The cultural identity of homo videns
in mediated city spaces

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Contemporary societies are organized under the rules of "mediated" civilization. Steadily we have passed from homo-sapiens who premised rational thinking as his basic principle to "homo – videns" who privileged the sense of vision against the procedure of logical estimation. Media gaining a dominant position in everyday life have managed to accustom interpersonal relationships, social structure and cultural identities to a mediated context where the sense of direct communication and exchange of ideas is almost a lost case. The problem of true communication, of real human relationships is even exaggerated in big cities where people tend to construct their identities and consequently their behavior, according to stereotypes presented in media. Since the notion of time, effectiveness, and speed are extremely important for "visual" citizens the lack of interpersonal communication leads inevitably to an isolated, "self-made" identity that each one of us constructs for himself, letting alone any common cultural experience. "Homo videns" in modern cities is a media product and his only true and common shared identity is this of "common visuality". As Hans Georg Gadamer has warned us: "From 'readers' we have become spectators of the world".

Introduction

The initial stimulus for this paper was the innovative work of G. Sartori (1998) who introduced the term of "homo videns" as the inheritor of "homo sapiens". G. Sartori describes with negative- black colors the evolution from the civilization of thought to the civilization of picture, of moving images. The argument of the famous political scientist lies on the supposition that the postmodern "course" to visuality wasn't an external or a technical one referring only to advanced communication networks but it was followed inevitably by changes to the whole "human" condition affecting both the person itself as an individual and the "social persona" as well.

Relevant and extended theoretical argumentation is provided to the above thesis by the literature about the so called "post-human" condition (see Hayles 1999, Fukuyama 2002, Pepperell 2003) which is trying to explain the metamorphosis of contemporary humans to the condition of "post-human", where several "traditional" human characteristics and idioms were transformed or disappeared due to the impact of technology. The post human condition functions as the denotation term for homo videns and explains vividly- while negatively - the width and significance of consequences included.

In this "framework" of visuality where virtual reality has displaced reality itself, construction of identities is nevertheless, a procedure which merely concludes and "obeys" to the above situation. We are talking about "self- made" identities that isolate people from each other, disconnecting their social relations and leading them to their visual-self who has less and less references to the real world.

Moreover modern cities' culture is well-grounded in the theory of mass communication or non-communication promoted by the sites of mass media. Citizens are TV viewers, are consumers of the widespread mass culture. Citizenship has shifted to "audience-ship" and therefore to spectatorship. Urban space turns to be the "remains" of media space, or in other words, the space left from media to people to cogitate about themselves; but is there such a space really?

The paper explores the interrelations and chain reactions between mediatized civilization, cultural identities of citizens and the new meaning of city space drawing inferences from the theoretical discussion on the specific issues. What we will try to highlight is the close interconnection between media representations on one side and the construction of contemporary urban identities and the new perception of city space, on the other side.

Do contemporary cities have the same "face", the same visage? Do they correspond to their traditional role as urban places that define, delimit and modify at the same time places, cultures, identities or they are in a dissolution procedure under the logic of globalized mediated space which dictates that no real boundaries and borderlines can abide or remain intact from media world commands.

Theoretical considerations

a) Homo videns

Is homo videns a new type of human being or is it just the product of mediatized and electronic- driven culture? Has our perception of world and our physical environment changed utterly because of media representations? Any possible answer should take into consideration the impact of media in the ways we see, we understand, and we face our living environment ever since media and especially TV have captivated a great percentage of our everyday living experience and knowledge.

The question is even more interesting if we add the prospective of "return", of possible "rectification". Can we become more human again regaining some of our old features or there is no way back? It seems that the route of technology does not leave big margins for such a

thought. It is clear that any improvement in the "videns" situation can only happen in the present realm of mediated world if we deliberately follow different paths of living and choose ways of expressing ourselves in a more "natural" way.

On the other hand the influences of media are tremendous. Homo videns is conquered by the power of the spectacle as a new way of forming human relationships.

> The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a Weltanschauung which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified. (Debord 1995: 4)

The moving images cross the mind of homo- videns as a parade of symbols and it is not just another additional visual experience; it has substituted real experience. The more he is captivated of the illustrated spectacle life the more he stays aloof in front of his real life. But "To see doesn't mean that you understand also" says Sartori (1998) meaning that vision cannot replace thinking, what's more critical thinking. "Literal" vision is not the same with the "figurative" one, which is accompanied with mental elaboration of the message (Thompson, G. 1997: 295). The first is just the sense of vision the second depends on cultural variables; variables that in the second media age are defined very much from media.

