

From the art of persuasion to deep-fake, words rule the education of the citizen. The advice of Aristotle and Umberto Eco.

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Abstract: The digitalization process exposes society to false communications, in the face of which one feels powerless. The increasingly intrusive evolution of information technology must stimulate scholars in all fields to understand these changes without indulging in apocalyptic attitudes. Intellectuals and educators must be aware that the use of technology is a further evolution of the art of persuasion that politics has always used to build consensus.

In every age, the commitment of intellectuals has been to expose lies and teach how to live in honesty and commitment to all. Contemporary reality, made more complex as it is speeded up by technological tools, is the explicit manifestation of the irrepressible conjugation of the sciences.

Keywords: Umberto Eco; rhetoric; truth; power; mass.



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1. Introduction

In 2023, there was an appeal initiated by the *Future of Life Institute* [March 22, 2023] and signed by thousands of renowned computer experts [Hinton, Yoshua Bengio et al., 2023], calling for a moratorium on the testing of new generative artificial intelligence systems.

On 16 February 2024, the planetary IT companies met in Munich to define an ethical agreement on the use of the network during election campaigns.

It is clear to everyone that the manipulation of information by means of generative AI can alter public debate; communication tools can determine citizens' knowledge and significantly influence public opinion, influencing political action. The 2008 Turing Award winners themselves for their work on neural networks, LeCun [2019], Bengio [Heikkilä, 2024] and Hinton [Heaven, 2023] (pioneer of facial recognition studies) are of a different opinion [Guardelli, 2024].

What position should intellectuals and educators take? How should pedagogical sciences orient themselves? Should alarmist messages be sent to the new generations?

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To understand how to act, it is appropriate to check whether in the past there have been changes in the way of communicating, aimed at politically influencing citizens, and how these have been resolved.

2. Teaching the good, even with lies

Since ancient times, the *dialectic* represented the completeness of democracy precisely when it happened, Socratically, that in the debate the one who had been convinced did not feel defeated, but the bearer of the same demands that had overwhelmed him, since he was moved by the certainty that each new understanding was a step towards improving the initial thesis: convincing thus became synonymous with “winning together”.

The use of the word, as a unique tool for communicating ideas, was increasingly conditioned by the use of techniques and instruments that amplified its meaning; likewise, the way in which concepts were transferred transformed the use of the concept of truth.

Aristotle was explicit that «those who tell us not to use reason with slaves, but only to give them orders, are in error [Arist.,Polit. 1260 b 5-7]». It must be made clear that reasoning with slaves, just as talking to family members, is not meant to solicit their judgement or agreement but only to communicate; obviously, in the domestic context, communication did not require the exercise of rhetoric, strictly conceived as the art of persuasion.

Based on this consideration, Aristotle believed that the use of speech was the main instrument of political life in the *polis*, a fundamental attitude for the soul of the politician himself. The ancient Greeks already used the techniques of rhetoric with sagacity in order to convince the interlocutor to accept a cause.

Aristotle agreed with Plato that the right rhetoric, the successful rhetoric, needed a basis of truth; however, he did not refrain from giving rhetoricians advice on how to construct persuasive sounds and arguments, concentrating on deliberative rhetoric, a mix of decision and action that is the main activity of the *politikoi*.

«For those who deliberate appropriately about everything, my boy, there is only one principle (*arché*): know what you deliberate about, or, necessarily, make mistakes. But it remains hidden from most people who do not know the essence (*ousia*) of each thing. By behaving as if they knew it, they do not come to an agreement on the principle of enquiry, and going on they are likely to disagree with themselves and with others [Plato, Fedro, 237 c.]».

Rhetoric was the study of the ability to intuit the purpose of practical dialogue, analysing the logical structure with which to offer a technical method to the politicians of the time; with the use of rhetorical strategies, all aspiring politicians could succeed, regardless of whether they intend to speak truthfully or not.

