

# Eco's pedagogy of song from *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964) to the present day. About songs and performers as medial content

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**Abstract:** In *Apocalittici e integrati* Eco laid the foundations not only for a pedagogy of mass technological consumption, but also for a pedagogy of the Italian song. This aspect, although little explored in the following sixty years, nevertheless seems to have left some traces in Italian popular music studies. In this field in fact several of Eco's concepts, such as the axiology between the consumer song and the different song, the emotional function of songs and the discursive function of performers, have been taken up through new perspectives and defunctionalized as analytical elements. The scholar's merit is thus to have provided a pedagogical-mediological key valid in any media system to objects such as songs and performers. These two elements, as cultural constructs, once conveyed in the media system in a mediated form, urge the identity substrates individual and collective, and stimulate re-appropriative processes that interpellate dynamics of distinction due to various factors. His epistemological model thus proves to be topical even today, and his research trajectories can be applied in a mediological and educational key in order to understand certain media and consumption logics even of today's digital soundscapes, to stimulate conscious listening by the new generations, and finally to reflect on the use of song as an inclusive and educational vehicle for sharing values and behavior.

**Keywords:** Music pedagogy; mass culture; song, performers; mediascape.

## 1. Introduction

Music pedagogy, ever since its sociological declinations, has also sporadically dealt with song (Delfrati, 2008). In the Italian area one of the first scholars who has reflected on this question was Umberto Eco in *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), where he moves along the intersections between semiotics, sociologies and pedagogics fields, as was demonstrated (Lorusso, 2015). In this regard some studies (Felini, 2004; Di Bari, 2009) have placed in this volume the initial embryo of a Eco's broader pedagogy of the media in mass culture, which will be developed in other works, that consists in a proposal of resistance to the technopole (Postman, 1993) through an intermediate way between the apocalyptic and the integrated vision towards the technologies of mass society.

In this system the impact of song has been little explored, in line with a sidelining of this form in Italy within the reflections on mediatization processes, which have shown a significant delay that only in the last few years seems to be on the way to being overcome (Cecchi, 2019; Soldani, 2023; Locatelli & Mosconi, 2024). Italian popular music studies have certainly dealt with the song's universe in Eco, but despite its interdisciplinary nature the pedagogical slant has been left out at the expense of



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other perspectives. A caesura has thus been created in the Italian mediascape between the media pedagogy proposed by the semiotician scholar also in relation to the universe of popular music and his defining and aesthetic interest, like Jacopo Tomatis (2019) implead, who notes how Eco's reflections on song have not been fully understood in Italy.

In our opinion in this time it's therefore necessary to fill this gap. The song, in fact, today is still a variegated customary phenomenon in the Italian media system with an even greater degree of discursive complexity more than 1964. Not only that: song-form has various implications that can also be solicited in the educational sphere, both in the teaching of Italian language, as demonstrated by various studies (summarized in Coveri, 2020; Caon, 2023), and in a broader dynamic musical pedagogy that uses song as an educational and inclusive device (Delfrati, 2008).

Today the innervation of the song in the mediascape continues to gather instances from public opinion also in relation to the behavioral models that these ubiquitous and protean products (Ortoleva, 20220) convey. For these reasons in this paper we aim to identify the research trajectories opened by Eco in this issue, and then monitor their lines of development in Italian song studies to reread them from a mediological perspective. The final objective is to define the characteristics of his pedagogical-medial-musical framework in relation to song-form, and to assess its possible applicative utility in the current digital landscape.

## 2. Umberto Eco's Pedagogy of consumer song in mass society

Eco's reflection on song in *Apocalittici e integrati* is placed at the center of an essay already published in the same year by Bompiani, born as a preface to *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza* (Straniero et al., 1964). This book, that recounting the Cantacronache's experience (to which some of the authors belonged), followed in the footsteps of Adorno's sociology of music (1947, 1956) and the Frankfurt school, showing how Italy lacked at the time a conscious reflection on the functions of listening to pop music that was attracting an increasingly unaware mass of listeners (Savonardo, 2010). The Cantacronache's proposal was on a civil song that really knew how to shake consciences, and that was not merely a soundscape of an indistinct public that only wanted to be entertained and amused.

In the first part of the essay, the one that serves more as a preface, Eco shows a contrast between two types of songs: the *canzone di consumo*, which is grouped in the music called *gastronomica*, a type of music that originates as an industrial product to satisfy market demands; and the *canzone diversa*, sung by singers who renounce both traditional melody and rhythm and who use words «che contano e si stanno a sentire» (Eco, 1964, p. 280). Eco's interest, unlike the Cantacronache, is not to the opposition between these two types, but to the intersection between them, opting for an intermediate solution between the positions of the apocalyptic and those of the integrated. His wish is that there might be a different song in Italy from the one in vogue at that time with historical and social ambitions, but at the same time capable of expressing «una nuova e [specially] più vera dimensione dell'evadere cantando» (Eco, 1964, p. 281).

