

“Educating for thinking” between “Apocalyptic and Integrated” For a pedagogy of mass communication

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Abstract: After the introductory note with which Eco justifies the title of the work (chosen by the publisher Bompiani), the article reflects on the surprising relevance of *Apocalyptic and Integrated* (2017) in today’s age. By tracing some key concepts of the work, which refer to complexity and agency, the need for selective and consciously matured thinking/action is brought to light. This is because today’s reality should be read with a gaze trained to grasp the nodes of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1978), which refers to the world of signs and meanings in which we are immersed. Thus, through the phenomenology of the capable man (Ricoeur, 2005), a path is traced that, rooted in memory and promise, links the past and the future, highlighting the exercise of critical thinking as the main way of carefully monitoring the criteria that determine the choices of action. Today more than ever, as in 1964, when Eco’s work was published, there is a need for a pedagogy of mass communication that reflects on education for thinking (Lipman, 2005) as a possible paideutic path capable of facing the challenges posed by the society of mass media and A.I.

Keywords: Apocalyptic and Integrated; complexity; critical thinking; education.

1. Introduction

In defining the position of the apocalyptic (those who see the advent of mass culture as a sign of an irreversible decline) and the integrated (those who, often without being fully aware of it, produce and issue messages at all levels), Eco emphasises the need for a third way, capable of an oppositional conjunction between the two categories, which thus become complementary. As Barbieri notes, «Eco’s words showed the narrow-mindedness of one position (that of the integrated) as well as the other (that of the apocalyptic), outlining a not easy but fruitful middle path, without preconceived refusals, without narrow-minded principles, without great initial dogmas, without metaphysical or gnoseological certainties, without the pretence of founding a basic truth» (2015, p. 24). «Neither apocalyptic nor integrated, this seems to be the right attitude even for the present, which Eco, a great fan of mass culture at the time, demonstrates in action through his intelligent analyses [...]» (Belpoliti, 2015, p. 14). Emblematic in this respect is the figure of the Salamanca scholar, an expert in astronomy and geography who is able to impart knowledge of the Ptolemaic astronomical model from ancient texts. His knowledge allows him to enjoy prestige and success until Columbus proposes the opportunity to «buscar el Levante por el Ponente» (Eco, 2017, p. 367) and he sets off to discover America. Faced with such a situation, the Salamanca scholar has two alternatives: «either undergo a training course in order to acquire sufficient knowledge to enable him to become a master of culture



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and life in the changing horizons of relations, or lay the foundations for a new science, which consists in maintaining the moral and cultural pessimism of the discovery of America» (ibid.).

Today's cultural universe, however, is characterised by constant changes that continue to weaken the *limen* between technical values and human values; this implies that the latter must be identified, with reference to the future, by means of parameters that take into account the situations created by technological progress. All this requires the ability to appeal to a critical thinking that is capable of examining phenomena and constantly reviewing the premises of the discourses that underpin the hermeneutic processes of reality.

2. Between complexity and agency: for “selective” and consciously matured thinking/acting

According to Ferraro (2015, p. 103), *Apocalyptic and Integrated* is characterised by two key concepts, neither of which is explicitly articulated by the Author: complexity and agency. The concept of complexity, typical of today's society, as Morin (2005) reminds us, was far from familiar in the 1960s, but it can be seen in Eco's criticism of the criterion of interpreting reality through sharp and simple oppositions. The Author rejects the logic of exclusion that characterised the cultural climate of the time, anticipating a paradigm shift in perspective, a shift that the cultural industry itself would subsequently embrace. This shift entailed an embrace of multiplicity and complexity, as evidenced by the proliferation of television and musical offers, as well as the production of complex objects, «insofar as they are designed to be enjoyed in different ways by different audiences» (Ferraro, 2015, p. 103). Agency implies the notion that the occurrence of change is closely connected with intentionality, namely human initiative, «the manner in which one aligns one's relationship with the messages that are received, or the many forms in which it is possible to intervene in what is happening» (ibid., p. 104). This refers to decision-making, as Ferraro observes: «It is no longer a matter of being placed in a certain position, for example belonging to a certain social class; it is a matter of having or not having the capacity to take a position, by making choices, and thus in some way “taking the floor”» (ibid., pp. 104-105; Arendt, 2016; Spina, 2018, pp. 109-120; Spina, 2024, pp. 228-239). However, it should be pointed out that the concept of “taking the floor”, from a pedagogical and educational perspective, should not be interpreted within the context of integrated perspectives, which also promote the proliferation of posts and likes on various social networks, particularly in relation to contemporary reality. The prevailing metaphor of sharing (Panosetti, 2015, p. 139) carries with it the risk of «weakening the already limited critical capacity of today's media consumption» (ibid.). It is therefore necessary that the idolatry of the ideal of absolute speech be countered by the criticism of this speech. Moreover, it is Eco himself, in an interview on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, who affirms that the continuous criticism of others' speech underlies the process of collective growth, the main function of every culture (ibid.). It is then necessary to foster an agency capable of discerning the difference between the uncritical acceptance of the passive role of “consumer” and the choice of an active role of creative participation (Ferraro, 2015, p. 106). This involves cultivating «an attitude aimed at a selective action on things» (ibid.). After all, Dewey had already pointed out that «selective emphasis [...] is the

heartbeat of mental life. To reject this operation is to discredit thinking as such» (Dewey, 1973, p. 37).

