

# Umberto Eco

## *Innovation & repetition: between modern & postmodern aesthetics*

It is not by chance that modern aesthetics and modern theories of art (and I mean by “modern” those born with Mannerism, developed through Romanticism, and provocatively restated by the early twentieth-century avant-gardes) have frequently identified the artistic message with metaphor. Metaphor (the new and inventive one, not the worn-out catachresis) is a way to designate something by the name of something else, thus presenting that something in an unexpected way. The modern criterion for recognizing the artistic value was *novelty*, high information. The pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts – not of Art – and of industry.

A good craftsman, as well as an industrial factory, produces many *tokens*, or occurrences, of the same *type* or model. One appreciates the type, and appreci-

ates the way the token meets the requirements of the type: but the modern aesthetics did not recognize such a procedure as an artistic one. That is why the Romantic aesthetics made such a careful distinction between “major” and “minor” arts, between arts and crafts. To make a parallel with sciences: crafts and industry were similar to the correct application of an already known law to a new case. Art, on the contrary (and by art I mean also literature, poetry, movies, and so on) corresponded rather to a “scientific revolution”: every work of modern art figures out a new law, imposes a *new paradigm*, a new way of looking at the world.

Modern aesthetics frequently forgot that the classical theory of art, from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages, was not so eager to stress a distinction between arts and crafts. The same term (*techne*, *ars*) was used to designate both the performance of a barber or a shipbuilder, the work of a painter or a poet. The classical aesthetics was not so anxious for innovation at any cost: on the contrary, it frequently appreciated as “beautiful” the good tokens of an everlasting type. Even in those cases in which modern sensitivity enjoys the “revolution” performed by a classical artist, his contemporary enjoyed the opposite aspect of

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his work, that is, his respect for previous models.<sup>1</sup>

This is the reason why modern aesthetics was so severe apropos the industrial-like products of the mass media. A popular song, a TV commercial, a comic strip, a detective novel, a Western movie were seen as more or less successful tokens of a given model or type. As such they were judged as pleasurable but non-artistic. Furthermore, this excess of pleasurability, repetition, lack of innovation, was felt as a commercial trick (the product had to meet the expectations of its audience), not as the provocative proposal of a new (and difficult to accept) world vision. The products of mass media were equated with the products of industry insofar as they were produced *in series*, and the “serial” production was considered as alien to the artistic invention.

According to the modern aesthetics, the principal features of the mass-media products were repetition, iteration, obedience to a preestablished schema, and redundancy (as opposed to information).<sup>2</sup>

The device of *iteration* is typical, for instance, of television commercials: one distractedly watches the playing out of a sketch, then focuses one’s attention on the punch line that reappears at the end of the episode. It is precisely on this foreseen and awaited reappearance that our modest but irrefutable pleasure is based.

1 On the opposition between innovation and repetition, see my works *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962) and *Apocalittici e Integrati* (Milan: Bompiani, 1964). Partial English translations appear in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979).

2 I repeat here some of my old remarks in “The Myth of Superman” (1962), now in *The Role of the Reader*.

Likewise, the reading of a traditional detective story presumes the enjoyment of a scheme. The scheme is so important that the most famous authors have founded their fortune on its very immutability.

Furthermore, the writer plays upon a continuous series of connotations (for example, the characteristics of the detective and of his immediate “entourage”) to such an extent that their reappearance in each story is an essential condition of its reading pleasure. And so we have the by now historical “tics” of Sherlock Holmes, the punctilious vanity of Hercule Poirot, the pipe and the familiar fixes of Maigret, on up to the famous idiosyncracies of the most unabashed heroes of the hard-boiled novel. Vices, gestures, habits of the character portrayed permit us to recognize an old friend. These familiar features allow us to “enter into” the event. When our favorite author writes a story in which the usual characters do not appear, we are not even aware that the fundamental scheme of the story is still like the others: we read the book with a certain detachment and are immediately prone to judge it a “minor” one.

All this becomes very clear if we take a famous character such as Nero Wolfe, immortalized by Rex Stout. I shall review here the main characteristics of Nero Wolfe and his partners because it is important to ascertain how important they are for the reader of Stout’s books. Nero Wolfe, from Montenegro, a naturalized American from time immemorial, is outlandishly fat, so much so that his leather easy chair must be expressly designed for him. He is fearfully lazy. In fact, he never leaves the house and depends for his investigations on the smart and brilliant Archie Goodwin, with whom he indulges in a continuous sharp and tense polemic, tempered

somewhat by their mutual sense of humor. Nero Wolfe is an absolute glutton, and his cook, Fritz, is the vestal virgin in the pantry, devoted to the unending care of this highly cultivated palate and equally greedy stomach; but along with the pleasures of the table, Wolfe cultivates an all-absorbing and exclusive passion for orchids; he has a priceless collection in the greenhouse on the top floor of the villa where he lives. Quite possessed by gluttony and flowers, assailed by a series of accessory tics (love of scholarly literature, systematic misogyny, insatiable thirst for money), Nero Wolfe conducts his investigations, masterpieces of psychological penetration, sitting in his office, carefully weighing the information verbally furnished by Archie, studying the protagonists of each event who are obliged to visit him in his office, arguing with Inspector Cramer (attention: he always holds a methodically extinguished cigar in his mouth), quarreling with the odious Sergeant Purley Stebbins; and, finally, in a fixed setting from which he never veers, summoning the protagonists of the case to a meeting in his studio, usually in the evening. There, with skillful dialectical subterfuges, almost always before he himself knows the truth, he drives the guilty one into a public demonstration of hysteria by which he gives himself away.

