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Yesterday's Fiction, Tomorrow's News
Post-Truth and Literature in Umberto Eco's *Numero Zero*

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Abstract

In contemporary Western society, the concept of truth is destabilizing in face of relativist skepticism and an influx of ‘fake news’. While digital media are often considered accomplice to the ‘post-truth’ problem, the role of literature in the modern world is still largely undescribed. Umberto Eco’s *Numero Zero* revolves around the Italian news industry in the 1990’s, and can be seen as an early example of post-truth literature. Through a close reading of the novel, this thesis considers the way *Numero Zero* reflects on the role of literature in a post-truth society, both as a work that reflects explicitly on various kinds of media, and as a novel.

In his use of literature as a motif, Eco builds associations between literary readership and intelligence and critical thinking. Additionally, whereas literature once carried significant intellectual weight, it is now easily dismissed as irrelevant and outdated. In its postmodern self-reflexivity, the novel ironically denounces its own importance, but it also empowers itself by reminding the reader of literature’s valuable aspects. Furthermore, as an example of early post-truth literature, the novel investigates the epistemological problems that arise in a post-truth society, in particular through a juxtaposition of fake news and conspiracy theories.

Numero Zero confronts the reader with the precarious state of truth and knowledge in modern society, and encourages a continued search for truth in face of post-truth skepticism and apathy.

Introduction

Umberto Eco's final novel, *Numero Zero* (2015), paints a grim and satirical picture of the state of the news industry in the Italy of the 1990's. It centers on the creation of a fictive daily newspaper, *Domani*, which is supposed to report not on "yesterday's news" but on "what might happen tomorrow" (30). As a tagline, *Domani* promises to "tell the truth about everything" (23). In reality, the newspaper is a farce for a powerful businessman with a political agenda: its zero-issues are to be used as blackmail material; the paper itself will be closed down before it ever appears in print. In the meantime, editor-in-chief Simei happily supports the fabrication of biased and false news, and explicitly instructs his writers to flaunt their integrity during the writing process (e.g. 57). Though the writers are unaware that their work will not be published, none of them are particularly bothered by Simei's call for dishonesty. It is, in fact, suggested that such practices are commonplace among news media (NZ 184).

Framing the story of *Domani*'s conception is the narrative of Colonna, a failed writer, translator, and journalist, who is approached by Simei and agrees to join the writing staff. More importantly, he also agrees to write a book about the paper's creation. The book will not portray events as they happen in reality; Colonna must "give the idea of another kind of newspaper," one that promises to tell the truth at any cost, and is eventually shut down because it has upset powerful people (NZ 23). Unlike the other writers, Colonna is informed of the true purpose of *Domani*, and becomes actively engaged in keeping the secret. His job is to ensure that Simei emerges from the project a hero in the public eye, or else with considerable financial recompense. Thus, while the focus of *Numero Zero* is on the news industry, the novel also gives attention to other kinds of media. Literature, in particular, is juxtaposed with newspapers as a source of knowledge.

This thesis considers how Umberto Eco's *Numero Zero* reflects on the role of literature in a 'post-truth' society. It first outlines the historical setting of the novel, Italy in the 1990's, and

the status of news media and truth in Italian society at that time. Then it discusses Umberto Eco's view on the relationship between literature, truth, and interpretation. The concept 'post-truth' is explained in light of Eco's epistemological theory. Next, a connection is made between literature and post-truth through the postmodernist movement of the late twentieth century. Finally, through a close reading of *Numero Zero*, the novel's position in post-truth discourse is analyzed. The thesis looks at appearances of the literary medium within the novel, as well as the way the novel itself—as a work of literature—engages with post-truth issues.

The Italian 1990's

The setting of the novel—Milan, 1992—relates the text to a defining moment in Italian history: the *Mani Pulite* ('clean hands') investigations. In February of 1992, a relatively minor arrest of an administrator in Milan plunged the country into chaos as the subsequent judicial investigation uncovered a widespread system of bribery and corruption that involved all of the country's main political parties, as well as major social and economic institutions (Koff 21-22). Thousands of people came under suspicion, including politicians who held or had held top functions on the national level. As a result, a newfound desperation for legitimacy swept through Italian politics, destroying much of the old order. Parties that had existed since the Second World War or earlier splintered or changed form in major ways to leave behind accusations of corruption. The string of scandals exposed by the investigations was mockingly referred to as *Tangentopoli*, or 'kickback city' (Koff 21-23).

