can be taken through this network,

rhizome or labyrinth, the process on which all communication, and therefore all understanding, depends. It is an essentially tentative and hazardous process, of which the act of criminal detection is an exemplary illustration. Just as the detective finds the author of a crime by postulating certain rules concerning the connections between human motives and actions and physical events, so in the normal processes of communication we find the meaning of a sign by postulating certain rules concerning the relationship between that sign and others. Eco's Wittgensteinian detective, William of Baskerville, has a clear understanding of the provisional nature of all forms of understanding: 'The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless' (Eco, 1980, p. 495).

It is this combination of tendencies in varying degrees opposed to one another which gives Eco's semiotics its distinctiveness and interest, and lends a peculiar complexity to the relationship between the general theory and the specific media analyses. Let us now look closer at these analyses, to see how they have evolved under the impact of Eco's semiotics. This will give at least a pragmatic answer to the question how theory and practice are related. We can then consider further the answers of a more abstract nature that Eco himself offers.

ANALYSIS OF MASS MEDIA: STEVE CANYON, SUPERMAN AND PEANUTS

Eco dates his serious interest in the media from the very early Sixties. Up till then his work had been mainly concerned first with medieval aesthetics, then with the 'open' work of art. *Apocalittici e integrati*, his first, pre-semiotic, volume on the media, was largely made up of essays written in the immediately preceding years in response to a climate of growing interest in the subject; he put them together in a book, Eco tells us, in order to compete for a chair in the 'pedagogy and psychology of mass-communications' (Eco, 1977, p. x). After an introductory essay and a discussion of the concept of Kitsch, the book contains readings of the Steve Canyon,

Superman (translated in Eco, 1979b) and Peanuts comic strips, and a series of reflections on a variety of topics, the most substantial of which concern the 'practical use' of fictional characters, pop music and television.

We shall return to the introductory essay shortly. That on Kitch is of interest here because it was as he wrote it Eco tells us (1977, p. xv), that he realised the need for the unifying theoretical framework provided by semiotics; but it need not otherwise concern us in this context, since it relates to Eco's work on poetics and aesthetics much more than to his analysis of the media (it will be included with the forthcoming translation of *Opera aperta*, Eco, 1989). The other chapters are linked, first, by a related set of themes. These concern what Eco calls the 'paternalism' and the 'function of evading and masking reality' characteristic of so many products of the mass media (Eco, 1977, pp. 264-5). Comics, for instance, tend to display a Manichean vision of the world, a constant tendency to classify characters as either purely bad or purely good, that clearly oversimplifies and distorts the real complexities of human nature. Equally importantly, they tend to exclude the dimension of change and therefore of history. Superman, for instance, is fixed in an eternal present, like a mythological hero of antiquity; his adventures are an endless repetition of identical occurrences. This implicit denial of the historical process reinforces the passivity (the *eterodirezione*) typical of modern society, and works against the sense of freedom and responsibility. Eco finds a similar, and equally symptomatic, characteristic in Rita Pavone's version of the song 'If I had a hammer'. Whereas the original was a protest directed against 'real, historical objectives', Pavone's version is completely trivialised; she only wants to hammer out the minor irritants of teenage life (1977, p. 293).

Eco sums up the ethos of the Superman comics by saying that it is civic rather than political: his good deeds are a series of 'minor, partial acts', and exclude any 'total awareness'; the only form that evil assumes is the attack on private property, while all forms of authority are seen as fundamentally good. Here, as in the case of Steve Canyon and also Lil' Abner, the ultimate ideological aim is therefore to preserve the system through a process of reform (1977, pp. 258-60; 181). All these related

aspects of the modern media are characterised by what Eco calls, drawing on information theory, a high degree of redundancy; they produce no new knowledge, but merely retail the familiar. There would be nothing intrinsically wrong in this, were it not for the fact that such redundancy is the dominant feature of the media. In a world in which, from other sources, we are assaulted by so much 'information' in that so much of what we perceive is threatening and unassimilable, the media thus offer an 'indulgent invitation to repose' (1977, p. 252). As Eco says in his chapter on pop songs, 'the drama of mass culture is that the model for a moment of rest becomes the norm ... a surrender to conformism of behaviour, the passive ecstasy demanded by a paternalist pedagogy' (1977, p. 282).

