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*Lost on the (Eco’s) Island: Model Reader in the Era of Television*

The possibilities of Eco’s dialectic of openness

In his celebrated work of 1962 *The Open Work* at one point Umberto Eco states the following:

> The tendency toward disorder, characteristic of the poetics of openness, must be understood as tendency toward controlled disorder, toward a circumscribed potential, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by the germ of formativity present in any form that wants to remain open to the free choice of the addressee. (64-65)

Subsequently, in the introductory part of the study *The Role of the Reader* created almost thirty years later, we come upon the following formulation: “An open text outlines a 'closed' project of its model reader as a component of its structural strategy”. (9) From these two short quotations, separated by a considerable span of time, it is already possible to see the dialectical nature of Eco’s hermeneutic theory, which numerous writers claim is attempting to reconcile, on the one hand, the inviolability of the act of artistic creation with so called “rights of the reader”, and on the other to adapt methods of interpretation to the independent interpretative requirements of author, reader and the work itself. The issues involved in interpretation became increasingly complex for Eco, particularly because he was profoundly aware that the media society at the turn of the century was gradually but ineluctably doing away with the difference between the pure work of art and mass culture. In order to separate the products of art from cultural production in a broader sense, i.e. in order to demarcate the effect of original text from medialised con-text, Eco attempted to locate authentic artistic experience and accordingly to locate the potential reason for interpretation, along the author-reader axis, creating figures called the model author (*autore modello*) and model reader (*lettore modello*). These are the figures of the ideal transmitter of textual content and the ideal recipient of the same content, since, according to Eco, the intention inherent to every work is to find, through its own semiotic strategies, the perfect hermeneutic
partner/reader that, to simplify matters, will be able to understand the intentions of their favourite author.

Eco’s dialectics of openness is thus also in evidence even when he is arguing, as in Interpretation and Overinterpretation, for a more precise determination of the borders of the liberty of interpretation. The text itself, then, creates its own model reader, who is able to make completely autonomous conclusions about the text, depending on the intellectual commitment, the cultural horizon and knowledge and so on. The empirical reader (lettore empirico) can only create hypotheses about what kind of ideal reader the work desires. Since the intention of some texts consists primarily in the creation of a model reader who will be capable of grasping the text, this lettore modello, this ideal reader, will also create its own model author, the autore modello, different from the real or empirical author. These mirroring positions of lettore modello and autore modello, are the positions from which the real reader works hermeneutically to create the intention of the text – the primary reason behind the creation of the artwork (Eco, “Interpretation” 45-66).

Following up this line of reasoning we could expect that all the canonical works of art that enjoy the undivided admiration of the experts and of the general public, for example famous paintings, well known operas and novels, as well as the blockbusters of pop culture – Hollywood film megahits and TV series – would satisfy Eco’s rule of conformity of intentions: if the creators of a book or film know what their readers want, then they will be able to respond to them as to an extremely rewarding lettore modello that is in harmony with the authors’ intentions to entertain or create art, accepting their semiotic strategies, in which case there will be an untrammelled route towards a perfect interpretation of the work. Although we have here a theorist of extremely wide insights into the media, who can operate with equal facility within very diverse sets of literary and non-literary signifiers, Eco’s semiotic pair the lettore modello and the autore modello, and the interpretative triangle composed of intention of the author, reader and work itself seem more of a non-aggression pact between (ostensibly) incompatible textual systems than a convinced stance of an opponent of hermetic semiosis. I would found this conviction on Eco’s persistent rejection of an interpretative model that by associative sequences and concatenation of meanings would expand the critical substrate
of the text beyond the imagined intentio operis, and beyond the idyllic coexistence of ideal author with ideal work. Here I do not mean to say that this hermeneutic system is inappropriate or inapplicable; quite the reverse, I would think of it as a very productive theory on condition that the overinterpretation be understood as a capacity for the revival of meaning in a society that is dominated by the mass media and as ultimate act for the redemption of mass culture in the post-modern period. Justification for this conciliating attitude towards postulates of Eco (that are after all fairly exclusive) can be found in Jonathan Culler, vi who, although not sharing Eco’s disciplined attitude with respect to the text, does nevertheless believe in the all-encompassing nature of the semiotic method:

   Just as linguistics does not seek to interpret the sentences of a language but to reconstruct the system of rules that constitutes it and enables it to function, so a good deal of what may be mistakenly seen as overinterpretation or somewhat better, as overstanding, vii is an attempt to relate a text to the general mechanisms of narrative, of figuration, of ideology, and so on. And semiotics, the science of signs, of which Umberto Eco is the most distinguished representative, is precisely the attempt to identify the codes and mechanisms through which meaning is produced in various regions of social life. (“Interpretation” 116)

Here I would raise the question of whether we have to find the ideal reader exactly in the place in which his ideal author has imagined him or whether we might perhaps theoretically legitimize, under the influence of the cultural and media nomadism of this day and age, the exaggerated visibility of all things and the elision of the difference between high and low art, what Eco with unconcealed contempt calls eccesso di meraviglia (“I limiti dell'interpretazione” 87). viii I would like, very concretely, to suggest the proposition that, firstly, the lettore modello is a fluid category whose recognition of the pleasure in the text is independent of any coupling with some imagined or real autore modello, rather more on the measure in which the reader is capable of subordinating his own encyclopaedic knowledge of the world to the processes of the imagination; secondly, that the intentio operis does not respond to the issue of “what the work wants” but rather “what the work does”. I see the reasons for these interpretative slippages, or as Eco calls them in English hermetic drifts, primarily in the interference of the culture of the image and the culture of the written text, in the interference that is, without the chance of being stopped, creating new meanings.
Interference of literary and television texts: Framed stories and the TV series *Lost*

In his essay *L’innovazione nel seriale* ix Umberto Eco endeavoured to define the problem of concatenation in the contemporary media-characterized culture as an essential difference between the formal and structural principle of serial production, whether it has to do with television serials in hundreds of instalments, or sequels of popular film megahits or even perhaps avant-garde art that saw in repetition (as structural element of the work) a challenge to the Modernist principle of art as self-renewing organism. From Eco’s very wide-ranging analysis of the divisions, interactions and possibilities of the serialisation of media genres, for us, in this context, the most instructive part is his introduction of the concept of the *intertextual dialogue*, which starts off from the principle of post-modern explicit intertextuality, free referentiality and a wide range of interpretations to end up in hardline neo-avant-garde tautology and speech about art as a manner of producing art (Eco, “Sugli specchi” 125-146). The intertextual dialogue designates the formal concatenation of the parts of the action, the characters, costume design, even the procedures of the director, into a kind of second degree seriality, where one film can become a continuation of some previous film with which it has no connection in respect of the actors, the production or the fable.

As an example, Eco quotes the situation in which ET, figure from the film of the same name of Steven Spielberg, is caught in town on Halloween and stumbles upon a person disguised as a dwarf from George Lucas’s *The Empire Strikes Back*. ET is at first surprised, and then embraces the dwarf as if he had seen an old childhood friend. Since the dwarf is actually a character from another film, this is here only a potential intertextual dimension that is disclosed merely to the passionate fans of Hollywood sci-fi, while only few devotees of the genre will be capable of detecting the additional ironic and extra-textual dimension inherent in the fact that both freaks have come out of the same design workshop (Spielberg’s). In this manner, the contingent field of the series becomes the entirety of popular culture, for the full understanding of which it is not just an entertainment-hip *lettore modello* that is required, but a very informed connoisseur of a large part of more recent filmic history. x
As we can see, the problem of intertextuality in contemporary media culture is practically impossible to evade, and it should be actually sought, as Eco himself suggests in this example, primarily among culturally cognate productions with an audience which shares similar aesthetic views and expectations. But let us look at the following example: the very popular television series *Lost* (which won a number of Emmy awards and was for several weeks the most watched programme on ABC) with its basic fabular framework and serious psychological working-out of the characters set off intertextual connections with a number of previous TV serials, films and indeed extremely ambitious literary works. We might count among its direct or indirect precursors the novel *Robinson Crusoe* of Daniel Defoe, *Alice in Wonderland* of Lewis Carroll, *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and the SF novella *The Langoliers* of Stephen King. In the film world the closest kinships can be established with *The Lost Horizon* of Frank Capra (1937), the *Jurassic Park* trilogy of Steven Spielberg (1993/1997/2001) and *Cast Away* directed by Robert Zemeckis (2000), with Tom Hanks being the only survivor of a FedEx plane crash. Because of the associations with experiences beyond physical reality, a number of serials come to mind: *The Twilight Zone, Twin Peaks, X-Files*, and the reality show *Survivor* which looks as if it has been conceived as an adrenaline-rich training mission for the hell of *Lost*.°