Through its emphasis on the media, the novel also connects the specific context of the *Tangentopoli* scandal to the decades succeeding it. From the end of 1993 through the first decade of the new millennium, Italy's political scene was dominated by Silvio Berlusconi, known—among other things—for his extensive application of news and advertising media in

his political campaigns (Koff 106). As the owner of Italy's largest media empire, Berlusconi had the means at his disposal to use media influence on a massive scale, and did so with great success: his party, *Forza Italia*, won the March 1994 elections despite having been formed only two months earlier (Koff 81). Berlusconi's victory can be seen as reflective of a newly emerging "postmodernist culture" in Italy; a culture characterized by a disappointment in the traditional ways of Italian politics, a rhetoric of freedom and spontaneity, and a pervasive distrust of existing power structures (Koff 78).

This culture of suspicion and freedom-centered philosophy, along with the political strategy of mass media propaganda, are central themes of *Numero Zero*. In the novel, Eco compares and contrasts different types of media—rather, different types of narrative—to reflect on the status of truth in Italian society after the *Tangentopoli* scandal.

Literature and Truth

Eco distinguishes broadly between two types of texts: creative writing, and scientific or academic writing (the kind of journalism that commits itself to certain ethical standards may be counted in the latter category). The difference between the two text types resides in the way each responds to interpretation. The author of a scientific text has the ability to declare a particular interpretation of their text to be the correct one. The author of a creative text, rather, must "respect their readers" and allow any interpretation to exist that the reader can successfully argue for (*Confessions* 4-5). This is, in fact, the purpose of literature: "The text is a lazy machine that wants its readers to do part of its job—that is, it's a device conceived in order to elicit interpretations" (*Confessions* 34-35). While Eco allows that some scientific text can absolutely be considered creative, he draws a clear distinction between texts that are intended to function

on a level of true or false, and texts that can never be judged in such a way, because their meaning is inherently unstable.

The notion that science and scientific texts lay claim to objective truth also does not mean that every, or even any, such text actually professes *the* objective truth. After all, even when disregarding the most skeptical philosophical notions of truth (ones that allow its advocates to question everything endlessly) and adopting the Western notion of scientific truth as the best of measurements, Eco points out that truth is not straightforward. It has taken many shapes throughout history: at one point, for instance, it was considered ‘objectively true’ that the Earth was flat, which most people now know to be false (*Serendipities* 3). Falsehoods—whether they spring from conspiracy theories, superstitions, or deliberate lies—can be extremely persuasive; more persuasive, even, than reality (*Serendipities* 17). More importantly, Eco finds that in order to test whether a false story is false, it must already have some objectively true counterpart with which to compare it. He concludes that "[t]he truly genuine problem thus does not consist of proving something false but in proving that the authentic object is authentic" so that it can be used as a measure to test falsehoods against (*Serendipities* 19). This seems to lead to a chicken-and-egg line of reasoning, in which the truth must be known in order to declare falsehood, and falsehoods must be recognized in order to know what is true. The question arises: If we cannot know, consistently, what is true, how can we make any kind of judgement on what is false?

Eco does not think that theories disproved by history and ones generally believed in modern society should be considered equal; some relevant judgement can be cast. He suggests that there is an inductive “process of verification” by the collective “Community” of human beings, which leads society to discard those theories which are incompatible with reality as humans perceive it, and to accept those which are not proven to be inconsistent with that reality (*Serendipities* 19-20). The knowledge that emerges from this process is always provisional, and may have to be discarded based on later evidence, but that should not keep us from treating our present

knowledge as exactly that (*Serendipities* 20). “[T]he criterion of the wisdom of the community is based on constant awareness of the fallibility of our learning” (*Serendipities* 20). So long as the “human faith in the work of [the] Community” persists, knowledge—however provisional—is achievable.

Post-Truth

Faith in the Community is essential for allowing a commonly held notion of truth to exist. Looking at modern society, it seems as if that faith might be wavering. A wave of publications with titles such as *The Death of Truth* (Tiedemann, 2005), *The New War on Truth* (d’Ancona, 2017), and *The Misinformation Age* (O’Connor and Weatherall, 2019), and the prevalence of the term ‘post-truth’ in current descriptions of Western society and politics, suggest that something is changing fundamentally in the way people engage with truth and knowledge. John Corner defines ‘post-truth’ in broad terms as a sense of “epochal shift” (Corner 1100). He notes that there seems to be an underlying assumption of a previous age during which truth was unequivocal (Corner 1100-1101). Whether such a time of definite truth ever existed, is rather doubtful, since no notion of truth has ever been universally accepted (Antczak and Osbeck 1). Antczak and Osbeck therefore give a meaning to ‘post-truth’ that is not to do with a sense of being historically “past” truth, but rather “the sense that truth has become irrelevant” (Antczak and Osbeck 2). The key of the problem lies “in the ‘willful ignorance’ employed when we do not know whether something is true but assert it to be so because it is consistent with our feelings” (Antczak and Osbeck 2). A post-truth society, in this definition, is one that is founded on an apathy toward the difference between objective knowledge and opinion.

