Eco and Gramsci: Unexplored Connections in Cultural Studies

Marco Ruggieri

University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

Although its relevance is widely recognised, the contribution of Umberto Eco’s semiotic theory and cultural analyses to the field of Cultural Studies has yet to be studied extensively. This article claims that Eco’s appropriation of the legacy of Antonio Gramsci, forerunner of Cultural Studies, plays a key role in this contribution. The connections between Eco and Gramsci have gone almost unexplored despite them being two key figures in the development of Italian critical theory. These connections can be found in their shared interests in mass culture and the role of the intellectual in mass society. This article highlights how, in his work of the 1960s and 1970s, Eco de-ideologises Gramsci and substantiates his cultural analyses through the methodologies of structuralism and interpretative semiotics.

Between Pareyson and Gramsci: Eco’s Approach to Cultural Studies

Crocean idealism and Marxist criticism were the two major schools of thought in Italy in the 1960s. Despite the many differences between the two, both were founded upon the historicist philosophical legacy that remained the prevalent background of cultural research, even in studies that raised the question of mass culture and communication. Against this background, Umberto Eco’s research paves the way for the modernisation and internationalisation of the Italian cultural debate by integrating American media studies and structuralism, as well as the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce, which brought Eco to his semiotic turn and the overcoming of structuralism. Influenced by this theoretical background and the aesthetic theory of Luigi Pareyson, Eco developed a new interpretation of culture and communication that emphasises questions such as that of the cultural dynamics of meaning making or the problem of reception. Thanks to this new interpretation, Eco laid the foundations for culturalist research in Italy, so much so that his work of the 1960s should be considered, as Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel writes, ‘the anticipation of Cultural Studies’. This brings us to a gap in the research: although largely acknowledged, Eco’s influence on Cultural Studies at a national and international level, as well as the mutual impact on Eco’s work, is yet to be extensively considered.

This article intends to begin the investigation of the almost unexplored connections between Eco and the interdisciplinary area of Cultural Studies by focusing on the relationship between Eco and Antonio Gramsci, whose work is widely recognised as a forerunner of Cultural Studies. The focus

CONTACT Marco Ruggieri marco.ruggieri@ed.ac.uk University of Edinburgh

1Charles L. Leavitt, ‘Probing the limits of Crocean historicism’, The Italianist, 37.3 (1998), 387–406 (pp. 394–95).
2Eco ‘opened up a new cultural era in which other voices were integrated, such as those of Richard Hoggart, Marshall McLuhan, and Dwight MacDonald, ultimately showing how our culture had entered into entirely new times’. Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel, ‘Cultural Studies, Ideology, and Media Texts’, in The Philosophy of Umberto Eco, ed. by Sara G. Beardsworth and Randall E. Auxier (Chicago: Open Court, 2017), pp. 657–67 (p. 658).
3Umberto Eco, La struttura assesta (Milan: Bompiani, 1968).
4Escudero Chauvel, ‘Cultural Studies, Ideology, and Media Texts’, p. 658.
5Michele Filippini, Gramsci globale. Guida pratica alle interpretazioni di Gramsci nel mondo (Bologna: Odoya, 2011).
of this article may appear quite narrow, as a reappraisal of Eco’s contribution to the interdiscipli-
ary field of Cultural Studies cannot be limited to Eco’s partial appropriation of Gramsci’s legacy.
However, an exhaustive treatment of this broad question would be impossible in this context, if only
due to the expansiveness of Cultural Studies and its ‘magnetic’ status, namely, its capability of
drawing an infinite number of subjects within its fluid boundaries. An examination of the connect-
ions between Eco and Gramsci provides an excellent starting point for further discussion on this
broad and complex topic. Eco’s theoretical gesture of intersecting his background as a scholar of
aesthetics, from Pareyson’s Turinese school, with the non-orthodox stance of humanistic Marxism,
pioneered by Gramsci, can be seen, in fact, as the founding act of Italian culturalist research.

It should be emphasised that Pareyson’s aesthetics is radically alternative to the prevailing
philosophy in Italy in the mid-twentieth century, since it rules out any residual idealism or historicist
grounding, as well as the correspondence between intuition and expression. Pareyson’s theory of formativity builds on the idea that the real content of a work is the artist’s ‘concreta esperienza, la sua vita interiore, la sua irripetibile spiritualità, la sua reazione personale
all’ambiente storico in cui vive, i suoi pensieri, costumi, sentimenti, ideali, credenze e aspirazioni’.
These result in the artist’s ‘modo di formare’, a concept that resembles style but that is determined
by concrete aspects rather than individual artistic genius and intuition, as it is for Benedetto Croce.10
In this regard, Pareyson’s formativity can be compared to the conception of culture
developed in British Cultural Studies, summarised in Raymond Williams’ definition of culture as
‘a whole way of life’, a conception that Eco also holds when discussing the polysemic nature of the
term ‘culture’.12

Another key question in Pareyson’s theory is that of interpretation. According to Pareyson,
interpretation is what presides over any process of meaning making. What the receivers of any type
of communication receive is a message encapsulating a certain ‘modo di formare’. This represents
the producer’s interpretation of the world. In their turn, the receivers interpret this work according
to their cultural schemas or, in Eco’s later definition, their encyclopaedia. Another key concept of
Cultural Studies is prefigured here: the idea of the bidirectionality of the process of meaning
making, against which the idea of the audience’s freedom in the face of mass communications is
conceived.15

While a hypothesis about Pareyson’s relevance to Italian Cultural Studies would require more
extensive analysis, it is worth pointing out that it finds further confirmation when considering the
philosophy of some of his disciples in Turin. Gianni Vattimo’s theory of weak thought fosters the
postmodern idea of the decline of the uniqueness and immutability of truth. Vattimo’s perception
of this decline, however, does not correspond to a passive nihilism but to accepting the coexistence
and permeation of different truths, justified by their historical nature. Vattimo’s theory shares one

6Toby Miller, A Companion to Cultural Studies (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), p. 1.
7The humanistic position within the broad universe of Marxism appropriated Gramsci’s overcoming of the ‘Hegelian and Crocean
notions of “philosophy of spirit”, on the one hand, and the historical economism of mechanistic forms of Marxism, on the other
hand. In conceiving Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, Gramsci placed himself in a tradition of non-determinist Marxist thought
[...], that opposed idealist, positivist, naturalist, and universalist conceptions of history’. Marcus E. Green, ‘Gramsci’s Concept of
the “Simple”: Religion, Common Sense, and the Philosophy of Praxis’, Rethinking Marxism, 30.4 (2018), 525–45 (p. 534).
8Luigi Pareyson, Estetica. Teoria della formatività (Milan: Bompiani, 2010), p. 7.
9Ibid., p. 28.
10Benedetto Croce, Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale (Bari: Laterza, 1908).
11Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780–1950 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 272.
12Umberto Eco, ‘Esiste la controcultura?’, in his Sette anni di desiderio (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), pp. 217–31.
13Pareyson, pp. 179–88.
14Anticipated since the times of Eco’s overcoming of the notion of structure in La struttura assente, the model of encyclopaedia
has its foundations in Umberto Eco, Trattato di semiotica generale (Milan: Bompiani, 1975), pp. 143–44, and its most complete
theorisation in Umberto Eco, Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), pp. 55–140.
15Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957); Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/
decoding’, in Culture, Media, Language, ed. by Stuart Hall and others (London: Routledge, 1980), pp. 128–38.
16Gianni Vattimo, ‘Diallettica, differenza, pensiero debole’, in Il pensiero debole, ed. by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milan:
Feltrinelli, 1995), pp. 12–28.
of the main assumptions of the culturalist approach, that is, its focus on the 'moments and contexts of meaning making.'

