EDUCATING "HOMO VIDENS"
PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AS A WAY OF COUNTERING THE "ANTIMEDITATIVE SITUATION" OF OUR TIME AND OF FOSTERING THE DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDE.

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Abstract

Homo videns is today's man or woman whose knowledge-frames are shaped by the use of modern media. The passive experience (from childhood on) of an overwhelmingly image-based media can prevent children from developing a capacity for abstraction--that is, the ability to form general concepts, to make comparisons, and to acknowledge different points of view. What is at stake is the future of democracy as a form of life that rests on rational discussion and argumentative skills. *Philosophy for Children* offers an effective means to counter this phenomenon. If *homo videns* is (or risks being) overwhelmed by the immediacy of the medium and narcotized by 'un-reflection' like a prisoner in Plato's cave, children and adolescents who participate in the discourses of *Philosophy for Children* have the opportunity to experiment with thinking, to have first-hand experience in the co-construction of knowledge, and thereby to become citizens of a real and effective democracy.

Over the last twenty years some of the most prominent scholars in political science have been pointing out the danger for democracy posed by the massive dissemination of TV and other 'video-media'. As I understand it, the argument reads as follows: a mature democratic society requires its members to take part in public discourse and deliberation, and therefore people who are – in Matthew Lipman's words – "engaged in thinking, reflective, introspective, responsible, reasonable, collaborative, cooperative."[i]. But the environment in which future citizens grow up, instead of enhancing these skills, is dominated by 'visual communication'; reflective thought is supplanted by a passive submission to an endless flux of images that does not demand a critical attitude but on the contrary, mesmerizes, induces a quasi-narcotic status, and overcomes the individual by its immediacy. The problem lies in the form of the message rather than in the contents of the images (the triviality of so many TV shows; the violence of the

videogames etc.). Images, in their ceaseless flux, impose themselves as givenness, as unquestionable facts, and the audience is substantially inactive. Less attentive than attracted, it is – as advertising agents know well - a target, a subject to be seduced, not an interlocutor actively involved in an inquiry. Rational persuasion, based on arguments and therefore on a rhetoric animated by *logos*, is mostly replaced by sensory excitement, by aesthetic (in the etymological sense of *aesthesis*[ii]) and emotional blandishment, by recourse to what is unusual, surprising, interesting (in Kierkegaard's sense of the word). Visual communication addresses our subjectivity in a way that risks undermining what is the very basis of a democratic society, that is the capacity for rational discussion in which each and everyone must be potentially involved (and therefore 'equipped').

Within the framework outlined so far, this paper is structured in two parts:

1. First, I will sketch the convergent ideas of three authors who – concerned for the future of democracy – have sounded an alarm on the disruptive (for democratic discourse) effects of the predominance of television, and of a predominantly visual culture in general;

2. Secondly, I will try to illustrate how the program of Philosophy for Children is an effective means for countering the consequences of this visual culture, and for encouraging attitudes that are necessary for a democratic society. In this paper I will not dwell on a close analysis of complex thinking and its articulation by Lipman as critical, creative and caring thinking. It would in fact be possible to illustrate how each one of these dimensions can act as a barrier against the dominance of 'video-culture'[iii], but I will confine myself to showing how the paradigmatic P4C session, as a practice of thinking and inquiry, is opposed in a pedagogically significant manner to the visual (and un-critical) environment in which children more typically grow up[iv].

§1: THE BIRTH OF *HOMO (TELE-)VIDENS*

One of the first thinkers who approached the issue of the risks for contemporary democratic societies linked with entering - in his words – the *Age of the Eye* was Otto Neurath (1996), one of the leading figures of the Vienna Circle. He was a sociologist, an educator of adults, the conceiver and founder of the *International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science*. His reflections on the issue we are dealing with can be found in his posthumous work *Visual education – Humanisation vs Popularisation*. Though written in 1945, when TV and videogames did not yet exist, the book somehow anticipates the warning that has emerged over the last two decades. This is due not only to Neurath's visionary capacity to analyse the development of contemporary society, but to the fact that TV and the Internet are the epitome of a tendency dating back to the second half of the 19th century when the electronic media (photography and telegraph) began to replace the typographical in framing minds [POSTMAN 2002]. Thus, Neurath wrote at a moment when electric media already had a long history. He understood before others that something crucial had happened in the history of human knowledge and communication, something we had to come to grips with in order for liberal democracy to survive. This paper does not focus on Neurath's solutions and educational strategies-- that is the idea of a *visual education* through an international pictorial language aimed at diffusing knowledge among wider areas of population so that each and everyone could be equipped with 'intellectual means', and provided with the necessary information to take part in public debates and in the decisional processes of his or her community. This paper does focus on Neurath's diagnosis, which is a powerful and passionate examination of the risks to which democracy is exposed in the *Age of the Eye*, in the epoch in which 'visualization' prevails.

