Editor's Essay: Good-bye Homo Sapiens

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The currency of the public discussion converging on issues such as fake news, sham testimonials, manipulation of images and political swindles, addressed by most of the authors in the present issue, signals the start of a vigorous preoccupation with the state of our culture. This concern has compelled me to attempt to isolate what circumstances might be historically specific to the current cultural malaise. Social critics, in their desire to find evidence of the fraud, duplicity and general immorality that is at the heart of our ailments, never tire of pointing to the political establishment as the foremost cause and offender. While not defending politicians under any circumstances, I'll argue that the muddle and disarray that characterise current politics are incidental to a much more pernicious threat. What is commonly overlooked, especially by media analysts and observers, is the distinctive contribution of technology to the degradation of culture. Yes, technology.

I'd like to start by telling you a true story:

> During the early 1970s, running water was installed in the houses of Ibieca, a small village in northeast Spain. With pipes running directly to their homes, Ibiecans no longer had to fetch water from the village fountain. Families gradually purchased washing machines, and women stopped gathering to scrub laundry by hand at the village washbasin.
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> Arduous tasks were rendered technologically superfluous, but village life unexpectedly changed. The public fountain and washbasin, once scenes of vigorous social interaction, became nearly deserted. Men began losing their sense of familiarity with the children and the donkeys that had once helped them to haul water. Women stopped congregating at the washbasin to intermix their scrubbing with politically empowering gossip about men and village life. In hindsight, the installation of running water helped break down the Ibiecans' strong bonds – with one another, with their animals, and with the land – that had knit them together as a community. (Sclove, 1995, p. 3)

The automobile, to give another example of what may result from technological innovation, served to increase air pollution, contributed to health problems, made many nations dependent on expensive foreign oil, ruined neighbourhood life in many communities and, ironically, added to the time it takes to get to work. I don't propose that automobiles and running water are intrinsically evil; we all know that there are many advantages to them, but not all of their upshots are wholesome.

In light of recent technological advances, which are much more consequential than running water, I'd like you to consider the monumental cultural, political and social changes that are forthcoming. The specific, relatively recent technology I'll discuss here is the screen. Television, computer, laptop, cinema and mobile telephone screens have lately afforded us a source of information that, because of the specific characteristics of the image, has a deictic relationship with "reality". Visual data allow us to *witness* reality, so what we see with our

eyes has always arbitrated our assessments of the "truth". Evidently, there is an ethical concern here, and it is that those who monopolise the screen's contents can manipulate the image almost effortlessly. But this is also incidental to what is at the heart of the matter: It is the *manner* in which we interact, gather information and construct knowledge that has changed radically, so much so that it may be contributing to a regress in our evolution. Where the word, especially in its most sublime form, the written word, had brought us to the pinnacle of our intellectual capabilities, unveiling for us the splendid cosmos of abstract thought and making us true Homo sapiens, the newly-preponderant synthetic image, whether moving or static, delivers the obvious, elementary, raw exterior of objects and movement and is starting to pull us back to a time when speculative thought was an irrelevant complication in a primitive world of basic survival skills.

By this statement I do not propose a return to a pre-penicillin world, nor do I suggest people destroy every screen they can lay their hands on. But there should be an acknowledgement that those screens, in a much more significant manner than running water, are standing between the citizens and the real world and may be diminishing their capacity for complex, abstract thought. We should also come to terms with the fact that, in the pre-communication-technology world, we fashioned our environments (cultural, political, social...) using very different modes of interaction. Back then the spoken word, articulated in person, inevitably determined the properties and peculiarities of such environments. We designed those environments and, in turn, those environments allowed us to systematise the organisation of modern societies. The new technologies are unavoidably changing our surroundings, altering social discourse and changing us in a much more profound way than running water did in Ibieca. It is not likely that Ibiecans ever intended to change their way of life in the way running water changed it, and it is also unlikely that modern Homo sapiens are overly concerned with future calamities brought about by technology, or even troubled by the warnings issued by noted scholars like Giovanni Sartori.

At the end of the last century, Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori pondered the future of mankind, now that information gathered from screens was poised to replace the type of knowledge derived from the written page (2002, pp. 11–13). While he was more concerned with television than with computer screens, he wrote at a time of great technological upheaval, lamenting the fact that the written word, a critical factor in the development of what we call Homo sapiens, or "wise man," might one day become obsolete.