Mario Perniola provides another key, and even more direct, contribution to the development of Cultural Studies in Italy, despite his differences with postmodern theory and, above all, Vattimo. Recalling Pareyson’s formativity, Perniola conceives ‘[il] sentire come reificazione della sensibilità nel simulacro e come già sentito’, therefore developing a culturalist approach to aesthetic experience. Perniola applies this understanding to his analyses of a wider array of cultural products and phenomena, therefore contributing to the establishment of a methodological praxis for the study of visual and material culture, and Cultural Studies more widely.

Moreover, these scholars share another common feature: the conflict between their fidelity to Pareyson’s philosophy, seen as the only alternative to a widespread idealism, and the need to embrace new artistic, philosophical, and political perspectives. Besides their interest or even their involvement in avant-gardist movements, this need results in the political attempt to overcome Pareyson’s catholic anti-Marxism, at a time of profound differences between Catholicism and communism, the two major cultural and political models in Italy. In different ways, the cultural and philosophical research of these representatives of Pareyson’s Turinese school displays a constant search for a compromise between different conceptions and for the overcoming of ideologies. Eco’s attempt to find theoretical grounds for dialogue between Pareyson’s theory of aesthetics and the humanistic stance of Marxism, as pioneered by Gramsci, is thus very relevant as it is also a political initiative.

Therefore, the reappraisal of Eco’s contribution to Cultural Studies is bound to begin with the dialogue between Pareyson’s aesthetics and the Gramscian Marxism observed in Eco’s work. However, while Eco’s connections to Pareyson are well known, those with Gramsci remain surprisingly unexplored.

What is even more surprising is that the first to pursue this thread of research was the conservative journalist Marcello Veneziani. Of course, Veneziani’s reading is politically oriented and anything but academic: Eco is described as the ideologist behind the neo-Gramscian hegemonic project of leftist think-tanks that took control of school education and academia, disseminating their ideology through the powerful means of the publishing group *Repubblica–L’Espresso*. Nevertheless, when identifying the common thread between Eco’s and Gramsci’s cultural strategies, Veneziani correctly identifies a fertile perspective: there are, indeed, several contact points, however dissimilar the circumstances in which the two worked, and direct and indirect references to Gramsci can be identified in Eco’s work. Eco and Gramsci share an interest in the interpretation of mass cultural products and the aim of transforming the sociopolitical conditions of which those products are simultaneously the result and the reproductive agents. The work of Gramsci and Eco is twofold – research and action – based on a shared understanding of the intellectual’s role in society. The main difference lies in the overall objectives of their work: while Gramsci aimed at the

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17Stewart M. Hoover, ‘The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion’, *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1,1 (2002), 25–36 (p. 29).
18Mario Perniola, ‘Lettera a Gianni Vattimo sul “pensiero debole”’, Aut-Aut, 201 (1984), pp. 51–64.
19Leonardo V. Distaso, ‘Ricordo di Mario Perniola’, *Il Rasoio di Occam*, 10 March 2018 <http://brasiodioccam-microme.ca.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2018/03/10/ricordo-di-mario-perniola/> [accessed 27 January 2021].
20Mario Perniola, *La società dei simulacri* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1980); Mario Perniola, *Ritual Thinking: Sexuality, Death, World*, trans. by Massimo Verdicchio (Amherst: Humanity, 2000).
21Umberto Eco, ‘Il gruppo 63, quarant’anni dopo’, in his Costruire il nemico e altri scritti occasionali (Milan: Bompiani, 2011), pp. 137–68; Mario Perniola, *L’avventura situazionista. Storia critica dell’ultima avanguardia del XX secolo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2013).
22Bruce Haddock, ‘The crisis of ideology in Italy: Eco, Vattimo and the Erosion of Critical Space’, *The Italianist*, 31 (2011), 14–24.
23Filippini, pp. 61–6.
24Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 6–9; Anna Maria Lorusso, *Umberto Eco. Temi, problemi e percorsi semiotici* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), pp. 19–21; Claudio Paolucci, *Umberto Eco. Tra ordine e avventura* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2016), pp. 66–74. See also Umberto Eco, *Intellectual Autobiography*, in *The Philosophy of Umberto Eco*, pp. 3–65 (pp. 17–9).
25Marcello Veneziani, ‘Le ceneri di Gramsci’, *Il Tempo*, 27 April 2017; Marcello Veneziani, *Impardonabili. Cento ritratti di maestri sconvenienti* (Venice: Marsilio, 2017), pp. 352–57. Ebook.
revolutionary subversion of the existing order, as we shall see, from the 1960s, Eco worked towards the democratization and dissemination of culture from within the system. As this article seeks to demonstrate, Eco’s project is, on the one hand, rooted in a Gramscian struggle for cultural hegemony and, on the other, anticipates its substantial transformation – if not its dissolution – in post-industrial society.\(^{26}\)

**Mass Culture: A Common, Uncharted Ground**

The failure of the workers’ protest wave in the first post-war period urged Gramsci to reconsider the theoretical premises on which the socialist revolutionary strategy was founded. Gramsci reinterpreted the status of the superstructures in Marxist philosophy, rejecting deterministic readings and identifying them as the main battlefield for class struggle.\(^{27}\) According to Gramsci, the first step towards revolution should be to remove the popular masses from the cultural influence of the dominant class, whose dominion was therefore cultural at its core. Moreover, a transformation of the entire sociopolitical and economic order required the consent of all social classes, that is, the creation of a new hegemony.\(^{28}\) The capitalistic hegemony in force was such because the proletariat’s subalternity did not result from mere coercion but from the widespread belief that this was, borrowing from Roland Barthes, a natural rather than a historical condition.\(^{29}\) Gramsci stressed that the signs of the hegemony could be observed – and challenged – in popular culture, namely, in the cultural forms that the subalterns perceive as their own and that reinforce the existing hegemony.\(^{30}\)

For Gramsci, just as educators need to grasp which worldviews contribute to the cultural upbringing of the younger generations and transform them,\(^{31}\) any attempt to bring about social transformation should build upon an exploratory study of mass culture. While the phrase ‘cultura di massa’ is more common nowadays, it should be stressed that Gramsci spoke of ‘cultura popolare’. He was, nevertheless, well aware that the cultural forms the phrase refers to are not genuinely popular but are rather the sedimentation of fragmentary elements of past hegemonic systems subsequently internalised by the subaltern masses.\(^{32}\) In his study of mass culture, Gramsci focuses on commercial literature, and through his analysis of this cultural production, he brings to light the prevailing worldview of the popular masses.\(^{33}\) Commercial literature translates and resolves in the fictional universe the subalterns’ desire for revenge by persuading them to put their trust in a hero rather than in their class consciousness,\(^{34}\) and thus contributing to exorcising the revolution that Gramsci worked towards. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argue that Gramsci’s analysis ‘retained uncriticized residues of its original bias towards the written word as the core of cultural formation in individuals and in society’, while ‘emerging forms of radio and cinema receive minimal attention in the

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\(^{26}\)Robert Lumley, ‘Introduction’, in Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*, ed. by Robert Lumley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 1–14 (pp. 6–7).