Neurath describes what he calls "our visual scene" as follows:

> Frequent changes of the visual scene are characteristic of our modern urbanised life, which is gradually invading the rural districts as well. Posters call to us from the walls of streets and corridors; exhibitions invite us; the cinema screen attracts millions of people night after night; an increasing number of periodicals and pamphlets present new pictures in colour or in black and white […] Change of visual impressions is the norm […] Lantern slides, film strips, films, models, still and in motion, give documentary information, realistic and symbolic» [NEURATH 1996, p. 291].

In another passage he points out what is at stake from an educational point of view:

> Modern life is tied up with quick changes in our environment, with hurry and haste, and adaptations to these features form a part of the educational approach, but it will depend on human decision to what extent humanity will guard a meditative mood and support habits of argumentation [NEURATH 1996, p. 288].

Neurath is aware of a potentially fatal gap: on the one hand "arguing and meditating, which form the backbone of serious education according to our tradition" [*Ibidem*] and which are necessary to a democratic society; on the other the proliferation of visual media which threatens "the meditative mood [which] is an essential element of all kinds of education. To a certain extent, meditation is essential for all kinds of activity" [NEURATH 1996, p. 267]. Every educational undertaking should take this gap into account, and promote actions that counter the anti-meditative drift which jeopardizes the destiny of democratic society, if the latter is understood as a 'place' where rational discussion and inquiry rule. Neurath's solution (that is, *visual education*) can still represent, if opportunely updated, a helpful educational strategy, along directions which cannot be examined here. In the second part of this paper I'll try to show how P4C is a particularly effective curriculum for counteracting the *anti-meditative situation* of our times, which Neurath diagnosed in such a prophetic way (and apart from a traditionalist and reactionary mood).

In the last years of his life Karl Popper, a fellow countryman of Neurath and major opponent in the epistemological field[v], regularly insisted on how much TV, with its pernicious impact on children's minds, represents the new threat which liberal democracy and the *open society* (that is, a society that supports and fosters open-mindedness) has to face after the fall of communism.[vi] Although the focus of Popper (who refers to CONDRY 1993) is very specifically targeting the quantity of violence shown on TV to young people, there are in his arguments[vii] some aspects worth mentioning in our context. First of all it is noteworthy that Popper - approaching the issue of the role of TV - felt the need to broaden his definition of democracy or, better still, to underscore aspects of democracy which lie in the background in his other writings. Popper's fundamental idea, the core-notion around which his political thought is organized, is that democracy is the political system within which it is possible to remove rulers without violence and bloodshed. In his booklet on TV Popper argues against a loose – and potentially harmful - sense of the term 'democratic'. In order to justify the poor, trashy quality of the TV shows, a media tycoon said to Popper that people wanted it and that respect must be paid to the desires of people. His choices – the tycoon concluded - were supported by «the reasons of the democracy» [POPPER 2002, P. 72]. «Now – Popper remark – there's nothing in the democracy that justifies the thesis of that media tycoon, according to whose opinion the fact of offering TV programs *at ever-lower levels from an educational point of view* corresponds to the principles of democracy "because people want it"» [*Ibidem*][viii]. In order to counter such a viewpoint Popper emphasises the strong connection between democracy and education:

> . . . democracy always aimed at raising the level of education; this is an old, traditional aspiration of democratic societies. The ideas of that 'gentleman' don't absolutely correspond to the idea of democracy, which was always and is still the idea of raising general education by offering to each and everyone increasingly better opportunities [*Ibidem*].

A slight interpretative tilt allows us to make explicit all the implications of this quotation and to go beyond Popper's firm statement that «in democracy ... there is nothing more than the mere principle of defence from dictatorship» [*Ibidem*]. Democracy is also a way of life which is based upon and encourages rational discussion, critical habits of thought, and the *intellectual passions* [POLANYI 1990, cap. VI]. As a consequence it is possible to reject the statement of reactionaries of all times (and, nowadays, of media tycoons) that democracy is the prevalence of mass instinct and base passions. In fact education is the first line of defence for democracy – taken in this strong meaning. On this topic Popper tells us something which will help our exposition to progress. By drawing on his own evolutionary epistemology Popper underlines that the mental development of children depends, to a great extent, on the interaction with their environment. For this reason,

> . . . what we call education is something which influences this environment in a way that we judge good for the development of these children ... What does 'learning' really mean? And what does 'teaching' really mean? It means to influence their environment in such a way that children can prepare themselves for their future tasks ... For this reason all depends on the environment, and therefore we, as the older generation, have the responsibility to create the best environmental conditions. Now, the point is that television is a part of children's environment and it is, of course, a part we are responsible for, because it is a man-made part of the environment» [POPPER 2002, p. 75].

We cannot discuss here Popper's proposal to require a license people working in the field of broadcasting. It is sufficient to underline that the effects of television are connected with the fact that television represents an educational environment (or a curriculum, to avail ourselves of a Postman's suggestion [POSTMAN 1983]). Therefore, in order to counteract its influence on democratic society, we have to operate in the area

of education, by designing learning environments and curricula which would defuse the anti-democratic potential of the video-culture.

