

Metafiction and media

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Abstract

Numero Zero (2015) is Umberto Eco's last novel. In it he ironizes journalism, journalists, history, even science and conspiracy. Through many digressions in the narration the homodiegetic narrator ironically narrates the social situation of 1992 Italy and the collapse of trust in journalistic truth. Made up of 18 chapters, the novel stands as a great truth of what is termed "Machine del fango", namely the undermining of a personal or a group honor and/or credibility with a clear purpose of blackmail. *The intertextuality* (Kristeva, 1969), *the double coding* (Jencks, 1977) and the structure of a *historiographic metafiction* (Hutcheon, 1988), make this a novel written according to postmodern poetics.

Keywords: Double coding, intertextuality, postmodernism, historiographic metafiction, media, effective journalism, irony.

Ironizing the global village

The emergence of mass-media which conveys its messages through several different media, poses an ever growing threat to older type media. Inventions such as the telegraph, the radio, television and later internet portals, Facebook and other online social networks take primacy over print journalism in publicizing news and have driven journalism towards shaping up the news items in the form of broader investigations or opinions.

A daily newspaper is destined to become more like a weekly magazine. We'll be talking about what might happen tomorrow, with feature articles, investigative supplements, unexpected predictions [...]

(Eco, 2015, 15)

This competition between media reduces the authenticity while increasing the effect of the news, entailing that even defamation manages to climb a higher level. The public is no longer offered what is "good", but rather what is "sensational". This is precisely what Eco addresses in his *Numero Zero*, the novel that introduces the work of a newsroom struggling to obtain news. Choosing 1992 as the year in which to set the story relates to the social developments in Italy at the time which saw the degeneration not only of written journalism, but journalism in general. Regardless of the period chosen, the novel remains relevant even for our own time when the entire world has turned into a *global village* (McLuhan, 1962) and journalism has become banal to the degree that it no longer serves to inform, but to carry rumors about divorces, infidelities or body proportions.

Eco's novel unveils the story of journalism playing with conspiracy. Television and other broadcast media have taken away the news from print newspapers and thus traditional "[...] journalism has become increasingly weaker in the information market [...]" (Gozzini, 2011: 295).

The novel recounts the time when journalism was set to serve the interests of a person or a political group. "This is the Age of Anxiety for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any "point of view"." (McLuhan 1994: 27). In order to withstand competition the media seek sensational news whereby the effect replaces the meaning while reflections replace facts. In an interview for *Corriere Della Sera* Eco explains how journalism takes a u-turn: the private lives of public figures become central news across all media. "In USA during the time of John Fitzgerald Kennedy it was never reported about his affair with Marilyn Monroe; Richard Nixon was accused on political grounds and not for some doings of his private life. The u-turn comes with Bill Clinton, the president being accused of his private dealings conducted in the White House office" (Eco & Mieli, 2015). This marks the time of journalism degeneration, this universal phenomenon viewed inside one single newsroom in Eco's novel. Newspapers do not alter readers' tastes; rather, they tend to suit their readers and thus strengthen their ignorance. We'll start off from the principle that they're not what you'd call great readers; in fact most of them won't have a book in the house, though, when they have to, they'll talk about the latest book that's selling millions of copies around the world. Our readers may not read books, but they are fascinated by great eccentric painters who sell for billions

(Eco, 2015: 14)

The novel also touches on the issue of investigative journalism, which in our era rather than be based on facts, is based on conspiracies. Thus "[...] for the first time in its almost centenary history, the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 was awarded to reporter Sheri Fink, who worked for a portal and not a traditional daily paper [...]" (Gozzini, 2011: 294). Even more striking in Gozzini's example is the fact that the portal is funded by private citizens who no longer trust the printed or other traditional media investigations, as in their view these cannot provide news in a form considered vital for democracy.

This makes one think that journalists are what society itself produces, and their products are what we ourselves request for. *Numero Zero* is not only against the degeneration of journalism, it is a novel against a society unable to control its own products.

Media against myth

Numero Zero is set in and around a monthly newspaper newsroom in 1992 Italy. It is a period of transition for the Italian society with new media jeopardizing traditional style journalism. Colonna, the novel's narrator, tells us of his failed life, superficial knowledge and work as a translator and ghostwriter.

Losers, like autodidacts, always know much more than winners. If you want to win, you need to know just one thing and not to waste your time on anything else: the pleasures of erudition are reserved for losers. The more a person knows, the more things have gone wrong.

(Eco, 2015: 9)

Through this character, who could not even finish his university studies, Eco presents a clear picture of the state of journalism: most of the journalists opt for the profession after having failed elsewhere in life.

The second chapter describes the newsroom preparations for a paper to be named *Tomorrow*, which will never emerge into the market. Eco ironically scourges the Italian society, history, economy and politics. Colonna is employed to write a book about the preparations for this new paper, while others in the editorial staff strive to find news at a time when television has greatly shadowed the printed newspapers. Vimercate, the commentator, is the one trying to observe the entire life of public figures in hope that, by revealing their secrets, he will manage to blackmail them. Eco's novel puts a question mark on the authenticity of the news that manage to shake up Italy and the world. In the words of J. L. Borges: "[...] it seems that it what the topic that chose Eco and not the other way round [...]". *Tomorrow* aspires to become a prophetic paper of what the future holds, discussing private lives, superstitions and destroying the myths produced by history. The editorial board, consisting of failed individuals stands as a testimony to the lost trust in truth and the promotion of conspiracy. The novel is a metaphor; placed in Italy, it could well suit any countries where corrupt politics rules over people.

The Time Play

A special feature of *Numero Zero* is its play with time. The newspaper to emerge is called *Tomorrow* and the news is to be published *tomorrow*, suggesting a somewhat proleptic story. In fact the whole story is presented in an analeptic form as an ironic play with the future of journalism.

The narration time is the one that interests the readers. The author tells us only about those days when Colonna did things that might be of interest to the readers. Although the dates encompass a period of one month, a few days are missing since the narrator did nothing worth narrating about during those days. Also, the story is limited only to those details that the narrator finds important for the readers to know.

There is some speeding up and slowing down observable within the narration time. In the first two chapters the narrator introduces us to his life and background and then gradually presents other characters. Thus, the entire plot of the novel is given in a few pages. Of course, the speeding up and the slowing down are both issues of the author's strategy.

The slowdowns in the narration style also appear in the description of the characters and objects. These may have been made with the intention to have the reader slows down their reading in order to reflect. For example, in a dialogue with Braggadocio, the narrator describes the types and characteristics of the car. The reader may find this to be unnecessary, but once we realize that these two characters lack money and talk about the latest car models, the ironic intention is understood. As Genette says, "[...] every description is not necessarily a pause in the narrative [...]" (Genette, 1983: 94) because some breaks are somewhat skewed, aimed for comment and reflection rather than narration.

The entire story is built through the figure of analepsis with occasional flashbacks. The retrospective narrative is filled with many analeptic stories, which are forms of

smaller reminiscences within the great analepsis. The event starts on June 6, 1992, only to go back to April 6th in the second chapter and only in the 17th chapter does the time return to the character's present to then continue as a linear story. The author sets the story time through his chapters. We know that story time lasts for 14 days and sometimes even includes exact hours.

Vimercate and Berlusconi

The theory of intertextuality consists on the claim that no text can be original and that every text is merely a branching or a combination of previous texts. Intertextuality is not an imitation; it is a recapturing of bits and pieces from other texts and a construction of a new authentic voice. Eco applies three types of intertextuality in his *Numero Zero*: quotation, reference and allusion.

The quotation is the most visible form of intertextuality. Although a quotation can be of an open type, it may lose its initial semantic value during its use and melt into the theme of the new text, obtaining new semantic value. These quotations come not only from other fictional books, but nonfictional texts too.

At the beginning of the novel Eco uses a quotation which might well be taken for its motto:

Only connect!

E. M. FORSTER

This is a pure case of quotation, as Eco gives the full expression and even the author's name. Edward Morgan Forster uses this expression as an epigraph to his novel *Howards End*. Obviously, in Eco's novel the same expression obtains new semantics and context. Different to Forster's novel, the expression in *Numero Zero* may relate to links with history, journalism, literature, painting, film, society, politics, and even the degradation of journalism, no longer interested in facts and truths but in making up news from the smallest of hints.

Another quotation is the one the author uses when describing Maya's breasts. But Braggadocio was wrong: she had breasts, and I could feel them, small but firm. The Song of Songs: like two young fawns.

(Eco, 2015: 48-49)

In this case, the quotation serves only function of comparison. But, some times in the novel the quotation is refunctionalized and loses its meaning, adapting to a game taking place in the newsroom.

Reference is similar to quotation, yet it does not provide the original text, and even when it does, it paraphrases the original or presents it only as an example. This of course makes it difficult to read the intertextuality for readers who may be unfamiliar with the reference. In *Numero Zero*, Eco doesn't only use references obtained from previous texts, but also those from films, newspapers, and historical documents. A good part of these references may be intermediated, coming not from other texts, but works of art, cinematographic works and the like.

None of these fellow travelers came from particularly inspiring backgrounds—a *Bridge of San Luis Rey*—and I have no idea how Simei had managed to track them down.

(Eco, 2015: 15)

This one refers to the editorial staff. The narrator, having presented them, uses this reference to show that they were failed journalists just like the characters in Thornton Wilder's novel.

Bald as von Stroheim, his nape vertical to his neck, but his face was that of Telly Savalas, Lieutenant Kojak. There — always some allusion.

(Eco, 2015: 16)

This reference also comes in the form of comparison, without any function inside the text. The first reference is about Erich von Stroheim, an Austrian-American director, actor and producer. The second is about Aristotelis "Telly" Savalas, an American singer and actor, who starred in the television series *Kojak* (1973-1978). It is a case with two references within one sentence. The novel is full of signs referring to writers, singers, actors, composers, films, paintings, etc.

Another great reference may be Braggadocio's assumption on Benito Mussolini's last hours. According to historical documents and reports, Duce is known to have been executed along with his mistress, Claretta Petacci. Braggadocio hypothesizes that Duce was not in fact killed, but was helped by Vatican services to flee to Argentina. The account is of course invented by Eco, as in an interview he himself had claimed to have personally known Mussolini's executor. We also know that the account relates to another leader of the time: Adolf Hitler. Reports about his and his wife's suicides were followed by the hypothesis indicating that in fact they had managed to flee to Argentina. So, although Eco provides no sources, the story behind the Fascist leader's escape is related to the one of the Nazi leader. Through this fabrication Eco is requiring that the readers disclose the corruption of journalism based solely on effect while at the same time ironizing with history.

The third and the most overt phenomenon of intertextuality is allusion, quite often encountered in this novel. If quotation and reference disclose the author's erudition, allusion only shows the writer's ability to narrate, requiring the reader to grasp the semiotic signs in the text and guess the individual or the situation to which the author alludes. An example of allusion is that of *commendatore* Vimercate paying for the *Tomorrow* newspaper, which will never emerge into the market, serving only to disclose the secrets of different personalities so as to blackmail them.

All right. The one who's paying is Commendator Vimercate. You'll have heard of him [...]

Vimercate. Yes I have. He ends up in the papers from time to time: he controls a dozen or so hotels on the Adriatic coast, owns a large number of homes for pensioners and the infirm, has various shady dealings around which there's much speculation, and controls a number of local TV channels that start at eleven at night and broadcast nothing but auctions, telesales, and a few risqué shows [...]

And twenty or so publications.

(Eco, 2015: 12)

To those focusing only on semantic messages this character might not be very significant, but the semiotic reader insists on the allegorical message, knowing that the author is obsessed with the Middle Ages, an era characterized by allegorical literature. This allegorical meaning, as one of the four meanings of the medieval literary doctrine, relates to the figure of Vimercate, always invisible and absent from

events, though with an omnipresent power. The fact that the events take place in Italy and the story mentions a politician owning an immense amount of properties, television outlets, bookshops, and that he constantly ends up in newspapers, makes one think that the politician in question is none other but Silvio Berlusconi. Vimercate is referred to with an honorary title of a 'commendatore', referring to a reverent rank of the cavalry orders of merit, while Berlusconi is referred to with the honorary title of a 'cavaliere'. The name Vimercate also relates to a place thus called, known to situate the largest bookshop of the Mondadori Publishing House, owned by Berlusconi. *Numero zero* with many references to political reality and fictional, historical and literary writings is an intertextual network that covers the history and actuality, ironizing everything through an effective narrative that parodies *effective journalism* as a dominant journalism today. In his paradox fiction, Eco treat a grand narrative about fascism within small narrative focused in journalism.

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