\(^{27}\)Gramsci defines culture as ‘il terreno in cui determinati gruppi sociali prendono coscienza del proprio essere sociale, della propria forza, dei propri compiti, del proprio divenire’ in *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), II, p. 1319.

\(^{28}\)Quaderni, I, pp. 40–1.

\(^{29}\)Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), pp. 9–10.

\(^{30}\)Giuseppe Petronio, ‘Cultura popolare’, in Gramsci. *Le sue idee nel nostro tempo*, ed. by Carlo Ricchini, Eugenio Manca, and Luisa Melograni (Rome: L’Unità, 1987), pp. 86–7; Robert S. Dombrowski, *Antonio Gramsci* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), pp. 100–21; Marcia Landy ‘Gramsci, in and on Media’, in *Perspectives on Gramsci: Politics, Culture and Social Theory*, ed. by Joseph Francese (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 110–21; Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 67–77.

\(^{31}\)Quaderni, III, p. 2314.

\(^{32}\)Quaderni, III, p. 2312.

\(^{33}\)Il successo di un libro di letteratura commerciale indica (e spesso è il solo indicatore esistente) quale sia la “filosofia dell’epoca”, cioè quale massa di sentimenti [e di concezioni del mondo] predomi in nella moltitudine “silenziosa”, *Quaderni*, I, p. 587.

\(^{34}\)Quaderni, III, pp. 1879–82.
Notebooks’. However, as Forgacs later points out, the most significant point of Gramsci’s analysis of mass culture should not be sought in their content but in the way they reveal narrative archetypes that reflect a certain worldview, and the way the cultural industry conveys this worldview to the masses. Also, despite the limited development of the media in the time Gramsci was writing his Notebooks and his limited access to other media while in prison, Gramsci does grasp the cinema’s adoption of the narrative models of commercial narrative.

Eco undertook research on mass culture as early as twenty years after Gramsci’s death but in a radically different scenario. The difference results from both the evolution of the political picture – both national and international – and the progress of communication technologies. These profound transformations affected, as Eco writes, ‘la stessa nozione di uomo, di razionalità, di comunicazione, di rapporto tra cultura e società in un momento in cui la cultura assume forme inedite e apparentemente aberranti’. While the transformation of cultural production and consumption patterns emerged emphatically, studies in this field were mostly neglected, even by Gramsci’s supposed heirs, the intellectuals of the Italian Left. In the 1960s, under the influence of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, most Italian Marxist intellectuals perceived mass culture as a threat and denounced the audience standardisation, the imposition of bourgeois cultural models, and the widespread Americanism. From Eco’s perspective, this was yet another widening of the existing gap between the intellectual elite and the popular mass that Gramsci had brought to light. Italian Marxists of the 1960s appeared to make no concrete effort to analyse or change mass culture. Indeed, from the perspective of traditional Marxism, mass culture was nothing but the economic base’s translation to the superstructural plane. The Gramscian notion of hegemony, based on the permeation of cultural and material elements, eventually came to be regarded as a conceptual construct that helps to understand, not change, the social structure. The reception of the most innovative aspects of Gramsci’s theory mostly took place outside of a Marxist framework, as was the case with Eco.

In Apocalittici e integrati (1964), Eco maintains that passivity was the prevailing attitude towards mass culture. This applied to intellectuals involved in the cultural industry, who uncritically contributed to the imposition of the hegemonic cultural model in the name of progress and the immutability of the existing conditions. But it equally applied to those who, still anchored to a latent idealism, remained convinced that ‘Culture’ has nothing to do with mass culture, and is not conditioned by its existence. The latter included the major part of Italian Marxist intellectuals and, above all, those most closely tied to the official cultural policies of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI). In two polemical articles, published in the party’s review Rinascita, Eco accuses those intellectuals of ‘pigrizia intellettuale’, ‘polemica moralistica’, ‘adornismo di riporto’, and of

35 David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘General Introduction’, in Antonio Gramsci, Selections from Cultural Writings, ed. by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. by William Boehloer (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2012).
36 Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Lezione gramschiana 2017 con David Forgacs, online video recording, YouTube, 12 June 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBmhMnQr-KE] [accessed 27 January 2021].
37 Quoderni, I, p. 358.
38 For an introduction to the Italian sociocultural evolution in the second post-war period, see David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
39 Umberto Eco, ‘Per una indagine sulla situazione culturale’, Rinascita, 39 (1963), 24–6 (p. 24).
40 See Christine Ann Evans, ‘Eco’s Fifth Column: The Critic of Culture Within the Precincts of the Popular’, in Umberto Eco’s Alternative: The Politics of Culture and the Ambiguities of Interpretation-, ed. by Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 241–56 (pp. 241–43) for an introduction to Eco’s relationship with the Frankfurt School.
41 Quoderni, III, p. 2118.
42 Filippini, p. 60.
43 Cultura come a qualcosa che si articoli secondo le imprescindibili e incorrotte necessità di uno Spirito che non venga storicamente condizionato dall’esistenza della cultura di massa’. Umberto Eco, Apocalittici e integrati (Milan: Bompiani, 2019), p. 10.
44 Eco, ‘Per una indagine’; Umberto Eco, ‘Modelli descrittivi e interpretazione storica’, Rinascita, 40 (1963), 24–6. For a comprehensive commentary of these articles and their cultural and political background, see Claudio Crapis and Giandomenico Crapis, Umberto Eco e il PCI. Arte, cultura di massa e strutturalismo in un saggio dimenticato del 1963 (Reggio Emilia: Imprimatur, 2016).
treating the proletarians like underdeveloped colonials, while stressing the need for an anthropological analysis of the human in mass society.\textsuperscript{45}

From a methodological point of view, Eco claims that the proposed analyses require the same research tools whose use was previously limited to ‘high culture’. While Marxism is still considered a valid methodology – as long as it is viewed as a research methodology rather than a worldview\textsuperscript{46} – Eco brings into play the critical tools of structuralist research, such as narratology, linguistic analysis, and semiology. On the other hand, the majority of Italian Marxists who responded to Eco’s articles in Rinascita regarded with great suspicion his attempt to hold Marxism and structuralism together.\textsuperscript{47} While accepting Eco’s criticism of the Marxists’ often supercilious and patronising attitude towards mass cultural products, Rossana Rossanda affirmed that Eco’s methodological proposals, that is to say, structuralist methodologies, could not make any contribution to the transformation of society since they were, Rossanda writes, ‘allevate nel cuore di un sistema di idee e di tecniche che il capitalismo moderno sollecita e assorbe’.\textsuperscript{48} At that time, Rossanda was the head of the cultural section of the PCI, so her words can be read as an expression of the Party’s official line.