If this distinction already appears in the Cantacronache's volume, with a more apocalyptic approach to musical escapism, the real novelty of Eco's proposal comes in the «terzo ordine di problemi [after the consumer and the different song], [...] che

questo libro [Cantacronache's book] non affronta ancora» (Eco, 1964, p. 281): the problematization not of the song as a text or about its performers, but on the effects that arise in the listener through its fruition and listening. The analysis of this aspect in the Eco's opinion can be conducted on four levels.<sup>1</sup> 1) A value level, to identify the values of mass culture that are expressed by songs in each historical and cultural context. 2) An emotional level, by interviewing listeners to investigate the emotions they feel when listening to the songs. At this level Eco proposes a detailed taxonomy of the song's emotional function, identifying functions like the diversion one, the cathartic one and the idealization one<sup>1</sup>. 3) A social level, to investigate structurally the conditions and characteristics that enable songs to elicit certain reactions in listeners, and the degree of consumer choice.

The final part of the essay has a more specifically pedagogical slant. Here Eco reflects first on the mass as a community of listeners, then on the mechanisms through which the meanings conveyed by songs are made their own on an identity level by individuals and social groups. According to the semiotician, in fact, «una generazione non solo si riconosce in una certa produzione musicale [...], ma la assume come bandiera» (Eco, 1964, p. 288). To argue this assumption Eco refers to the figure and production of Rita Pavone, presented as a cultural construct (Tomatis, 2019). Her character in fact is a different age from her real one, but despite this her performances are constructed by soliciting the instances of thirteen and fourteen-year-olds girls. The way with which she appears in the media landscape makes her a model for the audience in whom young people can recognize themselves, since she shares instances close to them. However this model, being a mass model, is binding and not free, and the degree of choice of the viewers is consequently reduced: Pavone is in fact a character that is continuously proposed in the media landscape, because it's subject to what Delfrati (2008, p. 145) in his pedagogy of music calls the «tirannia mediatica del neopopolare».

The conclusion of the essay does not seem to give any answers, but poses two questions in relation to the expressive possibilities of the *canzone diversa*. 1) Firstly Eco asks in what way it can also be a consumer product, a song that intercepts instances not only of culture or reflection, but also of evasion. 2) Then he asks himself whether this song must necessarily be forced to reject popularity and industrial circulation, lest its risk becoming a «mito mistificatorio produttore di esigenze fittizie». (Eco, 1964, p. 294).

### 3. Traces of Eco's pedagogy of song in Italian popular music studies

The pedagogical elements of Eco's reflection on Italian song and its performers have been rather forgotten in Italian popular music studies. However, we will now try to identify some traces of these elements that emerge in the three of the main lines of research developed from Eco's reflections: the musicological-literary line, the socio-semiotic line and the historical-culturological line.

The first, the musicological-literary one, is conducted in particular in Paolo Talanca's works (2017, 2024), who places Eco's definition of '*canzone diversa*' at the

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<sup>1</sup> This model, which echoes some taxonomies of the art's functions formulated in the early 20th century, will also be use in more recent research, such as Gasperoni, Marconi & Santoro, 2004.

center of his epistemological model. The scholar, reworking the concept of distinction in musical genres by Franco Fabbri (1996), defines different songs as those songs that have a text characterized by verbal, musical and performative elements that take on distinctive value, and which distinguish them from other songs. The *canzone diversa* is thus understood as a form of poetry in music (La Via, 2006) which adheres to a non-literary, but musical-literary canon. Talanca thus establishes a contrast between poetic authorship, that is the distinctive effort of these songs and their authors and performers (the 'cantautori'), and the icon, that is a repetition of formal models that satisfy the gastronomic logic, variables only within the dialectic between innovation and repetition (Eco, 1985). According to the text-centric Talanca's model the *canzone diversa* stands on an archaeo-media level as the first model of Italian *canzone d'autore*, and traces a distinctive line that is also valid in the actual mediascape. Even today, in fact, according to Talanca, it is heuristically valid - indeed, it's necessary - to differentiate a consumer-song from a different-song (a *canzone d'autore*). A different song is then a song that can perform an educational function, because it can stir the consciences of its users and stimulate reflection in them.