It was necessary to learn how to use persuasive rhetoric - today we call it *propaganda* - by linking it to feelings towards the homeland, as politics had to be run for the collective good and not for private interests; it is important to emphasise that Aristotle considered politics to be linked to emotions, which were considered to be profitable in contributing to the betterment of the state.

The orator, the rhetorician, the politician should first of all have been able to manage their emotions in a disciplined manner in order to persuade their interlocutors later on.

Since rhetoric aims at persuasion - and what is persuasive is always persuasive to someone - it is understood that a skilful or technically competent rhetoric fits the soul of its audience. Consequently, the further the words of politicians are from practical wisdom «at the right times, for the right things, to the right people, for the right end, in the right way [Aristotele, *Rhet.* 1355 b 17 – 21.]», the further they are from the eventual political will to convey the right feelings and emotions.

Even an honest man needs to be a good orator if he intends to persuade his audience to do what is actually right or advantageous; in order to steer interlocutors towards a right attitude, one must make use of a persuasive sagacity that goes beyond mere technicality, even using the *entimeme* (the non-real premise) to persuade especially an audience of people entrenched in their own error. In this statement there is the overcoming of the apparent amorality or immorality that some readers have evinced in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: persuading the bad to pursue the good implies a corrective deception, a “noble lie” to effect a pedagogical correction.

The politician, even if possessed of practical wisdom and all the virtues, before a corrupt public would need rhetoric to achieve moral political ends. In a non-ideal political system - any forum other than one's own family! -, the politician had to adapt, of necessity, to the same corruption as the public speaker: to appear furious at a trivial insult or to remain indifferent to the crudest insult! In metaphorical but illuminating terms, it is as if his appetites, desires and emotions are always inappropriately stimulated or appeased, stimulating untruthful but useful communication.

Consequently, the virtues of the politician should not be conditioned by his political thinking but by the goal he intends to realise; this means that personally, although in theory he pursues eudaimonia, the politician may succeed in realising true happiness in the social system, but what living in that system has been made to appear as happiness: the pleasure of honour or personal gratification.

The goals that the politician realises, for himself or for the city in which he operates, are consequently shaped and conditioned by words that conceal the truth; the ideals that he represents - practical or political wisdom - are filtered and shaped by rhetoric and distorted communication.

When the goals a *politikos* pursues are shaped and controlled by persuasion, rhetoric has in effect begun to infiltrate politics and philosophy. If politics must teach the truth about happiness (eudaimonia) to citizens, only politics informed by philosophy can socialise a city to live in the light of this truth: thus rhetoric conditions the education (*paideia*) for citizens.

The more rhetoric uses lies to persuade, the deeper the politician's conditioning: consequently, the corruption (ignorance) of citizens grows.

When a *polis* achieves extreme democracy or tyranny, in which those in charge are in turn controlled by their appetites and live a “life fit for cattle”, it is evident that, both in the soul of the politician and in his city, rhetoric will have gone to its limits: demagoguery and flattery [Arist., *Eth. Nic.*, 1095 b 19 - 22; 1176 b 9 - 17].

The contamination of philosophy and politics by rhetoric will be taken to extremes when rhetoric totally replaces politics and takes control of the city.

In an ideal city, rhetoric has a minimal role to play; in a very corrupt city it has disguised itself as politics and manages its objectives.

Politics is not an art that can be practiced by always communicating the truth: Aristotle, although he analysed the danger underlying the use of rhetoric, believed it

possible that the art of speech, used by the right men, could be a tool to steer society towards the good, to counter distorted feelings and emotions, to push the *polis* towards an authentic *eudaimonia* for all.

3. Mass media factories of truth

Umberto Eco reiterated that in a liberal state reality it would be necessary for all interlocutors to be given equal and unconditional opportunities to put forward their ideas. In his view, these would be the inescapable ways to achieve a democratic society.