At the same time, Eco’s approach collided with a widespread Crocean idealism. The main claim against Eco’s position was that in any good scientific research there must be an identity between the studied subject and the studying methodologies, whereas, in Apocalittici e integrati, ‘low culture’ was analysed through the means of ‘high culture’.\textsuperscript{49} The field of mass culture and communications was still seen as an ‘indiscipline’, although, as Apocalittici e integrati demonstrates, regulated by the same laws underlying the domain of high culture. Eco devoted a significant part of his lifelong research to overthrowing this misconception of the homogeneity between subject and methodology. After his initial adoption of an interdisciplinary perspective employing a wide array of methodologies regardless of the domain they were originally conceived for,\textsuperscript{50} Eco found in semiotics a discipline for studying all cultural items with the same methodologies and conceptual paradigms.\textsuperscript{51}

Hegemony and Commercial Literature

A comparative analysis of Eco’s and Gramsci’s work brings to light a shared conception of the cultural industry and mass culture. They are both convinced that control of the cultural industry, either direct or indirect, plays a key role in the establishment and conservation of hegemony. This conception collided with the largely prevailing deterministic view of base and superstructure. It is worth recalling what the forerunner of British Cultural Studies and scholar of Gramsci, the Marxist Raymond Williams, claimed in this regard: culture is not a mere superstructural reflection of the economic base but is itself a productive force, and thus contributes to shape the economic and sociopolitical structure of society.\textsuperscript{52} Similarly, Eco maintains that ‘la informazione non è più uno strumento per produrre beni economici, ma è diventato esso stesso il principale dei beni. La Comunicazione si è trasformata in industria pesante’.\textsuperscript{53} As a consequence, Eco grasps the importance of analysing – rather than demonising – the media, the products they convey to the masses, and the interpretations of those products. A similar understanding could already be found in

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\item Eco, ‘Per una indagine’, p. 25.
\item Eco, ‘Modelli descrittivi’, p. 26.
\item Giansiro Ferrara, Gian Franco Venè, Rossana Rossanda, Luciano De Maria, Massimo Pini, Luigi Pestalozza, Giuliano Scabia, and even Louis Althusser were the authors of the most critical responses to Eco during the debate in Rinascita. See Crapis and Crapis, pp. 113–42.
\item Rossana Rossanda, ‘Per una cultura rivoluzionaria’, Rinascita, 45 (1963), 27–9 (p. 28).
\item Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, p. V.
\item See Umberto Eco, Opera Aperta (Milan: Bompiani, 1962).
\item Eco defines semiotics as ‘una disciplina che studia l’insieme della cultura, risolvendo in segni una immensa varietà di oggetti e di eventi’ in Trattato di semiotica generale, p. 17.
\item Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 75–94.
\item Umberto Eco, ‘Per una guerriglia semiologica’, in il costume di casa: evidenze e misteri dell’ideologia italiana negli anni sessanta (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), pp. 418–31 (p. 419).
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Gramsci’s *Quaderni*, although the author was not fully able to develop methodologies appropriate to chart this unexplored ground.\textsuperscript{54} Eco substantiates Gramsci’s understanding using the analytic instruments of structuralism, in which he finds an alternative to the multiform and latent Italian idealism, which Gramsci’s work was not unaffected by. Nevertheless, Eco retains a Gramscian approach when it comes to his interest in the relationship between ideology and the cultural industry, and to the interpretation of research in this field as the first phase of intellectual commitment.

References to Gramsci in Eco’s work are occasional and brief, but in his writings of the 1960s and 1970s, a certain Gramscianism imbues his vocabulary on several occasions, as in this passage from *Apocalittici e integrati*:

> La situazione nota come cultura di massa si verifica nel momento storico in cui le masse entrano come protagoniste nella vita associata, corresponsabili della cosa pubblica. Queste masse sovente hanno […] elaborato […] proposte che salgono dal basso. Ma paradossalmente il loro modo di divertirsi, di pensare, di immaginare non nasce dal basso: attraverso le comunicazioni di massa viene proposto loro sotto forma di messaggi formulati secondo il codice della classe egemone. Abbiamo così la situazione singolare di una cultura di massa nel cui ambito un proletariato consuma modelli culturali borghesi ritenendoli una propria espressione autonoma. Dal canto proprio una cultura borghese […] identifica nella cultura di massa una ‘sotto-cultura’ che non le appartiene, senza avvedersi che le matrici della cultura di massa sono ancora quelle della cultura ‘superiore’.\textsuperscript{55}

Even beyond the presence of Gramscian keywords, it is hard to overlook the connections with Gramsci’s writings on the subalterns’ hetero-produced culture defined ‘folclore’.\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, Gramsci holds a dynamic idea of culture that closely resembles Eco’s osmotic conception of the relationship between different cultural levels. According to Eco, there are continual and bidirectional transitions between different levels of culture and different media, so that mass cultural products often attain high artistic levels. High artistic value can also be found in disregarded cultural products such as comics. Eco recognises that comics require, as such, a nearly total stylisation that often results in the lack of any profundity in their stories and characters.\textsuperscript{57} However, such stylisation often attains high expressive levels, as with Charles Schulz’s and Jules Feiffer’s comics, which draw attention to the illnesses of modern industrial society.\textsuperscript{58}

Gramsci was likewise convinced that mass culture can bring about positive innovations, in his words, ‘una serie di innovazioni, spesso creative e progressiste […] in contraddizione, o semplicemente diverse, dalla morale degli strati dirigenti’.\textsuperscript{59} There is, in both authors, a duality in their overall assessment of the products of the cultural industry. They can be either toxic products or an alternative cultural model encapsulating the criticism of contemporary society and bringing it to the popular masses with an appropriate language. In this light, the hypothesis of a profound connection between Eco and Gramsci finds further validation. But this connection, this continuity, remains mostly at a subtextual level and is rarely made explicit in Eco’s work. Eco’s relationship with Gramsci may be compared to that between Eco and Roland Barthes, described by Isabella Pezzini as an evident familiarity mostly appearing in parenthetical annotations and indirect citations, which remains in the background as it represents the very foundations of Eco’s studies.\textsuperscript{60} The relationship with Gramsci’s work can, alternatively, be described, as the semiotician himself does, in terms of ‘inspiration’. In an interview with Eco, James Hay claims that ‘there is indirectly a kind of Gramscian impulse in your diagnosis of the recent political context’. Hay’s words find confirmation in Eco’s response: ‘as for Gramsci, certainly I was inspired by his way of analyzing the ideology

\textsuperscript{54}Petronio, pp. 86–7.
\textsuperscript{55}Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{56}See the 27th notebook of *Quaderni*, III, entirely devoted to the question of folklore.
\textsuperscript{57}Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., pp. 263–72.
\textsuperscript{59}Quaderni, III, p. 2313.
\textsuperscript{60}Isabella Pezzini, ‘Apocalittici, integrati e Barthes’, *Doppiozero*, 9 May 2014 <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/apocalittici-e-integrati/apocalittici-integrati-e-barthes> [accessed 27 January 2021].
conveyed by popular culture. He was, decades and decades ago, among the first to analyze in this sense the “popular culture”.61

In a limited number of cases, however, Eco’s reference to Gramsci manifests itself more visibly. In Apocalittici e integrati, Eco cites the note in which Gramsci draws a connection between the myth of the superman, supposedly originating in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the nineteenth-century serial novel.62 According to Gramsci:

È opportuno domandarsi […] se le concezioni ‘superumane’, […] siano di pretta origine nicciana, siano cioè il prodotto di una elaborazione di pensiero da porsi nella sfera della ‘alta cultura’, oppure abbiano origini molto più moderate, siano, per esempio, connesse con la letteratura di appendice. (E lo stesso Nietzsche non sarà stato per nulla influenzato dai romanzi francesi d’appendice? […] ) In ogni modo pare si possa affermare che molta sedicente ‘superumanità’ nicciana ha solo come origine e modello dottrinale non Zaratustra ma Il conte di Montecristo di A. Dumas.63