The second line, which is the sociosemiotic one, is represented by the reflections of Lucio Spaziante (2007, 2016), which carry out a shift from the text-song to the discursive system of pop music, investigating the relationship between enunciator-enunciated and the overall dynamics of musical discourse construction. Spaziante, by identifying the iconic bearing of certain figures of the musical scene, shows how the relationship they weave with the audience is given as the specific narrative frame within the songs are conveyed, that is never only musical, but have some visual and performative elements. In the analysis of Rita Pavone's case it was Eco who identified the discord between the performer and the character, which manifests itself on an initially anagraphic level, and then affects all her behavior. This distance leads Pavone to become an icon and a myth: her songs are in fact perceived close by her admirers firstly because they truly embody «i problemi dei suoi fans» (Eco, 1964, p. 290 ), and secondly because her way of appearance in the media landscape envelops them with an erotic charge that positions her as a model for the audience to follow, since she embodies a profound sense of rebellion against the prevailing cultural model rejected by the younger generations. Not only the song-text: also the performer's body becomes a physical vehicle of certain values that take on a mediated form, and in this form are enjoyed by the spectators, who never merely observe them passively, but contribute to the construction of the meanings conveyed in the performance, reconfiguring them in cultural, identity, behavioral and re-appropriative terms. According to Bourdieu's (1983) sociological framework, to which Spaziante's line looks at several times, when a performer appears in the mediascape offers a form of renegotiation of his social and cultural capital that he gives to the audience, which reconfigures it in behavioral and sharing terms.

The third and final line, the historical-culturological one, is clearly traced by Jacopo Tomatis in his monumental *Storia culturale della canzone italiana* (2019), moving its reflections from the historical and sociological Marco Santoro's framework (2010). In this volume Eco is present along two levels. On the historical one Tomatis shows his role within the debate on Italian song conducted in the 1960s. On the methodological one, more interesting than the previous one, the scholar takes from Eco two assumptions that he places at the center of his framework: 1) the need to never investigate the song only as a text, but as a set of practices; 2) the avoidance of considering

the whole song, including the diverse, as a product of the supposedly high culture, but as a «prodotto di massa per la massa» (Tomatis 2019: 264), within which intellectuals also fall, because, since as Eco noted, «tutti siamo massa» (Tomatis 2019: 24). If we are all mass, we can overcome the distinctive aporia between the apocalyptic and the integrated vision by going beyond the opposition between intellectuals who place themselves above the masses and their need to feel, at least at some time, part of the mass itself (Manconi, 2012). By this way Tomatis establishes in Eco the definition of the new Italian popular music in the second half of the 1960s and the methodological framework for current musicological analysis, which are no longer exclusively text-centric, but have a more historical, social and cultural slant. The question of texts thus leaves, thanks to Eco, the field of pure aesthetics to enter that of culturological and sociological reflection *tout court*. Reconstructing the history of Italian song in these terms means reconstructing the history of listening practices, forms of fruition and behaviours that communities and social groups have implemented in relation to songs and genres.

#### 4. A mediological reinterpretation of Eco's pedagogy of song in the current mediascape

At this point we can reread Eco's reflection from the mediological perspective which is recently entering in Italian popular music studies (Tomatis 2021, Bertolini 2023, 2024). According to this frame songs and performers are part of a broader transmedia narrative ecosystem composed of different materials (not only musical) that interrelate constructing the network of signification with which they appear in the media landscape, and through which they solicit identity, social and cultural substrates (Locatelli, Mosconi 2024). Eco's analysis has both a mediological and a transmedia slant. The mediological background is in considering songs and performers as media content, since in the media system they always appear in a mediated form that conditions their fruition and the possibility of conveying meanings. Transmedia slant is evident in observing how the musical tale never passes through the text alone, but provokes different reactions in the audience through the construction of a story that uses different languages and media.

According to this interpretation songs became emotional devices. Thanks to listening, in fact, our body is led to feel certain emotions and to direct the experience of enjoyment towards them, which can sometimes be directed towards listening to the words, as in the case of the 'canzone diversa', or it can be enveloped by the erotic charge of singing performances such as those of Mina, or visual ones such as those of Rita Pavone. Then performers also become emotional devices: Pavone in fact, as a cultural construct, has a tripartite identity on a sound, narrative and media level (Spaziante 2016: 36). These three identities transform her into a character that assumes a specific form that renegotiates her cultural and social capital through a process that I have defined elsewhere as cultural mediatization (Bertolini, 2025)<sup>2</sup>. The form in which performers appear in the media system - or rather, it would be better to

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring to a talk entitled *La mediatizzazione culturale dei cantautori in Italia: prospettive di ricerca e case studies*, that I discussed at the University of Bologna in September 2024 during the conference for the twentieth anniversary of the journal *Studi Culturali*, soon to be published, for which I would like to thank, in particular, the chair Paolo Magaudo and Marco Solaroli.

say 'are made to appear' - is thus never aseptic, but it's the framework within which a discourse is carried out that enters into a dialogue with the mass spectators.