Arguably, there are two sides to the post-truth problem: on one hand, there is a public that is increasingly apathetic to objective measures of truth; on the other, there is an influx of

politicians and institutions who are willing to abuse and reinforce that apathy for the sake of expanding their own power (Corner 1100). The post-truth way of regarding information is extremely profitable to those who are willing to ignore the moral and epistemological implications of disregarding objective truth (Corner 1101). The more philosophical aspects of post-truth may well reinforce the functional, political dimension, and vice versa, as for instance politicians can wield epistemological theory as a weapon to support their own claims in face of incompatible truths uncovered by science (O'Connor and Weatherall 25-26).

One way in which post-truth politics are actively practiced is through the deliberate spread of misinformation. 'Fake news,' a term which has risen in popularity along with 'post-truth' since the Trump campaign (Corner 1100-1001; Waisbord 1867), refers specifically to physical or digital media output that contains explicit and intentional falsehoods. Corner finds fake news comparable to bias or propaganda, though the negative judgement propagated by fake news and the intentionality of its production are relatively more intense (Corner 1100-1101). While the term seems to be quite new, fake news as a phenomenon is far from it; O'Connor and Weatherall trace its American roots back to the American Revolution, with different newspapers and pamphlets reporting on events of the then-ongoing war from a determinedly one-sided perspective. Since then, false news stories have been published on occasion, even in times of peace (O'Connor and Weatherall 152-153). For the most part, however, "Gilded age media technology" limited the impact of these instances of fake news (O'Connor and Weatherall 154). It is no coincidence that fake news is finding more fertile ground in the (Western) world of the twenty-first century. New, widely accessible social media are facilitating the spread of misinformation on a scale that would have been unimaginable thirty years ago. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow fake news to travel across the world in a split second, among hundreds of millions of users (O'Connor and Weatherall 154).

Post-Truth and Literature

It has been suggested that the current move toward a post-truth society was facilitated by the focus on interpretive relativism that was prominent in academic movements of the late twentieth century (Antczak and Osbeck 3). An emphasis on the subjectivity of knowledge may have spread “from the context of literary, religious, or artistic texts to that of scientific theory,” with the result that “interpretive acts” are now seen as “equivalent across these contexts” (Antczak and Osbeck 3). Postmodernism, in particular, has been pointed at as a possible influence on post-truth rhetoric (Corner 1104). As noted above, post-truth society and politics depend on much more than philosophy: it is “economic, social, and moral, [...] tied concretely to corporate lobbying and broadly influencing policy making” (Antczak & Osbeck 2-3). Any causal connection between the practice of post-truth politics and academic theory underlying a relativist interpretation of knowledge must be made with caution. However, an understanding of postmodern engagement with relativism may still provide insight into how (postmodern) literature—among which Eco’s works have often been counted—might interact with post-truth on a theoretical level.

According to postmodern theory, all knowledge is textual, and nothing that is textual can be objective: all texts inherently contain interpretive preconceptions that shape the content. A corner stone of postmodern theory therefore is the deconstruction of and “incredulity toward” master narratives (Lyotard xxiv). Originally called *grand récits* or *metanarratives* by Jean-François Lyotard, master narratives are overarching interpretative structures in society that legitimize a certain way of assigning of meaning to individual facts (Lyotard xxiv). Lyotard and other postmodern critics have counted science and Enlightenment among the most potent master narratives of the modern age (Lyotard xxiii; Hutcheon 6-7). It is, essentially, not a question of the master narrative being true or untrue; rather, postmodernism seeks to demonstrate that consensus—or “the illusion of consensus”—which legitimates one master

narrative over another, is not an objective measurement of legitimacy (Hutcheon 7). In fact, there is no one master narrative that naturally takes precedence over all others. At the same time, no knowledge can “escape complicity with some master narrative” (Hutcheon 13). Postmodernist theory decentralizes the power structures that have shaped ‘objective truth’ as it is commonly known, by recognizing that other, less commonly recognized interpretations of reality are no less valid simply because they exist on the periphery of mainstream knowledge (Hutcheon 197). It merely recognizes and accepts that knowledge is inherently subjective and dependent on the interpretation of humans (Hutcheon 191). The problem, now that this recognition is being extended beyond academia, is that there seems to be “a tendency to equate the *descriptive* claim that human meaning-making is always to some extent particular and perspectival [...] with a *proscriptive* claim that per force, ‘facts are in the eye of the beholder’ [...] and power rules” (Antczak and Osbeck 3).

