

From homo sapiens to homo videns

By Mario Pereyra

Are we moving from beings of thought and conscience to beings controlled by electronic image?

In the beginning was the Word," says John's gospel. Now one would have to say that "in the beginning was the image."—Giovanni Sartori.¹

The Bible has no problem defining the human: "In the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). But scientists have coined phrases and constructed taxonomies in order to define who and what the humans are.

In 1758, Carl von Linnaeus (1707-1778), a Swedish botanist, introduced the "system of human nature" that established the classification of species following an assumed evolutionary pattern. He catalogued the *Homo* (human) species as a branch of the *Hominids*, two-legged creatures. From there the search began for our presumed remote ancestors, including *homo habilis* (skillful man), *homo erectus*, and finally *homo sapiens*. Evolutionists contend that the latter has continued to evolve into the various kinds of contemporary men and women.

And now comes *homo videns*, a discovery by the Italian sociologist, Giovanni Sartori. His book, *Homo Videns: Teledirected Society*, has been a best-seller in Latin America, and its Italian version sold out in a few months. Sartori's thesis, although based on a questionable worldview, deserves our attention. He argues that evolution has turned backward since the 1950s, since *homo sapiens* is being dethroned by *homo videns*. The former is characterized by a large brain, the ability to walk perfectly on two feet and work skillfully with hands, the use of language, the fantastic development of culture, and other aspects described by anthropologists. Sartori agrees with the philosopher Ernst Cas-

sirer (1874-1945) in affirming that humans are essentially characterized by their symbolizing activity, "the ability to communicate by means of articulated sounds and meaningful signals."² From this it can be deduced that the human's "thinking and knowing as a symbolizing being are built in language and through language."³ So it is that spoken and written language are not only the base of culture but also the very essence of the nature of *homo sapiens*.

With the appearance of television in mid-century and the establishment of the television industry, Sartori maintains, human development was interrupted and reversed, for image perception began to replace abstract thinking. This process of involution was accentuated with the coming of cybernetics in the 1980s and with the appearance of the computer and multimedia technology. TV allows us to see at a distance things that are real, but the PC shows us virtual or simulated reality. Thus, seeing is privileged above speaking, the image is affirmed above the word. With the prevalence of vision, the symbolizing creature becomes the seeing creature.

Sartori declares that he doesn't seek to attack TV as a means of communication (although he emphasizes all its weaknesses) or the computer as an efficient information storage and retrieval system. His concern is with our dependence upon them, which develops when book culture is neglected. He argues that television impoverishes and makes us "more credulous and naive"⁴ and inactive. It also atrophies the gift for abstraction and understanding of problems, as it stimulates the concrete

thinking linked to the image on screen.

Images and concepts

One example that illustrates this is the classification of words in categories such as denotation and connotation. The first category includes words referring to observable things such as *book, table, house, dog, tree*, etc.—words that denote or point to specific objects or facts of which we have a mental image or representation. They are the basis for concrete thinking. Other words refer to ideas, such as *nation, sovereignty, liberty, justice*, etc. These expressions are not “visible,” but rather are concepts linked to abstract mental processes. Abstract language is responsible for the development of civilization and science over the centuries—that which really characterizes the human species. Sartori suggests that television “produces images and destroys concepts, and thus atrophies our capacity for abstraction.”⁵

At the core of his argument is the “video-child.” Statistics suggest that TV has replaced the baby-sitter and has become the child’s primary school (an entertaining and interesting school as compared to the boring school in a building). Watching TV before learning to read and write produces a negative mind-set for school learning. In addition, undue early TV exposure engenders a phobia against school books and

a tendency to respond only to shows, strident music, and the sensational. Children are dominated by impulse; they act before they think. TV, argues Sartori, “softens” the brain.

Reading, on the other hand, requires solitude, concentration, discriminating ability, appreciation for conceptualization, and reasoning. *Homo videns* “tires of reading, prefers the abbreviated flash of a synthetic image. It fascinates and seduces him. He renounces to logical links, reasoned sequence and reflection. By contrast, he yields to the immediate, heated, emotionally-involving impulse.”⁶ The TV addict rejects persistent effort, tenacious action, and research—in effect, the cultivation of one’s thoughts and actions.

One may think that these ideas are exaggerated and open to debate. Sartori replies: Look at the parts of the world where TV dominates, and what do you see? The dwindling of reading scores, the scarcity of critical thinking, the growing difficulty students experience in comprehension and composition. Logical reasoning on verbally postulated premises is no longer there. Thinking becomes dependent on the images received.

This image-based thinking has considerably increased with the introduction of the computer, the Internet, and the surfing of cyberspace, expanding

the ranks of *homo videns*. As in the case of TV, the impact of the PC depends on the use made of it. Is it instrument, entertainment, pastime, or does it become a drug, a mania? Generally speaking, people who surf the Internet tend to passive dependence more than interactive, productive work. One must recognize that the information superhighways of the Internet not only transmit a great mass of useful information, but also a lot of trash and foolishness. Furthermore, recent research reveals that surfing the Internet increases the level of depression and loneliness.⁷

The culture of the spectacular

Homo videns dwells in the world of the spectacular, dominated by the famous. From Tokyo to Buenos Aires, from Moscow to Washington, from Paris to Kuwait, no matter how different the situation or the culture, popularity dominates the market; the rating rules. Why is success defined in almost the same way anywhere on the planet? How do we get the impression that TV is the same everywhere? As we near the end of the century, every country in the global village has converted society into an audience, and the population into couch potatoes hypnotized by the magic of the spectacular.

There are auditions, programs, magazines, newspapers, and supplements—

ever more bulky—devoted to informing about and promoting the spectacular. Not long ago those supplements were published only on weekends instead of every day. They contain entertainment, artistic events, theater plays, movies, and the all-powerful TV programs, the stars that shine in the splendid firmament of popularity. The entertainment industry sells the products that are the fashion of the day. The market of notoriety absorbs ever more and more time, structuring the values of *homo videns*.

The industry of the spectacular is not only omnipresent, but omnipotent. It hoards, manages, directs, or manipulates everything. The economy is dependent on the media. A negative comment by some well-known journalist, whether or not he or she knows anything about the stock market, can cause the fall of stock values and the ruin of strong industries or business enterprises. Politics is also captive to ratings. The media may give wide publicity to scandal, as in the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Politicians must now be good TV actors if they want to get the votes. Even the world of art, the intellectual and scientific world, are sensitive to the opinion of the media. Everybody wants access to the wide stage of fame.

Often one sees people's faces behind someone being interviewed on TV, hands raised to capture the attention, trying to get a piece of the action on the screen. In times past, people sought to cut a low profile and dresses were designed to disguise the shape of the body. But now fashion highlights the curves and the contours.

The law of the spectacular that comes to the fore in *homo videns*, rules at every level. The main object is to be an actor, to be seen, to pretend, to play a role, no matter what the arena. Charisma, loquacity, the histrionic touch, the magic of collective hypnotism constitute the key to success. The principal value is no longer morality, holiness, unselfishness, intelligence, or art—but fame. The fa-

mous who shine in the powerful spotlight of popularity can taste with satisfaction the honey of glory. In previous times, one had to do something for the public good, to discover, invent, or write something important. One no longer needs excellence, intelligence, wisdom, or even money. It's enough to have an attractive figure, to seduce, make an impact, exhibit oneself on the stage of the communications media.

Hollywood was the first to discover the economic power that is built on fame, creating the celebrity industry. The fascinating power of fame transforms almost anything into something and moves fortunes. Models on the billboards, actors, singers, sports celebrities—anyone in the "fame sphere"—has become the advertising endorsement for consumer products. No matter the quality of the product, people will buy it because Claudia Shiffer, Michael Jordan, or Bruce Willis uses it. Ultimately, they themselves are the product. That's why the famous are besieged. The TV industry, journalists, photographers, pursue them without mercy, as in the case of Princess Diana. Reporters write books about them, and industries are built on the foundation of their fame.

