Reading Things, Umberto Eco

Contents

Two Families of Objects

What would be a better way to initiate a column devoted to signs and myths—which we will try to carry forward without any obsession with regularity, responding instead to the suggestions that arrive from all sides—than by making a devout pilgrimage to one of the sanctuaries of mass communication, the Milan Trade Fair? And with the awareness that we are going there on a specific mission. Because it's one thing to enter as an economic operator: For him the Fair doesn't spout any false talk, it gives him a chance to find what he's looking for, touch it, buy it.

This is a game with no double meanings, at least as honest as any commercial competition is honest in a market economy. But it's another thing to go there as spectator (as most visitors do): For him the Fair is a great kermesse of triumphant merchandise, and it takes on the characteristics, to a minor degree, of the big international expos, the world's fairs.

If—as Marx said—"the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an 'immense accumulation of commodities,'" then world's fairs are the temple in which this merchandise loses all real contact with its value in use and most of its contact with its barter value, to become a series of pure connotative signs, at an emotional fever pitch. The goods almost lose their concrete individuality to become so many notes in an anthem to progress, a hymn to the abundance and happiness of consumption and production.

But a trade fair is an international expo only halfway, because the merchandise is there to be sold. The products are signs of an undifferentiated desire, but they are also objective terms of an individuated and precise desire. The immense population of objects collected here refers us to that "sociology of objects" that is developing in France, of which we will speak on another occasion. But a sociology (or a semiology) of objects means that they must be seen within the concrete system of the society that creates them and receives them, so they must be seen as a language listened to as it is being spoken, and of which we try to discern the regulating system.

Here, on the other hand, the objects appear lined up as if in a dictionary, or in a grammar, verbs with verbs, adverbs with adverbs, lamps with lamps, tractors with tractors. Wouldn't it be right to conclude that this collection of objects, which is a trade fair, actually leaves the visitor free, because it imposes on him no logic of the accumulation of objects and allows him to gaze coldly, to choose? On the contrary, however, the ideological message of a fair emerges only at second glance, when we have almost been taken in by the persuasive game it establishes.

The objects are of two types. The first are the “beautiful” objects, desirable, fairly accessible. They include easy chairs, lamps, sausages, liquors, motorboats, swimming pools. The visitor loves them and would like to own them. He cannot perhaps buy a motorboat but he can think of the remote possibility—one day, who knows?—of making such a purchase. But there is one thing he doesn’t desire: to accumulate objects of a single type. He may want an ashtray, but not a hundred ashtrays; a rubber boat, but not a thousand rubber boats. So his desire is keen but not frantic; it can be postponed, but its difficulty never creates the drama of impossibility. When you think about it, these “beautiful” objects are all consumer goods.

Then there are the others. They are “ugly,” because they are cranes, cement mixers, lathes, hods, excavators, hydraulic presses (actually, they are very beautiful, more beautiful than the first, but the visitor doesn’t know this). Since they are ugly and cumbersome, they are undesirable, also because they seem strangely de-functionalized, with their wheels spinning pointlessly, their blades striking the air without slicing anything. . . .

They are inaccessible, but the visitor doesn’t care. He knows that even if he could buy a machine tool, it would be of no use to him. Because these objects, unlike the others, function only if they are accumulable. A thousand ashtrays are useless, but a thousand machine tools make big industry. At the end of his rounds, the ordinary visitor believes he has chosen. He desires beautiful objects, accessible, and not accumulable, and rejects those that are ugly and accumulable (but inaccessible). In reality, he has not chosen; he has only accepted his role as consumer of consumer goods since he cannot be a proprietor of means of production. But he is content.
Tomorrow he will work harder in order to be able to buy, one day, an easy chair and a refrigerator. He will work at the lathe, which is not his because (the fair has told him) he doesn’t want it.

1970

Lady Barbara

More and more often I find myself hearing the refrain of some song, running through my mind—a thing everybody has experienced.

But in the past few years the refrain has always come to me accompanied by a murmuring, the muttering of a crowd, an outburst of applause, with quite a distinct dynamic. It is not the refrain as it is, or as it should be—as you would hear it on a record, I mean, or translate it from printed music—it is a refrain that explodes violently, bursts as if from a telluric movement. In short, it erupts like a volcano. Before there was nothing, or a long dream of tectonic laziness without desires; then, all of a sudden, a roar, a spiral movement starts, a hornet that first flies from the distance then approaches with the sound of a missile, and then comes the refrain. It is more than a refrain, it is a coitus, a great satisfaction. Bzzz, bzzz, vrrr vrrr—and then suddenly the great aural effusion: “Lady Barbara, sei tu . ..” (I mention “Lady Barbara” because it’s the first song that comes to mind, but the example is valid for almost all Italian pop festival songs, summer hits, and so on.)

This means that the style of festival songs has been influenced by a TV habit: The advent of the climax, in the comic gag as in the song, must be underlined by applause. But the applause mustn’t come after the climax (as in the old days), but before.

