

Rereading the History of Pedagogy between Apocalyptic and Integrated. A Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Ubiquity

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Abstract: On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of Umberto Eco's *Apocalypse Postponed* (1964), this paper proposes to interrogate pedagogy and explore an alternative path through a critical rereading of the dichotomy between Apocalyptic and Integrative in Eco's text and the implications for contemporary pedagogy. In an interdisciplinary dialogue that combines General Pedagogy and the History of Pedagogy, the aim is to outline a possible dialectical path that overcomes this polarisation, elaborating a pedagogical 'third position' that can respond in a complex and dynamic way to the challenges of mass culture and technological pervasiveness. This paper aims to reflect on how pedagogy today can position itself neither in a position of demonising technological and media innovations nor in a perspective of uncritical emphasisation but rather as a field of critical thinking and educational praxis capable of valorising both the dimension of presence and that of distance. The aim is to develop an educational model capable of forming conscious, critical, creative, responsible and reflective citizens capable of dealing with today's society's cultural and media complexity. In this perspective, our contribution analyses the ethical, social and political implications of a pedagogy configured as a space of mediation and cultural negotiation, capable of contributing to the construction of collective and individual meanings in an era characterised by ubiquity and the hybridisation of physical and digital worlds.

Keywords: critical pedagogy; media education; apocalyptic and integrated; ubiquity; global citizenship.



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1. Introduction

The 20th century was a century of epochal transformations affecting all spheres of human life, from politics to economics, from culture to technology. One of the most relevant and pervasive phenomena of the 20th century was undoubtedly the advent and impetuous development of the mass media, which profoundly changed how we communicate, learn, socialise and construct individual and collective identities. In this context of rapid and radical changes, pedagogy, as a reflective and design science of education, has been called upon to redefine its role and tasks, questioning itself on how to educate the new generations in a world increasingly shaped by the media and mass culture. In this scenario, a work such as Umberto Eco's *Apocalypse Postponed* (1964) takes on a paradigmatic value, as it offers a lucid and penetrating key to understanding the different positions that have emerged in the twentieth-century cultural and pedagogical debate on the relationship between education and mass media. Although focused on a media context dominated by television, Eco's analysis retains a surprising topicality, stimulating pedagogical reflection on the educational challenges posed by the digital age and convergent culture (Jenkins, 2006).

This contribution intends to reread the Echoian dichotomy between 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated' from a historical-pedagogical perspective, particularly to the debate and experiences that characterised the 20th century. The aim is to outline the contours of a 'third way' that, overcoming the shoals of an apocalyptic demonisation and an integrated exaltation of the media, promotes a critical, aware and creative educational approach, capable of forming citizens capable of inhabiting the contemporary media environment with competence and responsibility.

2. Pedagogy and Media: A Century of Debate

The pedagogical 20th century opened with the affirmation of activism, which, in contrast to the traditional school, predominantly transmissive and bookish, places direct experience, doing, and the learner's activity at the centre of educational action. John Dewey, one of the greatest exponents of this movement, in works such as *School and Society* (1899) and *Democracy and Education* (1916), emphasises the importance of an education that starts from the child's interests and needs, that involves him in concrete and meaningful activities, and that relates him to his living environment. From this perspective, the media, as an integral part of everyday experience, can be seen as a resource for learning as long as it is used critically and functionally for educational projects. Dewey writes: 'An education whose normal task is to promote the fullest and richest participation in the life of society cannot fail to recognise the essential importance of the media in modern society. It will have to integrate these means into its educational programme' (Dewey, 1916, p.92).