The narrative outline of the series is in essence very simple and can hardly be counted particularly original. Oceanic Air, on intercontinental flight 815 over the Pacific, runs into an area of great atmospheric depression and comes down about a thousand miles outside its regular flight path. Forty-seven travellers survive, and attempt to organise life on the unknown (and only ostensibly desert) island in the middle of the Pacific. While at the fabular level *Lost* can be considered a clear descendant of the popular “survival genre” with the additional spice of metaphysical and transcendental themes, at a structural level, it displays not only innovative narrative strategies within a television genre, but also calls into question the postulate that serialised TV fun is meant only for evening relaxation in the family circle. If that was the original intention of the authors (which there is no reason to doubt), we can conclude, in conjunction with more careful observation and a little semiotic dissection, that its effect is by no means limited to this ambition. The series pays equal attention to the real-time action and the events on
the island, which include the interpersonal relations of the dozen main characters, as to
the lives of these characters before the crash. It is only with the minute analysis of their
history told through a number of flash-backs, that events on the island take on their full
meaning and become fully motivated. Each episode is devoted to one of the characters,
whom we come upon in some traumatic phase of his or her life, when only a radical
existential turnabout can provide an exit from the crisis. By an irony of fate, this turn will
happen to all of them on the island, and it is the viewer’s task to inscribe the empty space
of meaning between the outline action on the island and the traumatic personal histories
presented in the form of inserted parallel narration. But is this a usual procedure in
television series?

When we are considering serialised TV, Umberto Eco thinks that our attention
should be primarily engaged by the problem of the narrative structure of the series, for
this will reveal to us first of all what kind of seriality is involved, i.e., only by uncovering
the narrative model can we access the actual content of the narration. In the paper
L’innovazione nel seriale, he pulls into a system several principles of serialization: first,
il ritorno dell’identico, i.e., according to the type of viewer expectations, which is most
common in crime series:


The second principle is characterized by the loop structure, a circular backward
movement, which is primarily commercially motivated. For instance, instead of showing
the character aging because of the inexorable passage of time, he is constantly kept vital,
by showing his alleged adventures of youth: what happens in the future is not important
in this case, for anyway nothing is allowed to cast doubt upon his superior position in the
current time of the series.xli The third, the spiral principle, works by having always the
same things happening to the protagonists, without in fact anything happening to them
that can shape a quantifiable temporal dimension or allow any change in the place of the
action. The spiral technique of serialisation is most often used by writers of comedy series like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, which can be shown as long as there is a commercial interest. The fourth principle is not based on narrative structure but on the personality of an actor who, except in the event of outstanding director’s operations, almost always plays himself. Eco cites the example of John Wayne with his type-cast embodiment of the romantic cowboy, while a contemporary version of authorial seriality could be seen in Jim Carrey whose uncommonly serious role in the film *The Truman Show* is usually felt to be a melpomene departure from the comedy genre in which he has serialised his own character. If we go back to *Lost*, we can now claim that because of the key influence that the flashback stories have on the understanding of the whole content, we cannot talk of a single dominant kind of narrative structure, i.e., of the systematizing of the central content into the formal framework of the story. It seems much more truthful to describe the show as the gathering of the disparate stories into a framework that gives them new meaning but that is not necessary for the individual comprehension of them. Are we, accordingly, here still in the media area of the TV series, or have we slipped off towards the narrative structure of the literary work of art?