This note also proves the earlier presence in Gramsci of what Eco claims to be the bidirectionality of the passages between different cultural levels, so much so that the notion of ‘levels of culture’ itself is challenged, and prefigures Eco’s rhizomatic interpretation of culture64 based on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s model of the rhizome.65

If Eco’s reference to Gramsci’s note on the myth of superman could have gone unnoticed in Apocalittici e integrati, it becomes the pivotal idea for the essays collected in Il superuomo di massa, wherein Eco states:

Sviluppare l’ipotesi gramsciana significava andare alla ricerca degli avatars del superuomo di massa, e così fanno questi saggi, da Sue sino a Salgari o a Natoli, per finire ai tempi nostri con un superuomo raccontato in termini di spy thriller – ed è James Bond.66

In addition to the narrative case studies, Eco developed a historical–typological classification of the serial novel, highly reminiscent of Gramsci’s more rudimentary classification in the note entitled ‘Diversi tipi di romanzo popolare’.67 The attitude towards classification and categorisation, a subpart of a wider attitude towards analytic thought, is certainly another common feature between the two authors. Further exemplification can be found in Eco’s recovery of the category ‘nipotini di padre Bresciani’ under which Gramsci classifies novelists whose work he considered reactionary and Jesuitical.68 Eco turns Gramsci’s label into ‘nipotini di padre De Maistre’ and deploys it in a similar fashion to the authors of his own day.69

Returning to the subject of the mass superman, it should be noted that the Superman of the comic strips, which Eco had previously studied,70 can be included among the so-called avatars of the mass studied in Il Superuomo di massa. In his study of Superman, Eco focuses on the narrative structure regulating each episode. This structure is defined as ‘iterative’, namely, based on repetition, redundancy, and the confirmation of the already known. The first level of iterativity lies in the very form of the product, in its seriality. Moreover, each episode starts from an initial state of order, which is later disrupted by ‘the evil’. Hence, the initial state of order of the comic’s setting – the American sociopolitical and economic model – is presented as ‘the good’. The role of Superman is to rule out any deviation, returning it to the established order. On the one hand, such narrative structure convinces readers of the order’s legitimacy and immutability while, on the other, it gives them a subtle pleasure when finding confirmation of their expectations.

61Umberto Eco, ‘Interview with Umberto Eco’, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 10.1 (2013), 50–8 (p. 53).
62Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, p. 5.
63Quaderni, III, p. 1879.
64Eco, Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio, p. 112.
65Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie (Paris: Minuit, 1980) pp. 9–37.
66Umberto Eco, Il superuomo di massa (Milan: Bompiani, 2015), pp. 6–7.
67Quaderni, III, pp. 2120–23.
68Quaderni, III, pp. 2198–202.
69Umberto Eco, Il costume di casa: evidenze e misteri dell’ideologia italiana negli anni Sessanta (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), pp. 227–86.
70Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, pp. 219–62.
Anagnorisis is yet another mechanism employed in commercial narrative to achieve the same results. Eco devotes one of the essays collected in *Il superuomo di massa* to anagnorisis. Anagnorisis is defined as a critical discovery, such as the unexpected recognition of a character’s real identity, which results in a key and abrupt alteration of the course of the narrative events. Eco identifies an exemplary use of this narrative structure precisely in the novel that Gramsci regarded as the model of the serial novel: Dumas’s *Le comte de Monte-Cristo*. After having been caught up in a conspiracy and unjustly held prisoner for fourteen years, the novel’s protagonist Edmond Dantès, manages to escape and sets out to find those who were responsible for his downfall. The hero assumes fake identities and manages to find his enemies and take his revenge on them, to whom (and here anagnorisis repeatedly takes place) he reveals himself very dramatically each time. It is through such structure that what Gramsci had called the opiate nature of the serial novel is accomplished:

Il romanzo d’appendice sostituisce (e favorisce nel tempo stesso) il fantasticare dell’uomo del popolo, è un vero sognare ad occhi aperti. […] Si può dire che nel popolo il fantasticare è dipendente dal ‘complesso di inferiorità’ (sociale) che determina lunghe fantasticherie sull’idea di vendetta, di punizione dei colpevoli dei mali sopportati, ecc. Nel *Conte di Montecristo* ci sono tutti gli elementi per culcare queste fantasticherie e per quindi propinare un narcotico che attutisca il senso del male.  

This is one of those cases in which, as previously mentioned, Eco substantiates Gramsci’s intuitions with more thorough analyses carried out through the methodologies of textual semiotics. Eco confirms this himself:

Ripresa ai giorni nostri l’ipotesi gramsciana si esercita in questi saggi attraverso metodi narratologici e semiotici: analisi di testi, confronto di artifici narrativi con sistemi esterni di condizionamento commerciale, con universi ideologici e con strategie stilistiche, cercando di porre in correlazione tutte queste ‘serie’ attraverso modelli strutturali omologhi.

One last example worth examining is that of Eco’s study of *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue in *Il superuomo di massa*, further proof that ‘ogni analisi strutturale di un testo è sempre la verifica di ipotesi psico-sociologiche e ideologiche sia pure latenti’. Eco reads Sue’s novel and the ideology it conveys through specific narrative structures from the perspective of the wider phenomenon identified by Gramsci, that is, the populism of the European intellectual. The semiotician demonstrates a correspondence between the structures of commercial narrative and those of political discourse.

Eco explains that the French novelist meant to bring the miserable conditions of the Parisian popular masses to the attention of his bourgeois public, although his vision was one of pity and paternalism rather than a ‘j’accuse’. Nevertheless, the novel had a much wider circulation among the lowest social groups, who found their own stories and misfortunes in the novel. This brought Sue, who was writing and publishing the novel serially, to modify his view. Eco points out that such a peculiar situation is, in truth, the normality of mass communications. The author, or the cultural industry, creates a product and expects a certain kind of interpretation but ends up generating different interpretations due to the audience’s breadth and diversity. This is the key point of Eco’s application of semiotic theory to the study of mass culture, which recalls not only Peirce’s interpretative semiotics but also, as mentioned in the introduction, Pareyson’s theory of aesthetics.

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71Eco, *Il superuomo di massa*, pp. 27–36. See also Umberto Eco, ‘Io sono Edmond Dantès’, in *Biblionostalgia. Divagazioni sentimentali sulle letture degli anni più verdi*, ed. by Mario Scognamiglio ( Milan: Rovello, 2008), pp. 3–26.
72Quaderni, II, p. 799.
73Eco, *Il superuomo di massa*, p. 7.
74Ibid., p. 38.
75Gramsci defines this phenomenon ‘movimento di “andare al popolo”, del populismo degli intellettuali nello scorcio del secolo XIX dopo l’avvento delle grandi masse operaie […] e il tramonto definitivo della democrazia quarantottesca’ in *Quaderni*, III, p. 1941.
76Eco expands on this argument in *Lector in fabula* ( Milan: Bompiani, 1979).
Almost by chance at first, and then intentionally, Sue became the great accuser of social inequalities in the populace’s perception. However, this was yet another case of the subaltern masses perceiving a view birthed by the dominant class as their own. Although he declared himself a socialist, Sue’s social and political thought was very far from socialism: it was, rather, a social-democratic, reformist view aiming to fix some social plagues while preserving the hegemonic system and its relations of power. Les Mystères de Paris structurally reflects this. Even in this case, the abuses, misfortunes, and miseries of the individuals from the popular masses are fixed by a superman, Prince Rodolophe de Gerostein. From a Gramscian perspective, the novel fostered the idea that an improvement of the subalterns’ conditions would arise from the intervention of a charitable prince rather than from the formation of class consciousness and revolution.