As in parliament or in a court of law, everyone should have felt free to speak in order to persuade the other; the condition of equality between subjects is the manifest representation of democracy, even through the contingency of times, spaces and modes of interlocution.

Eco denounced that in contemporary societies the power relationship is unequal, because there is an economic power that owns both the means of production and the means of communication.

In the 1940s, with their essay *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, the Frankfurtian Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno accused American culture of being a consumer-driven industry, devoid of pedagogical and moral will, capable of producing a homogenising effect on minds and people. McLuhan, in his 1951 work entitled *The Mechanical Bride*, spoke explicitly of mass culture, massification and consumerism. A few years later, Roland Barthes, in his 1957 text *Myths of Today*, also pointed the finger at the trade in cultural products run by the mass media of that period. In 1962, in his essay entitled *L'Esprit du temps. Essai sur la culture de masse* – in Italy was translated: *The Culture Industry* - Edgar Morin denounced the conditioning power of the mass media and the imbalance in favour of the industry that used communication tools to sell and enrich itself.

Eco's assertion «it will always be power that persuades me, not me that persuades power [Eco, 1964, p. 378]» marks a qualitative leap in criticism, as it makes it explicit that the power of the mass media system is destined to be used fundamentally by politics.

It is very likely that Umberto Eco did not miss Spengler's *Sunset of the West*, when he rhetorically asked, "What is truth?" [Spengler, 1978, p. 1338].

In some far-sighted passages written in 1918, Spengler emphasized that statements that are more likely to be repeated and spread than others are bound to become true, regardless of the truth itself. One hundred ago, Spengler explained that is the narration – also called storytelling! - that, when is widely spread, becomes the truth and builds the social mass that feeds on that truth, constituting itself [cfr. Marchetti, 2024].

«Some poor naive person may sit at the table and collect principles to define "the truth" - but this will remain his truth. The other truth, the public truth of the moment, the one that only matters in the real world of action and success, today is a product of the press. What the press wants is true. Those who control the press create, transform, change truths. All it takes is three weeks of press work and the whole world will know "the truth" [Spengler, 1978, *ibid.*]».

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, in a Germany plunged into chaos, Spengler's ventilated operation of truth-grabbing by the potentates had failed to grasp the grim omen inherent in such statements. The confluence of economic

power and media power represented a concrete threat to the future of Germany; arguments and political slogans would become «irrefutable as long as there is the money to repeat them over and over again [Spengler, 1978, *ibid.*]».

The most classic reference was Antony's funeral speech in favour of Julius Caesar, on the Shakespearean model, capable of transforming the dux into a hero acclaimed by the crowd after discovering that he would leave the Romans his riches: here was the power of the spoken word, which, however, only acted on those present for a single moment.

«The dynamism of the modern press aims instead at lasting effects. It wants to exert constant pressure on minds [Spengler, 1978, *ibid.*]».

Spengler not only emphasised the ability of the press to produce lasting effects by reiterating messages in an exaggerated manner but, shrewdly, he juxtaposed the result of the mass media operation with the ability to construct techniques and technologies of communication that would be accepted by the masses, conditioning them.

He had sufficient experience of his historical period to denounce that politics, by taking over the mass media, would be able to exert a decisive and incontrovertible force, especially in conditioning schools and the new generations.

«The political press is also connected with the spread of general school education, which, completely absent in antiquity, conceals the aim of transforming the masses into objects of party politics subject to the power of the press. [...] Those who have learned to read will fall under their power, and the late democracy, after dreaming of a right of self-determination for the people, will lead to a determination of the peoples by the powers that control the printed word. The struggle today is to wrest this weapon from each other's hands. [...] behind the scenes, the new powers are engaged in an invisible struggle to secure the press through money. Without the readers realising it, the newspaper changes hands and then they too change master [Spengler, 1978, *ibid.*]».

