Interview with Umberto Eco, between July 2012 and January 2013
Interview conducted through written correspondence
Interview edited by James Hay

James Hay: Professor Eco, I appreciate your granting me this interview. I am not alone in having learned useful lessons from your writing about communications, culture, and critical theory, and in having admired your astonishingly robust "archive" of references through which you have introduced fresh and inspired insights on these topics. And although your projects often draw references from and about the past, you have produced over your career relentlessly insightful and clever diagnoses of "the present"—particularly of popular media/cultures. I confess to having initially thought about interviewing you for this issue of CC/CS because this issue (my first as the editor of the journal) will represent how "critical studies" and "cultural studies" of media and communication in 2013 have been shaped through earlier questions and perspectives about their contexts. So, I requested an interview with you because your earlier work about semiotics, critical and cultural theory, "mass communication," and "popular culture" (some of it from as early as the 1960s) continues to inform the kinds of questions and perspectives that this journal represents, but also because your recent writing has introduced new perspectives and questions about developments in the twenty-first century.

I had imagined that I would pose to you a few questions about how the current media environment has been explained (rightly or wrongly) through discourses about "media convergence," "user-generated content," "social networking," "surveillance society," etc. This seemed a reasonable line of questioning since, in different historical...
contexts, you have sought to make sense of and to introduce new questions about what, at that time, were considered to be "new media." For instance, your early rationales about and applications of semiotics rethought influential "critical" positions about "mass culture," as well as influential social scientific accounts of "mass communication" at that time. And you suggested that broadcast television problematized older conceptions of art, culture, and communication, and required different strategies of critical response. Your writing and lectures about "open" and "closed" texts, and in the 1970s about "encoding" and "decoding," had a significant impact on a critical communication/media studies and an emergent "cultural studies" that were rethinking the agency of the TV viewer. During the mid-1980s you discussed the first wave of the privatization of TV broadcasting in Italy as a transition from a "paleo-TV" to a "neo-TV." Your interventions over the second half of the twentieth century provide an important background through which to rethink discourses about the present context of media practices—the current "reinvention" of something still referred to as "TV," TV's realignment with other media, a context of so-called "media convergence," "interactivity," "social networks," and "user-generated content." There also are fascinating ways that your argument from the late 1960s about a "semiotic guerrilla warfare"—wherein a universe of new media/technology is "patrolled by groups of communications guerillas who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception"—now underpins some of the assumptions in the twenty-first century about the empowerment of citizens and consumers through interactive media and about a new interactive media activism.

I also have thought that you would be able to address the historical contradictions of "new media" and recent political formations and crises, in Italy and elsewhere. We live in a time when the term "media revolution" has been applied casually to both technological and political "revolution," so in light of your longstanding interest in developing critical strategies for questioning and understanding the political implications of new media worlds, I have wondered whether you see the twenty-first-century transformations and crises of Italian politics and culture as shaped through a "media revolution" and whether you find the current critical accounts of "new media" adequate in explaining emergent political formations. I also was interested in how you think about the current contradictions of democracy in relation to media practice—a question implicit in your 1967 essay about a semiotic guerrilla warfare but also through your effort to transform media institutions, as in your efforts during the 1990s to establish Italy's first "Internet Commons" for and in Bologna.

However, as I began to reflect on this latter set of questions about the relation between the current mediadscape and political practice and formations, I was struck by your recent collection of essays, which has been translated into English as Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism and which was published in Italian under the title, A passo di gambero (or, "the way a shrimp walks," a reference to the shrimp's backward way of walking). This is a collection of essays which were initially published in newspapers and magazines and addressed a variety of trends and habits comprising Italian culture, politics, and media in the twenty-first century. In some respects, these two recent books may be your most direct response to political
developments and contradictions in current Italy (and the world). However, it also is a noteworthy project—against the background of your earlier work and in relation to “cultural studies”—because it (cleverly, as always) folds political practice and formation into cultural practice and formation. That the essays were initially published in newspapers and magazines attests to your longstanding efforts to introduce questions about culture and politics to both academic and nonacademic audiences.

So, I have settled on a few questions about this project as a framework for a short conversation with you about the past and the present. Would you begin by saying something about the Italian and English titles of Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism? Do the title, and particularly the subtitle, of the English edition faithfully represent the book’s and essays’ most important lines of thought? Is there anything that you want to clarify about the title for the mostly English-reading audience of my journal?