Before moving from the realm of analysis to that of intellectual strategy, another common aspect that should be briefly considered is to be found in the field of linguistic theory. Consistent with structuralist assumptions, and within the framework of a semiological critique of culture, Eco initially interprets culture as a code and later moves towards the encyclopaedic model. Semiotic theory can be equally reckoned among the foundations of Gramsci’s work: a proto-structuralist interpretation of culture as a ‘language’ can be observed in Quaderni del carcere, for example, where Gramsci argues that language should be interpreted in the widest possible sense so as to include culture and philosophy.77 In this respect, Alessandro Carlucci draws a connection between Gramsci and Ferdinand de Saussure, the forerunner of structuralism. Although no direct influence is claimed, Carlucci identifies several commonalities, above all the idea that linguistic conventions are arbitrary and not ‘fixed once and for all by the completely free decision of an individual or a restricted group’ but ‘the product of social forces’ and ‘heritage of the preceding period’.78 Such reflections on the conventionality of linguistic codes are consistent with those on collective political history and therefore relate to hegemony: as much as ‘previous models of correct linguistic usage have exerted influences and left traces on how speakers use language, and that later generations of speakers have internalised those models to the point of following them instinctively in their linguistic practice’, likewise ‘the supposedly spontaneous formation and spread of collective orientations and political views, far from being the result of free will […]’, results instead from more complex processes of cultural influence.79 More or less consciously, when equating the way linguistic and cultural codes work, Gramsci’s reflections seem to contain the seeds of the conceptual and methodological revolution Eco attempted to carry out against the still idealistic background of the 1960s, which he later accomplished through his turn to semiotics.

The Intellectual in Mass Society

Gramsci’s reading of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructures also impacts his interpretation of intellectual work: while recognising its link with the socioeconomic structure, he regards intellectuals as vectors of either transformation or conservation of the structure. Gramsci states as follows:

Ogni gruppo sociale, nascendo sul terreno originario di una funzione essenziale nel mondo della produzione economica, si crea insieme, organicamente, uno o più ceti di intellettuali che gli danno omogeneità e consapevolezza della propria funzione non solo nel campo economico, ma anche in quello sociale e politico: l’imprenditore capitalista crea con sé il tecnico dell’industria, lo scienziato dell’economia politica, l’organizzatore di una nuova cultura, di un nuovo diritto, ecc. ecc.80

77Quaderni, II, p. 1330.
78Alessandro Carlucci, ‘Gramsci and Saussure: Similarities and Possible Links’, Isonomia (2010) <https://isonomia.uniurb.it/vecchiaserie/2010carlucci2.pdf> [accessed 9 June 2020].
79Alessandro Carlucci, Gramsci and Languages: Unification, Diversity, Hegemony (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 181.
80Quaderni, III, p. 1513.
Gramsci’s view traces the synthetic relationship of diverse elements upon which his philosophy of praxis is based: organic intellectuals frame the technical knowledge of a certain social body within a wider humanistic and historical framework that legitimises their ruling role in society. The role of organic intellectuals is not limited to philosophical speculation or to art production and criticism, as they perform a wider range of organisational functions. In doing so, intellectual work develops the class consciousness and promotes the hegemony of the group of which it is an expression. Gramsci himself acts as an organic intellectual to the subaltern classes and conceives his party as a collective intellectual.

Gramsci defines the organic intellectual model as that of a new intellectual, where the divide between the new and the old is found in the rise of the industrial mass society that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Following this chronological landmark, there nonetheless persists another intellectual model that Gramsci labels ‘traditional’. Traditional intellectuals are organic to no group but themselves and locate their own position beyond the material base and the dialectic between the different social classes. Even when such a gap between the intellectual and the material world is rejected, as in the idealism of Benedetto Croce who ‘saw clearly the connections between culture and politics’, intellectuals are seen as a meta-party acting as the mastermind of politics. They regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the hegemony in force but, according to Gramsci:

Una delle caratteristiche più rilevanti di ogni gruppo che si sviluppa verso il dominio è la sua lotta per l’assimilazione e la conquista ‘ideologica’ degli intellettuali tradizionali, assimilazione e conquista che è tanto più rapida ed efficace quanto più il gruppo dato elabora simultaneamente i propri intellettuali organici.

In Apocalittici e integrati, Eco offers a similar description of the social roles and functions of intellectuals drawing the notorious distinction between apocalyptic and integrated intellectuals. Eco calls ‘apocalyptic’ those intellectuals who still hold an elitist conception of culture according to which the very idea of mass culture is an aberration. They see the advent of media as the apocalypse and present themselves as the last, heroic defence of the Culture’s besieged fort. In a somewhat provocative way, Eco traces this attitude back to the aforementioned myth of the superman and the so-called ‘consolatory narrative’, bringing Gramsci into play again:

L’apocalittico in fermo consola il lettore, perché gli lascia intravedere, sullo sfondo della catastrofe, l’esistenza di una comunità di ‘superuomini’ capaci di elevarsi, non foss’altro che attraverso il rifiuto, al di sopra della banalità media. […] Si è detto ‘superuomini’ pensando all’origine nicciana (o pseudonicciana) di molti di questi atteggiamenti. Ma lo si è detto con malizia, pensando alla malizia con cui Gramsci insinuava che il modello del superuomo nicciano fosse da individuarsi negli eroi della narrativa ottocentesca di appendice.

Apocalyptic dissent offers an indirect contribution to the enhancement of the system it blames, ending up being the most sophisticated product on offer for mass consumption. Gramsci’s claim about the traditional intellectuals’ ideological conquest by the ruling class seems to resurface. More precisely, Eco asserts that this intellectual attitude indirectly contributes to the hegemony in force, which incorporates these supposedly critical expressions. In summary, what Eco’s apocalyptic intellectuals and Gramsci’s traditional intellectuals share is a detachment from the concrete socio-cultural context and its political and economic dynamics. Although they flaunt it, their detachment

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81Quaderni, III, p. 1551.
82More precisely, these functions are ‘organizzative in senso lato, sia nel campo della produzione, sia in quello politico-amministrativo’, Quaderni, III, p. 2041.
83See Alberto Asor Rosa, ‘Cultura e società di massa’, Quaderni Storici, 7 (1972), 565–84.
84Paolo Barlera, ‘Towards a Genealogy and Methodology of Italian Cultural Studies’, Annali d’Italianistica, 16 (1998), 15–30 (pp. 18–9).
85Quaderni, III, p. 1517.
86Eco argues that, for the apocalyptics, ‘il solo pensiero di una cultura condivisa da tutti, prodotta in modo che si adatti a tutti, e elaborata sulla misura di tutti, è un mostruoso controsenso’, Apocalittici e integrati, p. 4.
87Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, p. 5.
88Ibid., p. 4.
remains at the level of supposition since, as Eco writes, ‘il sistema di condizionamenti detto industria culturale non presenta la comoda possibilità di due livelli indipendenti, l’uno quello della comunicazione di massa, l’altro quello della elaborazione aristocratica, che la precede senza esserne condizionata’. This passage leads back to Eco’s osmotic interpretation of the levels of culture that was also found in Gramsci.