This does not mean, in *Apocalittici e integrati*, that all products of the media necessarily exercise such an influence. The chapter on the 'practical use' of fictional characters (1977, pp. 187-218) centres on the distinction between characters as 'topoi' and characters as 'types'; the concept of type is largely drawn from Lukács, to stand for the kind of literary character that embodies a significant aspect of a given historical reality, and therefore produces a form of real knowledge. It follows from everything that has been said so far that the media's characters are predominantly topoi, but there are also occasions when comic strips can contain types in this sense. Feiffer's characters belong to such a class, and so, Eco argues in the chapter on Peanuts, do those of Schultz; they are images of 'non-integration', a 'microcosm in which our tragedy and our comedy are represented', and by virtue of this can perform a 'critical and liberating function' (1977, pp. 270-1; 265).

The discussion of Peanuts is an important part of Eco's book, because it supports the view that the media, in spite of their normally negative effect, are capable of significant improvement. The introductory chapter and the title of *Apocalittici e integrati* make this point. The latter stands for two opposed attitudes to the world of mass communications on the part of contemporary intellectuals: the apocalyptic view that the media mark the beginning of the end of civilisation and culture, and the integrated view that accepts and affirms them. Eco, of course, holds with neither. His position is summed up in his notes on television:

To recognise the cultural possibilities contained even in a good programme of songs or a fashion show, and to understand the necessity of integrating these aspects with a role of denunciation and an invitation to discussion, this is the role of the cultural man in the face of the new medium. (Eco 1977, p. 344)

Here and later, Eco's constant tendency is to refuse a simplifying, unitary view, to insist on the complexity of issues, to try and see as many sides as possible to each one.

In this and other respects, the continuity between *Apocalittici e integrati* and *Opera aperta* is very striking; the two books in fact complement each other. *Opera aperta*, we have seen, is about the kind of art that reflects, and is best suited to, the world in which we now live. Traditional art conveys a traditional view of the world as stable and ordered; the 'open' work does the opposite. Traditional art contains a high degree of 'redundancy' because it confirms what we already know; the 'open' work generates a high degree of 'information' because, by breaking established conventions of expression, it vastly extends the possibilities of interpretation and forces the public to search for new kinds of meaning. Eco's critique of the media is thus analogous to his critique of traditional art; the high degree of 'redundancy' in the messages it produces conveys a falsely ordered view of the world. The improvements he calls for in the media are also in the direction of greater openness, but this does not mean, it must be said, that the public should be fed on a diet of 'open' art works. The kind of openness Eco requires of the media is of a more pragmatic and accessible kind: openness to the real complexity and difficulty of things, openness to change, and openness to discussion.

JAMES BOND AND EUGENE SUE

According to Eco, we have seen, *Apocalittici e integrati* opened the way to semiotics for him (Eco, 1977, p. xv). He tells us in the same place that he then went on to apply semiotic methods to media studies in essays on television (Eco, 1973b), on James

Bond and Eugène Sue's novels (now in *Il superuomo di massa* (Eco, 1978), and translated in Eco, 1979b), on advertising in *La struttura assente* and *Le forme del contenuto* (Eco, 1971; and now subsumed into *A Theory of Semiotics*). The Bond and Sue essays were in fact first published in 1965, shortly after those in *Apocalittici e integrati*, and there are not surprisingly many common features in the two groups. The Steve Canyon study in particular shows signs of the structuralist influences that Eco was to develop more fully later. There are references to decoding the message, revealing its structure, to relations between signs and code, to structural levels. Canyon's face is described as a sign, a conventional element of a 'language'; Eco speaks of a 'grammar' of framing techniques (1977, pp. 137, 147). Moreover in both the Steve Canyon and the Superman essays there is a focus on the connection between structures and ideology which, we have seen, is one of the distinctive features of Eco's semiotics. This last characteristic is also an element of continuity with *Opera aperta*, with its insistence of the parallels between the modern 'open' work and the modern view of the world.