Therefore, visuality is the core value of tele-society. Along with visuality comes "visibility" that is extremely important for media communications and for the new content of "public". F. Ortega explains:

> Everything that the media make visible becomes public, whatever the subject, personage, or event dealt with. The objective is not, therefore, to reproduce shared areas of life. But from the moment that the spotlight of the media is projected on something, this something becomes a component of the common property. (2002: 214)

If our society and culture is "teledirected" as Sartori describes it then it does not seem necessary that people living in this society have to be totally teledirected as well. Perhaps culture is the main force which guides people's behavior; a conscious thought, though can change behavior and consequently change culture as well or at least the results of its impact. But if we come to uphold Habermas option that "the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness is exhausted" (quoted in Poster 1995: 44) then the limits of reaction are narrowed dangerously.

On the other hand, culture has also the feature of stability. Once it is established and accepted it hardly changes. Following the stream which provides easy solutions for communication using a PC or any other electronic device, homo videns is constantly isolating himself from the social environment where he lives because the range of information he needs can be easily achieved by watching TV and the need for interpersonal communication or any other form of two dimensional communication has fallen into a nugatory idea. The knowledge most people have for events derives from the reception of mass-mediated symbolic forms that are diffused by media. The deployment of technical media plays a crucial role in the ways people act and interact with one other and the dominant form of mass communication does not provide ways of interaction. (Thompson 1990: 225). The result is "privatization" as F. Ortega says which "means a greater reclusion of the individual in his isolation; a vindication of greater individual liberty; an exaltation of the family and its morals" (2004: 214).

Personal relations require effort, trust, direct communication and direct consequences and opposed to "media nature" relations where abstraction and anonymity prevails are hardly to be obtained. If we include the factor of speedy life that is a common characteristic in life in cities we can understand why people seem to feel more relaxed in communicating with the

"anonymous other" on PC. This is how the "private-public sphere" (Ortega, 2004: 217) is constructed converting the sense of common shared publicity to an individualistic perspective convenient enough for contemporary alienated people.

Homo videns portrays the turn of human beings from their orientation to community towards to an orientation of strict individualism. N. Postman (1986) envisages in his book the collateral effects of television which has taken the role of ideological agent operating as a given subconscious for the people affecting their relationships, their way of thinking, their total perception of the world. TV civilization has replaced steadily words with visual signs, thinking by watching, and human relations with coded messages. At the end it has intruded in human brain altering basic functions of human behavior. Sartori defends the thesis that,

> television is not only a mean of communication; it is also seen as a source of all knowledge and is an 'anthropogenetic' instrument, a medium which, displacing communication from the context to the world of image, gives birth to a new 'anthropos' ..., a 'moloid' who does not read and exhibits an 'alarming mental lethargy' (quoted in Filho, 2004: 302).

In the age of "simulacra" as Baudrillard (1994) describes it, even identities are a fake imitation, a fake representation of what is supposed to be a real culture. In this age truth and fiction are very close; in fact they are overlapping each other. In the end "The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard 1994: 1).

b) Constructing visual identities

Homo sapiens was the authentic evolution of human nature while homo videns is described and perceived as the divergent course of contemporary human condition. This difference in the origins changes dramatically the symptoms of this new-identity which is formed very early in childhood, since children have access and therefore familiarity with technology from a very young age. G. Sartori warns us that "televisual children" are

> deformed by the electronic nanny even before they learn to read or write, likely to become individuals who are increasingly lost, distracted, directionless, anomic, bored, in need of psychoanalysis, depressive and, in short suffering from a profound sense of emptiness. (quoted in Filho, 2004: 302).

Construction of identities is primary a matter of ideology adopted consciously or not while it is embedded within a social context. Constant repetition of acts, behavior and cultural patterns works in the direction of an ideological socialization, which regarding the present audio-visual age, is very much specific and limited of the possible directions that could be followed. Anyway, nowadays socialization is measured by the exposure to media and in this sense "whoever in underexposed to the media is dissocialized or virtually asocial". (Baudrillard 1994: 80). Maybe the "telly-led society" that Sartori is referring to is another term of one-dimensional society and, in the end, of one dimensional man as Marcuse (1964/1971) analyzed very early, in the decade of the 60s.