While, in the Quaderni, the traditional and organic intellectuals are placed in opposition, Eco’s apocalyptics find their counterparts in the integrated intellectuals, for whom:

Poiché la televisione, il giornale, la radio, il cinema e il fumetto, il romanzo popolare e il Reader’s Digest mettono ormai i beni culturali a disposizione di tutti, rendendo amabile e leggero l’assorbimento delle nozioni e la ricezione di informazioni, stiamo vivendo in un’epoca di allargamento dell’area culturale in cui finalmente si attua ad ampio livello, col concorso dei migliori, la circolazione di un’arte e una cultura ‘popolare’. Se questa cultura salga dal basso o sia confezionata dall’alto per consumatori indifesi, non è problema che l’integrato si ponga.

These differ from the apocalyptics not only in their divergent view of mass culture and media but also because of their direct involvement in the cultural industry. However, drawing a parallel with Gramsci’s organic intellectual is more complex than it was between apocalyptic and traditional intellectuals. In the first place, the organic intellectual can indeed act in opposition to the ruling class, depending on the social group they are the expression of, while the integrated intellectual contributes directly towards the hegemony in force. Yet, from a broader perspective, it is the very reference to class dialectic, and thus to the entire paradigm upon which Gramsci’s theory is based, that is dismissed by Eco. It is worth emphasising again this paramount difference between Eco and Gramsci: as this article seeks to demonstrate, the semiotician finds in Gramsci valuable instruments to study and modify reality, beyond what Italian Marxist scholars had done previously, but these instruments are deprived of their native historicist–Marxist framework, which is deemed inappropriate to reading the contemporary. In so doing, Eco revivifies Gramsci’s thought in a different historical context and brings to the fore elements that were neglected in Gramsci’s Italian readings, such as ‘the mechanisms of consent, to the role of culture and popular ideology or common sense in reproducing the social order’, which would have had more attention in the rising British Cultural Studies.

While significant continuities can be identified between Eco’s and Gramsci’s views of the role of the intellectual, a major difference surfaces when it comes to the elaboration of concrete cultural policies for social transformation: the lack in Gramsci of specific cultural policies for the counter-hegemonic struggle that the intellectual organic to the subaltern classes should pursue. The absence of a clear project is particularly evident when considering the field of mass culture, as Gramsci’s attempts to propose alternative models or to bring to the public’s attention the signs of hegemony in mass cultural products are somewhat rare and meagre. As Barlera points out, there are ‘no doubts for Gramsci that efforts should be made to forge a new “class of intellectuals”’, but it is not clear what these should do with mass culture, whether it is only to be studied as the “expression of the “spirit of the age””, fought ‘as the rank and file’s favourite “escape from reality”’, or if intellectuals should try ‘to eradicate the “opium” that was intoxicating the young Italians’, and in what manner. The concrete conditions under which Gramsci wrote his Quaderni certainly played a role in this absence, as well as the different degree of mass media development that an intellectual could rely on to reach out to the popular masses.

Conversely, a comprehensive intellectual strategy designed to ‘ridare agli esseri umani una certa libertà di fronte al fenomeno totale della Comunicazione’ is found in Eco. The development of this

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89Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, p. 10.
90Eco, Apocalittici e integrati, p. 4.
91David Forgacs, ‘Gramsci and Marxism in Britain’, New Left Review, 176 (1989), 70–88, (p. 81).
92Barlera, p. 17.
93Eco, ‘Per una guerriglia semiologica’, p. 428.
strategy, however, is anything but uniform due to the ever-changing historical and technological background against which it develops and the difficulties it encounters in reaching out to the large audience of mass communications. The first phase of this path took place during the 1950s and 1960s. In this period, Eco actively took part in the cultural industry, for instance, working for RAI and participating in some TV shows. Such participation went hand in hand with an intention to change the cultural industry from within, and with his analysis of mass culture in Apocalittici e integrati. This makes clear that Eco’s interest in mass culture was not merely anthropological: Eco meant to appropriate its language and adapt it to his own communicative needs, although he did not accept it uncritically as the integrated intellectuals do.

This picture underwent a critical change in the late 1960s. Starting with La struttura assente (1968), Eco turned to interpretative semiotics and shifted the focus of his research from the way cultural products are created by the cultural industry to the ways they are interpreted by the audience. Such a change also follows the radicalisation of the political debate from 1968 onwards. Eco’s project for semiological guerrilla warfare testifies to both these shifts. In ‘Per una guerriglia semilogica’, cultural policies aimed to intervene at the level of the message’s source are set aside, while the focus shifts to the audience and their interpretation of the message. Eco builds on the assumption that ‘la variabilità delle interpretazioni è la legge costante delle comunicazioni di massa. I messaggi partono dalla Fonte e arrivano in situazioni sociologiche differenziate, dove agiscono codici diversi’. Consequently, mass communication always implies a certain degree of misinterpretation. This misinterpretation results from the gap between the code employed by the source, which it expects the receivers to employ, and the code the receivers actually employ. Eco aims at turning this situation to the advantage of cultural democratisation: misinterpretations shall be stimulated in the audience and made deliberate. In such a way, Eco’s semiological guerrilla warfare means to:

agoguire capillarmente tutti i gruppi che ascoltano la televisione portandoli a discutere il messaggio che ricevono, [...] mutare il significato che la Fonte aveva attribuito a questo messaggio. Una organizzazione educativa che riuscisse a far discutere una determinata udienza sul messaggio che sta ricevendo, potrebbe capovolgere il significato di quel messaggio. Oppure mostrare che quel messaggio può essere interpretato in modi diversi.

In a 1971 article, published in Il Manifesto under the pen name of ‘Dedalus’, Eco defines the same strategy in terms of counterinformation:

La controinformazione non è caratterizzata dai suoi contenuti ideologici. Deve essere caratterizzata dal fatto che essa si realizza sulle spalle, per così dire, dell’informazione normale, prendendola in contropiede e succhiandole il sangue. [...] Controinformazione non significa dire al telegiornale cose diverse, ma andare dove la gente guarda il telegiornale e intervenire facendo notare come esso distorce le informazioni e come, interpretandolo tra le righe, si potrebbe cavarne informazione diversa.

It is by no means insignificant that Eco unbinds counterinformative practice, and thus semiological guerrilla warfare, from ideological contents. Shortly thereafter, Eco completed his turn to semiotics, in which the critique of ideology takes a key role. In Trattato di semiotica generale, ideology is defined as a ‘visione del mondo parziale e sconnessa’, as it distorts meaning by concealing some semantic properties and overexposing others. To define ideology, Eco also recovers the Marxist category of ‘false consciousness’. In this respect, Paolo Desogus draws a connection between Eco’s semiotics and Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, stating that both are located at the superstructural

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94Umberto Eco, ‘Eco Umberto’, in Autodizionario degli scrittori italiani, ed. by Felice Piemontese (Milan: Leonardo, 1990), pp. 147–52 (p. 149).
95Eco, ‘Per una guerriglia semilogica’, p. 426.
96Eco, ‘Per una guerriglia semilogica’, p. 429.
97Dedalus, ‘Cerchiamo di usare anche Toro Seduto’, Il Manifesto, 23 May 1971 <https://ilmanifesto.it/cherchiamo-di-usare-anche-toro-seduto/> [accessed 27 January 2021].
98Eco, Trattato di semiotica generale, p. 369.
99Ibid., p. 360.
level, whose contradictions they shed light on. Desogus also pinpoints the profound limits of Eco’s strategy due, first, to the hegemony’s capability of tolerating and incorporating oppositional practices, such as the desecration or distortion of hegemonic cultural codes and, second, to the limited scope of that strategy, unable to involve the popular masses.