It must precede, announce, accompany it. The applause is a musical fact; it doesn't represent an opinion of the show or approval of it; it is one of the means the show uses to produce an overwhelming effect and achieve an enthusiastic reception. In other words, applause no longer serves to demonstrate that the audience is pleased, but to command the public, "Be pleased, or rather, be enthusiastic. . . . Listen to what's just about to happen." This is a device that Poe deplored in the popular novels of Sue, when he said that Sue lacked the ars celandi artem, or rather that he excelled in alerting the audience, "Look out, in a moment something wonderful is going to happen that will fill you with amazement." How is anticipatory applause achieved? In two ways. One is the more squalid and mechanical: by flashing at the audience a luminous sign that orders "applause."

This method is used in television, but only for shows with an invited public, politely called to collaborate in return for the free ticket. But the pre-applause, which proved quite productive, had to be transported, without reliance on cheap methods, also to big events with a paying public, like the San Remo Festival. The order to applaud thus had to be given, not by extrinsic means, but from within the song itself. They had to create a situation whereby the members of the public felt an inner urge to applaud and sustain the romantic outburst of the singer, under the impression that they were behaving freely, joyously.

Now, how do you achieve a feeling of liberation, surprise, or joy? By creating a situation of tension, boredom, repetition, monotony to the extreme degree, then finally giving a signal that signifies the end of boredom and dullness, promising new and more satisfying experiences. You only have to use the procedure a few times and to give the liberating signal certain recognizable characteristics; after that the public's behavior will not be unlike that of Pavlov's dog: bell, saliva. So the festival songs all begin with a first part (known as the "verse") that is very slow, hardly musical, unrhymed, with a vague tune that seems to bite its tail, in search of itself, or which is blatantly ugly and unpleasant. And thus when the moment of the refrain arrives, you have only to increase the intensity, or the pace, or give an indication of a recognizable tune, and the public explodes with an impassioned ovation that accompanies the opening of the aural calyx, expanding the orchestral fluid and the enraptured, listening hearts.

For example, there was Sergio Endrigo's song at San Remo. An unpleasant opening, with deliberately cultivated and mechanical images (kerosene, dead horses), and a tune that suggests ecclesiastical music, a marked absence of meter and rhyme. And then, all of a sudden, announced by a smile, by flung-out arms, and by the cooperation of the orchestra, we're off . . . "the ship, the ship will set sail," and you have tune, meter, rhyme, and everything tells the audience that the music, which previously wasn't present except negatively, has finally arrived.
But the destiny of the pop song, if styles have a logic and inventions have a manner, is traveling in a difficult direction, because to be so overwhelming and "informative" (in the cybernetic sense) the moment of the explosion should be (and will have increasingly to be) unique, punctual, isolated in the middle of the composition, which to be overwhelming will have to underline and prolong the waiting, the introductory frustration.

The destiny of a beautiful song is thus to be all very ugly, except for one little, humble, marvelous central moment, which must die out at once, so that when it returns it will be hailed by the most intense ovation

ever heard. Only when the song has become entirely unpleasant will the audience feel happy at last.

1972

Lumbar Thought

A few weeks ago, Luca Goldoni wrote an amusing report from the Adriatic coast about the mishaps of those who wear blue jeans for reasons of fashion, and no longer know how to sit down or arrange the external reproductive apparatus. I believe the problem broached by Goldoni is rich in philosophical reflections, which I would like to pursue on my own and with the maximum seriousness, because no everyday experience is too base for the thinking man, and it is time to make philosophy proceed, not only on its own two feet, but also with its own loins.

I began wearing blue jeans in the days when very few people did, but always on vacation. I found—and still find—them very comfortable, especially when I travel, because there are no problems of creases, tearing, spots. Today they are worn also for looks, but primarily they are very utilitarian. It's only in the past few years that I've had to renounce this pleasure because I've put on weight. True, if you search thoroughly you can find an extra large (Macy's could fit even Oliver Hardy with blue jeans), but they are large not only around the waist, but also around the legs, and they are not a pretty sight.

Recently, cutting down on drink, I shed the number of pounds necessary for me to try again some almost normal jeans. I underwent the calvary described by Luca Goldoni, as the saleswoman said, "Pull it tight, it'll stretch a bit"; and I emerged, not having to suck in my belly (I refuse to accept such compromises). And so, after a long time, I was enjoying the sensation of wearing pants that, instead of clutching the waist, held the hips, because it is a characteristic of jeans to grip the lumbar-sacral region and stay up thanks not to suspension but to adherence.

After such a long time, the sensation was new. The jeans didn't pinch, but they made their presence felt. Elastic though they were, I sensed a kind of sheath around the lower half of my body. Even if I had wished, I couldn't turn or wiggle my belly inside my pants; if anything, I had to turn it or wiggle it together with my pants. Which subdivides so to speak one's body into two independent zones, one free of clothing, above the belt, and the other organically identified with the clothing, from immediately below the belt to the anklebones. I discovered that my movements, my way of walking, turning, sitting, hurrying, were different. Not more difficult, or less difficult, but certainly different.

As a result, I lived in the knowledge that I had jeans on, whereas normally we live forgetting that we're wearing undershorts or trousers. I lived for my jeans, and as a result I assumed the exterior behavior of one who wears jeans. In any case, I assumed a demeanor. It's strange that the traditionally most informal and antietiquette garment should be the one that so strongly imposes an etiquette. As a rule I am boisterous, I sprawl in a chair, I slump wherever I please, with no claim to elegance: my blue jeans checked these actions, made me more polite and mature. I discussed it at length, especially with consultants of the opposite sex, from whom I learned what, for that matter, I had already suspected: that for women experiences of this kind are familiar because all their garments are conceived to impose a demeanor—high heels, girdles, brassieres, pantyhose, tight sweaters.

I thought then about how much, in the history of civilization, dress as armor has influenced behavior and, in consequence, exterior morality. The Victorian bourgeois was stiff and formal because of stiff collars; the nineteenth-century gentleman was constrained by his tight redingotes, boots, and top hats that didn't allow brusque movements of the head. If Vienna had been on the equator and its bourgeoisie had gone around in Bermuda shorts, would Freud have described the same neurotic symptoms, the same Oedipal triangles? And would he have described them in the same way if he, the doctor, had been a Scot, in a kilt (under which, as everyone knows, the rule is to wear nothing)? A garment that squeezes the testicles makes a man think differently.

Women during menstruation; people suffering from orchitis, victims of hemorrhoids, urethritis, prostate and similar ailments know to what extent pressures or obstacles in the sacroiliac area influence one's mood and mental agility. But the same can be said (perhaps to a lesser degree) of the neck, the back, the head, the feet. A human race that has learned to move about in shoes has oriented its thought differently from the way it would have done if the race had gone barefoot. It is sad, especially for philosophers in the idealistic tradition, to think that the Spirit originates from these conditions; yet not only is this true, but the great thing is that Hegel knew it also, and therefore studied the cranial bumps indicated by phrenologists, and in a book actually entitled Phenomenology of Mind.

But the problem of my jeans led me to other observations. Not only did the garment impose a demeanor on me; by focusing my attention on demeanor, it obliged me to live towards the exterior world. It reduced, in other words, the exercise of my interior-ness. For people in my profession it is normal to walk along with your mind on other things: the article you have to write, the lecture you must give, the relationship between the One and the Many, the Andreotti government, how to deal with the problem of the Redemption, whether there is life on Mars, the latest song of Celentano, the paradox of Epimenides. In our line this is called "the interior life." Well, with my new jeans my life was entirely exterior: I thought about the relationship between me and my pants, and the relationship between my pants and me and the society we lived in. I had achieved heteroconsciousness, that is to say, an epidermic self-awareness.

I realized then that thinkers, over the centuries, have fought to free themselves of armor. Warriors lived an exterior life, all enclosed in cuirasses and tunics; but monks had invented a habit that, while fulfilling, on its awn, the requirements of demeanor (majestic, flowing, all of a piece, so that it fell in statuesque folds), it left the body (inside, underneath) completely free and unaware of itself. Monks were rich in interior life and very dirty, because the body, protected by a habit that, ennobling it, released it, was free to think, and to forget about itself. The idea was not only ecclesiastic; you have to think only of the beautiful mandes Erasmus wore. And when even the intellectual must dress in lay armor (wigs, waistcoats, knee breeches) we see that when he retires to think, he swaggers in rich dressinggowns, or in Balzac's loose, drôlatique blouses. Thought abhors tights.

But if armor obliges its wearer to live the exterior life, then the age-old female spell is due also to the feet that society has imposed armors on women, forcing them to neglect the exercise of thought. Woman has been enslaved by fashion not only because, in obliging her to be attractive, to maintain an ethereal demeanor, to be pretty and stimulating, it made

her a sex object; she has been enslaved chiefly because the clothing counseled for her forced her psychologically to live for the exterior. And this makes us realize how intellectually gifted and heroic a girl had to be before she could become, in those clothes, Madame de Sevigne, Vittoria Colonna, Madame Curie, or Rosa Luxemburg. The reflection has some value because it leads us to discover that, apparent symbol of liberation and equality with men, the blue jeans that fashion today imposes on women are a trap of Domination; for they don't free the body, but subject it to another label and imprison it in other armors that don't seem to be armors because they apparently are not "feminine."

A final reflection—in imposing an exterior demeanor, clothes are semiotic devices, machines for communicating. This was known, but there had been no attempt to illustrate the parallel with the syntactic structures of language, which, in the opinion of many people, influence our view of the world. The syntactic structures of fashions also influence our view of the world, and in a far more physical way than the consecutio temporum or the existence of the subjunctive. You see how many mysterious paths the dialectic between oppression and liberation must follow, and the struggle to bring light. Even via the groin.

1976

Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage

Cult

"Was that artillery fire, or is it my heart pounding?" Whenever Casablanca is shown, at this point the audience reacts with an enthusiasm usually reserved for football. Sometimes a single word is enough: Fans cry every time Bogey says "kid." Frequently the spectators quote the best lines before the actors say them.

According to traditional standards in aesthetics, Casablanca is not a work of art, if such an expression still has a meaning. In any case, if the films of Dreyer, Eisenstein, or Antonioni are works of art, Casablanca represents a very modest aesthetic achievement. It is a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly, its characters are psychologically incredible, its actors act in a mannered way. Nevertheless, it is a great example of cinematic discourse, a palimpsest for future students of twentieth-century religiosity, a paramount laboratory for semiotic research into textual strategies. Moreover, it has become a cult movie.

What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise. Naturally all these elements (characters and episodes) must have some archetypical appeal, as we shall see. One can ask and answer questions about the various subway stations of New York or Paris only if these spots have become or have been assumed as mythical areas and such names as Canarsie Line or Vincennes-Neuilly stand not only for physical places but become the catalyzers of collective memories.

Curiously enough, a book can also inspire a cult even though it is a great work of art: Both The Three Musketeers and The Divine Comedy rank among the cult books; and there are more trivia games among the fans of

Dante than among the fans of Dumas. I suspect that a cult movie, on the contrary, must display some organic imperfections: It seems that the boastful Rio Bravo is a cult movie and the great Stagecoach is not.

I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. In the case of a book one can unhinge it, so to speak, physically, reducing it to a series of excerpts. A movie, on the contrary, must be already ramshackle, rickety, unhinged in itself. A perfect movie, since it cannot be reread every time we want, from the point we choose, as happens with a book, remains in our memory as a whole, in the form of a central idea or emotion; only an unhinged movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs. It should display not one central idea but many. It should not reveal a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on, and because of, its glorious ricketiness.

However, it must have some quality. Let me say that it can be ramshackle from the production point of view (in that nobody knew exactly what was going to be done next)—as happened evidently with the Rocky Horror Picture Show—but it must display certain textual features, in the sense that, outside the conscious control of its creators, it becomes a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality. Its addressee must suspect it is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors. A cult movie is the proof that, as literature comes from literature, cinema comes from cinema.

Which elements, in a movie, can be separated from the whole and adored for themselves? In order to go on with this analysis of Casablanca I should use some important semiotic categories, such as the ones (provided by the Russian Formalists) of theme and motif. I confess I find it very difficult to ascertain what the various Russian Formalists meant by motif. If—as Veselovsky says— a motif is the simplest narrative unit, then one wonders why "fire from heaven" should belong to the same category as "the persecuted maid" (since the former can be represented by an image, while the latter requires a certain narrative development).

It would be interesting to follow Tomashevsky and to look in Casablanca for free or tied and for dynamic or static motifs. We should distinguish between more or less universal narrative functions a la Propp, visual stereotypes like the Cynic Adventurer, and more complex archetypical situations like the Unhappy Love. I hope someone will do this job, but here I will assume, more prudently (and borrowing the concept from research into Artificial Intelligence) the more flexible notion of "frame."

In The Role of the Reader I distinguished between common and intertextual frames. I meant by "common frame" data-structures for representing stereotyped situations such as dining at a restaurant or going to the railway station; in other words, a sequence of actions more or less coded by our normal experience.

And by "intertextual frames" I meant stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual tradition and recorded by our encyclopedia, such as, for example, the standard duel between the sheriff and the bad guy or the narrative situation in which the hero fights the villain and wins, or more macroscopic textual situations, such as the story of the vierge souillée or the classic recognition scene (Bakhtin considered it a motif,

in the sense of a chronotope). We could distinguish between stereotyped intertextual frames (for instance, the Drunkard Redeemed by Love) and stereotyped iconographical units (for instance, the Evil Nazi). But since even these iconographical units, when they appear in a movie, if they do not directly elicit an action, at least suggest its possible development, we can use the notion of intertextual frame to cover both.

Moreover, we are interested in finding those frames that not only are recognizable by the audience as belonging to a sort of ancestral intertextual tradition but that also display a particular fascination. "A suspect who eludes a passport control and is shot by the police" is undoubtedly an intertextual frame but it does not have a "magic" flavor. Let me address intuitively the idea of "magic" frame. Let me define as "magic" those frames that, when they appear in a movie and can be separated from the whole, transform this movie into a cult object. In Casablanca we find more intertextual frames than "magic" intertextual frames.

I will call the latter "intertextual archetypes." The term "archetype" does not claim to have any particular psychoanalytic or mythic connotation, but serves only to indicate a preestablished and frequently reappearing narrative situation, cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts and provoking in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déjà vu that everybody yearns to see again. I would not say that an intertextual archetype is necessarily "universal." It can belong to a rather recent textual tradition, as with certain topoi of slapstick comedy. It is sufficient to consider it as a topos or standard situation that manages to be particularly appealing to a given cultural area or a historical period. The Making of Casablanca "Can I tell you a story?" Ilse asks. Then she adds: "I don't know the finish yet."

Rick says: "Well, go on, tell it. Maybe one will come to you as you go along."
Rick's line is a sort of epitome of Casablanca itself. According to Ingrid Bergman, the film was apparently being made up at the same time that it was being shot. Until the last moment not even Michael Curtiz knew whether Ilse would leave with Rick or with Victor, and Ingrid Bergman seems so fascinatingly mysterious because she did not know at which man she was to look with greater tenderness. This explains why, in the story, she does not, in fact, choose her fate: She is chosen.

When you don't know how to deal with a story, you put stereotyped situations in it because you know that they, at least, have already worked elsewhere. Let us take a marginal but revealing example. Each time Laszlo orders something to drink (and it happens four times) he changes his choice:

(1) Cointreau,
(2) cocktail,
(3) cognac, and
(4) whisky (he once drinks champagne but he does not ask for it). Why such confusing and confused drinking habits for a man endowed with an ascetic temper? There is no psychological reason. My guess is that each time Curtiz was simply quoting, unconsciously, similar situations in other movies and trying to provide a reasonably complete repetition of them.

Thus one is tempted to read Casablanca as T. S. Eliot read Hamlet, attributing its fascination not to the fact that it was a successful work

(actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate efforts) but to the imperfection of its composition. He viewed Hamlet as the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier versions of the story, and so the puzzling ambiguity of the main character was due to the author's difficulty in putting together different topoi. So both public and critics find Hamlet beautiful because it is interesting, but believe it is interesting because it is beautiful.

On a smaller scale the same thing happened to Casablanca. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time. When only a few of these formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire of stock formulas is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia: the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius. Stop by Stop Every story involves one or more archetypes. To make a good story a single archetype is usually enough. But Casablanca is not satisfied with that. It uses them all.

It would be nice to identify our archetypes scene by scene and shot by shot, stopping the tape at every relevant step. Every time I have scanned Casablanca with very cooperative research groups, the review has taken many hours. Furthermore, when a team starts this kind of game, the instances of stopping the videotape increase proportionally with the size of the audience. Each member of the team sees something that the others have missed, and many of them start to find in the movie even memories of movies made after Casablanca—evidently the normal situation for a cult movie, suggesting that perhaps the best deconstructive readings should be made of unhinged texts (or that deconstruction is simply a way of breaking up texts).

However, I think that the first twenty minutes of the film represent a sort of review of the principal archetypes. Once they have been assembled, without any synthetic concern, then the story starts to suggest a sort of savage syntax of the archetypical elements and organizes them in multileveled oppositions. Casablanca looks like a musical piece with an extraordinarily long overture, where every theme is exhibited according to a monodic line. Only later does the symphonic work take place. In a way the first twenty minutes could be analyzed by a Russian Formalist and the rest by a Greimasian.

Let me then try only a sample analysis of the first part. I think that a real text-analytical study of Casablanca is still to be made, and I offer only some hints to future teams of researchers, who will carry out, someday, a complete reconstruction of its deep textual structure.

1.First, African music, then the Marseillaise. Two different genres are evoked: adventure movie and patriotic movie.

2.Third genre. The globe: Newsreel. The voice even suggests the news report. Fourth genre: the odyssey of refugees. Fifth genre: Casablanca and Lisbon are, traditionally, hauts lieux for international intrigues. Thus in two minutes five genres are evoked.

3.Casablanca—Lisbon. Passage to the Promised Land (Lisbon— America). Casablanca is the Magic Door. We still do not know what the Magic Key is or by which Magic Horse one can reach the Promised Land.

4."Wait, wait, wait." To make the passage one must submit to a Test. The Long Expectation. Purgatory situation.

5.“Deutschland über Alles.” The German anthem introduces the theme of Barbarians.

6.The Casbah. Pépé le Moko. Confusion, robberies, violence, and repression.

7. Pétain (Vichy) vs. the Cross of Lorraine. See at the end the same opposition closing the story: Eau de Vichy vs.

Choice of the Resistance. War Propaganda movie.

8.The Magic Key: the visa. It is around the winning of the Magic Key that passions are unleashed. Captain Renault mentioned: He is the Guardian of the Door, or the boatman of the Acheron to be conquered by a Magic Gift (money or sex).

9.The Magic Horse: the airplane. The airplane flies over Rick’s Café Américain, thus recalling the Promised Land of which the Café is the reduced model.

10. Major Strasser shows up. Theme of the Barbarians, and their emasculated slaves. “Je suis l’empire à la fin de la décadence/Qui regarde passer les grands barbares blancs/En composant des acrostiques indolents. . . .”

11. “Everybody comes to Rick’s.” By quoting the original play, Renault introduces the audience to the Café. The interior: Foreign Legion (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell, and also his own skeleton in the closet), Grand Hotel (people come and people go, and nothing ever happens), Mississippi River
Boat, New Orleans Brothel (black piano player), the Gambling Inferno in Macao or Singapore (with Chinese women), the Smugglers’ Paradise, the Last Outpost on the Edge of the Desert. Rick’s place is a magic circle where everything can happen—love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. Limited resources and the unity of place, due to the theatrical origin of the story, suggested an admirable condensation of events in a single setting. One can identify the usual paraphernalia of at least ten exotic genres.

12. Rick slowly shows up, first by synecdoche (his hand), then by metonymy (the check). The various aspects of the contradictory (plurifilmic) personality of Rick are introduced: the Fatal Adventurer, the Self-Made Businessman (money is money), the Tough Guy from a gangster movie, Our Man in Casablanca (international intrigue), the Cynic. Only later he will be characterized also as the Hemingwayan Hero (he helped the Ethiopians and the Spaniards against fascism). He does not drink. This undoubtedly represents a nice problem, for later Rick must play the role of the Redeemed Drunkard and he has to be made a drunkard (as a Disillusioned Lover) so that he can be redeemed. But Bogey’s face sustains rather well this unbearable number of contradictory psychological features.

13. The Magic Key, in person: the transit letters. Rick receives them from Peter Lorre and from this moment everybody wants them: how to avoid thinking of Sam Spade and of The Maltese Falcon?

14. Music Hall. Mr. Ferrari. Change of genre: comedy with brilliant dialogue. Rick is now the Disenchanted Lover, or the Cynical Seducer.

15. Rick vs. Renault. The Charming Scoundrels.

16. The theme of the Magic Horse and the Promised Land returns.

17. Roulette as the Game of Life and Death (Russian Roulette that devours fortunes and can destroy the happiness of the Bulgarian Couple, the Epiphany of Innocence). The Dirty Trick: cheating at cards. At this point the Trick is an Evil one but later it will be a Good one, providing a way to the Magic Key for the Bulgarian bride.

18. Arrest and tentative escape of Ugarte. Action movie.

19. Laszlo and Ilse. The Uncontaminated Hero and La Femme Fatale. Both in white—always; clever opposition with Germans, usually in black. In the meeting at Laszlo's table, Strasser is in white, in order to reduce the opposition. However, Strasser and Ilse are Beauty and the Beast. The Norwegian agent: spy movie.

20. The Desperate Lover and Drink to Forget.

21. The Faithful Servant and his Beloved Master. Don Quixote and Sancho.

22. Play it (again, Sam). Anticipated quotation of Woody Allen.

23. The long flashback begins. Flashback as a content and flashback as a form. Quotation of the flashback as a topical stylistic device. The Power of Memory. Last Day in Paris. Two Weeks in Another Town. Brief Encounter. French movie of the 1930's (the station as quai des brumes).

24. At this point the review of the archetypes is more or less complete. There is still the moment when Rick plays the Diamond in the Rough (who allows the Bulgarian bride to win), and two typical situations: the scene of the Marseillaise and the two lovers discovering that Love Is Forever. The gift to the Bulgarian bride (along with the enthusiasm of the waiters), the Marseillaise, and the Love Scene are three instances of the rhetorical figure of Climax, as the quintessence of Drama (each climax coming obviously with its own anticlimax).

Now the story can elaborate upon its elements. The first symphonic elaboration comes with the second scene around the roulette table. We discover for the first time that the Magic Key (that everybody believed to be only purchasable with money) can in reality be given only as a Gift, a reward for Purity. The Donor will be Rick. He gives (free) the visa to
Laszlo. In reality there is also a third Gift, the Gift Rick makes of his own desire, sacrificing himself. Note that there is no gift for Ilse, who, in some way, even though innocent, has betrayed two men. The Receiver of the Gift is the Uncontaminated Laszlo.

By becoming the Donor, Rick meets Redemption. No one impure can reach the Promised Land. But Rick and Renault redeem themselves and can reach the other Promised Land, not America (which is Paradise) but the Resistance, the Holy War (which is a glorious Purgatory). Laszlo flies directly to Paradise because he has already suffered the ordeal of the underground. Rick, moreover, is not the only one who accepts sacrifice: The idea of sacrifice pervades the whole story, Ilse's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is prepared to give herself to help her husband, Victor's sacrifice when he is prepared to see Ilse with Rick to guarantee her safety.

The second symphonic elaboration is upon the theme of the Unhappy Love. Unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilse and cannot have her. Unhappy for Ilse, who loves Rick and cannot leave with him. Unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilse. The interplay of unhappy loves produces numerous twists and turns. In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse leaves him. Then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse is attracted to Rick. Finally Ilse is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband.

These unhappy loves are arranged in a triangle. But in the normal adulterous triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover, while in this case both men are betrayed and suffer a loss.

In this defeat, however, an additional element plays a part, so subtly that it almost escapes the level of consciousness. Quite subliminally a hint of Platonic Love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted by the personality of Rick, and it seems that at a certain point each of the two is playing out the duel of sacrifice to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's Confessions, the woman is here an intermediary between the two men. She herself does not bear any positive value (except, obviously, Beauty): The whole story is a virile affair, a dance of seduction between Male Heroes.

From now on the film carries out the definitive construction of its intertwined triangles, to end with the solution of the Supreme Sacrifice and of the Redeemed Bad Guys. Note that, while the redemption of Rick has long been prepared, the redemption of Renault is absolutely unjustified and comes only because this was the final requirement the movie had to meet in order to be a perfect Epos of Frames. The Archetypes Hold a Reunion Casablanca is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, and because human beings live not "real" life but life as stereotypically portrayed in previous films. Casablanca carries the sense of déjà vu to such a degree that the addressee is ready to see in it what happened after it as well. It is not until To Have and Have Not that Bogey plays the role of the Hemingway hero, but here he appears "already" loaded with Hemingwayesque connotations simply because Rick fought in Spain.

Peter Lorre trails reminiscences of Fritz Lang, Conrad Veidt's German officer emanates a faint whiff of The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. He is not a ruthless, technological Nazi; he is a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar.

Casablanca became a cult movie because it is not one movie. It is "movies." And this is the reason it works, in defiance of any aesthetic theory.

For it stages the powers of Narrativity in its natural state, before art intervenes to tame it. This is why we accept the way that characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, that conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation when a spy is approaching, that bar girls cry at the sound of the Marseillaise . . .

When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly, we plumb Homeric profundity. Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion.

Just as the extreme of pain meets sensual pleasure, and the extreme of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the extreme of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime.
Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. Nature has spoken in place of men. This, alone, is a phenomenon worthy of veneration. The Charged Cult
The structure of Casablanca helps us understand what happens in later movies born in order to become cult objects.

What Casablanca does unconsciously, other movies will do with extreme intertextual awareness, assuming also that the addressee is equally aware of their purposes. These are "postmodern" movies, where the quotation of the topos is recognized as the only way to cope with the burden of our filmic encyclopedic expertise.

Think for instance of Bananas, with its explicit quotation of the Odessa steps from Eisenstein's Potemkin. In Casablanca one enjoys quotation even though one does not recognize it, and those who recognize it feel as if they all belonged to the same little clique. In Bananas those who do not catch the topos cannot enjoy the scene and those who do simply feel smart.

Another (and different) case is the quotation of the topical duel between the black Arab giant with his scimitar and the unprotected hero, in Raiders of the Lost Ark. If you remember, the topos suddenly turns into another one, and the unprotected hero becomes in a second The Fastest Gun in the West. Here the ingenuous viewer can miss the quotation though his enjoyment will then be rather slight; and real enjoyment is reserved for the people accustomed to cult movies, who know the whole repertoire of "magic" archetypes. In a way, Bananas works for cultivated "cinephiles" while Raiders works for Casablanca-addicts.

The third case is that of E.T. , when the alien is brought outside in a Halloween disguise and meets the dwarf coming from The Empire Strikes Back. You remember that E.T. starts and runs to cheer him (or it). Here nobody can enjoy the scene if he does not share, at least, the following elements of intertextual competence:
(1) He must know where the second character comes from (Spielberg citing Lucas),

(2) He must know something about the links between the two directors, and

(3) He must know that both monsters have been designed by Rambaldi and that, consequently, they are linked by some form of brotherhood.

The required expertise is not only intercinematic, it is intermedia, in the sense that the addressee must know not only other movies but all the mass media gossip about movies. This third example presupposes a "Casablanca universe" in which cult has become the normal way of enjoying movies. Thus in this case we witness an instance of metacult, or of cult about cult—a Cult
Culture.

It would be semiotically uninteresting to look for quotations of archetypes in Raiders or in Indiana Jones: They were conceived within a metasemiotic culture, and what the semiotician can find in them is exactly what the directors put there. Spielberg and Lucas are semiotically nourished authors working for a culture of instinctive semioticians.

With Casablanca the situation is different. So Casablanca explains Raiders, but Raiders does not explain Casablanca. At most it can explain the new ways in which Casablanca will be received in the next years.

It will be a sad day when a too smart audience will read Casablanca as conceived by Michael Curtiz after having read Calvino and Barthes. But that day will come. Perhaps we have been able to discover here, for the last time, the Truth. Après nous, le déluge.

1984

A Photograph

The readers of L'Espresso will recall the tape of the last minutes of Radio Alice,1 recorded as the police were hammering at the door. One thing that impressed many people was how the announcer, as he reported in a tense voice what was happening, tried to convey the situation by referring to a scene in a movie.
There was undoubtedly something singular about an individual going through a fairly traumatic experience as if he were in a film.

There can be only two interpretations. One is the traditional:

Life is lived as a work of art. The other obliges us to reflect a bit further: It is the visual work (cinema, videotape, mural, comic strip, photograph) that is now a part of our memory. Which is quite different, and seems to confirm a hypothesis already ventured, namely that the younger generations have absorbed as elements of their behavior a series of elements filtered through the mass media (and coming, in some cases, from the most impenetrable areas of our century's artistic experimentation). To tell the truth, it isn't even necessary to talk about new generations: If you are barely middle-aged, you will have learned personally the extent to which experience (love, fear, or hope) is filtered through "already seen" images. I leave it to moralists to deplore this way of living by intermediate communication. We must only bear in mind that mankind has never done anything else, and before Nadar and the Lumières, it used other images, drawn from pagan carvings or the illuminated manuscripts of the Apocalypse.

We can foresee another objection, this time not from cherishers of the tradition: Isn't it perhaps an unpleasant example of the ideology of scientific neutrality, the way, when we are faced by active behavior and searing, dramatic events, we always try again and again to analyze them, define them, interpret them, dissect them? Can we define that which by definition eludes all defining?

Well, we must have the courage to assert once more what we believe in: Today more than ever political news itself is marked, motivated, abundantly nourished by the symbolic. Understanding the mechanisms of the symbolic in which we move means being political. Not understanding them leads to mistaken politics. Of course, it is also a mistake to reduce political and economic events to mere symbolic mechanisms; but it is equally wrong to ignore this dimension.

There are unquestionably many reasons, and serious ones, for the outcome of Luciano Lama's intervention* at the University of Rome, but one particular reason must not be overlooked: the opposition between two theatrical or spatial structures. Lama presented himself on a podium

(however makeshift), thus obeying the rules of a frontal communication characteristic of tradeunion, working-class spatiality, facing a crowd of students who have, however, developed other ways of aggregation and interaction, decentralized, mobile, apparently disorganized.

Theirs is a different way of organizing space and so that day at the University there was the clash also between two concepts of perspective, the one we might call Brunelleschian and the other cubist. True, anyone reducing the whole story to these factors would be mistaken, but anyone trying to dismiss this interpretation as an intellectual game would be mistaken, too. The Catholic Church, the French Revolution, Nazism, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, not to mention the Rolling Stones and soccer clubs, have always known very well that the deployment of space is religion, politics, ideology. So let's give back to the spatial and the visual the place they deserve in the history of political and social relations.

And now to another event. These past months, within that variegated and shifting experience that is called "the movement," the men carrying .38's have emerged. From various quarters the movement has been asked to denounce them as an alien body; and there were forces exerting pressure both from outside and from within. Apparently this demand for rejection encountered difficulties, and various elements came into play. Synthetically, we can say that many belonging to the movement didn't feel like labeling as outsiders forces that, even if they revealed themselves in unacceptable and tragically suicidal ways, seemed to express a reality of social protest that couldn't be denied. I am repeating discussions that all of us have heard.

Basically what was said was this: They are wrong, but they are part of a mass movement. And the debate was harsh, painful. Now, last week, there occurred a kind of precipitation of all the elements of the debate previously suspended in uncertainty. Suddenly, and I say suddenly because decisive statements were issued in the space of a day, the gunmen were cut off. Why at that moment? Why not before? It's not enough to say that recent events in Milan* made a deep impression on many people, because similar events in Rome had also had a profound effect. What happened that was new and different? We may venture a hypothesis, once again recalling that an explanation never explains everything, but becomes part of a landscape of explanations in reciprocal relationship. A photograph appeared.

Many photographs have appeared, but this one made the rounds of all the papers after being published in the Corriere d'Informazione. As everyone will recall, it was the photograph of a young man wearing a knitted ski-mask, standing alone, in profile, in the middle of a street, legs apart, arms outstretched horizontally, with both hands grasping a pistol. Other forms can be seen in the background, but the photograph's structure is classical in its simplicity: The central figure, isolated, dominates it.

If it is licit (and it is necessary) to make aesthetic observations in such cases, this is one of those photographs that will go down in history and will appear in a thousand books. The vicissitudes of our century have been summed up in a few exemplary photographs that have proved epoch-making: the unruly crowd pouring into the square during the "ten days that shook the world"; Robert Capa's dying miliciano; the marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima; the Vietnamese prisoner being executed with a shot in the temple; Che Guevara's tortured body on a plank in a barracks. Each of these images has become a myth and has condensed numerous speeches. It has surpassed the individual circumstance that

produced it; it no longer speaks of that single character or of those characters, but expresses concepts. It is unique, but at the same time it refers to other images that preceded it or that, in imitation, have followed it. Each of these photographs seems a film we have seen and refers to other films that had seen it. Sometimes it isn't a photograph but a painting, or a poster.

What did the photograph of the Milanese gunman "say"? I believe it abruptly revealed, without the need for a lot of digressive speeches, something that has been circulating in a lot of talk, but that words alone could not make people accept. That photograph didn't resemble any of the images which, for at least four generations, had been emblems of the idea of revolution. The collective element was missing; in a traumatic way the figure of the lone hero returned here. And this lone hero was not the one familiar in revolutionary iconography, which when it portrayed a man alone always saw him as victim, sacrificial lamb: the dying miliciano or the slain Che, in fact. This individual hero, on the contrary, had the pose, the terrifying isolation of the tough guy of gangster movies or the solitary gunman of the West—no longer dear to a generation who consider themselves metropolitan Indians.

This image suggested other worlds, other figurative, narrative traditions that had nothing to do with the proletarian tradition, with the idea of popular revolt, of mass struggle. Suddenly it inspired a syndrome of rejection. It came to express the following concept: Revolution is elsewhere and, even if it is possible, it doesn't proceed via this "individual" act.

The photograph, for a civilization now accustomed to thinking in images, was not the description of a single event (and, in fact, it makes no difference who the man was, nor does the photograph help in identifying him): It was an argument. And it worked. It is of no interest to know if it was posed (and therefore faked), whether it was the testimony of an act of conscious bravado, if it was the work of a professional photographer who gauged the moment, the light, the frame, or whether it virtually took itself, was snapped accidentally by unskilled and lucky hands. At the moment it appeared, its communicative career began: Once again the political and the private have been marked by the plots of the symbolic, which, as always happens, has proved producer of reality.

1977

The end