Just as *Apocalittici e integrati* anticipates the method of the Bond and Sue essays, so these continue major themes of the earlier volume. *Il superuomo di massa*, the title of the book in which the Bond and Sue essays were subsequently incorporated, indicates one theme of central importance. Steve Canyon, Superman, James Bond and Sue's hero Rodolphe de Gerolstein are all variants of the same superhuman figure, myths of a peculiarly modern, media-generated kind. In all cases, the consequence of the exercise of their remarkable powers is a reaffirmation of the status quo. Like Superman, for instance, Rodolphe is simply a small-scale reformer; Sue's novels are characterised by reformism and paternalism, with no hint of a 'new autonomy to be given to the "people"' (Eco, 1978, p. 65). The Manichean opposition of good and evil is also a continuing consideration, common to the Steve Canyon and the James Bond essay; Fleming grossly oversimplifies issues, ensuring that Bond always suppresses any doubts about the rightness of his chosen occupation. This 'proceeding by means of schemes' is in itself reactionary, according to Eco, because it suppresses the real complexity of things (Eco, 1978, p. 170).

Finally, the concept of redundancy remains a leading topic in the discussion of both Fleming and Sue. The Bond novels illustrate to an exemplary degree that 'absolute redundancy typical of the escapist machinery that operates in the field of mass communications' (Eco, 1978, p. 168). Redundancy here takes the distinctive form of a technique of pointless description; the lengthy provision of details irrelevant to the action and perfectly familiar to most readers, descriptions, for instance, of cigarette packets. These give pleasure entirely by virtue of their obviousness, which acts as a reassurance to the reader. In Sue's work a similar effect of redundancy is achieved through the development of the plot, which produces frequent surprises (and therefore 'information'), but always recuperates these effects by a reassertion of bourgeois morality and the status quo; the reader is 'tranquillized by being reminded of what he knows already' (Eco, 1978, p. 61). Like the Superman comics, Sue's stories are an endless repetition of the same basic sequences; nothing significant ever changes.

How, then, are these 'semiotic' studies different from those of *Apocalittici e integrati*? There is, as one might expect, greater evidence of the influence of French structuralism: the Sue essay speaks of 'sinusoidal structures' of tension followed by release; the Bond essay identifies key situations reminiscent of Propp and his French followers, and 'rigorous rules of combination' based on pairs of oppositions reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss (1978, pp. 55; 147). But the strongest sign of Eco's new semiotic interests is to be found not within the essays, but outside them, in the preface he wrote for that on Sue, when, at the invitation of Lucien Goldmann, it was included in an issue of the *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales* on the sociology of literature (Eco, 1978, pp. viii; 27-31). This constitutes one of his earliest, and strongest, statements of a consciously structural approach, and marks very clearly 'the difference between his position and that of the French structuralists on whom he draws. He argues for a middle way between the French search for narrative universals and the kind of vulgar Marxism that ignores the specific properties of writing. His interest is in the 'structural homology' between the different series, the parallels between textual structures and those of culture, ideology and the social

system. Yet this position is still very largely that of *Opera aperta* and *Apocalittici e integrati*.

To judge from the Bond and Sue essays, therefore, the impact of Eco's semiotics on his analyses of the media was not all that substantial. To say this is not, of course, in any way to reduce the essays' interest; they are without question brilliant, and as interesting to read today as they were when they first appeared (Eco thinks the Bond essay is the most republished of all his writings (Eco, 1978, p. viii)). Moreover, in his preface to *Il superuomo di massa*, Eco says that the essays contained in it are not 'pure examples of the semiotics of narrative' but 'exploratory contributions to a textual semiotics not obsessed by the demands of formalisation', with the exception of the 'one rigorous study' which is that on Bond, semiotic tools are only employed where they are needed (Eco, 1978, p. vii). Thus to suggest that the impact of semiotics on the Bond and Sue essays is somewhat insubstantial, is to make a point that Eco himself has largely conceded (though I would not myself see the Bond study as a particularly rigorous application of semiotics). Can the same point also be made of Eco's subsequent studies of the media, in *La struttura assente*?

LA STRUTTURA ASSENTE: THE RHETORIC OF ADVERTISING

La struttura assente is not only Eco's first major semiotic work, but also a general introduction to semiotic, or as he then called it semiological, research. Eco's studies of the media thus appear here, for the first time, within an extensive and systematic theoretical framework. There is another difference with the earlier studies that we should note, concerning their social purpose. As we have seen, Eco believed at the time of writing *Apocalittici e integrati* that the media were capable of significant improvement. By his own account he subsequently lost faith in this possibility, and placed his hopes instead in the defensive strategy of 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' which, we have seen, *La struttura assente* proposes. A focus of interest on the reception rather than on the production of mass communications thus characterises Eco's writing from *La struttura assente* onwards. It

appears, however, that between 1974 and 1977 his faith in improvement to some degree revived, encouraged by the example of the RAI's second television news programme, the free radio stations, and similar phenomena of the mid Seventies (Eco, 1977, p. xiv).