Umberto Eco: The original title was A passo di gambbero, and some foreign publishers translated it the same way—for instance A reculons comme une écervisse, A passo de cangrejo, Im Krebsgang voran, A paso de caranguejo. I was thinking of that animal which marches backwards. I was referring to many of the contemporary inventions that seem to reproduce old features. For example Marconi invented a wireless system, and now the Internet goes on phone wires; the DVD cannot be used to explore a film forwards and backwards, image by image, while the old cassettes could. And so on. Obviously these examples represent many varieties and complexities of the “regressive” aspects of our contemporary world. During the 1960s I wrote many short articles about the situation of Italian politics and media. When my publisher recently had the idea of reprinting it, guess what happened? Many readers believed that it was written now, about the Italy after the Millennium, while others believed I was a genius who forecasted future events. The disastrous explanation is that a lot of situations in Italy have not changed in the course of the last 40 years, so that my analyses still look up to date. That’s regression or retrogression or reversion, a state of decay.

JH: I have chosen Turning Back the Clock, and to a certain extent Inventing the Enemy, as a primary point of reference for our interview because they seem to me to be some of your most direct accounts of current political developments—in Italy and in the world. Before I explain to you why I want the interview to explore your thoughts about these developments, would you agree that, amongst all of your books, these two books are your most direct and sustained accounts of political practices? And if so, why have you felt compelled to emphasize or call attention to political trends in two of your most recent books? Or would you say that your earlier work on semiology, popular culture, and media addressed questions of power and politics as much as have these recent collections? It seems to me that your earlier work does provide a way of thinking about questions of power, control, politics (certainly “rules”), but not as directly as in these books.
UE: The essays collected in these two books are not academic research or novels (and I am a scholar and a novelist). Instead, they belong to a continuous activity of social criticism I have performed through newspapers or magazines for years (and this activity includes the essays written in the 1960s that comprise the book which I mentioned a moment ago). This is my way to be politically involved in contemporary affairs. You can find many other examples of this kind of activity of mine in books such as Dalla periferia dell’impero, Travels in the Hyperreality, Sette anni di desiderio, Five moral pieces, La bustina di Minerva, and so on. In a way, even novels such as Foucault’s Pendulum and The Prague Cemetery are forms of social criticism, dealing with many negative aspects of our civilization. If two recent books on the same problems followed each other in such a short time, that probably is due to the fact that things got worse in the last years (the era of Bush and Berlusconi) and that I felt compelled to react more energetically, expressing (sometimes in satirical way) my indignation.

JH: I love the way that the essays in Turning Back the Clock collectively and cumulatively suggest multiple facets, fronts, and trajectories of a "populist" politics (and its relation to a "popular" culture) in Italy. There is indirectly a kind of Gramscian impulse in your diagnosis of the recent political context (a "historical conjuncture of forces," as Gramsci put it, though I mention this mostly as a thought and not as a question—unless you want to elaborate).

UE: Populism is not a new phenomenon. Think for instance of Juan Peron. However, today it represents a real menace for a democratic way of living. I could cite many forms of non-European populism, but it is enough to mention, for Europe, Le Pen, many racist movements here and there, and certainly/finally Berlusconi. Now, populism is a way to create a fake image of The People (which in itself does not exist, because it is a collection of individuals who think in different ways) so that a populist politician, ignoring Parliaments and other forms of political control (ignoring Montesquieu’s separations of powers) pretends to speak directly to the People, by creating a virtual image of a People which thinks as he wants. With Berlusconi, probably for the first time, populism was mixed with “popular” culture, by using in an unscrupulous way all the media to support the idea that the People were thinking as the populist politician pretended it does. As for Gramsci, certainly I was inspired by his way of analyzing the ideology conveyed by popular culture. He was, decades and decades ago, among the first to analyze in this sense the “popular culture”.

JH: Do you see points of convergence and divergence between a political populism in the US and the one in Italy?

UE: I mentioned above the Bush-Berlusconi era. Berlusconi makes an appeal to old fears by instigating his People against the Communist menace (which does not exist any longer), while Bush also created false documents to justify his attack on Iraq, simply to create a sense of national unity and to satisfy the need of a revenge in the mind of what he pretended to be the American People.
JH: Gramsci re-enters the picture here because in the United States the idea of a “national-popular” is complicated by the Right’s turn toward (or fantasy about) a kind of “pre-national-popular”—a popular or populism that is more or less disarticulated from the “nation” (centralized government, centralized media institutions, etc.), and more invested in a return to a “state” prior to a “nation-state.” Right-wing Libertarian and Tea Party activists (their narrative of a “return” to America’s birth—to a “state” before the formation of a United States) are vivid examples of that. Their “federalism” aspires to a Social Darwinism (the dismantling of old vestiges of the “welfare state”) even as they reject Darwinism. I invoke Darwin here because numerous essays in Turning Back the Clock discuss the new role of (perhaps very old) theology in Italian politics and culture, and one essay in particular, “Chance and Intelligent Design,” explicitly locates Darwinism in relation to a Protestant “fundamentalism” in the US “Bible Belt” and a twenty-first-century Italian Catholic fundamentalist theology. This essay, and its relation to the book’s cluster of essays about the mattering of theology in twenty-first-century Italy, suggest one front of political transformation as “turning back the clock.”

So, would you say that “turning back the clock” (the backward walk of the shrimp) refers to a historical contradiction of Modernity, perhaps a new stage of “modernity,” in Italy—i.e., a political neocorporatism that represents itself as revolutionary through a rationality/discourse about “change,” “progress,” and “liberties” (freeing ourselves from the past)? Are you suggesting that we need, more than ever, “long histories” of the present to recognize this contradiction—that moving forward occurs by moving backwards? I ask this also because some of your writing in the past has sought to explain other historical ruptures, and to diagnose other contexts (the 1980s or 1990s) with terms such as “neo-” or “post-.” What in that sense is “new” about the current historical context or “conjuncture”? Do you think of the recent past (the period which Turning Back the Clock analyzes) as emergent and residual formations?

UE: I am not a Hegelian and do not believe that History is always marching forwards, in the sense that what happens now is always an improvement of what happened yesterday. The Second World War was certainly a tragic form of improvement because it contributed to destroying the Nazi menace. But the First World War was a crazy return to the nineteenth-century nationalism and produced, as a side effect, the worst dictatorships of the twentieth century. The First World War was so useless that after the fall of the Soviet empire the political map of Europe returned to its pre-war form. It was as if we had lost seventy or more years without changing anything.

JH: So, is the neocorporative revolution-ism an example of “turning back the clock” because it co-opts the old lexicon of the Left—up through the 1970s—about a revolutionary politics? As an ancillary question, would you describe the current populism in Italy as borne of a “neoliberalism,” or is your emphasis on “turning back the clock” and “walking backwards” more about a new “conservatism”? In other words, is yours a way of rethinking the decade-old critical discourse about “neoliberalism” by
emphasizing the contradictions of backward and forward motions—motions that the term “neoliberalism” may not represent as well as “neoconservatism”? I don’t mean to split hairs, and I recognize that your book is implicitly about a “neoliberal” Italy. But the implication of backward and forward temporalities strikes me as important and extremely original.

UE: I basically agree with you but want to make clear that turning back the clock is not only a form of conservatism. Is it a form of conservatism to shift from wireless communication to the Internet by phone? No, it is due to fatal developments in technology. Thus, it means that sometimes our civilization realizes that we are going too fast and too much forwards and that sometimes one has to return to older ways of surviving. Think of ecology, for instance: we try to find new ways of living that are previous to the radical development of a savage industrial revolution. But I must say that, if it is indispensable to reduce the use of cars in order to use bicycles again, then this is certainly a way of “going back,” but at the same time a form of progress. It is the notion of “progress” (at any cost) that must be revised. Windows Vista was worse than its previous versions.

JH: In that sense, what has and has not changed since you published *Turning Back the Clock*? This seems no trivial question since Berlusconi has (finally) been replaced. I was watching the Striscie montage on RAI 3 two or three evenings ago, which stitched together from movie and TV clips a marvelous satire about Berlusconi as Dracula, the “undead” sleeping peacefully in a glass coffin, with the belt to his trousers undone and his hand slightly down the front of his pants—Italy’s new version of “Night of the Living Dead.” In other words, is the practice or ideology of “turning back the clock” and “walking backwards” the inability to overcome the conditions that nurtured support for Berlusconian policy in Italy? Or has it taken a “financial crisis” to be the historical “wooden stake” through the heart of that political and cultural (populist) formation?

UE: During the time that it has taken me to answer your questions, i.e., before the Italian elections in February 2013, Berlusconi has not been “replaced.” He is coming back, as in the night of the living dead. Thus we must always be vigilant about the political situation, and this is one of the tasks of critical thought.

JH: I have another question (to probe a bit further) about the current discourse of “media revolution.” In light of your longstanding interest in communication/media, it is not surprising that *Turning Back the Clock* includes essays that situate “media” (or “new media”—the Internet) as one of the threads shaping and holding together the recent historical context that the book discusses. In the last 10 years, the term “media revolution” has increasingly become a point/term where a discourse about “media” intersects with a discourse about a new kind of revolutionary politics. Some authors have suggested that “new media” have precipitated a new culture—what Henry Jenkins
refers to as a “convergence culture.” And Jenkins, wrongly I think, goes so far as to
equate interactive media with a new “participatory” culture and politics, which he
considers inherently more “democratic” than during the age of broadcasting. He
shares, in that sense, some of the same optimism and utopianism about the democratic
potential of interactive media, user-generated content, social networking, etc., as Clay
Shirky and Charles Leadbeater.