Post-truth is still a relatively novel topic in academic writing, and literature in a post-truth society even more so. Christopher Schaberg is one of the first to venture into this area in *The Work of Literature in an Age of Post-Truth* (2018). He questions “what it means to be interested in [and teach about] literature” in a time of rapid social media storytelling and disregard for veracity on society’s highest levels (2). While, on one hand, he sees a victory for literary critics in the rising perspectivism and awareness of grand narratives that marks post-truth society, he also finds that post-truth has come to mean something “sinister” (1). Like Antczak and Osbeck, he argues that the extent to which relativism has become an argument to shut down truth claims is problematic, because it “open[s] the floodgates to endless interpretation” (2). Perhaps ironically—after all, literature is known for its wide interpretability, and Eco even defines it in such terms—Schaberg believes that literature and literary criticism can provide solid ground in the “choppy seas of post-truth” (2).

[T]hese things are more important than ever: being able to read slowly, to carefully consider how narratives are fabricated, produced, disseminated, and consumed—and the weight (if not exactly truth) that people give these narratives, for however long or quickly. (Schaberg 144)

In other words, precisely because works of literature are by definition unstable, they are excellent vessels for exploring the similarly unstable post-truth worldview. Moreover, reading and interpreting literature demands creativity, innovativeness, and attentiveness; skills which are grounding and invaluable in our fast-moving technological society (Schaberg 144). Literature, in short, has the ability to reflect on or illustrate our post-truth society down to its inner workings, while also promoting the individual, critical thought that is crucial in a society that cannot easily distinguish truth from lie.

The next sections of the thesis consider several ways in which *Numero Zero* engages with post-truth literature. First, the focus is on discussions of literature within the novel. Then, *Numero Zero* itself is interpreted as a postmodern work that comments on its own literary nature. Finally, *Numero Zero* is analyzed as an example of a post-truth novel, with emphasis on the way conspiracy theories are used in Eco's literary works to reflect on epistemological problems.

Literature in the Novel

In line with Schaberg's argument that literature teaches (or helps develop) certain cognitive skills, in *Numero Zero*, literature is used primarily as a symbol of intelligence. For instance, Simei connects literary readership to critical thinking through his derogatory comments toward the readers of *Domani*. The paper is founded on the presupposition that its readers are "not what you'd call great readers" and "most of them won't have a book in the house" (NZ 27). Hence, the paper must contain simple, "[un]sophisticated," and sometimes even purposely inaccurate

language, “to talk on the same level as the reader” (NZ 26). Clichés are applauded, and Colonna is given the task of ensuring that all articles are written in the same style. As Simei phrases it: “We’re doing journalism here, not literature” (NZ 103). This direct juxtaposition of the newspaper and literature implies a fundamental difference between these media, in terms of their innovativeness and the skill involved in their writing.

The value of literature is embodied in a more positive way by another character, Maia Fresia. The most critical of *Domani*’s writers, Maia once wanted to be a literary scholar; she “nearly graduated in literature but had to stop for family reasons,” and instead went to work as a writer for a gossip magazine (NZ 27). Unlike the other writers, Maia does occasionally question the ethical standards of *Domani*. Several times, she suggests they write on topics that are truly relevant, and expresses disappointment that *Domani* seems to have no more quality than her previous employer (e.g. NZ 28; 74; 83). She is eager to reveal the truth for the sake of truth, rather than any political motives. In one instance, she comes up with a plan to uncover a mafia-run café so that the police can intervene. Simei and Colonna argue that the police will not care for the operation, to which Maia replies: “That’s for the police to decide. [...] They’ll find out some clever way – we just have to point out the problem” (NZ 87). While Simei thinks only about the influence this particular news item will secure them with people in power, Maia is trying to bring news writing back to its original purpose: to inform.

In a rushed world, Maia also embodies the more thorough and cautious form of thought that Schaberg values in literature. Oftentimes, when others have already moved on to a different topic, she is still thinking about an earlier part of the conversation. Her sudden references back to that earlier topic tend to startle her companions, as does her tendency to refer to objects outside the field of vision of her interlocutor (NZ 110; 140). According to Braggadocio, another of *Domani*’s writers, her way of thinking is proof of a “limited perspective” and perhaps a result of “autism” (NZ 112). Colonna, rather, believes that she is taking “refuge in an inner world of

her own” and assumes that others—especially Colonna—can follow her into it (NZ 141). To him, Maia “stands for sincerity, common sense, and reason” (Capozzi 227). Braggadocio’s negative reaction to her, therefore is telling: these characteristics are no longer common to humans, certainly news writers, in the world *Numero Zero* portrays.