The work on the media in *La struttura assente* takes the form of a broad discussion of the subject of rhetoric and its relation to ideology, followed, by 'readings' of five examples of contemporary advertising (Eco, 1968, pp. 83-104, 165-88). Eco's semiotic rhetoric is drawn mainly from classical and Aristotelian sources, which he turns to with the help of the modern rhetorical theory of Chaim Perelman. It is thus a repertoire not, primarily, of emotive turns of expression, but of techniques of argument based on commonly accepted principles or beliefs, the *topics* of classical theory, as opposed to rational proof. Such principles or beliefs are treated by Eco as elements of ideology, and therefore related to the social structure and to history. The principal originality of this part of *La struttura assente* lies in the application of this concept of rhetoric to the analysis of advertising, and particularly in its use for the analysis of visual as well as verbal messages.

At the same time the 'readings' of advertising continue to use the information/redundancy opposition which, we have seen, has been a major theme of Eco's work from *Opera aperta* onwards. His first four advertisements, for Camay soap, a brand of swimming costume, the VW Beetle, and a piece of anti-Vietnam-war propaganda, are taken to illustrate different combinations of rhetorical and ideological information and redundancy: information in the sense, once again, that they show the public something new, redundancy in the sense of merely reiterating what the public knows already. The readings thus envisage the possibility that advertising can perform an ideologically positive function, that its rhetoric can be 'nutritive' rather than 'consolatory' (1968, p. 180).

Nevertheless the conclusion of the discussion is a negative and pessimistic one. Eco's fifth instance of advertising, for Knorr cream of asparagus soup, is offered as exemplary of the general tendencies of the medium. Not only is its ideology that of consumption; Eco also demonstrates the absolute conventionality of its means of persuasion, to make the point

that 'every message only repeats what the public already expected and already knew' (1968, p. 187). We are persuaded by advertising because it concerns itself with what we always wanted; so much so that its arguments are not assimilated as such, but only as prompts or cues (Eco uses the terms *sigle*: initials/abbreviations of themselves). The 'moral' function of semiotic research is thus to demonstrate that 'advertising has no informative value'; the advertiser does not create anything, but rather is himself 'spoken by his own language'. In the end the function of advertising is phatic, since all it does is reassure the receiver that communication is taking place, like non-committal grunts on the end of a telephone line (1968, pp. 184-8). This would seem to be what Eco means by saying that the media industry changes not just the form but also the 'very meaning of the message' in mass communications (pp. 410-1).

But do we really need semiotics to tell us this? Brilliant as these readings are - Eco is the equal of Barthes in decomposing the connotations of advertising messages - it must be said once again that there is little that is distinctively semiotic about the analysis. The main bodies of ideas on which Eco draws, rhetorical and information theory, might both legitimately be considered part of an 'imperialistic' semiotics, but are both also effectively independent of it; and the main point that he makes is substantially that which he himself made earlier in *Apocalittici e integrati*.

If we return, then, to Eco's disclaimer in the preface to *Il superuomo di massa*, that the essays contained in it are not 'pure examples of the semiotics of narrative' but contributions of an informal, conversational kind, might we not conclude that this limitation, if that is what it is, was less a matter of choice than one of necessity? Not that Eco is incapable of a high degree of technical formalisation on occasion; he himself points to his study of Allais's *Un drame bien parisien* as an example of such a kind of work (in Eco, 1979a, translated in 1979b; see also Eco, 1978, p. vii). But leaving aside the merits or demerits of this study (I tend to think myself that it is not one of his best), it is significant that it deals not with the mass media but with a complex and sophisticated piece of literature. In his writings on the media, given the kind of things that interest him and the purpose with which he approaches his subject, a high degree of