However, with the spread of radio, cinema and especially television, the relationship between education and the media became more complex and problematic. The extraordinary communicative potential of these new media, capable of reaching a vast audience and conveying persuasive messages, immediately aroused enthusiasm and concern, opening up a debate that pitted, to use Eco's felicitous expression, the 'apocalypics' and the 'integrated' against each other. Among the 'apocalypics' of the 20th century, a prominent role was played by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, in particular Horkheimer and Adorno, who in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (1947) denounced the alienating and standardising character of the 'culture industry',

which reduced culture to merchandise and individuals to passive consumers. In their view, the mass media, particularly film and television, produce a 'pseudo-culture' that, far from emancipating the masses, subjects them to even more pervasive social control. Horkheimer and Adorno write: 'Entertainment, in all its aspects, has become an extension of work under the sign of advanced capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanised labour process and stand up to it again. However, at the same time, mechanisation has assumed such power over the person in his leisure time and his happiness that it so radically determines the manufacture of leisure products that he can no longer perceive anything but copies and reproductions of the labour process itself' (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1947, p. 137). A critical stance towards the media is also expressed by other twentieth-century intellectuals, such as Günther Anders, who in *Man is Old-Fashioned* (1956) analysed the alienating impact of television on everyday life, or Neil Postman, who in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) denounced the transformation of culture into spectacle and the loss of critical sense in the television era. In the pedagogical sphere, these positions translate into an attitude of distrust and closure towards the media, which is seen as a threat to education and the development of autonomous and critical thinking. On the opposite side, that of the 'integrated', we find those who, especially since the 1960s, celebrate the democratic and liberating potential of the new media. With his famous thesis of the 'medium as message', McLuhan (1964) shifted the focus from the specific contents conveyed by the media to their technological and formal characteristics, which would profoundly influence our way of thinking and perceiving the world. His vision of the 'global village', made possible by electronic technologies, prefigures an interconnected world in which time-space barriers are annulled, with important educational implications. In the pedagogical sphere, 'integrated' positions translate into an openness towards using media in teaching and learning processes, as witnessed by the first media education experiences that spread from the 1970s onwards. In Italy, a pioneer of this approach was Mario Lodi, a primary school teacher and pedagogue, who introduced the use of cinema, school newspaper and other forms of media communication in his schools as tools to stimulate pupils' creativity and expression, as well as to promote active and participative teaching (Lodi, 1970). In France, Freinet came up with the idea of popular pedagogy, a movement of educational renewal, also based on the assumption of an education that starts from the child's needs, enhancing the child's experience and creativity through innovative teaching techniques, such as inter-school correspondence, the free text, printing at school and living calculation, to name the best known.

The pedagogical 'third way' that we wish to outline here proposes to overcome the opposition between the apocalyptic and the integrated, developing an ecological approach to the media (Postman, 1979), which considers them as complex environments that interact with individuals and other social institutions, profoundly influencing their behaviour, values and worldviews. From this perspective, the task of pedagogy is not to demonise or exalt the media but to study them critically, to understand their logic and language, and to educate the new generations in their conscious, responsible and creative use. A fundamental contribution in this direction has been offered in the last decades of the 20th century by media education, a field of research and educational intervention that aims to develop critical media competence in learners, enabling them to analyse, evaluate and produce media messages autonomously and consciously. As Buckingham, one of the leading exponents of this ap-

proach puts it, 'Media education aims to empower students to make informed and responsible decisions about how they choose, use, interpret and evaluate media, and how they, in turn, produce them' (Buckingham, 2003, p. 66).

3. *Apocalypse Postponed*: a reinterpretation from a pedagogical perspective

After sketching Eco's work (1964) from a historical perspective, let us try to interpret this information from the perspective of general pedagogy. According to the Treccani Encyclopaedia, the term 'apocalyptic' is 'referring to a person, strongly pessimistic, who sees everything black in the present and in the future' (<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/apocalittico/>). By 'integrated', on the other hand, the reference is to one who has 'become an integral part of a whole, fully inserted in a community, in a social, political, religious, cultural environment' (<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/integrato/>). Referring to Eco's work (1964), 'apocalyptic' identifies intellectuals who see mass culture as a threat to the authenticity of the various thought forms, thus expressing a pessimistic attitude towards the media. On the other hand, the 'integrated' welcomes it enthusiastically as a form of democratisation of culture because it allows culture to reach large sections of the population. The theme proposed by Eco (1964) raises interesting pedagogical questions. For example, what influence do the media and mass culture have on forming the new generations and their education? In answering this question, echoing Tisseron (2024), the opposition between the 'apocalyptic' and the 'integrated' turns into another dichotomy: Should we 'educate' (i.e. integrate) the new generations in today's digital media? Or 'protect' from the risk of homologation to today's mass culture?