Literature is not only shown to improve its readers’ ability to think critically and extensively; it is also a means of exploring philosophical theory—in this case, moral philosophy—through a hypothetical situation, which allows for comparison with and reflection on the situation as it is in reality. As Schaberg notes, literature forces the reader reflect on narratives, including those present in the outside world (144). In one particularly ironic passage of the novel, Simei announces that he wants to have “an article about honesty” written (NZ 181). His starting point is that “[i]t’s a fact, now, that the political parties are rotten, everyone is after kickbacks”—an immediate reference to the *Mani Pulite* investigations, which were well underway in May 1992, when this passage takes place—and he wants his writers “to come up with a party of honest people, a party of citizens able to talk a different kind of politics” (NZ 181). Simei makes no effort to cover that this ‘party of honest people’ is merely a fabrication, intended to “make it known that we’re in a position, if we so wish, to initiate a campaign against those [corrupt] parties” (NZ 181). He follows his demand by repeating once more that the ability of readers to judge the accuracy of news must not be overstated: “[O]ur readers don’t have a clue what happened ten years ago” (NZ 181).

It is Maia who brings up literature once more. The discussion reminds her of a book by Giovanni Mosca, *League of the Honest* (this is a reference to *La lega degli onesti*, published in 1945, though it is described by Maia as “an old pre-war novel” (NZ 183)). She recalls:

It’s about the *union sacrée* of decent people whose task it was to infiltrate the ranks of the dishonest, expose them, and convert them if possible to the path of honesty. But to be accepted by dishonest people, members of the league had to behave dishonestly. You

can imagine what happened. The league of honest people gradually turned into a league of crooks. (NZ 183)

The plot of Mosca's novel appears to reverse the situation of *Domani*, where it is dishonest people pretending to be morally righteous, rather than the other way around. This could be interpreted as a hopeful turn on the situation: if pretending to be dishonest leads well-meaning people to become crooks, then perhaps pretending to be honest might lead crooks to become well-meaning people. However, it seems more likely that Maia is looking at *Domani* as exactly the kind of enterprise portrayed in *League of the Honest*. While—as far as Maia knows—their intentions may have been good at one point, Simei and the staff have been corrupted by the crooked reality of news politics. Looking beyond the immediate situation of *Domani* and its writers, *League of the Honest* suggests that there is a certain inevitability to this process of corruption. To be able to change the way in which news is created on a larger scale, it is necessary to first occupy a position of power in the world of news media. In order to earn that power, adherence to the norms of news media is required, at least to an extent, and by adhering to those norms, the well-meaning advocates for change themselves become a part of the cycle of corruption. As Maia connects the situation in *Numero Zero* to the one described in Mosca's novel, new light is shed on the events in *Numero Zero*'s story world. This illustrates literature's ability to not only elicit critical thought, in general, but also to propose new ways of understanding specific aspects of the world, albeit proposals open to the reader's interpretation.

While ascribing arguably positive attributes to literature and reading, the novel also gives a strong impression that the fervent literary reader is a figure of the past. In the first chapter, as Colonna suspects someone has entered his house and gone through his things, he notes that “[his] books are in their usual disarray,” but it is unlikely that anyone looked through them, since “[i]f they wanted to make a discovery, there's only one thing to do these days: rummage through the computer” (NZ 3). Digital media are replacing print media as keepers of

information. Books were still important when Colonna was a student, though already new forms of information storage were making their entrance: “The oldest assistant carried his [the professor’s] books, the younger ones the tape recorder” (NZ 7). In Colonna’s present day, the computer and diskette have taken over. Indeed, later, Simei asks sardonically: “[W]ho reads books that newspapers review? Generally speaking, not even the reviewer. We should be thankful if the book has been read by the author” (NZ 74). Though obviously an exaggeration, the remark implies that neither modern readers nor modern writers are particularly involved in the literary craft any longer. Rather, discussing books, even the sort “that newspapers review,” has turned into a celebration of the author’s fame. Simei sardonically advises his writers that in reviewing literature, “you shouldn’t talk too much about the book but rather concentrate on the writer” (NZ 74). This kind of emphasis on who is speaking, rather than what is being said, is suited to post-truth news writing, which—like propaganda—has a tendency to use appeals to authority as a way to legitimize its content (Corner 1102).

Finally, a critical reflection on literature is presented through the “epic” Simei asks Colonna to write. The book is to detail the creation of *Domani* as it might have happened ideally (NZ 23). Its purpose is to secure Simei’s payment if the newspaper is indeed shut down at the end of the year: he will either collect royalties for the book’s publication, or “a sum of money, tax-free” from “someone who may not want it published” (NZ 19). Simei asks for a story that portrays him as a heroic advocate of truth, showing “how I laboured away for a year to create a model of journalism independent of all pressure” (NZ 23). As Colonna notes, “[t]he book will say the opposite of what actually happened” (NZ 23). Indeed, Simei makes no pretense that the book must adhere to any truth standard. While he corrects Colonna’s use of the word ‘blackmail’ in describing the contents of *Domani*, he has no objections to the accusation that the book will be entirely inaccurate. Reporting events as they happened, he says, is not the purpose of literature: “[M]y book doesn’t have to tell the story of what decisions were made in

our editorial meetings. I wouldn't need you for that – a tape recorder would do" (NZ 23). From Simei's perspective, clearly, literature is not so different from news writing; both are pieces in a game of political influence.