formalisation would have far less point, and might well not be possible.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The conclusion that this leads to is that semiotics, for Eco, is really a high-level metalanguage whose relevance for the work of specific media studies is very much an indirect and mediated one. Its nature is to provide a broad framework for such studies rather than to prescribe precise methods of analysis. That is what the discussion of mass communications in *A Theory of Semiotics* does, and that of television in Eco's 1968 semiotic outline of the subject (Eco, 1973b). The aim of semiotics, *A Theory of Semiotics* suggests, is to demonstrate, through a 'survey of the contradictory format of the semantic universe' how much broader this format is than most ideologies have recognised. Semiotics' 'heuristic and practical power' lies in the fact that it reveals, by showing the hidden interconnections of a given cultural system, the ways in which the labor of sign production can respect or betray the complexity of such a cultural network' (Eco, 1976, pp. 297-8). To say this is, in substance, to restate a position that has characterised Eco's work on the media from the very beginning. What is new here, apart from an elaborate hypothetical illustration, is the context and the terminology, concepts such as 'code-shifting' and 'overcoding' that Eco now uses to describe the operations of ideology in discourse.

The indirect, mediated relationship between theory and practical analysis is worth insisting on, because to do so counterbalances the 'imperialist' claims made in *A Theory of Semiotics*, that semiotic theory should concern itself with a 'unified approach' to all social and cultural phenomena, that it aims to produce a model for 'tracing the limits of future semiotic research'. Such claims create an impression of a monolithic, totalitarian discipline, that is contradicted by the practical work we have been considering. It is also contradicted by other theoretical statements of Eco's, both before and after his major theoretical text. One wonders in fact whether these claims, which all belong to the Seventies, were not inspired

principally by the needs of the moment, by a systematic effort on Eco's part to establish semiotics internationally as a new academic institution.

Eco's conclusion to *La struttura assente* seems to me to propose a more qualified and realistic view of the relationship between the general theory and the specific analysis, by recognising the substantial gap between the two. A distinction is made between 'semiotics' (in the plural), the individual systems of signs insofar as they can be expressed in formal terms, and 'semiology', the general theory. This is the basis of a further distinction, between two conflicting lines of research in the book: 'the call for a description of individual semiotics as "closed", rigorously structured systems seen in a synchronic section'; and the 'proposed model of communication as an "open" process, in which the message varies according to the codes, the codes are brought into play according to ideologies and circumstances, and the whole system of signs is constantly restructuring itself' (Eco, 1968, pp. 383-7; 413-8). The idea of 'openness' dominates the general theory, that of 'closed' systems the specific analysis; the tension between the two is recognised, and allowed to stand.

Subsequently the opposition between individual semiotics and semiology is replaced by that between individual semiotics and general semiotics. In a recent article on the subject, 'On fish and buttons' (Eco, 1984c; revised and translated into Italian in Eco, 1985, pp. 301-33), Eco seems to return, at least in part, to a position similar to that of *La struttura assente*. Interestingly, in the present context, the article is prompted by the sort of pragmatic British objections to semiotic theory that I alluded to at the beginning of my essay, in this case expressed in a review of Eco's *The Role of the Reader* by Roger Scruton (Eco, 1979b; Scruton 1980). In response to these objections Eco stresses that the possibility of a unified approach to all phenomena of signification and communication is a question, not a point to be taken for granted; and that a general semiotics, insofar as it makes this question its central concern, is not so much a science as a contemporary version of the philosophy of language. This assimilation of general semiotics to a branch of philosophy may not constitute a radical change of position, but it does seem to mark a significant difference of emphasis from Eco's work in

the Seventies, making greater allowance once more for the distance between the general theory and the specific analytical practice.

To emphasise in this way the indirect, mediated relationship between theory and practice in Eco's work is not, finally, to minimise the importance of the theory, either as an object of interest in its own right, or to Eco himself as a person and to the rest of Eco's work. In this last respect the fact that Eco saw the need for semiotic theory as he wrote his study on Kitsch is revealing (Eco, 1977, p. xv). For the subject of the Kitsch essay fell exactly on the borderline between his two main areas of interest up to that date, apart from medieval aesthetics, and one can easily see the attraction and value for him of a framework that embraced and united them together. More importantly, the theory has continued to exercise a major regulatory and directive function in Eco's activity as an intellectual; it provides the strong personal foundation that has enabled him to perform so consistently and powerfully his chosen practical role, embodied in his alter ego William of Baskerville: to work for a greater public awareness of the complexities and contradictions of the world we live in, to combat the temptation to take sides prematurely, to insist on differences where others confuse issues, and to point out similarities where others find total opposition, all in the interest of the principles of democracy, pluralism, freedom of opinion and information, and rational consciousness.

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