From the late 1970s, Eco progressively dismissed this strategy and the idea that the hegemony can be contrasted with an oppositional project unmasking and overturning the ideological contents conveyed by the media. This was certainly a much more historicist idea than Eco realised, and the same could be said for the initial phase of his intellectual engagement, based on the dialectic of the centre and the periphery of power. In this third phase, Eco embraced a post-structuralist understanding of power in which dialectic oppositions and the conviction that society can be transformed either from within (as in Apocalittici e integrati) or from without (as in the guerrilla strategy) dissolves. As explained in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theory of the rhizome, which Eco appropriates in Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio (1984), power has no within or without. In the framework of the crisis of ideologies and the widespread return to individuality (‘riflusso’), as opposed to the collectivism of the previous two decades, Eco also rethinks and partly downplays the very role of the intellectual in society and, above all, in its potential transformation. The intellectual is no more entitled to speak on behalf of totality, as Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel maintains, and is but one of many voices competing in the media polyphony. For this reason, Eco’s recourse to first-person narration, fragmentary and occasional writing, and intertextual irony, the cornerstones of his postmodernism, becomes significantly more frequent.

The intellectual is now seen as a ‘talking cricket’, namely, a critical voice that is much more feeble than before and that speaks to individual consciences or small groups rather than to the totality, criticising its own part more often than the other. Eco affirms that he based this figure on Norberto Bobbio’s understanding of the intellectual as early as 1968. However, it appears more appropriate for the period beginning in the late 1970s and covering Eco’s subsequent work, as he directs his efforts to provide critical instruments to interpret rather than to change reality, and he pursues a more generic, and perhaps evanescent, ‘sapere comune e al bene collettivo’. Although he progressively dismisses a Gramscian understanding of intellectual work, Eco arrives at a conception of intellectual work that can be considered as post-Gramscian. Indeed, the semiotician adopts what Pierpaolo Antonello calls a post-hegemonic perspective when redefining intellectual work, which is no more part of an organic project but, as Antonello writes, ‘incoraggia meccanismi riflessivi di presa di coscienza e di capacità d’azione che riguardano tutti gli strati sociali, come parte di una costruzione di forme sub-politiche (di resistenza) che si definiscono attraverso una prospettiva critica, emancipativa e costruttiva’.

**Conclusion**

This article examines the relationship between the work of Gramsci and Eco, with special attention to the latter’s work of the 1960s and 1970s, and demonstrates Eco’s recovery of Gramsci’s thought on mass culture analysis and the intellectual’s role in mass society. The nature of this relationship was defined in terms of continuity or complementarity: where Gramsci’s analysis comes to a standstill due to practical and methodological reasons, and no real sociocultural transformation strategy is built upon that analysis, Eco’s work intervenes to fill the gaps, reshape, and give effect to

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100 Paolo Desogus, ‘La teoria critica di Umberto Eco: La critica dell’ideologia e la guerrietta semiologica’, Enthymema, 7 (2012), 332–34 (p. 328).
101 See Umberto Eco, ‘La lingua, il potere e la forza’, in Sette anni di desiderio, pp. 183–95.
102 Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel, ‘Umberto Eco, gli anni Sessanta e i “cultural studies”’, in Nel nome del senso. Intorno all’opera di Umberto Eco, ed. by Jean Petitot and Paolo Fabbrì (Florence: Sansoni, 2001), pp. 365–76 (p. 373).
103 Umberto Eco, A passo di gambero: Guerre calde e populismo mediatico (Milan: Bompiani, 2007), p. 26. Ebook.
104 Ibid., p. 23.
105 Pierpaolo Antonello, Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell’Italia contemporanea (Milan: Mimesis, 2012), p. 18.
Gramsci’s theory. At the same time, Eco dismisses the Marxist basis that Gramsci’s theory was founded upon. Yet, it was also observed that, on the one hand, Gramsci himself had questioned some of the key concepts of Marxism and, on the other, as this article has sought to demonstrate, Eco’s dismissal is anything but complete in his work of the 1960s and 1970s since it retains a dialectical conception stemming precisely from that philosophical framework and worldview.

With this in mind, it is now possible to briefly return to what was said in the introduction: the pursuit of connections between Eco and Gramsci lays the foundations for Eco’s place in the framework of Cultural Studies, traditionally associated with Gramsci. The research carried out in this framework since the foundation of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964, the same year Apocalittici e integrati was published, indeed shares many aspects with the culturalist Eco that came to the fore in this article: the reworking of the concepts of class and class struggle in post-industrial media society, the displacement of idealistic interpretations of the text, the interdisciplinary approach, and the attention towards mass culture and the variability of its interpretations. Such convergence is still to be investigated both from the perspective of cultural theory and that of intellectual history, namely, of how scholars like Eco tried to combine their academic role with their sociopolitical commitment.

Likewise, while today the role of Gramsci, Pasolini, and De Martino at the foundation of Italian Cultural Studies is more widely acknowledged, Eco’s contribution, in this regard, is yet to be fully explored. Accordingly, it is not so usual to find references to Eco in contemporary Cultural Studies, in Italy or beyond. These references are mostly limited to Eco’s cultural analyses, probably the most outdated area of his lifelong research, neglecting the potential usefulness of his semiotic research for this field of studies whose greatest limit is often found in its lack of solid theoretical groundings.

This partial lack of consideration seems due to two main reasons. First, the degree of abstraction that semiotics implies and the resulting near-total absence of the issue of subjectivity, individuality, and identity, which is pivotal in contemporary Cultural Studies. As Anna Maria Lorusso points out, Eco’s subject is conceived in terms of its competences, inferences, and knowledge, whereas culture is mainly understood in over-personal terms. Second, there is a certain suspicion towards the application of semiotics to analytical practices, and the resulting question as to whether such a ‘complex theoretical system’ must necessarily ‘guide practical activity’. These two reasons might have overshadowed what still appears to be a fundamental contribution to cultural research and to the question of the intellectual’s role in mass society.

**Disclosure Statement**

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106 Michele Cometa, *Studi culturali* (Naples: Guida, 2010), pp. 144–46.
107 Eco himself recognised that theorising on such ever-changing subjects as mass culture and communications is like doing ‘la teoria del giovedì prossimo’ in Apocalittici e integrati, p. XII.
108 Paul Smith, ‘Cultural Studies’, in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, ed. by David H. Richter (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), pp. 188–201.
109 Lorusso, p. 120. See also Patrizia Violi, ‘Individual and Communal Encyclopedia’, in Umberto Eco’s Alternative, pp. 25–38, and Patrizia Violi, ‘La Mystérieuse flamme de la reine Loana et l’espace vide de l’individuel’, Cahiers de Narratologie, 33 (2018) https://doi.org/10.4000/narratologie.8110.
110 David Robey, ‘Umberto Eco: Theory and Practice in the Analysis of Media’, in Culture and Conflict in Post-War Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Robert Lumley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 160–77 (p. 160).