The gamut is much more ample: Archie's almost canonical arrest under suspicion of reticence and false testimony; the legal diatribes about the conditions on which Wolfe will take on a client; the hiring of part-time agents like Saul Panzer or Orrie Carther; the painting in the studio behind which Wolfe or Archie can watch, through a peephole, the behavior and reactions of a subject put to the test in the office itself; the scenes with Wolfe and an insincere client.... Such is the "eternal" story that the

faithful reader enjoys in Stout's novels. To make it palatable, the author must invent every time a "new" crime and "new" secondary characters, but these details only serve to reconfirm the permanence of a fixed repertoire of *topoi*.

Not knowing who the guilty party is becomes an accessory element, almost a pretext. It is not a matter of discovering who committed the crime, but, rather, of following certain "topical" gestures of "topical" characters whose stock behavior we already love. The reader, little interested in the "new" psychological or economic motivations of the "new" crime, in fact enjoys those moments when Wolfe repeats his usual gestures, when he goes up for the *n*th time to take care of his orchids while the case itself is reaching its dramatic climax, when Inspector Cramer threateningly enters with one foot between the door and the wall, pushing aside Goodwin and warning Wolfe with a shake of his finger that this time things will not go so smoothly. The attraction of the book, the sense of repose, of psychological extension which it is capable of conferring, lies in the fact that, plopped in an easy chair or in the seat of a train compartment, the readers continuously recover, point by point, what they already know, and what they want to know again: that is why they have purchased the book. They derive pleasure from the nonstory (if indeed a story is a development of events which should bring us from the point of departure to a point of arrival where we would never have dreamed of arriving); the distraction consists in the refutation of a development of events, in a withdrawal from the tension of past-present-future to the focus on an *instant*, which is loved precisely because it is recurrent.

It seems that mechanisms of this kind proliferate more widely in the popular

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

narrative of today than in the eighteenth-century romantic *feuilleton*, where the event was founded upon a *development* and where the characters were required to march towards their death in the course of unexpected and “incredible” adventures.

If this were true, it would be because the *feuilleton*, founded on the triumph of information, represented the preferred fare of a society that lived in the midst of messages loaded with redundancy; the sense of tradition, the norms of social life, moral principles, the rules of proper comportment in the framework of a bourgeois society designed a system of foreseeable messages that the social system provided for its members, and which allowed life to flow smoothly without unexpected jolts. In this sphere, the “informative” shock of a short story by Poe or the *coup de théâtre* of Ponson du Terrail provided the enjoyment of the “rupture.” In a contemporary industrial society, instead, the social change, the continuous rise of new behavioral standards, the dissolution of tradition, require a narrative based upon redundancy. Redundant narrative structures would appear in this panorama as an indulgent invitation to repose, a chance of relaxing.

In fact, even the nineteenth-century novel was repetitive. Its fundamental patterns were always the same, and it was not so difficult, for a smart reader, to tell before the end of the story if Miss So-and-So was or was not the lost daughter of the duke of X. One can only say that the nineteenth-century *feuilleton* and contemporary mass media use *different* devices for making the expected appear unexpected. Archie Goodwin is explicitly expecting, with the readers, that Nero Wolfe will act in a certain way, while Eugène Sue pretended not to know in advance what her readers sus-

pected, namely, that Fleur-de-Marie was the daughter of Rodolphe of Gerolstein. The formal principle does not change.

Perhaps one of the first inexhaustible characters during the decline of the *feuilleton* and bridging the two centuries at the close of *la belle époque* is Fantomas. Each episode of Fantomas closes with a kind of “unsuccessful catharsis”; Juve and Fandor finally come to get their hands on the elusive one when he, with an unforeseeable move, foils the arrest. Another singular fact: Fantomas, responsible for blackmail and sensational kidnappings, at the beginning of each episode finds himself inexplicably poor and in need of money and, therefore, also of new “action.” In this way the cycle is kept going.

I would like to consider now the case of an historical period (our own) for which iteration and repetition seem to dominate the whole world of artistic creativity, and in which it is difficult to distinguish between the repetition of the media and the repetition of the so-called major arts. In this period one is facing the discussion of a new theory of art, one that I would label *postmodern aesthetics*, which is revisiting the very concepts of repetition and iteration under a different profile. Recently in Italy such a debate has flourished under the standard of a “new aesthetics of seriality.” I recommend my readers to take “seriality,” in this case, as a very wide category or, if one wants, as another term for repetitive art.

Seriality and repetition are largely inflated concepts. The philosophy of the history of art has accustomed us to some technical meanings of these terms that it would be well to eliminate: I shall not speak of repetition in the sense of Kierkegaard, nor of “*répétition différente*,” in the sense of Deleuze. In the history of

contemporary music, series and seriality have been understood in a sense more or less opposite what we are discussing here. The dodecaphonic “series” is the opposite of the repetitive seriality typical of all the media, because there a given succession of twelve sounds is used once and only once within a single composition.

If you open a current dictionary, you will find that for “repeat” the meaning is “to say something or do something the second time or again and again; iteration of the same word, act or idea.” For “series” the meaning is “a continued succession of similar things.” It is a matter of establishing what it means to say “again” or “the same or similar things.”