Evelyn Vaughn compares the way *Lost* is structured, with its parallel narrations of the lives of the protagonists before the crash, to the formal principle of frame stories from the 14th century that provide their collective content surrounded by a framing situation that, in itself, does not have to have any connection with the motivation of the framed events. Vaughan cites as the best known of such collection of tales Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* ("Oceanic Tales" 55-64). As we know, the frame setting for the *Decameron* is the getaway of a group of young people from plague-ridden Florence who then, from a hill overlooking the town, during the course of ten days, tell ten short stories each. In *Lost*, the modern-day equivalent of the medieval pestilence is the loss of Flight 815 and "l’allegra brigata" are the survivors being brought together on the unknown island. Vaughn subjects her hypothesis to serious testing at several levels of reading and in each comparison narrative units, at first sight so different, make sense. Firstly, the frames often involve travelling: the pilgrims go to Canterbury, the refugees escape from Florence and the travellers from Sydney to Los Angeles crash on an island. Secondly, the stories within the frame often reveal personal secrets that
enable a better understanding of the key characters, which is of crucial importance, and in *Decameron* gives the characters a more three-dimensional form. Thirdly, the framework form enables the satisfaction of the dual longing of the reader or viewer by providing the certainty of a known area and always new complications. Finally, the stories inside the frame must always be a little bit edgy, in any event the figures in them are allowed more personal, ideological or sexual freedom than is the case in the mainstream narrative. Forms of social transgression described in the *Decameron* and in Chaucer and the general moral cataclysm in the former lives of the characters of *Lost* are the best confirmations of this. For the moment we can conclude that, if it is the intention of the TV series *Lost* to entertain the mainstream viewing public, then it does this not only with its set form of seriality, but also combining its intertextual bifurcations of the topoi of high and low culture, and not only with its own media incarnation as TV product: specific nature of the series and its significance lies in its autochtonous use of the narrative procedures of literary genres.

**Eco’s Island of the Day Before as prototype for a television palimpsest**

If we have thus determined to compare a television series to the narrative structure of a literary, specifically a novelistic, work, the principle of investigative economy demands that we find a literary work that with itself, with its own poetic strategy, evades genre and formal givens, encouraging a disciplinary drift. I found a literary work of such features in the title of Umberto Eco’s *The Island of the Day Before*, a large historical work that, on the one hand, applies in practice Eco’s impressive theoretical semiotic analyses and on the other shows the author’s sensitivity to intertextual and intermedial concatenations opening up the possibility for many areas of popular culture to become critically legitimate in new interdisciplinary relationships. Even at the first reading of the content level of the book we can note the fabular connection with *Lost*, but this, as we shall see, is not necessarily greater than with films that deal with surviving on a desert island, such as *Cast Away* or the fight with unknown hostile forces of paranormal origins such as *The Twilight Zone*. In the book, the unnamed narrator expounds the contents of the diary of a certain Roberto de la Grive, dated 1643,
created in the time that Roberto was caught on the stranded ship *Daphne* in mid-Pacific. At the first narrative level we follow Roberto’s life story, which in the form of an unfinished epistle and a kind of Baroque bildungsroman is told us by the extradiiegetic narrator. The first level of the tale ends with Roberto’s unrequited love for a certain Lady, for whom he intended his diary. The whole first level of the story, which speaks of Roberto’s past, is permeated by another level, that is, the present time of events on board the *Daphne*, the time in which he writes the diary and all the current events of his real time. The third level of the narration is constituted in the last part of the novel when Roberto, aware of the inexorable ending, starts to write a novel in which he makes himself the hero, in order in this meta-narrative reality to create a happier life’s role for himself. Which one of these three levels can be said the best to represent Roberto’s true identity, and which of the mentioned levels of reality can be said really to belong to him?