Eco's reflection presents itself as mediological and transmedia on a noumenal and formal level as an action in power that can take on different expressions in act. For this reason now we try to evaluate the application of this pedagogical mediology of song and its performers in the current mediascape. As we have seen, songs and performers form a network of mediation and mediatization through which they reach the public on different scales. Depending on the scale, these discursive products propose themselves as behavioral models addressing both the masses and different targets, as they take on a distinctive character within the mediascape due to specific textual characteristics. Songs through their words and musical progression, which trigger some emotions in the audience; performers through their performative and visual appearance, which solicit specific behaviors in the beholder. In Eco however these two tracks, exemplified by the Cantacronache's song and the figure of Pavone, remain separate.

Translating the scholar's system to the digital landscape, it's necessary in our opinion to reconfigure this dichotomy in ecosystemic terms (Pescatore, 2018), since songs and performers are now part of a media ecosystem that is more complex by nature (Bertoloni, 2023). In this way Eco's conceptual categories would also make it understand and analyze the new forms of innervation of songs and performers in the current digital mediascape. These forms go beyond the logics of authorship or industrial verticality in favor of new models of horizontal and circular re-appropriation, evident for example in the new practices of re-use and fruition of songs (and images) such as the models of extended writing within social networks (Bertoloni, 2024).

Even in the contemporary scene songs and performers still act as distinctive elements with their respective textual and performative portfolios, thus positioning themselves as pedagogical and behavioral models that stimulate public debates. We notice this topic in the many discussions related to the trap phenomenon in Italy, centered not casually on the lyrics of their songs and on the way in which their performers appear, thus globally on the behavioral models they propose to the young people who listen to them (Marino & Tomatis, 2019, Tomatis 2021). Indeed trappers through their appearance in the media landscape stage «la rappresentazione di stili di vita definiti e stigmatizzati, di volta in volta, come "pericolosi", "antisociali", "materialisti", "sessisti"» (Marino & Tomatis, 2019: 93). This perception, as Tomatis and Marino note, grows when the visual content of the trappers and their notoriety with the public (Eco would say 'the mass audience') are increased. In this way they attract the interest of public opinion by once again evoking the debate between the apocalyptic, who condemn their production as negative behavioral models, and the integrated ones, who instead extol their form as an emblem of a respectable musical novelty.

Eco's mediological-pedagogical perspective instead requires us to reflect on the forms of appearance of these songs and performers on a semiotic level, and suggests that we investigate the ways in which these products are enjoyed by the public through new horizontal paths, that have yet to be explored since it is through these trajectories that certain emotions are solicited in the audience.

## 5. Conclusions

It's therefore necessary, in conclusion, to update Eco's reflections on an inclusive level at least from two points of view: for the research, to carry out new investigations into the forms of musical fruition of today; for the analysis of media form, to explore the relationship between content and semiotic vehicles of expression of the song narrative universes. In the wake of Eco's words, which thus prove to be still profoundly relevant, it is then necessary to overcome the distinctive aporia between the apocalyptic and the integrated vision with three big objectives: try to understand how songs and performers imprint themselves on the contemporary soundscape; train generations to listen all music as consciously as possible, even escapist song; using song as an inclusive teaching device of «speciale normalità» (Ianes, 2006), since it can speak at the same time, indistinctly, to everyone (normality), but provoking different reactions in each (specialness).

Indeed, far from being demonized, escapist songs are valuable vehicles of behavioral models and codes which are imprinted in the digital mediascape and in the viewers of the younger generations through feedback processes. In this way their appearance can become an educational vehicle for content of all forms. This path of investigation is especially true for both popular songs and performers of great renown, as well as for those that appeal to small niches in the market scenario. In both cases it's therefore no longer necessary to ask about the aesthetic value of these products, but to reflect on the ways in which they are shared and the systems of signification they bring with them, as well as the ways in which they are re-used through re-appropriation practices by different social groups of receivers. Finally, we can explore how they re-circulate songs and performers in the mediascape by adding new segments to their social and cultural capital (Varriale, 2016).

In this way the itinerary of the song among the media (Soldani, 2023) may be rather complex to reconstruct, but its reconstruction appears necessary to understand how this cultural device can still represent an element of great cultural strength in conveying models and representing a pedagogical point of reference for communities of listeners, in particular for the younger generations.

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