The Novel as Literature

Being, itself, a novel, *Numero Zero* does not only reflect on literature as an outside observer; it is also an example of how literature can function in today's society. Rocco Capozzi describes the novel as "a *j'accuse* against lies, bad journalism, unbridled power of the media, conspiracies, people's lack of historical awareness, and the dangers of absolute skepticism" (223). Its setting, closer to the date of writing than any of Eco's earlier novels, as well as the mix of Eco's usual "parody, irony, and self-irony" with "bitter-sweet humor," paves the way for—more and less subtle—criticism of the state of modern society (227). Capozzi finds the story "grotesque," yet moderated by humor, and ironic in its reference to real-world events (227-228).

In this light, Colonna's writing is not only relevant as a direct consideration of what literature is or can be; it also helps to indirectly illustrate literature's abilities, by adding to the self-reflective nature of *Numero Zero*. The novel is structured as a frame narrative, a strategy Eco also applies in *The Name of the Rose*. In the latter work, the narrator of the outermost frame is extradiegetic, while in *Numero Zero*, the protagonist Colonna is an actor in both the inner and outer frame. The novel's first chapter, printed in italics, takes place on June 6, 1992, in Colonna's apartment. After reporting on the suspicion that someone broke in during the night, and discussing some events from his life as a student and aspiring writer, Colonna announces that he is about to tell a story looking back on the preceding months: "I'll pour a few drops [...] and try to go back to the beginning of this adventure, no need to refer to my diskette. I recall

everything quite clearly, at least at the moment” (NZ 15). The penultimate chapter, similarly in italics and continuing where the first chapter ended, opens with: “There. Now I’ve told it all” (NZ 229). Everything in between, it is suggested, belongs to Colonna’s manuscript.

The novel contains recurring suggestions implying that *Numero Zero* and Colonna’s work are one and the same. While recalling his own youthful attempts at writing in the first chapter, Colonna mentions that “when I tried writing a book of my own [...] I’d always be making cultural allusions” (NZ 13). Later, describing Braggadocio, Colonna says: “Bald as von Stroheim, his nape vertical to his neck, but his face was that of Telly Savalas, Lieutenant Kojak. There – always some allusion” (NZ 33). Not only does this remark confirm that Colonna is supposedly authoring the novel by referring back to his earlier statement; it also draws attention to the novel’s textuality in a self-reflexive fashion common to postmodern works (Hutcheon 82). Of course, the “cultural allusions” themselves, as instances of explicit intertextuality, are also typical of postmodern literature such as Eco himself has written, making the line doubly self-reflexive (Hutcheon 11).

At the same time, it is made abundantly clear that *Numero Zero* cannot be an exact replication of Colonna’s book (which Simei semi-cleverly titles *Domani: Yesterday*; NZ 22). When Colonna reports to Simei on his progress, his description of the book so far is exactly as he promised: an “account of the editorial meetings that had taken place, but reversing the roles” (NZ 152). *Numero Zero*, meanwhile, *is* telling the story as it (supposedly) happened; it is openly critical of Simei, the Commendatore, the political network surrounding *Domani*, and even Colonna himself. The narrative reaches further than *Domani: Yesterday*, able to reflect on a meta-level both on Colonna’s earlier manuscript, and on the events that transpired. Yet, it is still narrated by Colonna, thus retaining the sense of self-reflection created by Colonna’s references to his own writing.

In likening itself—at least in style and skill—to Colonna’s book, *Numero Zero* engages in self-criticism, as Colonna admits to being a “failed writer” (NZ 18), ironically calling into question the literary value of the novel. Yet, simultaneously, the contrast created between *Numero Zero* and *Domani: Yesterday* has the opposite effect: it emphasizes that *Numero Zero* is in fact telling the truth that *Domani: Yesterday* was meant to cover up. Eco seems to be directing the reader’s attention to the fact that literature is not, and need not be, truthful, and yet can contain truth—or rather “meaning”—if the reader is inclined to search for it (De Benedictis 182).

Post-Truth and Conspiracies

“Meaning” can indeed be found in *Numero Zero*; specifically, the novel can say something about post-truth. Though it predates the current fake news discussion, the theme of false and biased news clearly dominates the narrative, relating the novel to the context of its setting as much as to the context of its publication. The layers of deception present in *Domani*’s setup extend into the grotesque. As noted above, within the story world, the paper is created solely for political purposes and will likely never be published; the writers are unaware of this, but despite believing they are writing for a legitimate paper, they are willing to write biased and poorly sourced articles. Simei purposely asks the writers to be careless with their sources, and teaches them methods to avoid scrutiny. The contents of *Domani* are constantly determined based on the Commendatore’s needs and on social power structures, rather than on current events that deserve to be noted by a newspaper—though Simei pointedly assures the writers that “The Commendatore has never sought to influence me in any way” (NZ 152). The result of this parodic exaggeration is a critical evaluation of the news industry as it is in real life, seen through a magnifying glass; it is in this way similar to the novel discussed by Maia, suggesting a didactic note to that scene: Eco is teaching the reader how to engage with literature.

Just as fake news is only a symptom of a post-truth society and post-truth politics, so too, in the novel, is the corruption underlying *Domani* a symptom of broader social problems. *Numero Zero* anticipates a societal shift on a foundational level through the theme of conspiracy theories. Conspiracies are a common element in Eco's works: *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) both deal extensively with conspiracies dating back to early medieval times, while *The Prague Cemetery* (2010) focuses on the nineteenth century. In *Numero Zero*, Eco emphasizes that conspiracies are just as much to do with the recent past. Braggadocio, who is a vehement conspiracy theorist next to his job as a writer for *Domani*, is determined to prove among other things that Mussolini's death in 1945 was faked. He believes that 'Il Duce' fled to Argentina, where he lived on for many years, awaiting an opportunity to seize power once more.

The novel directly connects conspiracies to (fake) news writing through the characters' similar attitude toward the two practices. Simei and Colonna tell the writing staff to organize the paper in such a way that several unconnected news items together suggest a larger plot. "It's not the news that makes the newspaper, but the newspaper that makes the news. And if you know how to put four different news items together, then you can offer the reader a fifth" (NZ 60). Simei's remark is reminiscent of something Braggadocio tells Colonna earlier in the novel: "A bit of data on its own means nothing, all of it together lets you understand what you were unable to see at first. You have to uncover what they're trying to hide from you" (NZ 43-44). The practice of newswriting is in this way likened to—or perhaps reduced to—fabricating conspiracies. In both cases, facts can be hand-picked to suit a broader narrative of the writer's choice. While it may appear that the facts speak for themselves, it is really their intentional juxtaposition that suggest a relation between one event and another.

The way in which Braggadocio, as a conspiracy theorist, engages with truth is remarkably similar to that of the post-truth citizen. His point of departure is that no source of information

can be trusted, and “[s]uspicious never go too far” (NZ 49). This skepticism extends to the highest orders of truth. When Colonna mentions that constant suspicion and reevaluation is the method of science, Braggadocio counters:

‘[E]ven science lies. Look at the story of cold fusion. They lied to us for months and then it was found to be total nonsense.’

‘But it was discovered.’

‘By who? The Pentagon, who may have wanted to cover up an embarrassing incident. Perhaps the cold-fusion people were right and those who lied were the ones who say the others have lied.’ (NZ 49)

At least in appearance, Braggadocio practices the eternal skepticism of the (postmodern) relativist: if no source of knowledge can be reliably said to be objective, then objective knowledge is unattainable, and all truth-claims are inherently suspect. His paradoxical reasoning illustrates Eco’s own definition of truth. In order to determine whether a statement is objectively true, it must be tested against some rule—in this case the method proposed by science—but, by default, that rule cannot be tested against itself, and thereby becomes invalid (*Serendipities* 19).

It is his distrust of the established powers that most likens Braggadocio, the conspiracy theorist, to a post-truth citizen. His outlook on truth is practical more than it is philosophical; relativism is a result, and not a cause, of his skepticism. In casting out the institute of science as a source of truth, and failing to substitute for it some other objective measurement, the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood in any meaningful way is lost. Anything can mean everything, and therefore it is perfectly acceptable to hand-pick facts to support a preconceived theory: the facts can, after all, support *any* theory.

Braggadocio nuances his skepticism, to an extent. Looking at the ruins of houses that were bombed in the Second World War, he argues that such physical remains are the only way to

“bring back what the city was like almost fifty years ago” and that “the only real proven thing, for me, is this Milan of many decades ago” (NZ 37; 41-42). As with Simei’s tape recorder, it seems there is something undeniable about the city’s geography that defies even the most critical analysis of truth. It is commonly recognized that no medium can be perfectly objective (see Houwen; Schiller), and certainly there are alternative ways to interpret the sight of a bombed-out street; yet, the ability to see for himself the aftermath of a historical event seems to set this evidence apart from any other for Braggadocio. While, at first instance, this idea of first-hand evidence seems at last to provide some stability to his endless skepticism, Braggadocio soon returns to his usual cynical outlook. Physical evidence does not remain intact forever. Old neighborhoods change, are renovated, and eventually lose their value as historical artifacts. “Here it’s all still real,” he says, “but it’s already reeking as if it’s fake” (NZ 50). Even the most impartial evidence—the outside world itself—ultimately is subject to lies.