Behind Eco's conviction that it is always necessary to exercise critical action and control over the mass media, there was already a great tradition of denunciation that started from an awareness of the power of the word; with the advent of television, it became all the more necessary to provide citizens with the cultural tools so that they would be able to exercise critical scrutiny over the information suggested.

Umberto Eco was convinced that industrial society had turned culture and politics into objects of commercialisation; to counter this phenomenon, the same mass media tool had to be used; public messages had to be disseminated, which, like a vaccine, were supposed to build a critical conscience in citizens: this was why he taught and published.

«If culture is an aristocratic fact, the jealous cultivation, assiduous and solitary, of an interiority that refines itself and opposes the vulgarity of the crowd (Heraclitus: "Why do you want to draw me aside, O illiterates? Not for you have I written, but for those who can understand me. One is worth a hundred thousand to me, and nothing to the crowd"), then the mere thought of a culture shared by all, produced in such a way that it suits all, and elaborated to the measure of all, is monstrous nonsense.

Mass culture is anti-culture. But since it arises at the moment when the presence of the masses in associated life becomes the most evident phenomenon of

a historical context, “mass culture” does not mark a transitory and limited aberration: it becomes the sign of an irretrievable fall, in the face of which the man of culture (the last survivor of prehistory destined to become extinct) can only bear extreme witness in terms of the Apocalypse [Eco, 2011, pref.]».

Intellectuals who are now destined for extinction, increasingly powerless, less incisive, alienated in a massified context, according to Eco are witnessing their own Apocalypse but have a duty to bear witness to what is happening with words and writing.

Eco reproached intellectuals for not denouncing the imminent defeat, since they had always opted for a selective and non-political, Heraclitean and anti-Socratic, solipsistic approach on the model plastically reproduced by Auguste Rodin - who became the emblem of the wrong *Thinker*:

«What indeed is their mind and intelligence? They listen to the popular aedi and use the crowd as their teacher, without knowing that the many are worthless and only the few are good [Eraclito, 104 Diels-Kranz]».

4. Eco, using words in technological age

In 1980, Umberto Eco published his first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, which was destined to become one of the biggest worldwide successes of all time, thanks also to the film adaptation starring a great Sean Connery as William of Baskerville.

The Name of the Rose consciously represented a further building block in the critical framework of Echiian thought, namely, the realisation that ideas had to be palatable in order to be disseminated.

Together with the consolidated theoretical vision that Eco has constructed about the power of the word, we could say that there is a pedagogical will. The intellectual must transform his or her strategy, taking on the most appropriate guise to disseminate his or her ideas and thus enter the public debate, offering people the chance to learn about new forms of alternative thinking. The intellectual must teach people the tools of «intellectual defense» as Chomsky will later call them [Robichaud, March 26, 2013].

In the 1985, Eco described the *city of Fedora* like a place enclosed in a glass sphere; according to him, one could visit many similar cities, all contained in blue spheres, each in the many rooms of a palace: human beings, in every epoch of history, have tried to build their own Fedora, their own ideal society, but while they were intent on realising it, they saw the project they had imagined become obsolete, transformed into an object to be put aside.

A Fedora exists for real is the city we live in; but, precisely because it is real and liveable, it does not excite, it does not stir mystery, it does not induce fantasy, on the contrary, it invites its phantasmagorical overcoming.

Starting from his existence as a *grey stone* – so Eco calls the real city where we live - everyone arbitrarily transforms Fedora into something that is always different; the place where one would like to live becomes the imaginary representation of the subject, the transposition of each individual’s dreams; everyone lives his world with the impossibility of communication; everyone with his own truth.

« Worlds possible as epistemic constructs are real in proportion to how they are incorporated, not only syntactically, into the real world that produces them. [...] The

possibilities are not parallel, they are proportionally one inside the other, each participates a little in the reality of its container [Eco, 1985, pp. 209-210]».

For Eco, there is no world that can be defined as true because each man experiences a small slice of it, the subjects are boxed into the reality they have constructed. Or, someone can become a guest in the world design imagined by another.