To serialize means, in some way, *to repeat*. Therefore, we shall have to define a first meaning of “to repeat” by which the term means to make a *replica* of the same *abstract type*. Two sheets of type-writer paper are both *replicas* of the same commercial *type*. In this sense one thing is the same as another when the former exhibits the same properties as the latter, at least under a certain description: two sheets of typing paper are the same from the point of view of our functional needs, even though they are not the same for a physicist interested in the molecular structure of the objects. From the point of view of industrial mass production, two “tokens” can be considered as “replicas” of the same “type” when for a normal person with normal requirements, in the absence of evident imperfection, it is irrelevant whether one chooses one instead of the other. Two copies of a film or of a book are replicas of the same type.

The repetitiveness and the seriality that interests us here look instead at something that at first glance does not appear the same as (equal to) something else.

Let us now see the case in which (1) something is offered as original and different (according to the requirements of modern aesthetics); (2) we are aware that this something is repeating something else that we already know; and (3) notwithstanding this – better, just because of it – we like it (and we buy it).

The first type of repetition is the *retake*. In this case one recycles the characters of a previous successful story in order to exploit them, by telling what happened to them after the end of their first adventure. The most famous example of retake is Dumas’s *Twenty Years Later*, the most recent ones are the “to be continued” versions of *Star Wars* or *Superman*. The retake is dependent on a commercial decision. There is no rule establishing whether the second episode of the story should reproduce, with only slight variations, the first one, or must be a totally different story concerning the same characters. The retake is not strictly condemned to repetition. An illustrious example of retake are the many different stories of the Arthurian cycle, telling again and again the vicissitudes of Lancelot or Perceval.

The *remake* consists in telling again a previous successful story. See the innumerable editions of *Dr. Jekyll* or of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. The history of arts and literature is full of pseudo-remakes that were able to tell at every time something different. The whole of Shakespeare is a remake of preceding stories. Therefore “interesting” remakes can escape repetition.

The *series* works upon a fixed situation and a restricted number of fixed pivotal characters, around whom the secondary and changing ones turn. The secondary characters must give the impression that

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

the new story is different from the preceding ones, while in fact the narrative scheme does not change. I have said something above on the scheme of the novels by Rex Stout.

To the same type belong the TV serials such as *All in the Family*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Columbo*, etc. (I put together different TV genres that range from soap opera to situation comedy, and to the detective serial).

With a series one believes one is enjoying the novelty of the story (which is always the same) while in fact one is enjoying it because of the recurrence of a narrative scheme that remains constant. The series in this sense responds to the infantile need of hearing again always the same story, of being consoled by the "return of the Identical," superficially disguised.

The series consoles us (the consumers) because it rewards our ability to foresee: we are happy because we discover our own ability to guess what will happen. We are satisfied because we find again what we had expected, but we do not attribute this happy result to the obviousness of the narrative structure, but to our own presumed capacities to make forecasts. We do not think, "The author has constructed the story in a way that I could guess the end," but rather, "I was so smart to guess the end in spite of the efforts the author made to deceive me."

We find a variation of the series in the structure of the flashback: we see, for example, some comic-strip stories (such as Superman) in which the character is not followed along in a straight line during the course of his life, but is continually rediscovered at different moments of his life, obsessively revisited in order to discover there new opportunities for new narratives. It seems as if these moments of his life have fled from the narrator out of absentmindedness, but their

rediscovery does not change the psychological profile of the character, which is fixed already, once and for all. In topological terms this subtype of the series may be defined as a *loop*.

Usually the loop-series comes to be devised for commercial reasons: it is a matter of considering how to keep the series alive, of obviating the natural problem of the aging of the character. Instead of having characters put up with new adventures (that would imply their inexorable march toward death), they are made continually to relive their past. The loop solution produces paradoxes that were already the target of innumerable parodies. Characters have a little future but an enormous past, and in any case, nothing of their past will ever have to change the mythological present in which they have been presented to the reader from the beginning. Ten different lives would not suffice to make Little Orphan Annie undergo what she underwent in the first (and only) ten years of her life.

The spiral is another variation of the series. In the stories of Charlie Brown, apparently nothing happens, and any character is obsessively repeating his/her standard performance. And yet in every strip the character of Charlie Brown or Snoopy is enriched and deepened. This does not happen either with Nero Wolfe, or Starsky or Hutch: we are always interested in their new adventures, but we already know all we need to know about their psychology, their habits, their capacities, their ethical standpoints.

I would add finally that form of seriality that, in cinema and television, is motivated less by the narrative structure than by the nature of the actor himself: the mere presence of John Wayne, or of Jerry Lewis (when they are not directed by a great director, and even in these cases)

succeeds in making, always, the *same* film. The author tries to invent different stories, but the public recognizes (with satisfaction) always and ever the same story, under superficial disguises.

The *saga* differs from the series insofar as it concerns the story of a family and is interested in the “historical” lapse of time. It is genealogical. In the *saga*, the actors do age; the *saga* is a history of the aging of individuals, families, people, groups.

The *saga* can have a continuous lineage (the character is followed from birth to death; the same is then done for his son, his grandson, and so on, potentially forever), or it can be treelike (there is a patriarch, then the various narrative branches that concern not only his direct descendents, but also the collateral lines and the kin, each branch branching out infinitely). The most familiar (and recent) instance of *saga* is certainly *Dallas*.

The *saga* is a series in disguise. It differs from the series in that the characters change (they change also because the actors age). But in reality the *saga* repeats, in spite of its historicized form, celebrating in appearance the passage of time, the same story. As with ancient *sagas*, the deeds of the gallant ancestors are the same as the deeds of their descendents. In *Dallas*, grandfathers and grandsons undergo more or less the same ordeals: struggle for wealth and for power, life, death, defeat, victory, adultery, love, hate, envy, illusion, and delusion.

I mean by intertextual dialogue the phenomenon by which a given text echoes previous texts. Many forms of intertextuality are outside my present concerns. I am not interested, for example, in stylistic quotation, in those cases

in which a text quotes, in a more or less explicit way, a stylistic feature, a way of narrating typical of another author – either as a form of parody or in order to pay homage to a great and acknowledged master. There are imperceptible quotations, of which not even the author is aware, that are the normal effect of the game of artistic influence. There are also quotations of which the author is aware but that should remain ungraspable by the consumer; in these cases we are usually in the presence of a banal work and plagiarism.

What is more interesting is when the quotation is explicit and recognizable, as happens in literature or postmodern art, which blatantly and ironically play on intertextuality (novel on the techniques of the narrative, poetry on poetry, art on art).

There is a procedure typical of the postmodern narrative that has been much used recently in the field of mass communications: it concerns the ironic quotation of the commonplace (*topos*). Let us remember the killing of the Arab giant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the staircase of Odessa in Woody Allen’s *Bananas*. What joins these two quotations? In both cases, the spectator, in order to enjoy the allusion, must know the original *topoi*. In the case of the giant, it is a situation typical of the genre; in the case of *Bananas* – on the contrary – the *topos* appears for the first and only time in a single work, and only after that quotation the *topos* becomes a shibboleth for movie critics and moviegoers.

In both cases the *topoi* are recorded by the “encyclopedia” of the spectator; they make up a part of the treasury of the collective imagination and as such they come to be called upon. What differentiates the two quotations is the fact that the *topos* in *Raiders* is quoted in order to contradict it (what we expect to

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

happen, based on our experience, will not), while in *Bananas* the topos is introduced only because of its incongruity (the staircase has nothing to do with the rest of the story).

The first case recalls the series of cartoons that was published years ago by *Mad*, under the heading “a film which we would like to see.” For example, the heroine, in the West, tied by bandits to the railroad tracks: the alternating shots show on one side the approaching train and on the other the furious cavalcade of rescuers trying to arrive ahead of the locomotive. In the end, the girl (contrary to all the expectations suggested by the topos evoked) is crushed by the train. Here we are faced with a comic ploy which exploits the presupposition (correct) that the public will recognize the original topos, will apply to the quotation the “normal” system of expectations (I mean the expectations that this piece of encyclopedical information is supposed to elicit), and will then enjoy the way in which its expectations are frustrated. At this point the ingenuous spectator, at first frustrated, overcomes his frustration and transforms himself into a critical spectator who appreciates the way in which he was tricked.

In the case of *Bananas*, however, we are at a different level: the spectator with whom the text establishes an implicit agreement (tongue-in-cheek) is not the ingenuous spectator (who can be struck at most by the apparition of an incongruous event) but the critical spectator who appreciates the ironic ploy of the quotation and enjoys its desired incongruity. However, in both cases we have a critical side effect: aware of the quotation, the spectator is brought to elaborate ironically on the nature of such a device and to acknowledge the fact that he has been invited to play upon his encyclopedic competence.

The game becomes complicated in the “retake” of *Raiders*, that is, in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*: here the hero encounters not one but two giant enemies. In the first case, we are expecting that, according to the classical schemes of the adventure film, the hero will be disarmed, and we laugh when we discover that instead the hero has a pistol and easily kills his adversary. In the second case, the director knows that the spectators (having already seen the preceding film), will expect the hero to be armed, and indeed, Indiana Jones quickly looks for his pistol. He does not find it, and the spectators laugh because the expectation created by the first film is this time frustrated.

The cases cited put into play an intertextual encyclopedia. We have texts that are quoted from other texts and the knowledge of the preceding ones – taken for granted – is supposed to be necessary for the enjoyment of the new one.

More interesting for the analysis of the new intertextuality in the media is the example of *E.T.*, in the scene where the creature from outer space (an invention of Spielberg) is led into a city during Halloween and encounters another personage, disguised as the gnome in *The Empire Strikes Back* (an invention of Lucas). *E.T.* is jolted and seeks to hurl himself upon the gnome in order to embrace him, as if he had met an old friend. Here the spectators must know many things: they must certainly know of the existence of another film (intertextual knowledge), but they must also know that both monsters were created by Rambaldi, that the directors of the two films are linked together for various reasons (not least because they are the two most successful directors of the decade); they must, in short, have not only a knowledge of the texts but also a knowledge of the world, circumstances

external to the texts. One notices, naturally, that knowledge of the texts and the world are only two possible chapters of encyclopedic knowledge, and that therefore, in a certain measure, the text always makes reference to the same cultural patrimony.

Such phenomena of “intertextual dialogue” were once typical of experimental art, and presupposed a Model Reader, culturally very sophisticated.<sup>3</sup> The fact that similar devices have now become more common in the media world leads us to see that the media are carrying on – and presupposing – the possession of pieces of information already conveyed by other media.

The text of *E.T.* “knows” that the public has learned, from newspapers or from television, everything about Rambaldi, Lucas, and Spielberg. The media seem, in this play of extratextual quotation, to make reference to the world, but in effect they are referring to the contents of other messages sent by other media. The game is played, so to speak, on a “broadened” intertextuality. Any difference between knowledge of the world (understood naively as a knowledge derived from an extratextual experience) and intertextual knowledge has practically vanished. Our reflections to come, then, must not only question the phenomenon of repetition within a single work or a series of works, but all the phenomena that make various strategies of repetition producible, understandable, and commercially possible. In other words, repetition and seriality in the media pose new problems for the sociology of culture.

Another form of intertextuality is the genre-embedding that today is very common in the mass media. For exam-

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for the idea of “the model reader,” my *The Role of the Reader*.

ple, every Broadway musical (in the theater or on film) is, as a rule, nothing other than the story of how a Broadway musical is put on. The Broadway genre seems to require (postulate) a vast intertextual knowledge: in fact, it creates and institutes the required competence and the presuppositions indispensable to its understanding. Every one of these films or plays tells how a Broadway musical is put on, and furnishes us, in effect, with all the information about the genre it belongs to. The spectacle gives the public the sensation of knowing ahead of time that which it does not yet know and will know only at the moment. We stand facing the case of a colossal pre-eritition (or “passing over”). In this sense, the musical is a didactic work that takes account of the (idealized) rules of its own production.

Finally, we have the work that speaks of itself: not the work that speaks of a genre to which it belongs, but a work that speaks of its own structure, and of the way in which it was made. Critics and aestheticians were inclined to think that this device was an exclusive feature of the works of the avant-garde and alien to mass communications. Aesthetics knows this problem and indeed gave it a name long ago: it is the Hegelian problem of the Death of Art. But in these later times there have been cases of productions in the mass media capable of self-irony, and some of the examples mentioned above seem to me of great interest. Even here the line between “highbrow” arts and “lowbrow” arts seems to have become very thin.

Let us now try to review the phenomena listed above from the point of view of a “modern” conception of aesthetic value, according to which every work aesthetically “well done” is endowed with two characteristics:

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

(1) It must achieve a dialectic between order and novelty – in other words, between scheme and innovation;

(2) This dialectic must be perceived by the consumer, who must not only grasp the contents of the message, but also the way in which the message transmits those contents.

This being the case, nothing prevents the types of repetition listed above from achieving the conditions necessary to the realization of aesthetic value, and the history of the arts is ready to furnish us with satisfactory examples for each of the types in our classification.

*Retake.* Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* is nothing else but a retake of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, and precisely because of the success of the first, which was in its turn a retake of the themes of the Breton cycle. Boiardo and Ariosto added a goodly amount of irony into material that was very "serious" and "taken seriously" by previous readers. But even the third *Superman* is ironical in regard to the first (mystical and very, very serious). It appears as the retake of an archetype inspired by the gospel, made by winking at the films of Frank Tashlin.

*Remake.* I have already suggested that Shakespeare remade a lot of very well-known stories of the previous centuries.

*Series.* Every text presupposes and constructs always a double Model Reader (let us say, a naive and a "smart" one). The former uses the work as semantic machinery and is the victim of the strategies of the author who will lead him little by little along a series of previsions and expectations; the latter evaluates the work as an aesthetic product and enjoys the strategies implemented in order to produce a model reader of the first level. This second-level reader is the one who enjoys the seriality of the series, not so much for the return of the same thing (that the ingenuous reader believed was

different) but for the strategy of the variations; in other words, he enjoys the way in which the same story is worked over to appear to be different.

This enjoyment of variations is obviously encouraged by the more sophisticated series. Indeed, we can classify the products of serial narratives along a continuum that takes into account the different gradations of the reading agreement between the text and the "smart" reader (as opposed to the naive one). It is evident that even the most banal narrative product allows the reader to become, by an autonomous decision, a critical reader, able to recognize the innovative strategies (if any). But there are serial works that establish an explicit agreement with the critical reader and thus, so to speak, challenge him to acknowledge the innovative aspects of the text.

Belonging to this category are the television films of Lieutenant Columbo. It is worth noticing that in this series the authors spell out from the beginning who the murderer is. The spectator is not so much invited to play the naive game of guessing (whodunit?) as (1) to enjoy Columbo's detection technique, appreciated as an encore to a well-known piece of bravura (and in this sense the pleasure provided by Columbo is not so different from the one provided by Nero Wolfe); and (2) to discover in what way the author will succeed in winning his bet, which consists in having Columbo do what he always does, but nevertheless in a way that is not banally repetitive. Every story of Nero Wolfe was written by Rex Stout, but every episode of *Columbo* is directed by a different person. The critical addressee is invited to pronounce a judgment on the best variation.

I use the term "variation" thinking of the classical musical variations. They,

too, were “serial products” that aimed very little at the naive addressee and that bet everything on an agreement with the critical one. The composer was fundamentally interested only in the applause of the critical listener, who was supposed to appreciate the fantasy displayed in his innovations on an old theme.

In this sense, seriality and repetition are not opposed to innovation. Nothing is more “serial” than a tie pattern, and yet nothing can be so personalized as a tie. The example may be elementary, but that does not make it banal. Between the elementary aesthetics of the tie and the recognized “high” artistic value of the Goldberg Variations, there is a graded continuum of repetitious strategies, aimed at the response of the “smart” addressee.

The problem is that there is not, on the one hand, an aesthetics of “high” art (original and not serial), and on the other a pure sociology of the serial. Rather, there is an aesthetics of serial forms that requires an historical and anthropological study of the ways in which, at different times and in different places, the dialectic between repetition and innovation has been instantiated. When we fail to find innovation in the serial, this is perhaps less a result of the structures of the text, than of our “horizon of expectations” and our cultural habits. We know very well that in certain examples of non-Western art, where we always see the same thing, the natives recognize infinitesimal variations and feel the shiver of innovation. Where we see innovation, at least in the serial forms of the Western past, the original addressees were not at all interested in that aspect and conversely enjoyed the recurrences of the scheme.

*Saga.* The entire *Human Comedy* by Balzac presents a very good example of a

treelike saga, as much as *Dallas* does. Balzac is more interesting than *Dallas* because every one of his novels increases our knowledge of the society of his time, while every program of *Dallas* tells us the same thing about American society – but both use the same narrative scheme.

*Intertextuality.* The notion of intertextuality itself has been elaborated within the framework of a reflection on “high” art. Notwithstanding, the examples given above have been taken up provocatively by the world of mass communication in order to show how even these forms of intertextual dialogue have by now been transferred to the field of popular production.

It is typical of what is called postmodern literature and art (but did it not already happen thus with the music of Stravinsky?) to quote by using (sometimes under various stylistic disguises) *quotation marks* so that the reader pays no attention to the content of the citation but instead to the way in which the excerpt from a first text is introduced into the fabric of a second one. Renato Barilli has observed that one of the risks of this procedure is the failure to make the quotation marks evident, so that what is cited is accepted by the naive reader as an original invention rather than as an ironic reference.<sup>4</sup>

We have so far put forward three examples of quotations of a previous topos: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Bananas*, and *E.T.* Let us look closer at the third case: the spectator who knows nothing of the production of two films (in which one quotes from the other) cannot succeed in understanding why what happens does happen. By that gag, the movie focuses both upon movies and upon the media-universe. The understanding of

4 “Dal leggibile all’illegibile,” in Luigi Russo, ed., *Letteratura tra consumo e ricerca* (Bologna: Mulino, 1984).

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

this device is a condition for its aesthetic enjoyment. Thus, this episode can work only if one realizes that there are quotation marks somewhere. One can say that these marks can be perceived only on the basis of an extratextual knowledge. Nothing *in the film* helps the spectator to understand at what point there ought to be quotation marks. The film presupposes a previous world-knowledge on the part of the spectator. And if the spectator does not know? Too bad. The effect gets lost, but the film knows of other means to gain approval.

These imperceptible quotation marks, more than an aesthetic device, are a social artifice; they select the happy few (and the mass media usually hopes to produce millions of happy few . . .). To the naive spectator of the first level, the film has already given almost too much: that secret pleasure is reserved, for that time, for the critical spectator of the second level.

The case of *Raiders* is different. Here, if the critical spectator fails – does not recognize the quotation – there remain plenty of possibilities for the naive spectator, who at least can always enjoy the fact that the hero gets the best of his adversary. We are here confronted by a less subtle strategy than in the preceding example, a mode inclined to satisfy the urgent need of the producer, who in any case must sell his product to whomever he can. While it is difficult to imagine *Raiders* being seen and enjoyed by those spectators who do not grasp the interplay of quotations, it is always possible that this will happen, and the work is clearly open even to this possibility.

I do not feel like saying which, between the two texts cited, pursues the “more aesthetically noble” ends. It is enough for me (and perhaps for the moment I have already given myself much to think about) to point out a

(critically relevant) difference in the functioning and use of textual strategy.

We come now to the case of *Bananas*. On that staircase there descend, not only a baby carriage, but also a platoon of rabbis and I do not remember what else. What happens to the spectator who has not caught the quotation from the *Potemkin* mixed up with imprecise fancies about the *Fiddler on the Roof*? I believe that because of the orgiastic energy with which the scene – the staircase with its incongruous population – is presented, even the most naive spectator may grasp the symphonic turbulence of this Brueghel-like kermis. Even the most ingenious among the spectators “feels” a rhythm, an invention, and cannot help but fix his attention on the way it is put together.

At the extreme other end of the pole of the aesthetic interests, I would like to mention a work whose equivalent I have not succeeded in finding in the contemporary mass media; it is not only a masterpiece of intertextuality but also a paramount example of narrative metalanguage, which speaks of its own formation and of the rules of the narrative genre: I refer to *Tristram Shandy*.

It is impossible to read and enjoy Sterne’s antinovel novel without realizing that it is treating the novel form ironically. *Tristram Shandy* is so aware of its nature that it is impossible to find there a single ironical statement that does not make evident its own quotation marks. It brings to a high artistic resolution the rhetorical device called *pronuntiatio* (that is, the way of stressing imperceptibly the irony).

I believe that I have singled out a typology of “quotation marking” that must in some way be relevant to the ends of a phenomenology of aesthetic value, and of the pleasure that follows from it. I believe further that the strate-

gies for matching surprise and novelty with repetition, even if they are semiotic devices in themselves aesthetically neutral, can give place to different results on the aesthetic level.

Some conclusions follow:

Each of the types of repetition that we have examined is not limited to the mass media, but belongs by right to the entire history of artistic creativity: plagiarism, quotation, parody, the ironic retake, the intertextual joke, are typical of the entire artistic-literary tradition.

Much art has been and is repetitive. The concept of absolute originality is a contemporary one, born with Romanticism; classical art was in vast measure serial, and the “modern” avant-garde (at the beginning of this century) challenged the Romantic idea of “creation from nothingness,” with its techniques of collage, mustachios on the Mona Lisa, art about art, and so on.

The same type of repetitive procedure can produce either excellence or banality; it can put the addressees into conflict with themselves and with the intertextual tradition as a whole; thus it can provide them with easy consolations, projections, identifications: it can establish an agreement exclusively with the naive addressee, or exclusively with the smart one, or with both at different levels and along a continuum of solutions that cannot be reduced to a rudimentary typology.

Nevertheless, a typology of repetition does not furnish the criteria that can establish differences in aesthetic values.

Yet, since the various types of repetition are present in the whole of artistic and literary history, they can be taken into account in order to establish criteria of artistic value. An aesthetics of repetition requires as a premise a semiotics of the textual procedures of repetition.

I realize that all I have said until now still represents an attempt to reconsider the various forms of repetition in the media in terms of the “modern” dialectic between order and innovation. The fact, however, is that when one speaks today of the aesthetics of seriality, one alludes to something more radical, that is, to a notion of aesthetic value that wholly escapes the “modern” idea of art and literature.<sup>5</sup>

It has been observed that with the phenomenon of television serials we find a new concept of “the infinity of the text”; the text takes on the rhythms of that same dailiness in which it is produced, and that it mirrors. The problem is not one of recognizing that the serial text varies indefinitely upon a basic scheme (and in this sense it can be judged from the point of view of the “modern” aesthetics). The real problem is that what is of interest is not so much the single variations as “variability” as a formal principle, the fact that one can make variations to infinity. Variability to infinity has all the characteristics of repetition, and very little of innovation. But it is the “infinity” of the process that gives a new sense to the device of variation. What must be enjoyed – suggests the postmodern aesthetics – is the fact that a series of possible variations is potentially infinite. What becomes celebrated here is a sort of victory of life over art, with the paradoxical result that the era of electronics – instead of emphasizing the phenomena of shock, interruptions, novelty, and frustration of expectations – would produce a return to the continuum, the Cyclical, the Periodical, the Regular.

5 The “manifesto” of this new aesthetics of seriality is the special issue of the journal *Cinema & Cinema* 35 – 36 (1983): 20 – 24.

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

Omar Calabrese has thoroughly looked into this:<sup>6</sup> from the point of view of the “modern” dialectic between repetition and innovation, one can easily recognize how in the Columbo series, for example, on a basic scheme some of the best names in American cinema have worked in variations. Thus it would be difficult to speak, in such a case, of pure repetition: if the scheme of the detection and the psychology of the protagonist actor remains unchanged, the style of the narrative changes each time. This is no small thing, especially from the point of view of the “modern” aesthetics. But it is exactly on a different idea of style that Calabrese’s paper is centered. In these forms of repetition “we are not so much interested in what is repeated as we are in the way the components of the text come to be segmented and then how the segments come to be codified in order to establish a system of invariants: any component that does not belong to the system, can be defined as an *independent variable*.” In the most typical and apparently “degenerated” cases of seriality, the independent variables are not altogether the more visible, but the more microscopic, as in a homeopathic solution where the potion is all the more potent because by further “succussions” the original particles of the medicinal product have almost disappeared. This is what permits Calabrese to speak of the Columbo series as an “exercice de style” à la Queneau. We are, says Calabrese, facing a “neobaroque aesthetics” that is instantiated, not only by the “cultivated” products, but even, and above all, by those that are most degenerated. Apropos of *Dallas*, one can say that “the semantic opposition and the articulation of the elementary narrative structures

can migrate in combinations of the highest improbability around the various characters.”

Organized differentiations, polycentrism, regulated irregularity – such would be the fundamental aspects of this neobaroque aesthetic, the principal example of which is musical variations à la Bach. Since in the epoch of mass communications “the condition for listening . . . it is that for which all has already been said and already been written . . . as in the Kabuki theater, it may then be the most minuscule variant that will produce pleasure in the text, or that form of explicit repetition which is already known.”

What results from these reflections is clear. The focus of the theoretical inquiry is displaced. Before, mass mediologists tried to save the dignity of repetition by recognizing in it the possibility of a traditional dialectic between scheme and innovation (but it was still the innovation that accounted for the value, the way of rescuing the product from degradation and promoting it to a value). Now, the emphasis must be placed on the inseparable knot of scheme-variation, where the variation is no longer more appreciable than the scheme. The term *neobaroque* must not deceive: we are witnessing the birth of a new aesthetic sensibility much more archaic, and truly post-postmodern.

As Giovanna Grignaffini observes, “the neobaroque aesthetics has transformed a commercial constraint into a ‘formal principle.’” As a result, “any idea of unicity becomes destroyed to its very roots.”<sup>7</sup> As happened with Baroque music, and as (according to Walter Benjamin) happens in our era of “technological reproduction,” the messages of mass

6 “I replicanti,” *Cinema & Cinema* 35–36 (1983): 25–39.

7 “J.R. : vi presento il racconto,” *Cinema & Cinema* 35–36 (1983): 46–51.

media can and must be received and understood in a “state of inattention.”

It goes without saying that the authors I have quoted see very clearly how much commercial and “gastronomical” consolation there is in putting forward stories that always say the same thing and in a circular way always close in on themselves. But they do not only apply to such products a rigidly formalistic criterion, but also suggest that we ought to conceive of a new audience that feels perfectly comfortable with such a criterion. Only by presupposing such agreement can one speak of a new aesthetics of the serial. And only by such an agreement is the serial no longer the poor relative of the arts, but the form of art that can satisfy the new aesthetic sensibility, indeed, the post-postmodern Greek tragedy.

We would not be scandalized if such criteria were to be applied (as they have been applied) to abstract art. And in fact, here we are about to outline a new aesthetics of the “abstract” applied to the products of mass communication.

But this requires that the naive addressee of the first level will disappear, giving place only to the critical reader of the second level. In fact, there is no conceivable naive addressee of an abstract painting or sculpture. If there is one who – in front of them – asks, “But what does it mean?” this is not an addressee of either the first or second level; he is excluded from any artistic experience whatever. Of abstract works there is only a critical “reading”: what is formed is of no interest, only the way it is formed is interesting.

Can we expect the same for the serial products of television? What should we think about the birth of a new public that, indifferent to the stories told (which are in any case already known), only relishes the repetition and its own

microscopic variations? In spite of the fact that today the spectator still weeps in the face of the Texan families’ tribulations, ought we to expect in the near future a true and real genetic mutation?

If it should not happen this way, the radical proposal of the postmodern aesthetics would appear singularly snobby: as in a sort of neo-Orwellian world, the pleasures of the smart reading would be reserved for the members of the Party and the pleasures of the naive reading reserved for the proletarians. The entire industry of the serial would exist, as in the world of Mallarmé (made to end in a Book), with its only aim being to furnish neobaroque pleasure to the happy few, reserving pity and fear to the unhappy many who remain.

According to this hypothesis we should think of a universe of new consumers disinterested in what really happens to J.R., and bent on grasping the neobaroque pleasure provided by the form of his adventures. However, one could ask if such an outlook (even though warranting a *new* aesthetics) can be agreed to by an *old* semiotics.

Baroque music, as well as abstract art, is “a-semantic.” One can discuss, and I am the first to do so, whether it is possible to discriminate so straightforwardly between purely “syntactic” and “semantic” arts. But may we at least recognize that there are figurative arts and abstract arts? Baroque music and abstract painting are not figurative; television serials are.

Until what point shall we be able to enjoy as merely musical those variations that play upon “likenesses”? Can one escape from the fascination of the possible worlds that these “likenesses” outline?

Perhaps we are obliged to try a different hypothesis.

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*

We can say then that the neobaroque series brings to its first level of fruition (impossible to eliminate) the pure and simple myth. Myth has nothing to do with art. It is a story, always the same. It may not be the story of Atreus and it may be that of J.R. Why not? Every epoch has its mythmakers, its own sense of the sacred. Let us take for granted such a “figurative” representation and such an “orgiastic” enjoyment of the myth. Let us take for granted the intense emotional participation, the pleasure of the reiteration of a single and constant truth, and the tears, and the laughter – and finally the *catharsis*. Then we can conceive of an audience also able to shift onto an aesthetic level and to judge the art of the variations on a mythical theme – in the same way as one succeeds in appreciating a “beautiful funeral” even when the deceased was a dear person.

Are we sure that the same thing did not happen even with the classical tragedy?

If we reread Aristotle’s *Poetics* we see that it was possible to describe the model of a Greek tragedy as a *serial one*. From the quotations of the Stagirite we realize that the tragedies of which he had knowledge were many more than have come down to us, and they all followed (by varying it) one fixed scheme. We can suppose that those that have been saved were those that corresponded better to the canons of the ancient aesthetic sensibility. But we could also suppose that the decimation came about on the basis of political-cultural criteria, and no one can forbid us from imagining that Sophocles may have survived by virtue of a political maneuver, by sacrificing better authors (but “better” according to what criteria?).

If there were many more tragedies than those we know, and if they all followed (with variations) a fixed scheme,

what would happen if today we were able to see them and read them all together? Would our evaluations of the originality of Sophocles or Aeschylus be different from what they are currently? Would we find in these authors variations on topical themes where today we see indistinctly a unique (and sublime) way of confronting the problems of the human condition? Perhaps where we see absolute invention, the Greeks would have seen only the “correct” variation on a single scheme, and sublime appeared to them, not the single work, but precisely the scheme. It is not by chance that, when speaking of the art of poetry, Aristotle dealt mainly with schemes before all else, and mentioned single works only for the sake of an example.

Since at this point I am playing what Peirce called “the play of musement” and I am multiplying the hypotheses – in order to find out, maybe later, a single fruitful idea – let us now reverse our experiment and look at a contemporary TV serial from the point of view of a future neoromantic aesthetics which, supposedly, has assumed again that “originality is beautiful.” Let us imagine a society in the year 3000 A.D., in which 90 percent of all our present cultural production had been destroyed and of all our television serials only *one* show of Lieutenant Columbo had survived.

How would we “read” this work? Would we be moved by such an original picture of a little man in the struggle with the powers of evil, with the forces of capital, with an opulent and racist society dominated by WASPs? Would we appreciate this efficient, concise, and intense representation of the urban landscape of an industrial America?

When – in a single piece of a series – something is simply *presupposed* by the audience, which knows the whole series,

would we speak perhaps of an art of synthesis of a sublime capacity of telling through essential allusions?

In other words, how would we read a “piece” of a series, if the whole of the series remained unknown to us?

Such a series of questions could continue indefinitely. I started to put them forth because I think that we still know very little about the role of repetition in the universe of art and in the universe of mass media.

*Innovation  
& repetition:  
between  
modern &  
postmodern  
aesthetics*