How to reverse this involution

It is evident that we live in the age of images, supportive of fame and the spectacular. Perhaps the capacity for abstraction has not totally vanished, but surely the proliferation of TV screens has affected the capacity for reflection. After rushing home from work, millions find their principal occupation in curling up on the couch and playing with the remote control. Others sit enchanted in front of the blue screen of their computer monitor, and surf their dreams and fantasies.

For Sartori, the most important danger in all this is that *homo videns* is easy prey for the experts in manipulation of the collective will. Wanting in abstract and independent thinking, hindered in

achieving one's own identity, the *homo videns* is easily seduced by the magic of the technological panoply. Our Italian sociologist is particularly alarmed by video politics, the manipulation of the power of images by politicians and government. He notes that television "strongly conditions the electoral process, whether in the election of candidates" or in "governmental decisions" by distorting the proper functioning of democratic systems.⁸

Odina and Halevi assure us that fame is "the new gold standard by which everything can be measured," reducing "our ideals to the devouring desire to be illuminated, though it be for an instant and only through simulation by the media spotlight."⁹ Certainly the advent of the image culture has installed in today's mentality the hegemony of seduction¹⁰ and simulation.¹¹ Real events and objective facts have been relegated to second place. What has become important is their representation on the screen. Reality has shifted from the real world to the monitor screen, becoming "virtual reality." We are now in the age of "seeing" rather than "being."

Fame is derived from this context. It walks on the stage of appearances. It's a luxury vehicle for transporting fascinating aesthetics, but with an ethical vacuum. It relegates one's person to a world of simulation full of falsehood—a big lie. Dustin Hoffman, in launching one of his movies, ironically stated that politics and the movies are one and the same, causing one to believe that which is not true.¹² It is a glimmering mirage, a shell game, that magnifies the figure and exalts the ego to a ridiculous degree. There lies the death of certainties, of rational thinking, and of eternal values of the spirit. The eager seekers after fame have lost the human aspiration for religious transcendence, because the desire for notoriety does not bring with it that kind of metaphysical profundity.

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That is why, today more than ever, we need to rediscover the sense of being over and above the fallacies and "strategies of illusion"¹³ and to find the certainties of the essential values. What are those higher goods that guarantee authentic fulfillment of one's being? They are the courage to forge a personal identity based on the eternal values of love, faith, truth, integrity, and justice. They consist in learning: To listen to the voice of God. To perceive the sublime touch of beauty, the mysterious call to a life of service. To swell into fulness the stream of vital energy, and to take risks for the joy of living. To develop moderation, patience, authenticity, to not be carried away by anger. To learn that there is a place for tenderness, for hugs, for the human touch, even in small things. To open the gate to the land of hope. To lift aloft the banner of a new ideal. And so many other tangible and substantial realities of the humankind, in place of the artificial games and fatuous splendor of the famous who are at the service of *homo videns*.

Those who reflect seriously on contemporary cultural trends are lifting their voices in alarm over what they see in lost capacity for analysis, for autonomous decision-making. They are frightened at a population being "tele-directed" by excited or extravagant charlatans, people who triumph in the TV world, who lead us to lose our vision of the higher values of the mind and of the spirit. These students of today's society call us to return to books, to cultivate the habit of reading, to develop critical thinking, to become not mere refractors of the screen content but thinkers with minds of our own.

To all these, we must add another supreme imperative: a return to the Word, to the Holy Scriptures, which not only

favors thinking, but establishes ethical principles and transcendental values that are essential to life here and to life in the hereafter.

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Notes and references

1. Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns: La sociedad teledirigida* (Madrid: Santillana, S.A. Taurus, 1998), p. 37.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
7. *Clarín*, January 9, 1998, p. 43.
8. Sartori, pp. 66, 67.
9. See M. Odina and G. Halevi, *El factor fama* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1998).
10. See J. Baudrillard, *De la seducción* (Buenos Aires: Planeta-de Agostini, 1993).
11. See J. Baudrillard, *Cultura y simulacro* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1987).
12. Odina and Halevi, p. 67.
13. See Umberto Eco, *Las estrategias de la ilusión* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1987).