Watching television is not just another habit; it assembles a "private" cultural event, a form of hypnosis and a subconscious invasion of signs and messages that invade undisturbed to our understanding of this world. While TV invades into the private space of people, the concept of privacy collapses and in the place where mental concentration should be, TV message intrudes, transforming uniquely the procedure of critical elaboration of information received. Finally when any form of resistance to TV messages has been decreased the

relationship between TV and the viewer becomes a medium's "monologue". (Papadimitriou 2002: 197)

The technical medium has always been crucial for cultural transmission, because "it alters the material substratum, as well as the means of production and reception, upon which the process of cultural transmission depends". (Thompson 1990: 205). "Diving" into the world of spectacle does not offer another, alternative reality; for homo videns is reality itself. Devotion to media images leads of necessity to media-dependency. After this point media-world seems normal.

What media have succeeded in contemporary societies is to provide a blur picture of reality, where images, sounds, real events and "artificial" ones or media events (Katz & Dayan 1992) are consolidated to a unity from which none of us can escape at least without a serious effort. And even the possibility to escape is doubtful because the fear of social isolation is immediate (Noelle-Neumann 1991). Stereotypes, images and above all ideologies well-hidden behind TV screen carry the main duty of current cultural identities that are paradoxically both multi-cultural and one-dimensional at the same time. It is like adding details in a given product, how much you add makes a slight difference it does not change the substance, the "core" of the product; homogenization remains.

At this point the contribution of the theory of social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966) is crucial. Even more helpful is the thesis for the construction of reality by mass media by N. Luhmann (1996/2003: 143). As the author explains media do not address people as a reality of a physical entity and functions but as a social construction. The "myth of human" that media construct is been recycled and represented with qualities that media attach to it (1996/2003: 144). Homo videns is, in this sense a prototype and not a simulation. Media are aware that once the illusion is discovered as such somebody may try to escape. It is true that you cannot interfere in an illusion but you can certainly act and react to reality. But what if this is not an illusion and the only given, living reality is the one offered by media? Mark Poster gives a good explanation:

> The mediation has become so intense that the things mediated can no longer even pretend to be unaffected. The culture in increasingly simulational in the sense that the media often changes the things that it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities. In the second media age 'reality' becomes multiple (1995: 30).

In this constructed reality fragmentation occurs at the same time with homogeneity. This new coming "fragmented homogeneity" enhances similarity and the right to difference is usually never exercised from people.

In information society where information sometimes even exceeds our expectations, people seem to live in ignorance about how these telly-led identities are affecting subconsciously their behavior and everyday life according to values already predetermined by media. Media though, are not an independent sector of society, in contrary they belong to it and what they show derives from society and moreover reflects political and economic structures. This interpenetration between media and society and the fact that their duality has faded away is strengthening even more the dominance of homo videns. Because "the medium and the real is now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (Baudrillard 1994: 83).

This vicious circle is well supported by culture giving good reasons for the stability of the system. Because culture is after all a well grounded social system which from the point it is accepted it hardly changes.

c) Culture in between city place and media space. An equation running?

In a culture built around the society of spectacle and the empire of vision, cities turn to engage this culture's boundaries and characteristics as well. Images of media provide segmentation and this is reflected in citizens' behavior and acts. Cities are constantly crowded with lonely people seeking their isolation and privacy in every given opportunity.

Changes in cities architecture and public buildings bare the irrefutable witness of mediated alienation. Public buildings were always serving as historical representatives of the way(s) a society is looking the world and reflect modern tendencies. Modern shopping malls represent the consumer – society values and market oriented communities. It's easy if we think of

> … today's 'edge cities'; satellite communities joined by freeways and shopping malls, living spaces designed exclusively for the twin pursuits of driving and shopping. Peer into one of those shopping malls and you'll see how intimately related architecture is to the social imagination. By any reasonable standard, shopping malls break all the rules: their exteriors are bleak, unfinished, forbidding; the exits are never clearly marked; the space seems fiendishly designed to confuse. And in fact it has been designed to confuse. (Johnson 1997: 43)

Segmentation and isolation are images and situations reflected in block of apartments also where people hardly know each other yet they are living in the same house- building. Each design and architecture style "echoes and amplifies a set of values, an assumption about the larger society that frames it" (Johnson 1997: 44). Media have almost abolished the "interpersonal space", a space where people interact and response to each other. Because "when people interact, space matters. Spatial arrangements determine what people say, how they say it, and even whether it's necessary to say anything at all". (Reeves & Nass 1996: 37). So spatial organization whether it is public or private is bound to culture and perhaps consists and represents its core components.

Transformation in public sphere has affected cities commonality as well. The contradictions here are very interesting. Visuality and publicity does not come along together at least the way they used to. TV has replaced public sphere with a media-sphere which is governed by its own rules. TV constructs public events that are "consumed" (watched) in private. The notion of where the public is and how it is experienced is changing constantly. If we take the common example of people walking in a crowded city street, it is easy to observe that acting in a public place does not mean necessarily that these people gain any common experiences unless they urge for that. Speedy life, and new habits for citizens, e.g., wearing earphones for mobiles, MP3 players and other trendy electronic gadgets have promoted self reclusion even in public places. In the second media age public places, perhaps the most indicative and important image of a city's "face", turn to be "gathering loci" of people unwilling to give up their privacy, externalize and share their experience.

So can we argue that city place as partly a mental space is confined by media space? Do we have an equation running? And what do we mean by space? How important are the physical borders in a stage of dissolution from media?

The attributes of a "place" that Gieryn describes are quite enlightening for our argument. Accordingly, "place" can have three necessary and sufficient terms. Place is:

> (1) A unique geographic location (irrespective of scale), (2) a material form (either natural or artificial or both) and (3) (place is) invested with meaning(s) and values (that are flexible and malleable between and within communities) (quoted in Borer 2006: 175.)

The relationship between (1) and (3) is the dualism between "real" city and "imaginary" city. The intersection and coexistence of these "two cities" results to a unique personal experience that constructs "different cities" for each single individual and helps citizens to locate and recognize themselves as members of existing communities.

> While the real city appears to be soundly located and constructed within personal biography and the physical world, the imaginary city somehow seems to defy time, space and identity…. The imagined city thus intersects with the social to construct intimate personal relationships with place (Stevenson 2003: 113).

It seems that what was mostly affected by media "contamination" was the third aspect which involved meaning investment. Nowadays people invest on media to find meanings for them. Homo videns relies on the visual reality of given meanings letting alone any critical evaluation of them. This is how media culture is invented; based upon the dominant position of media in the battlefield of meaning.

Since culture is an elusive term in sociology, especially in media sociology, it is difficult enough to locate the space where culture takes place, especially to investigate if media culture is relocated somewhere else except media landscape. In any case though, any culture needs a place to be exercised, to be learned, to grow. Cities provide this place, are undertaking the role of the mediator between culture and people. People are acting their cultural acts upon cities dramaturgy. Quoting and reversing at the same time L. Mumford, M. I. Borer points out that: "The city remains the greatest stage in which we enact and reenact our cultural dramas" (Borer 2006: 173).

The "traditional" - but eternal as well - relationship between cities and cultures is based upon their interdependency. Culture includes the notion of "locality"; it needs to take place somewhere. A city also acquires its significance from peoples' actions that live in specific place. A city's identity and character is the collective image of living narratives, of meanings that people invest in specific places. But despite the fact then *we* give meaning to places, places of urban geography, cities in general have their own meaning as well, gained through the living history of people lived in them and added their own explanations and significations to them. The media have signalled the end of long narratives and the way urban culture is attached to them. In media age where long narratives are missing, short fragmented narratives are mirrors of fragmented personalities, of people self –restricted, alienated from the real world. Because "the postmodern world, fragmented and differentiated, gets along better with media narratives, with a limited scope and an ephemeral nature". (Ortega 2004: 218).

While in the first place culture was mainly the outcome of this tight relationship between cities and people, media have interfered actively proposing a new explanation for place; in fact media proposed placelessness. A new culture was introduced that needed nor cities, nor people's interaction in order to exist. The only prerequisite for this culture is "watching" and paying attention to images. Cities remain places where people act but this act is very well determined and predefined by media that prescribe to the viewers their roles

The question rising here is whether there is an "alternative" culture apart from the media constructed one, because we have to consider, from a materialistic point of view, that real culture is the "living" one. Culture consists of discourses which integrate meanings and ideologies that either are contested, negotiated or reconstructed and cities are not to be seen only as places and markets where political and economical struggles are conducted. Moreover cities are places that living culture is grown, common feelings and behaviors are articulated and local identities are formed.

The argument standing here addresses culture as an ongoing procedure: In the end, though, meanings and symbols are shared, a whole "bank" of cultural and semiotic resources (Kress et al. 2001: 10-11) is composed to the notion of culture. The contemporary "host" of

these contradictions and symbolic battles is mass media. Mass media may restrict a city to its physical territory but may as well expand it promoting "glocal" identities and communities as well (Wellman & Gulia 1999). If construction of identities is a process by which a person identifies himself in a specific cultural and physical environment, the cultural one is provided by media while the "empirical" one from cities. The result of this synthesis comes out like this: People living in contemporary cities identify themselves as global citizens. "Local" as a term, has engaged the meaning of the origin place while "glocal" addresses the hermaphrodite condition of contemporary citizenship and therefore, culture-ship. Place remains important, cities continue to be places where memories and everyday life proceeds but their contribution is sometimes neglected by homo videns who prefers his visual loneliness. The new urban imagining should be conceived under the abilities that new electronic media provide-especially Internet- and the opportunity that it gives its users to detach from the "real" world and join imagined and represented worlds where the notion of space is re-conceptualized. As Stevenson points out: "These worlds take the form of 'communities' and 'cities' which supposedly exist outside space and time – free from the bounds (and bonds) of place" (2003: 128).

We should point out though that culture is not only an epistemological assumption, is rather a materialized issue very much dependent from place and time even if modern conditions of life advocate for the opposite. Culture is also the place we live, work, and communicate; it still holds and offers the perception of communality. What people do in a city, the way they name places and how they invest feelings and memories on them plays a significant role to the practice of culture and at the end to the perception of the world.

What we should consider is whether, under the aforementioned condition, cities can continue "to live" in their traditional setting? Are they still normally "restricted" from physical boundaries or media culture-ship has overcome them?

Conclusion

"The ways that people make sense of the world they live in, or hope to build are tied to the places where they practice their culture" (Borer, 2006: 175). We can add to this interesting portrait of culture that even in the post human age of Informatics cities still remain the places where culture lives and grows, where culture is realized by everyday practices. Even cyberspace is mainly a physical place although it boasts for its placelessness; electronic addresses (e-mails), chat "rooms", information "highways", websites to be "visited" constitute the virtual cities (Stevenson 2003) where the terms of place and time are transformed into new symbolic forms but the psychological investment on them and their significance remains almost the same. The sense of place and specific bonds with it is still a crucial element for citizens' identities which even when surrounded by electronic-cultural hegemony they still need a real place to escape and be human. In human nature the "sense of belonging", of a place – based philosophy remains crucial for the natural grow of a personality. Perhaps the negative attributes of post human and homo videns situation can be efficiently eliminated by re-appraising the importance of city as a social organism, as a social locus, where common identities are constructed, changed and re-built again.

Media visuality as the 21st century's crucial concept cannot replace reality, can only interfere to it changing some variables. No matter what changes in virtual world and the level of intrusion in peoples' identities the sense of belonging, of living *in* and *within* a city, the bond to a specific community of people is still an important issue. Even homo videns needs to recognize the place he lives, to recall in his memory familiar places and events, people he has met. Mass media and virtual communities can offer a sense of common shared virtual places but since no one can really locate them they remain abstract, vague and fragile and therefore dangerous for identities, because once the PC or TV is turned off these worlds do no longer

exist. Subjective worlds are not equal to objective ones. Media and the electronic world of PCs are temporary places of a virtual consciousness that can serve as a part-time deliberation from physical constraints. On the other hand perhaps constraints are necessary to people in order to decide, to formulate and to locate themselves in the real world, where ideas and dreams are materialized. Because even in the realm of dreams materiality exists at least as a wish; the power of vision and dream comes from their inner possibility of escaping to reality. Otherwise they will turn into a Utopia.

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1   The symbol "/" indicates that the first date is the date of publication while the second is the date of the translation.

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