UE: I am more skeptical than Jenkins. There are presently in Italy new forms of
populism that work by arousing political reactions through Facebook or Twitter. Think
of the “psychology of masses.” Three citizens can be very balanced persons, but when
they act inside a mob of two hundred thousand persons they become a Crowd, ready to
perform the most irrational deeds. The same can happen with a social network.
Thousands of people communicating all together at the same time are out of any
critical control. They can act as a Crowd, ready for every kind of lynching.

JH: In your long career, you have responded to various historical contexts of what
might be described as “media revolutions”—e.g., your interventions in the 1960s
about TV and mass communication, your discussion in the 1980s about “neo-TV” in
Italy, and your recent ruminations about post-Internet forms of sociality and
political participation. Particularly fascinating are ways that you remind us of the
“long histories” of “new media”—and the importance of the long history as a
counter-weight (?) to the epochalist thinking about recent media as “revolutioniz-
ing.” I love this about your work—your reading of the new through often very old,
and forgotten or obscured references. And I like that your taking the “long”
historical route to understanding the present cuts against so many who see “new
media” as revolutionizing everything—for instance, the way that journalists most
easily were able to explain the “Arab Spring” as a “media revolution” (a young/new
generation that outsmarted its elders by mobilizing through Twitter, Facebook, and
YouTube). More than ever, we need playfully unsettling historical perspectives such
as yours about what is revolutionary, and Modern.

UE: The reference to the alleged Arab Spring is very appropriate. Through the
Internet, millions of people made something happen, and now we are doubting
if that was really a democratic revolution or on the contrary a conservative and
fundamentalist uprising. The Crowd acted, and the result was exactly the contrary of
what many of us (and many of them) believed and hoped.

JH: Do you think that it is possible to talk any longer about contemporary media
as the basis for “popular” culture, given the way that the current mediascape
(the post-broadcasting context) is so profoundly about segmenting and differentiat-
ing audiences?

UE: We are living within this new media world and it would be reactionary to think
of a different situation. We must simply elaborate new forms of criticism for a world
of super-divisions. If I had the right answer to this, I could compete as the Ruler of the World.

JH: I have a question about "warfare"—a term that explicitly or implicitly runs through Turning Back the Clock and your subsequent book, Inventing the Enemy, and that implicitly is bound up with your accounts of political populism and my question about "media revolutions." Is the reference to "hot war" in the subtitle of the English and Italian editions of Turning Back the Clock a term that you accept, or is it mostly the publisher's term? Are you proposing that "hot war" is a "turning back of the clock" to a time before the Cold War? Or would you say that "hot war" is a new stage or degree of a Cold War?

UE: Facts suggest that after the Cold War we are returning to many forms of Hot War. As I said in the essay that you are quoting, hot wars simply do not work. They kill people and destroy countries without solving the problems they were supposed to resolve. But there are in our world too many powers which produce weapons for hot wars, and it is difficult to eliminate them.

JH: I'm wondering whether you see the tendency to call forth an Enemy as only an impulse of the neoconservative administrations of Bush and Berlusconi. And to complicate things a bit more, do you see this as a historical trend that can occur on the Left? The Left after all can be reductive in its formulation of Enemies and conspiracy, or the tendency to cast Bush or Berlusconi as the Enemy rather than recognizing the diffuse and messy ("overdetermined") sources of power, i.e., that there are multiple enemies, and sometimes alliances with Enemies.

UE: In my first essay in Inventing the Enemy I point out that the necessity for an enemy is a constant instinct of human beings, like homicide, adultery, rape, or robbing. The only way to react to such an eternal tendency is to deconstruct always (always!) the images of enemies built up by the Forces of Evil.

JH: And what do we do about it? What, for you, are the forms of possibility for alternatives to "turning back the clock" and "walking backwards"? Is it any longer a matter of a "semiotic guerilla warfare"? In the 1980s, in part through practices of "culture jamming," this was a primary lesson that was, perhaps wrongly, gleaned from your work. To what extent does a political response depend on rethinking (or deconstructing?) the binary logic of new/old—going forward and walking backward? To what extent does a political response involve strategies other than deconstruction and semiotic warfare, instead for instance "mapping" the convergent forces that are making History in order to intervene in making History—as communications scholars, historians, or semioticians?

UE: Probably my metaphor of a media "guerilla warfare" was misunderstood. I was referring in that essay to a constant practice of the control of media, and to the
importance of criticizing, and teaching people to criticize, media messages in every place that media reach their audience. So, I was referring to an educational guerrilla. My idea was: since you have no power to transform media, try to change every day the way people receive their messages. It was a pedagogical utopia, I know, but sometimes utopias are indispensable.