However, there is the possibility of transforming the citizen into a visitor, capable of reviewing the various possibilities until reaching the awareness that the world is the result of a complexity of meaning that cannot be governed by a univocal representation that stands as a *weltanschauung*. All that remains is to draw from the many possible containers that reality offers, to build one's own cultural position to offer to others, filling yet another crystal balloon with one's own words, visited by those who are kind enough to listen.

Eco is aware of the conditioning power that words possess - even of the development of History -: the books we have never read, like those placed on the Index by the Holy Inquisition, are the tangible representation of the many meta-worlds that are unknown, because they are kept hidden, or because no one makes an effort to know them. These alternative worlds not only exist but condition the life and thoughts of human beings, changing the fate of History.

The protagonists of Echiian novels, once again, are not flesh-and-blood characters but rather the ideal representations that have moved peoples and their epics: this is the case of the falsity of the Act of Constantine, which is told in *Baudolino*; the randomness of esoteric culture, crucial for the modern era, told in *Foucault's Pendulum*; the anti-Jewish hatred born from the Protocols of Zion, yet another historical fake told in *The Prague Cemetery*.

Stories, words, and writing, when brought into play in public sharing, become protagonists of the «transmutation», of the slow and unexpected changes in consciences [Eco, 2007, pp. 315 sqq.].

Umberto Eco was among the first to feel the need to train citizens capable of managing the contents that lurk behind narrative structures and mechanisms. The mass media, television, and the web offer apparently new contents, especially because they are masked by the most advanced and enjoyable technology.

«The fact is, and I definitely discovered it on just that occasion - if you want to use television for teaching somebody something, you have first to teach somebody how to use television. In this sense, television is not so different from a book. You can use books to teach, but first you must teach people about books, at least about alphabet and words, and then about levels of credibility, suspension of disbelief, the difference between a novel and a book on history and so on and so forth [Eco, 1993, p.96]».

The story of new and fascinating worlds, capable of ensnaring the listener, has always been there. Indeed, persuading others is the very purpose of a story that, otherwise, would not be disclosed.

What matters is putting citizens in the condition of understanding that they are listening to someone else's story, to a dream that, not being their own, is not necessarily aimed at the well-being of those who allow themselves to be fascinated.

Homo sapiens has therefore not overturned its own anthropology, its way of being-in-the-world, but has only changed its stories of the world.

The use of mass media technologies, television, the web, are only amplifiers of the seductive power of the word - of its conditioning, even coercive force - that power groups use. The action of the intellectual must consist in demystifying this conditioning power, revealing it to citizens so that, in parallel with the pervasiveness of the mass media, a society can be organized that is capable of carefully managing the stories of others; citizens must learn to build and tell their own stories, so that each one can communicate their own dream and their own existence.

5. Conclusion

In the contemporary cultural panorama, even digital experts react with apocalyptic tones to the advent of AI. In fact, technology applied to politics has already highlighted the conditioning of public opinion in electoral situations; it is imagined that this could endanger democracy, miseducating citizens to participate [Galland, 2023].

In the light of a more careful historiographical study, it is possible to verify that political communication has always been structured to build consensus, to persuade citizens - Aristotle declared that politics is forced to use lies -.

We can affirm that the differential between the incisiveness of the persuasive force of political communication and the permeability (naivety, sic!) of the citizen can always be considered the same; from Aristotle onwards, in a proportional way, a communication increasingly capable of persuading corresponds to citizens increasingly equipped to defend themselves from the flattery of politics.

Umberto Eco has clearly highlighted the power of the word, capable of conditioning the opinion of citizens to the point of transforming History; for this reason, Eco warned of the need for intellectuals 1) to abandon an apocalyptic attitude towards new technologies and 2) to open themselves to a pedagogical attitude that allows them to understand the potential of the mass media to 3) teach the new generations how to use them to defend themselves from the compromise of meaning.

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