Regarding education, Eco (1964) states that the 'apocalyptic' and the 'integrated' position are not reconcilable. According to the 'apocalypstics', indiscriminate exposure to the media would lead to information overload, passive content consumption, loss of critical faculties, decreased developmental activities such as reading and reasoning, and dependence on electronic devices. The 'integrated', on the other hand, would consider the media a valuable educational tool, capable of stimulating knowledge with modern and interactive languages, opening the door to personalised learning and new types of resources.

However, despite the two positions above, pedagogy offers a third way to overcome this polarisation. An educational path that avoids the demonisation of technological and media innovations and an enthusiastic acceptance devoid of critical spirit. On the contrary, it develops an approach based on critical thinking and educational practices capable of enhancing both the dimension of physical presence and that of virtual connection (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Postman, 1982). In searching for the educational model that best represents this 'third way', one must first consider that pedagogy cannot do without using the technological tools at its disposal in the age of digitisation and ubiquity. One cannot keep hidden from the learner what they can understand, as this would make education itself abstruse from the context to which it belongs (Postman, 1982). Digital media offers a form of knowledge that the child, even before the age of six, can integrate into his or her skills very nicely, albeit with the indispensable mediation of the adult (Postman, 1981). To exclude him from this a priori, as the 'apocalypstics' would like, would be to leave him out of the social structure and the world in which he will live in the future (Gardner & Davis, 2013).

The goal between educating and protecting (Tisseron, 2024) becomes making the media's influence accessible to children through parents and educators without distorting the risks that their use may entail. A pedagogical reflection of this kind refrains from dwelling exclusively on the potentially harmful aspects of the media, 'also assessing what strategies can be used to make them a resource for the education, instruction and training of subjects' (Mariani, 2018, p. 31). Rather, it must move beyond the 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated' positions, not emphasising the dangers or the opportunities but opting for a dialectical pedagogy that relates resources to risks critically and unprejudiced (Mariani, 2018).

This means using media and tools not as an aim but as a 'vehicle' for learning, providing children with critical tools to decode the messages around them through a conscious and creative use of technology. The third pedagogical way, in other words, involves striking a balance between 'educating' and 'protecting' (Tisseron, 2024). To do so, however, it must foster the development of children's critical (and creative) thinking.

4. Developing critical (and creative) thinking in childhood

When speaking of 'critical thinking', it must be said that by 'criticism', we mean the science of 'judging', i.e. of expressing a judgement or appreciation concerning the validity or value of something: it is an activity of thinking as a conscious judgement that invests beliefs or actions. Critical pedagogy is, in this sense, a radical evaluation of educational practices and institutions aimed at changing and transforming educational approaches (Colicchi, 2009).

The pedagogy we refer to, concerning finding an alternative balance to 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated' positions, is not only a privileged space for constructing an individual's personal and collective identity but also a ground for reflection. An education capable of generating meta-reflections in adults as much as in children. That is critical analyses that examine their foundations, their purposes and the social and historical context in which they operate, questioning what idea of humanity and the world guides their actions (Tona, 2018). An educational approach linked to lived reality is an instrument of transformation and liberation, capable of fostering change in the individual and society (Freire, 2011). Critically reading the messages from the media and mass culture, or at least making them comprehensible to children, thus translates into learning to decode images and symbols, even in the most seemingly innocent products such as commercials or YouTube videos. Educating future generations, in other words, to recognise the persuasive strategies used in the media, preventing them from becoming passive consumers but aware of what they are being taught. Valuing, in short, the media and mass culture as instruments of communication and, at the same time, of learning (McLuhan, 1964).