Sartori's concern is one that many of us who teach might certainly share. I, for one, have had such concerns for a long time, a concern that grows as my students' capacity to express themselves relentlessly declines. If I may be granted this indulgence, I'd like to offer a bit of anecdotal evidence: in one of the first occasions that this decline made itself evident to me, a student, when trying to convey her trepidation regarding the number of pages I had assigned for reading, said: "when I saw the amount of pages you assigned, I went uuuggh!" This uuuggh was accompanied by a bizarre yet strangely endearing grimace. Regarding that same assignment, another student sent a classmate a message containing the image of a terror-stricken face with the caption OMG! The first few times that I was treated to such histrionics I did not deem the experience worth analysing, but after several more incidents I began to think that there was more to this than meets the eye. I concluded that the students, in fact, were giving me *visual* information, so rather than expressing their dismay, apprehension, joy or anxiety through a vocabulary of apposite words, they were *portraying* their feelings, acting them out. On another occasion, my question regarding the reading of Cervantes's masterpiece *Don Quixote* was met with a strange response: "I believe that the critical moment in the novel

is when John Lithgow defeats the Knight of the Mirrors". Oddly enough, I don't remember Cervantes including a present-day American actor in *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615). Evidently, the undergrad had skipped the reading and watched the TNT Classics version (2000) on screen, featuring Lithgow as the heroic knight of La Mancha, with Bob Hoskins as Sancho. In analysing his comment, I speculated that in this student's experience of Cervantes's story he *witnessed* Don Quixote become mad by rummaging through his library, opening the pages of books at random, and mumbling incoherent phrases, and that what he missed by *watching* the knight of La Mancha go mad was the beauty, wit and trenchant humour of Cervantes's description of the event, which I give here in Tobias Smollett's 1705 translation:

> In short, his understanding being quite perverted, he was seized by the strangest whim that ever entered the brain of a madman. This was no other, in a full persuasion, that it was highly expedient and necessary, not only for his own honour, but also for the good of the public, that he should profess knight-errantry, and ride through the world in arms, to seek adventures, and conform in all points to the practice of those itinerant heroes, whose exploits he had read; redressing all manner of grievances, and courting all occasions of exposing himself to such dangers, as in the event would entitle him to everlasting renown. This poor lunatic looked upon himself already as good as seated, by his own single valour, on the throne of Trebisond; and intoxicated with these agreeable vapours of his unaccountable folly, resolved to put his design in practice forthwith (p. 30).

Perhaps with this example I may be overstating the disparity in the type of *knowledge* that the word brings relative to the image, but I don't think so. The screen has provided the student with a concrete phenomenon, an instance of a specific situation that unfolds before his eyes. This explicit, unambiguous experience takes place in the absence of the arbitrating conceptual cosmos that is manifest in Cervantes's masterful description. Students who watched the film *Don Quixote* may explain their experience using a concrete vocabulary that describes actions and situations; what is lost is a grasp of both the work's elaborate complexity and the notional tracks that array and systematise the reader's thoughtful experience.

To elaborate on the differences between reading and seeing, I'd add that visual stimuli make an impression on the viewer that, in large measure, depends on what is sensed. Consequently, the viewer will cohere those stimuli, stabilising them in order to articulate that impression into idiosyncratic, intelligible patterns that hinge on the film's configuration. In spite of the intellectual concepts that the filmmaker may be attempting to convey, film's distinction and modern pre-eminence hinges upon its uncanny power to convey the recognisable, external world of physical energies. This is a familiar, seemingly spontaneous world of unmediated reality where the human being feels comfortable and at home and, moreover, one that engages two of our primeval senses in order to produce meaning: sight and hearing. On the other hand, the book's readers look at a paper object with rectangular white sheets and black makings printed in them. There is no denying that the contents of the book proceed through an ordered space that is the product of the intellect. Therein readers receive the impression of a conceptualised, abstract cosmos with stabilised components and properties; the written word is a font of conceptual knowledge that places truth and reality in a meaningful *context*. In a book, human direction of events is conspicuous and incontestable.