3. Educating the gaze to grasp the nodes of the rhizome

In the development of his reflections, Eco already seems aware that «the world of signs and meanings in which we are immersed is not made like a tree or a root, with its genealogical hierarchical ramifications, but like a rhizome» (Bonfante, 2015, p. 29). The latter (a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari, 1978) consists of a structure that connects any point to any other point; it has no centre; it is not hierarchical; it can be broken at any point and start up again along its own line; it can be dismantled, overturned, and in principle has neither beginning nor end (ibid.). From this perspective, Bonfante notes that a point such as a comic strip, a television programme, and, one might add, a video on social media or a prompt given to artificial intelligence, «can not only be connected to very different and fascinating parts of the great tangle of culture, but in doing so enables us to understand the tangle itself» (ibid.). In this respect, Marrone points to the need, in the study of mass culture and its media, to «withdraw one's gaze and search not for last minute truths [...] but for invariant patterns» (2015, p. 19) on which variations in the forms and styles of things and ideas are based. Completing this topological metaphor, Bonfante adds that «Eco has taught us a double movement: we must first bring our gaze closer to a detail and then withdraw it in order to make the connections and understand it in a network of cross-references among the nodes, even the very remote ones, of the rhizomatic tangle» (2015, p. 29). For Eco, it is the curiosity of intelligence that draws our gaze closer to the world: this implies work and the ability to connect the nodes of the rhizome. The hypothesis does not seem far-fetched, then, that in order to approach and withdraw a hermeneutic gaze on the world, we should promote an education that is able to elicit that agility in making connections, which is typical of systemic and critical thinking. This means educating our gaze to complexity, because in the face of «a quantitative growth of information, no matter how muddled and oppressive it appears, [...] unforeseen results can be produced, according to the law that there is no reformist neutralisation in the circulation of ideas. Rather, every cultural development [...] produces results which, in dialectical relation to given circumstances, outstrip the forecasts made by strategists or scholars of communication» (Eco, 2017, p. XIV).

4. For a phenomenology of capable man

With reference to the cognitive consequences of the enormous and immediate availability of content, especially for digital natives, Eco did not fail to highlight the risk of an impending crisis of collective memory which, in his opinion, is closely connected to the crisis of individual memory. In other words, according to the author, the young person living in front of the computer screen seems to be interested in deactivating certain memories because they are incompatible with the simultaneity that characterises reality. In this regard, he gives the example of many young people today who could not tell when mobile phones were invented, but who would certainly find it difficult to imagine a time when such devices did not exist (Panosetti, 2015, p. 141). There is no doubt, however, that the Web represents an enormous reservoir of material for those who retain curiosity and the propensity to cultivate memory. The

crucial point, therefore, is to once again maintain a critical capacity, which is above all the capacity for discernment and separation (Cosentino, 2002). The need to use IT tools critically, consciously cultivating memory and knowledge, in order to concretise an action aimed at ethically facing the challenges of the future, is clearly evident.

In tracing the phenomenology of the capable man, Ricoeur (2005, pp. 107-160) also emphasises memory as an emblematic factor closely linked to personal identity, along with promise. While it is impossible to go into the details of Ricoeur's reflection here, it is relevant for the purposes of this discourse to focus heuristic attention on the fact that, according to the Author, memory, in referring to "what is remembered" and "who remembers", places the main emphasis on sameness, a fundamental value of personal identity. At the same time, if memory, directed towards the past, is retrospective and, as such, capable of ensuring the perception of the continuity of one's own existence, the promise, as a paradigm of selfhood directed towards the future, is instead prospective. From an educational and pedagogical point of view, this means that the ability to promise presupposes the ability to say, the ability to act on the world, the ability to narrate and give form to the narrative idea of a life. The commitment underlying the promise is expressed through the will of constancy. At the same time, it is also true that the memory of the will, i.e. the will that continues to desire what was once a desire (and is now no longer a desire, because the assumptions underlying the promise itself have ceased to exist as a result of the changes that have occurred), bears within it the risk of obstinacy (an attitude that is seen in apocalypics). On the basis of these reflections and bearing in mind that, according to Ricoeur, being able to promise also means being able to break one's word, there is a clear need not only to reverse the order of priority between the one who promises and the recipient (first comes the other, who counts on me and on my fidelity to my word; then I respond to his expectation), but also for an exercise in critical thinking capable of monitoring the assumptions at the basis of promises directed towards otherness. This is also and especially true with regard to the study of a possible pedagogy of mass communication.

5. Concluding remarks

Faced with the prospect of a new human landscape, the limits, shape and tendencies of which are difficult to discern, an attitude of constructive research is required, which does not neglect vigilant and attentive noological activity. This is because, as Vargas Llosa notes, «when a culture closes the exercise of thinking in the attic of things that have gone out of fashion, literary and artistic products are promoted, accepted or rejected on the basis of marketing gimmicks [and we find ourselves faced with the] conditioned reflexes of an audience that lacks the intellectual defences and sensitivity necessary to detect the deception and blackmail of which it is the victim» (2012, p. 27). According to Belpoliti, «the lesson that remains relevant is the concrete study of cultural products and the way they are consumed - an important aspect, essential for understanding the world around us. Knowing before judging. The apocalypics hardly ever do this, but neither do the integrated, enthusiasts without a reason who seem to engage in it frequently» (Belpoliti, 2015, p. 15). In this perspective, «suspending judgement, thus taking the risk of entering into the merits of the differences, comparing and evaluating on a case-by-case basis remains the only antidote to succumbing to the sterile and endless dialectic between the apocalypics and the integrated» (Mangiapane, 2015, p. 123). In an attempt to avoid this risk, from the point of view of pedagogical reflection, this seems to suggest the idea of moving from

educational itineraries to multidimensional thinking (as conceived by Lipman - 2005), in order to concretise the promise, never obstinate, of interpreting culture without neglecting the recognition of the essence of the human being who, in the relationship with otherness and the world, finds fertile ground for the flowering of the best form of one's self.

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