If we put Roberto’s psychological profile at the centre of our interest, we shall notice that the “eccesso di meraviglia” to which Norma Bouchard makes rightful reference (“Whose Excess” 350-61) is just a neo-Baroque and very formalist *tour de force* by Eco, and that the real start of the novel, its semantic centre, is in fact the weak subject of the castaway on the *Amarilli* and the *Daphne* – Roberto de la Grive himself. As character, he is produced only in the total and lasting instability of his own identity, just as the metaphor of the instability of a whole epoch is mirrored in the impossibility of determining the longitude and in the imprecise cartography of the Southern Seas. In *The Island*, Eco’s strategy is the intertextual concatenation of the innumerable multitude of signs, from the Thirty Years’ War and the siege of Casale to astronomy, botany, seafaring skills and cartography, from amorous rhetoric and court customs to the philosophy of science that has become a symptom of Baroque lack of trust in the perspectives of the known world and fear of the still undiscovered and yet apprehended. In fact, Eco’s historically credible factual account of the seicento is the ornamental mise-en-scene enacted by the protagonist, Roberto de la Grive, in order to shift away from the foreground his incomplete process of self-identification. Is not the same thing happening to the characters in *Lost*, at an epistemological level? Both Roberto and characters in *Lost* can’t establish their new identity in the troubled and unpredictable present without constantly referring to the presumably happier past. The characters’ (and Roberto’s as
well) lack of knowledge of the island in the Pacific as micro-world that currently enfolds them (shown in the linear, real time of the action) is intensified by insights into individual figures’ attempts at self-identification. Their inadequate knowledge about themselves is best dealt with by tracking each character’s history in numerous flashbacks that in the script of the series were actually conceived as a kind of moral justification and explanation of their conduct on the island. In other words, with the likeable characters, we are given reasons why we should love them less, and for those we can in no way love explanations are given as to why we should at least hate them less. All this, though, would not be justification enough for the suggested comparison of *The Island of the Day Before* and the series *Lost* if the evidentiary material did not stand up to more serious methodological verification. Here, we shall prioritize semiotic analysis, although from what has been stated above very interesting conclusions from psychoanalytical theory, for example, could also be presumed.

A. Semantic and semiotic level of the work

In the book and in the series we can make out a basic narrative system that consists of the first diegetic level, that is, of the action in real or current time, and a second level, which is presented in the series in the form of flashbacks and in the novel in Roberto’s reminiscences of his childhood, life in Paris, the voyage on the *Amarilli* and so on. These two levels of reading also provide us with a qualitatively totally different insight into the destinies of the main characters: while the first level synchronically follows the figures from the current moment to the future, the second level diachronically describes events in book and series, showing us the history of the characters before the crash of Oceanic flight 815 and before Roberto is stranded on the *Daphne*. Both book and series, accordingly, deploy levels of reading that Eco calls the semantic and the critical level:

Dobbiamo distinguere fra interpretazione *semantica* e interpretazione *critica* (o, se si preferisce, fra interpretazione *semiosica* e interpretazione *semiotica*). L’interpretazione semantica o semiosica è il risultato del processo per cui il destinatario, di fronte alla manifestazione lineare del testo, la riempie del significato. L’interpretazione critica o semiotica è invece quella per cui si cerca di spiegare per quali ragioni strutturali il testo possa produrre quelle (o altre alternative) interpretazioni semantiche. (“I limiti dell’interpretazione” 29)
In the TV series *Lost* the semantic level is that in which we follow events on the island in linear time, wanting to find out, minute by minute, what will happen, whether the mystery of the Others will be solved, the secret of the enigmatic numbers, the inexplicable abductions and so on. To be sincere, the critical or semiotic levels, shown in the series in retrospective form of events that happened before the fall of the plane, are not actually necessary for the understanding of the semantic level – that which is in fact the vehicle for the excitement and the real reason for watching the series. Similarly, the average reader will be more apt to understand the descriptions of Roberto’s life before the shipwreck as Eco’s fondness for Baroque ornamentation than what is in truth a necessary addition to the potentially more interesting open level of the novel in which we follow what will happen to the character in the future. As we can see, both book and series provide structurally identical patterns of what Eco calls the first and second, or the semantic and the semiotic, level of reading of the work, enabling the ideal reader to turn himself or herself into a semiotic or aesthetic reader who wonders what the work requires of him and who thus at the same time collaborates closely with his or her ideal author: put simply, the reader of the first level wants to know just what is going to happen, while the second, the semiotic, reader gets involved in the meta-narrative dimension of the work, seeking an answer to the question of why something occurs (Eco, “Six Walks” 238-39).

**B) Hermetic and pragmatic semiosis**

The dialectics of the open/closed literary work, which we sketched out in the first section, has been a feature in Umberto Eco since his earliest theoretical insights, which are clearly positioned, by now in the polemical attitude to the pragmatism and deconstruction of Richard Rorty and Jonathan Culler, in the *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* of 1992. The main question that is thus raised is that of freedom of interpretation and the degree to which the reader’s knowledge about the text leads to the understanding of it, or if, in collaboration with the author’s unlimited concatenation and multiplication of possible meanings, it gets away from the imagined *intentio operis* of the author. Hermetic and pragmatic semiosis, as is well known, can be manners of producing the meaning of the work and hence implying those models of interpretation that are
dependent on or that adjust to the encyclopaedic competence (or lack thereof) of the reader, but can at the same time be the author’s (writer’s) strategy that he applies in order to generate interpretative mechanisms and produce dynamic tension in the work. In *The Island of the Day Before* Eco has applied both models of textual production of meaning that have their own clear diegetic hierarchy and temporal directionality. However much we might consider the mastering of this novel a complex task, its two clearly compartmentalised levels – the hermetic one (Roberto’s past) which is open to unpredictable associations and fabular ramifications involving potentially enormous quantity of past events, and the pragmatic one (Roberto’s present) which is the story actually being told – represent a concession that the *autore empirico* (Eco) offers to the empirical reader (me and you all) so that we might become, in spite of the narrative and chronological deviations, the ideal reader, the *lettore modello*. Norma Bouchard notes the dialectical nature of this strategy of Eco’s when she says that

> If *The Island* illustrates the dynamics and pitfalls of Hermetic models of sign production by way of narrative demise of Roberto – a strategy not unlike that of *Foucault’s Pendulum* – more forcefully even, it also voices their critique through diegesis of the anonymous narrator. Separated from the characters not only by chronotopic barriers but, more significantly, by interpretative patterns, this is a twenty-century narrator who obtrusively comments on the various practitioners of semiotic drifts, while appearing to engage in something of a Pragmatic model of interpretation. (“Whose Excess” 358)

In the TV series *Lost*, the hermetic model of sign production is, as we can assume by now, that which is used in the flashback narration. For example, in episode 11 of the first season, in a retrospective scene we can see the father of the principal character, Jack Shephard, in a clearly intoxicated condition, operating on a woman patient. Jack finds out, and, as he is himself a surgeon, takes his father’s place in the operating room. The patient dies, and the father forces the son to sign a statement saying it would have been impossible to save her but when Jack finds out that the woman was pregnant on admission he reports his father. This episode between father and son is, like many others in the series, told very neutrally, but with the complex aim of the viewer obtaining a semiotic answer to the question “how is this connected to the present events?”. All this in order to engage the viewer’s own cognitive requisites and be resigned to unlimited hermetic semiosis, to unpredictable complications and unexpected reversals, in fact, to
the authentic mystery of the series. As against this, the events in real time of the series have the task of eliciting a semantic viewer, who on the basis of a many provided pragmatic footholds will continuously ask herself/himself a basic but very thrilling question “what will happen next? – the driving force of almost all fictionalized TV products from the beginning of television.