Furthermore, I'd reiterate that, in film and other visual products, our attempts to retrieve meaning are largely focused on physical phenomena that we can see and hear, phenomena we associate with "nature". This is important, because for millennia humans have coped with "nature" as a reality that is independent of human direction, it is *there* regardless of us, and as such, what is seen and heard has a more intimate, diagnostic connection with "truth". The audio-visual, for the general public, is considered intuitively as a reliable mirror that reflects a reality, even in works of fiction: when challenging the overwhelming power of the image, then, a written text can be bowled over, reduced to the level of opinion. Incidentally, we can observe the attack on the world of the word very clearly today, with claims of "fake news", "fake declarations", and so on, that question the intrinsic validity of the word.

Does the new-fangled supremacy of the image, brought to us by technology, mean that Homo sapiens is evolving into a different creature, the one Sartori in the title of his book calls "Homo videns"? At what point do we begin to consider, very seriously, the consequences of the transition from a society of individuals formed by the pondered word to a society of individuals formed by visual inputs and virtual reality? The question is valid inasmuch as the *umwelt*, the world as experienced by that particular organism called Homo sapiens, may be changing. Here I would call on the Knight of La Mancha again to explain my argument: the old knight on screen looks and sounds like a flesh and blood individual, a circumstance that contributes silently, inconspicuously to the invalidation of Don Quixote as a symbol. This is because the heroic Knight of La Mancha was never meant to be *seen*: he is an allegory, the linguistic projection of a psyche, a concept produced by an alchemy of words meant to generate universes that share very little with the world of things. But, regrettably, the universal availability of the screen, allowing us to peer into "reality" directly through images and sounds, may one day obviate the need for that peculiar bond that we've had with the physical world since the advent of the word: the symbol.

It has been noted on several occasions that we, Homo sapiens, are symbolic creatures. In the 10th edition of his *Systema Naturae* (1758), Carl Linnaeus describes the human species as Homo sapiens, describing as well four of its geographical subspecies. In his *Essay on Man*, neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer aimed to recalibrate Linnaeus' definitions, moving beyond Aristotelian characterisations of man as "rational animal" to conclude that " … instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*" (1944, p. 26). Human beings, according to Cassirer, do not live in a purely physical universe that they perceive and describe using rational abilities; they rather live in a symbolic universe. Myth, religion and conjecture make up the symbolic texture of the human universe, and words are their agent and bearer. So this symbolic distinctiveness that defines the human being is manifested through abstract concepts that only language can provide; words, in short, are the building blocks of thought, and thought is a more profound, penetrating and insightful activity than visual perception. Evidently, language is a purely human creation, and while researchers do claim that animals have language, being that they communicate with each other, what animals communicate are sets of signals that alert others to danger, to the availability of food, and so forth, hardly the abstract concepts and ideas obtainable in that particular human discourse enabled by the word.

But, why should we be concerned? Well, to begin with, it is becoming clear that seated in front of a screen Homo sapiens is on the road to becoming that new creature, Sartori's "Homo videns", an organism that develops an awareness of its surroundings fundamentally through the senses of sight and hearing, just like so many other animals with which it shares the planet. One might argue that what one sees on a television or a computer screen comes

with language, with words that explain the images, but in a screen's hierarchy of value, the image reigns supreme and language functions as a mere auxiliary to it, like the ant riding on the back of an elephant. So, what I submit to you is that the concepts and ideas articulated in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* or Sir Peter Strawson's *Entity and Identity*, for instance, couldnt possibly be expressed through images, no matter how much contextual information were to be provided. Undoubtedly, intellectual concepts require a level of abstraction that prevents their authentic disclosure through audio-visual display.

This leads us back to our friend Homo sapiens and its invention of the word. Beyond its initial function of expressing hunger, fear, commands or needs, the word promptly developed, very likely, as a scheme to inform others of things *seen*, of events experienced through the sense of sight. This would have made the word a proxy for the act of observing directly, of regarding, and as such, something that would not have been considered direct evidence of *reality* by our early ancestors. Moreover, an oral description of a horse would have been a less creditable depiction of reality than the image of a horse painted on the walls of the caves at Altamira or Lascaux. Those depictions can be *seen*. So, did we invent language because we did not always have the resources to create images readily available? Probably not: at a certain point we must have realised that grunts, hand signals, facial expressions and concocted images on the sand needed supplementing in order to cope with our environment more efficiently. But, with all its power to guide our actions and filter our perception of the environment, our ancestors likely recognised that language is still a human contrivance and therefore not part of reality, not a part of what is "out there". Words, in short, were not as "real" as the mountain they needed to climb, the river they needed to cross, or the deer they were chasing, all things that they could *see*.

This then begs the question: Does our primeval acumen still influence our present-day hierarchy of value like some embryonic vestige of our troglodyte days? If we still think of the image on a screen or a photograph as conventional proof of reality, then the word, artificial and evanescent, can only mount a flimsy and ephemeral challenge to the staggering, primordial power of the image. If such is the case, the word and the particular type of knowledge it bears will eventually be superseded by technological marvels lurking in our future, electronic gadgets that will again enthrone the image as paramount and conclusive instrument for communicating truth. The progress towards this destination, starting with cave paintings, drawings, then photographs, film, television and computers has been unremitting and is evident: Early newspapers, for example, when technology allowed them to print photographs, acknowledged the image as the happy culmination of their efforts to communicate truth. The January 10, 1918 issue of the *San Antonio Light* magazine, for instance, illustrates the superiority that editors assigned to the image over the word. Therein one reads:

> One Picture is Worth a Thousand Words.
> The *San Antonio Light's* Pictorial Magazine of the War exemplifies the truth of
> the above statement – judging from the warm reception it has received at the
> hands of the *Sunday Light* readers. (1918, p. 6)

Conceivably, this publication's photographs of World War I battlefields had a much greater affective impact upon the magazine's readers than the war correspondents' reports describing fields littered with the dead and the dying, but the point being missed here is that the ideas, concepts, assessments and inferences found in a text like that of Joll and Martel's *Origins of the First World War* (2007) would do much more to enlighten a reader regarding the war than

a thousand pictures or even films. The power of the image, then, rests upon the visceral reaction it produces, upon the noncognitive emotional manner in which it is assimilated. The word, on the other hand, can reach one's understanding in a much more profound way and is the backbone of social organisation: Its decline, then, is a tragedy whose proportions (social, economic, political, cultural) we have yet properly to measure or understand.

This tragedy is in front of us on our screens every day. Politicians, in the strongest, most affluent nations, have begun to dispute the evidential and demonstrative substance of the word, labelling as "fake" the argumentation, logic and lines of reasoning that dare to question the legitimacy of their authority. Words have become expendable in the age of the visual, of what can be seen happening without the need for an in-depth explanation. All our heroes have become visual "action heroes": They somehow fly unaided through the skies, vaporise enemies with lethal rays emanating from their naked hands, generate explosions that eliminate any problem quickly and definitively without the need for dialogue, build enormous border walls that keep the criminals from entering the country and wear eye-catching wardrobe and eccentric, inexplicable hairdos. Evidently, words would be an obstacle to such exploits, as they could be used actually to explain that all of these visual stimuli are a fabrication, produced to have a visceral effect on viewers who are being asked to suspend their rational selves and believe the image. The post-word era we are entering is the post-knowledge era and, as perils accumulate, a post-knowledge popular base is growing whose political and cultural demands are being felt ubiquitously.

A starting point for measuring this tragedy would be assessing the way in which the preponderance of the image changes, in a fundamental manner, the way in which we communicate with each other. As Sartori states, when communication changes contexts, from the word to the image, the transformation is staggering. The word is a symbol whose value lies in what it signifies, in what it "makes us understand" (2002, p. 39). We are all, from intellectual to brick mason, immersed in our cultural cosmos because of the word's symbolic power. Proof that Homo sapiens are symbolic beings is that we can only gain access to our cultural cosmos if we can decipher symbols, only if we have the ability, the indispensable cultural and intellectual background to be able to understand language. You put most of us in front of an ancient Chinese text, and all we see is a number of converging lines forming complex shapes, and nothing else. We cannot enter that world, as it has no meaning and no discernible value. But given the relevant cultural background (e.g. being skilled in ancient Chinese), one could enter a rich cosmos of ideas, concepts, mindsets and beliefs when looking at such texts. That cosmos, which informed a whole culture for centuries, can only be reached with the knowledge of its words: we *are* symbolic animals.

So the change from word to image changes our very nature; it is a metamorphosis. In this regard, it is important to note that the screen is not only harmless entertainment; what is truly alarming to researchers like Sartori and John E. Grote is that the screen has been functioning as *paideia*, or form of education for the young. As Grote states, "It has also been found that the adult world has far less influence or impact on these children than the world created for them by television, by music and movies … " (2000, p. 194). In the opinion of several researchers, the screen is causing that metamorphosis of which I speak; it is an anthropogenetic medium that "is generating a new anthropos, a new type of human being" (Sartori, 2002, p. 40). This new human being will not read as an adult, and the exposure to all types of violence on screen will have desensitized them to others' pain and endorsed violence as an acceptable way to resolve disagreements.