Eco himself (2006) distinguishes between 'heavy' and 'light' media in terms of the level of intellectual engagement required and the type of interaction they imply on the part of the user. Heavy media, to be understood, require a high degree of active participation on the part of the recipient. They are media that provide a small amount of 'pre-packaged' information, leaving the user to complete and interpret the message. On the other hand, light media are designed to be consumed passively, as they offer already complete content that does not require an effort of comprehension on the part of the recipient. Suppose pedagogy wants to position itself as a 'third way' for

developing critical thinking, as opposed to Eco's (1964) apocalyptic and integrated perspective. In that case, it must prevent the media from becoming homologising and influential and encourage critical thinking and creativity. On the one hand, the acquisition of this kind of 'critical judgement' would make future generations free from the ideologies imposed on them; on the other hand, critical awareness would be integrated with being creative, i.e. with teaching children to deconstruct the conventional norms of the media, in order to use them to their advantage, increasing expressive potential (Buckingham, 2006).

Aspects that, as mentioned, must be enjoyed by children through adults, primarily parents and educators, and as such are addressed by a specific area of pedagogy: media education (Cambi, 2010; Di Bari, 2016).

5. Educating/with/for media to train for global citizenship

In defining terms, media education is described by Rivoltella (2001), one of the leading exponents of the subject, as "an area of the sciences of education and educational work that consists in producing reflection and operational strategies concerning media understood as an integral resource for educational intervention" (Rivoltella, 2001, p. 39).

Picking up on Eco (1964), we can understand media education as the educational model we were looking for to refine the apocalyptic and integrated perspective, as it is training in the use of digital media and, at the same time, critical reflection on them (Cambi, 2010). It lends itself, in fact, as the ideal means of pedagogy so that the use of media becomes both conscious, free and creative, always a function of development, regardless of the digital medium (television, computer, app...) that is used (Mariani, 2018; Buckingham, 2006).

In this sense, the goal will be much broader than educating on the conscious use of media. That is, through the help of them, starting from childhood, future generations will be educated in "citizenship." A link between media and citizenship refers to the relationship between participation and responsibility, awareness and respect for others beyond the physical or virtual context in which this occurs. Critically using media means educating for public participation and active and constructive thinking, especially in an age when the possibilities for doing so are continuously multiplying (Di Bari, 2018).

The third pedagogical way, utilising media education, is thus configured as a space for mediation and cultural negotiation. In an age defined as "complex" by Morin (2023), characterised by the hybridisation of physical and digital worlds, educating to/with/for media thus means training in a new idea of citizenship. This concept promotes belonging to an interconnected global community in which each individual takes responsibility for the local community and humanity. An approach that recognises the sociocultural interdependencies between people and encourages conscious, responsible and supportive behaviour. A citizenship that is ultimately responsible and respectful of others' forms of expression but simultaneously critical of a society's official cultural production (Rivoltella, 2020).

6. Conclusions

At the end of this historical-pedagogical examination, which started from Umberto Eco's analysis of Apocalyptic and Integrated (1964), it is necessary to draw an

overall balance, highlighting the enduring relevance of the issues raised and outlining the prospects of a pedagogy capable of facing the challenges posed by today's digital environment. The investigation has made it possible to highlight how the relationship between education and mass media represents a crucial topos in twentieth-century pedagogical reflection, a problematic knot enriched with new nuances and implications with the advent of digital technologies and convergent culture (Jenkins, 2006). The Echoian dichotomy between "apocalyptic" and "integrated," while referring to a media context in which television assumed a hegemonic role, retains a surprising heuristic capacity in bringing out the tensions and polarisations that have run through the pedagogical debate regarding the impact of media on educational processes. On the one hand, the "apocalyptic" positions, exemplified paradigmatically by Horkheimer and Adorno's radical critique of the culture industry in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (1947), vigorously denounced the risks of homogenisation, manipulation and cultural impoverishment inherent in the pervasive affirmation of mass media; on the other hand, the "integrated," among whom stands out the figure of McLuhan (1964) with his vision of the "global village", have glimpsed in the new media unprecedented potential for democratisation of culture, participation and cognitive enrichment.

However, as we have tried to argue, a mature and forward-looking pedagogical perspective cannot be reduced to a sterile opposition between opposing factions. However, it must aspire to a superior synthesis, to a "third way" that, eschewing both aprioristic demonisation and uncritical exaltation of the media, promotes a critical, ecological (Postman, 1979) and creative approach to the media environment. In this sense, the contribution of pioneers such as Dewey, Freinet and Lodi, despite the diversity of contexts and approaches, appears particularly significant, as it testifies to the possibility of integrating media into the educational project, enhancing its expressive, communicative and cognitive potential, without, however, abdicating a critical and selective posture. The pedagogical "third way" that emerges from these experiences is based on the realisation that media are not mere neutral tools but complex symbolic environments that profoundly shape the ways of learning, socialisation and identity construction. Therefore, the primary task of education in the digital age cannot be limited to mere instrumental literacy in new technologies but must aim at the development of critical media competence (Buckingham, 2006), understood as the ability to analyse, interpret, evaluate and produce media messages independently and responsibly. In this sense, media education and critical pedagogy of Freirean (Freire, 2011) and post-structuralist (Giroux, 1992) persuasive contributions have been made, emphasising the need to foster in learners a "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1970) that enables them to deconstruct the dominant discourses conveyed by the media, to unveil their ideological implications and to express their voice creatively and originally. In this scenario, the concept of "media ecology" proposed by Neil Postman (1985), who argues that media must be studied as complex environments, focusing on their interactions and their impact on society and individuals, is fundamental. The pedagogical "third way" implies, in this sense, a balance between using technologies and protecting students from their potential adverse effects while encouraging a critical and creative approach to media (Tisseron, 2024).

Contemporary pedagogical reflection, moreover, cannot ignore an acknowledgement of the increasingly interconnected, participatory and convergent nature of today's media environment. The new generations, the so-called "digital natives"

(Prensky, 2001), are growing up in a media ecosystem (Jenkins, 2006) in which the boundaries between production and consumption, information and entertainment, and public and private spheres are becoming increasingly blurred and permeable. In this context, the pedagogical “third way” is declined as education to, with and for the media (Rivoltella, 2001): to the media, insofar as it aims to develop critical skills of analysis and evaluation; with the media, insofar as it enhances their use as tools of learning and expression; for the media, insofar as it aims to form conscious and responsible citizens, capable of actively participating in democratic life and contributing to the construction of a more just and inclusive society. The challenge ahead is to form global citizens (Morin, 2023) capable of moving with awareness and critical spirit in a hyperconnected world, exercising active and responsible digital citizenship, and using media as tools for intercultural dialogue, democratic participation and social transformation (Di Bari, 2018). Critical pedagogy, in particular, offers conceptual and practical tools to analyse and challenge power structures in the media, promoting education that is both a political act aimed at emancipating individuals and transforming society (Kellner, 1989; McLaren, 1995).

In light of these considerations, rereading *Apocalyptic and Integrated* almost sixty years after publication still proves fruitful in stimuli and directions for contemporary pedagogy. With its ability to grasp the ambivalences and contradictions of the relationship between culture and mass media, Eco’s work invites us never to abdicate a critical and problematic attitude and never to give in to the temptation of easy schematism or one-sided views. The pedagogical “third way” that we have tried to outline is ultimately configured as an open path, a research-in-progress, which must constantly rethink and update its categories and practices in light of the continuous transformations of the media environment. A path that, while moving from a solid historical awareness and a rigorous theoretical framework, cannot but be situated, contextual, and attentive to the specificities of learning subjects and their life worlds. The most valuable legacy of *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, and more generally of the best pedagogical reflection of the twentieth century on the relationship between education and the media, thus lies in the invitation to cultivate a critical, curious and creative gaze capable of discerning, beyond the changing technological forms, the crucial challenges that concern the formation of man and citizen in the digital age. This invitation is as relevant and necessary as ever and one that 21st-century pedagogy cannot afford to ignore.

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