**From semiotic model of interpretation to the neo-Baroque spirit of the time**

If semiotic analysis has enabled us to establish the existence of a structural similarity between the TV series *Lost* and *The Island of the Day Before*, what still remains is the attempt to reply to the issue of what has enabled this similarity, whether it is a mere fortuitous occurrence or a consequence of the cultural climate, which has already produced, or is still to produce, many comparable examples. The intention of this study, as the reader has been able to gather, was by semiotic evidentiary material to indicate the latter option, particularly since the similarities in the fabulae between the book and the series leave little room for doubt. For example, both *Lost* and *The Island* might have entered more deeply into the specificities of their own genres, they could have been more commonly defined in terms of narrative structure; they could have become pure historical novels or thrillers, or drawn on the opportunities given by loop seriality; the book might have dealt more with human destinies and less with rhetoric, geography and botany, and the series might have adjusted its slow spiral rhythm better to the aesthetics of rapid interchange of image characteristic of most of today’s TV and film work. Instead, both the book and the series decided to follow the unexpected path, the one not likely to be followed by the mainstream literary and TV products. Moreover, it is clear that the slowness and retrospective technique of procrastination of the linear narration in *Lost* is motivated more by style than by fabula. Both series and book, along with the basic action with which they attempt to retain the attention of the reader or viewer devote equal attention to the ways in which they produce meaning. The inability of Baroque man to define his new position in the world in *The Island of the Day Before* is represented (along with a string of factual details) through the multiplication of the “real” Eco’s character Roberto de la Grive in his own meta-tale, in the novel within the
novel, within which Roberto has directed his end for himself, appropriating the omnipotent authorial position of Professor Eco. Thus, from out of the novel, he has entered our world, and like a Baroque trompe-l’oeil painting has opened up the space and time of a simulacrum, a parallel world of art and life.

In his attempt at an answer to the question of what stylistic paradigms determine the major part of today’s art, science, high and low culture Omar Calabrese has made use of the concept of the neo-Baroque age, and at the end of the eighties launched, on the edges of various postmodern discourses, a totally new theoretical debate in which a remarkable number of sharers have become involved to date. Calabrese’s very determining phrase, which is also the title of his by now cult book L’età neobarocca,²⁰ is the result of a methodological innovation in an attempt at a description of characteristics shared by the science, the culture and the media production of our time. Calabrese concludes that, for example, serious scientific theories, such as that of chaos, are the product of the same feeling of instability that created the story of the chameleon identity of Zelig, eponymous hero of the Woody Allen film.

But meta-narration is not the only or the most important feature of what I would call the neo-Baroque spirit²¹ in The Island and Lost. The series, set on an Edenic island surrounded by sand beaches and turquoise ocean, did not cease during the first two broadcasting seasons to emanate a sense of threat and danger that is actually probably enhanced by the Arcadian iconography and the impeccable sunsets. There is nothing here about supernatural forces as in Twilight Zone or any combination of inexplicable extraterrestrial appearances with paranormal excesses as in The X-Files or Twin Peaks; everything here is explicable or at least possible, but not on a desert island in the middle of the Pacific. It is the strategy of decontextualisation, the relocation of a known phenomenon to an unknown context, that shifts the horizon of expectation and in a dialectic of fear and hope, so characteristic of man in the Baroque time, describes the idiosyncratic stylistic procedure of The Island of the Day Before and Lost – a procedure that is so close to us today and that, ultimately, enables the ideal reader of a stylistically and substantially demanding novel to change places with the ideal reader of a very different media kind. In a time of the erosion of borders and the interchangeability of all experiences in media and the arts the letto modello is no longer a desired projection of
author and work, nor is it the fruit of their ideal symbiosis. The reader is now a media nomad in a world that is incessantly spectacularised under the omnipresent domination of the image.