So what happens in the future, if the image keeps obviating the word? The future is here. After providing a perverse "education" to the young, the screen, the image keeps acting upon them as adults, providing audio-visual information (not ideas) regarding what is happening in the world. A very large percentage of that information has to do with Manchester United, Real Madrid, the NY Yankees, the Kardashians, King Juan Carlos's 429th girlfriend or the grocer who lost his hand in a bizarre accident and had it reattached. News that has to do with politics is handled at the most superficial levels, which is the likely cause of the imbecility that pervades in government today.

How do we make that connection? One might rebut by reminding me that in democratic societies "the people" have elected those who conduct policy and hold the reins of government. Tragically, that may just be the reason for the evident lack of intelligence, aptitude and ethical judgment observed at every level of government today. This is because, unfortunately, governments are the result of "the people's" opinion. To give a suitable explanation for this one only needs to point to the genesis of public opinion. First, we must remember that opinion is subjective and does not need to be buttressed by evidence. Modern democratic governments obey not an informed, well-read public that has a profound grasp of the issues, expresses its concerns and votes in consequence; governments rather try to adapt their programmes to public opinion. The question then becomes: How is public opinion formed?

The answer to this question is not simple. Is the public being approached in the street, on the phone, through email or through "snail-mail"? Who formulates the questions, and to what purpose? It becomes apparent that the pollster has much agency regarding the answer that the interviewee gives to the question. In most cases the respondent does not expect to be asked and gives unpremeditated, guided answers to the questions. So those answers, as Sartori (2002, p. 78) fittingly emphasises, are superficial, volatile and/or made up at the moment in order to come across to the pollster as well informed. Moreover, the media can easily guide the citizens' opinions from afar through the information highway by sending across a bevy of accepted or "correct" images, notions and expectations. Russell Newman (as cited in Sartori, 2002, p. 78) concludes that "of every ten questions on national policy that are asked every year, the average citizen will have a strong opinion on one of them, perhaps two, and virtually no opinion on the rest. This doesn't keep the respondent from giving made-up opinions once the interviewer starts asking questions".

I trust that the elucidations above help define the reason that I maintain that governments based on public opinion are becoming undemocratic; in this day and age, the technology used by the media has made it very easy to influence and escort popular opinions towards a desired objective, and governments react in view of those objectives. Regarding network newscasts, which are truly important purveyors of images and of categorized "reality", Peter Hart (2005) states that

> … the network newscasts were largely populated by guests and experts drawn
> from the elite and powerful classes, while voices who might challenge their
> views were given severely limited access to the airwaves. Consequently, their
> perspectives remained largely unknown to the tens of millions of Americans
> who rely on evening newscasts for their information. This situation presents a
> dangerous problem for a democratic society: When important issues are under
> discussion, can a democracy properly function when critical ideas are excluded
> from popular debate? (p. 53)

The situation described by Hart is also evident in the networks' Internet services, which are increasingly accessed by the public. So is it possible that television, the Internet, the universal screen that was touted as the tool for the most absolute democracy, be facilitating the creation of a sheepish follower, of an automatic, computerised citizen, of a post Homo sapiens with an undemocratic mindset, even in "open" western societies where formal censorship is absent? In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1998) seem to think so:

> In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of the dominant elite. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent. This is especially true where the media actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, and aggressively portray themselves as spokesman for free speech and the general community interest. What is not evident (and remains undiscussed in the media) is the limited nature of such critiques [...] Money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. (pp. 1–2)

So as we say goodbye to Homo sapiens and welcome the appearance of a new species, of that new being brought about by the circumvented word and the triumph of the screen, one has to wonder what the future looks like. Will the screen keep functioning as a nursery for properly processed, predisposed thinkers? Will a resultant retrograde mindset, ill suited to addressing the ever-growing and difficult problems of the world, be dominant? Will the bewildering political landscape generate resolutions that mirror those of our unenlightened ancestors? What will happen to our dreams of social justice, such as the right to health, employment and social security that have been at the core of modern social democratic thought? Will the nostalgia for untroubled medieval utopias annul, once and for all, the critical insights that guided our thoughts and that books aptly delivered?

Has the future arrived?

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