In its final chapters, the novel recognizes the difficulty of retaining any certainty—or “faith in the Community,” in Eco’s terms—in a post-truth world. For the greater part of the novel, Colonna is skeptical of Braggadocio’s tales, and thinks he is simply twisting facts to fit his own needs. When Braggadocio proclaims to have found proof of the activities of Gladio, a clandestine NATO ‘stay-behind’ operation, in a long series of coincidences, Colonna replies that “perhaps it’s just your tendency to see conspiracies everywhere, so you put two and two together to make five” (NZ 208). Still, when Braggadocio is killed just as he intends to reveal his “cast-iron” facts to Simei (NZ 213), terror strikes Colonna. Braggadocio’s death “assured him a certain credibility” (NZ 222), and suddenly, Colonna is convinced that the mysterious ‘They’ who killed Braggadocio for his knowledge will also come for him.

I don’t know what was true and what he invented, though it’s clear that if his inquiry covered a hundred stories, he must have got to the truth on at least one of them, and that

is why he was silenced. But since he told me all of it yesterday, it means I also know that one story, though I don't know which it is. (NZ 224)

This passage problematizes the concept of 'knowing' in a context where truth and lie are indistinguishable. While Colonna may indeed have heard a true story from Braggadocio, he cannot be said to know the truth, as he does not know that it is true and the other parts of the theories are false. As Braggadocio says: "facts get lost between one piece of news and another" (NZ 208). In such a situation, the novel shows, it is not the truth, but emotion-fueled *belief* that most potently affects the real world. Colonna's fear of being killed shapes his actions from Braggadocio's death onward, and what he fears is the belief of Braggadocio's killer that Colonna knows something, though he does not know anything at all.

In fact, as truth becomes increasingly buried in lies, 'knowing' slowly becomes impossible. More to the point: 'knowing' becomes irrelevant. When a BBC documentary is launched on television, outlining a theory very similar to Braggadocio's, Maia happily proclaims that their fears are over. "*This television programme makes all other revelations entirely pointless and ridiculous, because, as you know, la réalité dépasse la fiction, and so, now, no one's able to invent anything. [...] This truth will make every other revelation seem like a lie*" (NZ 245-246). It no longer matters if Colonna knows something that 'they' want to hide, even if the documentary did not already uncover it. Once a conspiracy of this size is out in the world, Maia explains, the people become apathetic to the next great reveal. They are "*immune,*" so that "*whenever they tell us some new story or other, we say we've heard worse, and claim it's false*" (NZ 246). Eventually, even the BBC becomes unreliable, because they have themselves proclaimed that so many reputable organizations have lied. "[W]hy shouldn't the BBC have also lied?" (NZ 246).

So, by the end of the novel, even Maia has become a skeptic. Corruption is everywhere, and she and Colonna find themselves surrounded by lies, or worse; truths that can never be

uncovered. The best they can do, she says, is to go to a country where all corrupt practices are “*done in the open*” and there are “*no secrets*” (NZ 248). She even considers working for a gossip magazine there, because “the articles are rubbish but everyone knows it” (NZ 249). The only truth left is that there is no truth. Colonna answers that Italy is already well on its way to becoming “one of those havens you want to banish yourself to,” but the thought bothers him no longer (NZ 249). Thanks to Maia, he has regained his “*calm distrust of the world around [him]*” (NZ 250). In the novel’s last paragraph, reminiscent of the final lines of *1984* in its casual sense of defeat, he declares: “*I’ve stopped talking myself and have let others take over*” (251).

Conclusion

Numero Zero is the type of text that, in Eco’s words, “seeks to produce a new reader”: a reader who is critical, cautious, and able to philosophize along with the text in front of them (“Postscript” 562). It pushes the reader to become unsatisfied with inconclusiveness. In a final call to action, the novel pointedly refuses to provide closure. There is no grand reveal of conspiracy; in fact, the grand reveal seems to be that there never was one. But while Colonna may have “stopped talking,” the story remains unfinished. Against the conventions of the mystery genre, nothing is proven. It remains up to the reader to determine what is true and what is untrue. With Maia’s leading example in mind, and with Colonna’s apathy and Braggadocio’s eternal skepticism as painful reminders of what the alternative entails, the reader is enticed to *think*—about the novel, but also, guided by the novel’s self-reflection, about their own position as an interpreter of information in a post-truth world. *Numero Zero* demonstrates that literature has the ability to break through apathy and skepticism. It demands a more thorough form of thought. In a society that easily confuses fact and fiction and absolutely denounces the absolute, literature can inspire a continued search, however provisional, for truth.

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