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[3] Among the many sources referring to the basic postulates of Eco’s interpretive theories, the study of David Robey “Interpretation and Uncertainty” (In *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation*. Ed. Charlotte Ross and Rochelle Sibley. London: Ashgate, 2004) deserves mention for its concision. Robey claims that “In *Opera Aperta* the ‘open’ work is defined as one based on a poetic … whose purpose is to generate multiple interpretations. The ‘open’ work gives a more privileged role to the reader than traditional forms of arts do, by requiring him or her to co-operate more actively in the process of interpretation. But Eco insists, invoking the aesthetics of formativity of his mentor Luigi Pareyson, that the range of interpretations is always limited, not by the intentions of the historical author, but by the nature of the work itself”. (4)


[7] The concept of overinterpretation is taken by Culler from Wayne Booth, thinking that his dichotomy of understanding – overstanding is a good complement to and perhaps a more precise definition of the problems of which Eco is talking: “Instead of *interpretation* and overinterpretation, he contrasted understanding and overstanding. Understanding he conceived as Eco does, in terms of something like Eco’s model reader. Understanding is asking the questions and finding the answers that the text insists on. (…) Overstanding, by contrast, consists of pursuing questions that the text does not pose to its model reader. One advantage of Booth’s opposition over Eco’s is that it makes it easier to see the role and importance of overstanding then when this sort of practice is tendentiously called overinterpretation. (Culler, “In Defence of Interpretation”. In Eco *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 114)


[10] In connection with avant-garde art, the understanding of the principle of seriality and of intertextual dialogue is made additionally difficult because tautological seriality of a large part of conceptual art seems unsustainably contradictory, as it combines the closed nature of its experimental artistic structure within itself along with the obligatory knowledge of a context outside the actual work. An experiment within a structure can be conceptually innovative, but the processual nature of the idea is most often documented with endless series of formally identical documents/artefacts. For example, the experiences of John Baldessari with iterative compositions of the position of a ball within a photographic frame of the late sixties tell of the specific laws of an art medium defining the work to the same extent as the idea itself, i.e., experimentalism understood as the performative aspect of the work can be formally presented in a two-dimensional plane of the picture only as a serial sequence of temporal sections.
Here it is worth referring to the many manuals aimed as user’s guides to Lost or Internet sites in which fans of the series discuss minor points related to the lives of the characters, or indeed very serious philosophical repercussions of some of the approaches of the screenplay.

When he speaks of a loop structured series, Eco also uses the term flashback, but, as we shall see, not in a way comparable to the use of the principle in Lost. Eco recognises the flashback as the main structural and motivational reason for the episodic concatenation of this type of series, while in Lost it is used for additional complication of the basic outline story.


Eco, Umberto. L’isola del giorno prima. Milano: Bompiani, 1994


In the novel, this is presented by the search for the punto fijo (i.e., the method of dead-reckoning of longitude) in which Roberto became unwillingly involved in his forced participation on board the Amarilli, which led to his shipwreck and ultimate end on board the Daphne. Since early Baroque man could not master the mathematics of space, in his Island Roberto was to attempt to make up for this by defining a kind of space time, i.e., a moment in which, swimming along the one hundred and eighty degree line of longitude to the north he would always stay on the dateline and frustrate today turning into tomorrow. The novel is actually all about the aesthetics of instable systems, shown via the imprecise cartography of the earlier mariners, then via the insufficient knowledge about the world and nature and, finally, through the uncertain search of the protagonist for his own identity.

Eco explains the manner in which this can be achieved: “A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the ‘only right’ conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result.” (“Interpretation” 64)


For features of the neo-Baroque as contemporary spirit of the time and its manifestations in film and painting see also: Purgar, Kresimir. The Neo-Baroque Subject. Zagreb: Meanadarmaedia, 2006.
Works Cited:


