

# Mass culture and educability: pedagogical and didactic challenge

Margherita Cestaro<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Salesian University and University of Padua, Italy; m.cestaro@iusve.it

**Abstract:** Taking inspiration from Umberto Eco's book *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, the contribution aims to readdress today, in the era of digital communication, the concepts of "mass", "mass culture" and "mass communication". By focusing on the anthropological dimension characterizing mass culture and considering communication from a systemic-relational approach, the goal of the proposed reflection is to explore, through the dimension of *educability*, the pedagogical and educational challenge of transforming the constraining risks associated with the means – including artificial intelligence – that characterize mass communication today into a real possibility of human liberation.

**Keywords:** mass culture; communication; relationality; educability; Homo educandus.

## 1. "Mass culture": "globalized and digitized culture"

Revisiting Umberto Eco's text *Apocalittici e Integrati* today, 60 years after its initial publication, provides a valuable opportunity to re-examine the concepts of "mass," "mass culture," and "mass communication" within the context of our present. It prompts us to consider the defining characteristics of mass culture and the methods and forms of its communication in current plural and *glocal* social contexts.

As Eco suggests, "mass culture" begins to assert itself when the "masses become protagonists in associative life," thus becoming "co-responsible for associative life" (2017, p. 19). We can therefore recognize how today we are witnessing, also as a result of digital expansion and related technological innovation, an exponential extension of the "mass" in terms of:

- *visibility*: *media* and *social media* allow individuals to create their own public profiles. While this enables a presence in the digital agora and an escape from anonymity, it complicates the boundary between public and private spheres, leading to the potential risk of equating one's self-worth with the success of one's digital profile, where existence is defined by public visibility.

- *interconnection*: the ability to "exist" on the *glocal* public scene is tied to the quantity and quality of digital connections that enable individuals to access and engage with the communication products generated within it.



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<sup>1</sup> Adjunct Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, Salesian University Institute of Venice, affiliated with the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Pontifical Salesian University and PhD, Adjunct Professor in M-Ped01, FISPPA Department, University of Padua.

- *participation*: network access and communication circulation, by emphasizing the production and exchange of information, ideas, and messages, increase the possibility of interaction and collaboration to achieve common goals. This can drive bottom-up mobilization for shared causes, as exemplified by Greta Thunberg and the global youth movement for environmental and planetary defense. Additionally, while online presence invites proactive and active participation, it also risks reducing participation to mere reactions, manifested through choosing different emojis on digital platforms.

The interplay of these traits contributes to forming the "mass," which currently inhabits the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the planet, as a heterogeneous plurality of subjects who, more or less consciously, directly and/or indirectly support a *globalized culture*. This culture, stemming from globalization processes (economic and political, bolstered by the ongoing development of digital technologies and telecommunications), fosters the widespread perception of living in a single "global village" (McLuhan, 1967), a "world-city," or a large "world-city" (Augé, 2009).

It is thus more pertinent than ever to consider this "mass culture" – characterized by traits of globalization and digitalization – according to an "anthropological definition [...] valid to indicate a precise historical context (the one in which we live), in which all communicative phenomena [...] appear dialectically connected, each receiving from the context a qualification that no longer allows them to be reduced to similar phenomena that appeared in other historical periods" (Eco, 2017, pp. 10-11).

Focusing attention on the anthropological dimension, which characterizes this mass culture, urges one to pay attention to the communicative processes generated within it. In this way, one is invited to dwell on the very concept of communication, considering it not simply as a transfer of information between a sender and a receiver, but rather as a process, situated in a context, through which "individuals create a relationship by interacting with each other and contribute to jointly create the meaning of exchanges, to realize a common communicative project" (Zani, Selleri, David, 1994, p. 21).

The etymological origin of the term *communication*<sup>2</sup> contains the idea of "putting in common," "sharing," and "participating," thus denoting the action of interlocutors *sharing meanings through signs*.

In this direction, communication is outlined not only as a *saying to* but also and above all as an *acting with* that, translating itself in turn into words, gestures, facial expressions, body positions, messages (whatever their form), expresses the *communicative intentionality of the person(s) in his/her/their being in relation-with*. In other words, communication expresses the *intentional posture* of a subject who, through their "free being-in-front-of-the-world" (Guardini, 1987), transforms the latter into a subjectively and intersubjectively meaningful reality (Bertolini, 1989).

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<sup>2</sup> The Latin verb "communico" is derived from "communis, e" ("common"; "common good", "community"), which, in turn, originates from "cum-moenia" (walls, fortifications, common borders) and "cum-munus" (duty, work, common gift). Additionally, it is noteworthy that the meanings encapsulated in the word communication, from a semantic perspective, are analogous to those contained in the Greek term *koiné* ("community"), which itself derives from the verbs *koinonoo* ("I make common, I unite") or *koinoneo* ("I participate, I am involved").

Captured in its systemic-relational matrix, communication – in its becoming "common action" – actualizes itself in a process of inter-action, in which the individual actors, through the tool of language (verbal and non-verbal, "analog" and "digital"), *act* as protagonists actively engaged in the co-construction and sharing of meanings through which they define themselves, their own identity – how they see and feel themselves – and how they see and feel the other/the others, the reality that surrounds them and/or that they desire, as well as their own interaction. In other words, *they construct through communication the lens through which they transform the world into a culturally significant context*. It is then legitimate to ask ourselves what are the meanings through which the "mass" shapes reality, transforming it into its own cultural context.

So, considering communication as a subjective-intersubjective, performative, pragmatic, systemic, and relational action, and by analyzing globalized mass culture through this perspective, we find relevant the attitude Eco attributed to the "man of culture" who, in the face of the "era of industrial mechanism," deems it appropriate to "elaborate a new image of man in relation to the system of conditioning; a man not freed from the machine but free in relation to the machine" (Eco, 2017, p. 11).

From an epistemological perspective that recognizes the primacy of *human dignity* and its inherent *relationality* as its existential-ontological and ethical anchorage, the intent here is to explore, through the dimension of *educability*, the pedagogical and educational challenge of transforming the binding risks associated with the means— including artificial intelligence—characterizing today's mass communication, into a real possibility of human liberation.

## 2. "*Homo educandus*" in contemporary mass culture.

Adopting a phenomenological posture that is simultaneously critical, problematizing, and design when confronted with mass culture<sup>3</sup> and its multifaceted communication, compels us to consider two fundamental questions:

- "how" does mass culture challenge pedagogy, and particularly, "what" does it communicate to pedagogy in terms of human instances through its diverse forms of communication?
- "what" does pedagogy contribute to mass culture in terms of the direction of meaning and educational perspective?

Attempting to answer these questions without risking the loss of each one's uniqueness in the face of widespread, homogenizing communication requires us to maintain a constant focus on two closely interrelated dimensions that define humans in their existence with others: *subjectivity* and *sociality*.

Embracing the challenge of remaining faithful to the human, viewed not as an abstract category but as a "face" (Lévinas, 1990) "in flesh and blood" (Bertolini, 1989; Guardini, 1987) and inherently "unfinished" (Freire, 2002) and thus

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<sup>3</sup> Underlying such a stance is the tendency to "overcome the opposition of *low* and *high culture* towards a valorization of media culture as a specific form of cultural system" (Rivoltella, 2017, pp. 16-17). This perspective entails two implications. On one hand, it "emancipates the term 'mass' from its traditional negative connotation, definitively affirming the cultural value of its objects" (p. 17). On the other hand, it calls for a genuinely pedagogical attention to the mass, aimed at promoting the educability of each of its members who are, especially today, thanks to digital technology, both consumers and producers of culture.

committed and engaged in a continual process of self-exploration and realization in its "being-with" others-in-the-world, compels us to consider mass culture with the aim of promoting and valuing the "homo educandus" as a human being:

«*to be educated* and *educable* in his 'essential subjectivity,' which signifies the framework within which the individual human being can accomplish his own task and project, that is, to increasingly become himself in relation to others – things and people [and nature-environment] – within a specific community» (Orlando Cian, 1997, pp. 19-20).

Recognizing each human being as a subject that *must be educated* (to be educated) – as not yet concluded – but also and primarily as *educable* – as inhabited by a constitutive *possibility* of being and becoming – invites to recognize the value of educability. Understood as a human dimension teleologically oriented to urge each one to transform own "being-there" into a human and humanizing "project," through which he tries to "give shape" to himself and him living with-others-in-the-world.

Maintaining the focus on the educability of the human being, understood both as an individual and as a community, constitutes, in fact, the properly human instance and appeal founding pedagogy as a science aimed at the formation of the human. Therefore, it constitutes the anchorage and the anthropological and ethical horizon that enables communication and its technologies to be animated by a humanizing tension (Malavasi, 2019; 2020).

Viewed from a pedagogical perspective, communication is indeed educational when:

«it calls into question the initiative and the ability of each person to activate networks of relationships and to modulate them in accordance with the needs of the interlocutors and the predetermined goals. Therefore, beyond the simple exchange of messages, it appears as a relational system animated by values and clearly oriented towards the intentional achievement of formative objectives». (Pati, 1984, p. 144).

Caring of the educability of the "Homo educandus" then means paying attention to the 'what' and the 'how' he constructs his communication within a global context permeated by digital technologies and new media. It urges, that is, to adopt a listening posture aimed at grasping what the 'content aspects' are – the nodes of meaning – as well as the plurality of ways ('the how') in which the messages *mediated* and *mediating*<sup>4</sup> the current mass culture take form. Listening to such communication – mediated and mediating – while maintaining a human-centered focus, also requires concentrating the pedagogical gaze particularly on two anthropological dimensions that, due to the changes affecting our contemporary world, are particularly under strain: the *body* and *time*.

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<sup>4</sup> With these two adjectives, we mean to emphasize the performative recursion that links communication and mass culture. The messages (in their content and form) are not only mediated by the communication "medium" (channel), to the point of coinciding with the message itself – "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1967) – but in turn, these messages, through the meanings they convey, contribute to mediating the form of current mass culture.

*Homo educandus: from the “augmented” body to the “embodied” body.*

In the era of *big data*, we are witnessing the rise of a "new metaphysics" according to which "everything is information." Every aspect of existence – "matter, body, brain, behaviors, the whole phenomenological reality" – is considered reducible "to a pure quantity of binary information calculable through algorithms," and is therefore judged "potentially modelable in the form of profiles and predictive models" (Benasayag, 2022, p. 30).

Such a technocratic vision of existence, in contributing to the deconstruction of the very idea of the subject, denaturing it of its main constitutive traits (intentionality, responsibility, freedom, relationality, transcendence), reduces it to that of an individual reduced to a *profile*.

«The profile is a construction of the human as pure exteriority, pure panopticon: transparent to itself as to others, visible to the gaze of every control. Every human who has become a profile is an aggregate of modules, and the modular man is purely evaluated and self-evaluated based on performances that obey external criteria. The profile is the realm of exoskeletons, in which every interiority, which always implies a certain opacity, is frowned upon – and even suspect. [...] The profile is [...] a mini-node of communication that thinks of and perceives itself as a segment of the information system. [...] Profiled, we are inhabited by the desire to submit to the images of dominant behaviors». (Benasayag, 2019, pp. 90-91).

Perceived – and induced to perceive oneself – as a profile, the individual, to defend and confirm their own image, is induced to function rather than to exist (Benasayag, 2019) and – even more so – “it will be necessary to teach them to de-exist in order to continue functioning as an aggregate of modules” (Benasayag, 2022, p. 30).

Helping the human being to free themselves from the logic of "functioning" to rediscover themselves as a unique subjectivity, irreducible to any claim of quantification, whose value cannot be accounted for by the number of followers and/or their binary performances, encourages the need to help each individual *learn to reconnect with themselves* in order to *be intentionally and responsibly connected with others* even *in and through* the network.

In this direction, the educational urgency – and challenge – that emerges is to accompany each person to recognize themselves not as *Körper*, a fragmentable and modelable body, enhanced and unlimited, but primarily as *Leib*, an *embodied subject* capable, precisely through their own body, of intentionally coming into *contact* (Cestaro, 2021) – in relation – with themselves, with others, and with reality, establishing precisely through sensitive experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2003) a link of mutual recursivity between what, through such contact, is mutually generated both "inside oneself" (in terms of emotional as well as cognitive experiences: perception of self, others, reality, needs,...) and "outside oneself" (in terms of the quality of interactions with others, with reality, with nature). In other words, helping each person rediscover themselves as an embodied subjectivity implies focusing educational attention on the dimension of *corporeality* understood as a relational place



through which each person, in experiencing their being in the world – as a sensitive body – intentionally explores and knows the world.

*Homo educandus: for a reconquest of “situated time”.*

Resisting the imperative of functioning that reduces the individual to one profile among many, nullifying him in the “Yes” (Heidegger, 2020) of an anonymous multitude, necessitates educating each individual to recognize themselves as unfinished subjectivity. This subjectivity strives towards a constant becoming that can only unfold in a temporal dimension where the present finds its meaning while remaining anchored to a past that, without binding to what has been, rather disposes towards the possibility of a future perceived and experienced as a “not yet” to be learned to desire, to plan, to build.

The challenge here is to help each individual escape from the claim, dominant in the digital world, of “formatting time”: a claim that reduces time to a self-referential system where “the past, the present, and the future are reified in the actuality of the data” (Benasayag, Bastien, 2022, p. 163). In such a formatted and artificial time, where meaning is constructed by self-sustaining data, it is the subject himself who is formatted. He can “function” to the extent that he conforms – or delegates – the intentionality of his own action to the rules of digital functioning, thus becoming himself “part of the operation of the system.” The participation of the individual is thus “conditioned by his perpetual adaptation.” This adaptation performs the identity of the individual and of the mass community by placing it within a parallel, modeled reality, constructed “by and for the linear calculations of digital behavior” (p. 48).

This reduction of human action to a modeled reaction implies an inherent “big violence” which, by compelling us to “sever our ties with our history, the places, and realities that build us”, engenders “the man of reactivity”. This one, isolated and “dislocated” into a plurality of “detached pieces”, finds himself “alone without himself” (Benasayag, Bastien, 2022, p. 164).

Educating ourselves to educate in de-formatting time therefore invokes the urgency of helping the person reconnect with a human, historical, and situated time, directly experienceable within life contexts where each one can experience themselves as a temporal being. As a being called to build oneself through time while also knowing how to traverse and transcend it (Zambrano, 2008), opening up to that transformative tension preserved in the dimensions of the inedited (Cestaro, 2022; 2023), of desire (Amadini, 2021), of the utopia which, “quantum satis” (Buber, 1993), can become possible every day through each one's commitment.

De-formatting time consequently emerges as an educational and ethical action grounded in the *quest for meaning* that inhabits and propels the human being as a desiring entity in search of that which, in constituting intrinsic value, offers itself as a “good, beautiful, just” horizon to learn to “act together” with others in the world (Arendt, 2009).

### **3. Opening Conclusions: educational-didactic proposal for educability starting from mass Communication**

In consideration of the reflections presented thus far, it is pertinent to question the initial steps required to initiate an educational-didactic approach tailored towards fostering the learner's self-recognition as an unfinished subject, embodied through

their physical existence and the relationships that connect them to others and the world.

In the pedagogical awareness that education cannot occur without contact with the other (Milan, 2007), we assert that the educator's primary concern is to comprehend "where the other is", what his existential posture is, or what's inhabiting him in his "here and now", on what his "feeling" and "seeing" focusing in. We contend that caring the educability of *homo educandus* today necessitates transforming "feeling" and "seeing", mediated by traditional and new media, into valuable opportunities to foster processes of critical reflective self-awareness (Mortari, 2009), regarding one's existence with others in and for the world.

By adopting a pedagogical and educational posture aimed at "reading" reality (Freire, 2023) and listening to its emerging messages, we believe that attending to the youthful perspective, as expressed in the songs at the Sanremo festival annually, serves as a significant indicator of the experiences and representations of the world that characterize our historical period.

On this regard, for a critical-problematizing educator, texts such as *La noia* (*The boredom*), *La rabbia* (*The anger*), *Autodistruttivo* (*Self-destructive*), *Governo punk* (*Punk government*), *Onda alta* (*High wave*), or *Spettacolare* (*Spectacular*), *Vai* (*Go*), by highlighting dominant emotions and/or worldviews prevalent among today's youth, offer useful tools to initiate educational-didactic paths centered on the youthful's existential posture. Such paths aim to facilitate self-exploratory process, enabling everyone to not only be consumer of mass communication but also to critically engage with what his perceive, feel, and in turn convey the network.

The educational task then becomes enabling each person to adopt a critical and responsible stance towards what they hear, learning to become aware of:

- their own way of perceiving themselves, others, and reality;
- their own way of intending themselves and what is "other" than themselves (others, natural and social reality);
- what they personally aim for and desire as "good, beautiful, and right" for mutual well-being in the world with others;
- what they recognize as guiding values.

Educating everyone to listen to themselves and others, with particular attention to the dimension of desire – sometimes hidden, disappointed, or trampled – which is concealed in mutual communication, urges us to promote the formation of human and humanizing contexts. Contexts in which we allow each person, with others, not only to "share" meanings but also, and above all, to become aware of what, through mutual communication, we want to achieve, build, and desire together.

In the digital age of mass communication, educating each one to connect with himself to learn to connect with others presents the challenge of transforming the masses engaged in globalized communication into a "community of people" (Mounier, 2004).

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