A few years after Popper's pamphlet appeared, the most prominent Italian theorist of democracy, Giovanni Sartori, approached the same problem in a more radical way. Sartori does not limit himself to denouncing the violence in TV shows but admonishes that

> TV is producing a permutation, a metamorphosis that regards the very nature of the *homo sapiens*. TV is not simply a communication medium; it is at the same time *paideia*, an 'anthropogenetic' means, that is, a medium which generates a new *anthropos*, a new kind of human being » [SARTORI 1997, p. 14].

From *homo sapiens*, «a product of written civilization» we are moving towards *homo videns*, a human being for whom «word is replaced by image» [SARTORI 1997, p. XV] and whose main faculty is not reason but sight. Sartori's alarm is based on the fact that «our children watch hours and hours of television before learning to read and write» [SARTORI 1997, p. 14] and that «the child, whose first school … is television, is a symbolic animal that receives its *imprint*, its educational mould, from an utterly sight-centred world» [SARTORI 1997, p. 15]. Implicitly diverging from Popper's (and Condry's) views, Sartori concludes:

> In this *paideia* the tendency to violence ... is only part of the problem. The child's brain is like a sponge registering and absorbing indiscriminately ... everything he or she sees. On the contrary, and on the other side, children brought up by the TV *do not read* as adults, and become video-dotards, life sentenced to videogames [*Ibidem*].

Sartori's attention focuses on the shift from reasoning capacity to mere perception: the massive and passive use of TV and other 'visual' media prevents children from

creating an abstractive attitude that includes the ability to form general concepts, to make comparisons, and to acknowledge different points of view.

> *Homo sapiens* ... owes all his knowledge and all his progress in understanding to his *abstractive capacity* . . . our capacity to deal with political, social, and economic reality in which we live, and even more our capacity to subject nature to human being is based exclusively upon *thinking through concepts*, which are invisible and inexistent entities to the naked eye. . . . Summing up: all the knowledge of *homo sapiens* develops in the realm of the *mundus intelligibilis* (made up of concepts, and mental conceptions) which is not, in any circumstances, the *mundus sensibilis* perceived by our senses. And the point is this: television inverts the progress from the perceptible to the intelligible and reverses it into the *ictu oculi*, *i.e.* into a return to mere sight. Television produces images and effaces concepts: but by doing so, it atrophies our abstracting capacity and, consequently, all our capacity for understanding [SARTORI 1997, pp. 22-3].

We cannot inquire here into Sartori's theory of knowledge, but we have to carefully interpret his text in a way that rejects unilateral, hasty and trivializing readings, without wasting its argumentative potential. We need not inflict banishment and ostracism on the perceptual dimension of human knowledge. As the studies of *Gestaltpsycologie* and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty have showed, perception is an essential and primary moment of human cognitive process, with autonomous laws of construction of the percept. Perception is not the mere and passive registration of unrelated data, but the assembling of meaningful totalities, of *forms* (*Gestalten*) which have a sense not because of the high-order activity of thinking, nor through the application of intellectual categories, but by virtue of endogenous rules of constitution. We have not to slide into the intellectualist prejudice (accessory to the sensationalist one[ix]) according to which the first moment of knowledge is merely a received sensory stimulus on which the activity of the intellect imposes a form. Perceptual knowledge is already-in-form, and presents

itself in meaningful configurations, in discrete and segregated figures which our perceptual system structures [KANIZSA 1980; KANIZSA 1991; BOZZI 1989]. The *primacy of perception* [MERLEAU-PONTY 2004]--the fact that every piece of knowledge emerges from an original and fundamental relationship with the life-world, doesn't exclude but implies a "primacy of the abstract" [HAYEK 1988, cap. III]: we don't deal with – as the empiricist model maintains – an amorphous sensory material that the subject passively receives, rather:

> What we call knowledge is first a system of norms of action assisted and modified by rules which indicate equivalences or differences or various combinations of stimuli ... in the last analysis all sensory experiences, perceptions, images, concepts etc. ... derive their peculiar properties from the norms of action they apply and it doesn't make sense to speak about thinking or perceiving unless as the function of an acting organism in which the differentiation of the stimuli shows itself in the differences in the dispositions to act that they cause» [HAYEK 1988, p. 51. My translation from the Italian version][x].

In other words, the categorial attitude is rooted in the sensory order--it doesn't intervene a second time. *Homo percipiens* is not therefore the antagonist of *homo sapiens* but he is *homo sapiens* in so far as he is originally related to the world through the lived body. By modifying Sartori's argumentation slightly, we can say that the adversary of *homo sapiens* is *homo tele-videns*, exposed to a destructured and desultory flux of images, a haphazard and syncopated sequence that doesn't permit and doesn't require any *mise en forme*[xi] because it doesn't appeal to any cognitive activity but to sheer *jouissance* [MAFFESSOLI 1990][xii], that is, to a feeling of immersion in a captivating and rutilant (but also indistinct and undifferentiated) world of appearances. This *homo tele-videns* isn't *homo percipiens* to the extent that perception is our primary contact with world through our lived body: *homo tele-videns* is far from the context of the *Lebenswelt* (in the original Husserlian meaning of the term), he is un-sensitive to it because he is titillated

at the level of a sensoriality which has cut off its ties with the lived body as primordial openness to the world, and is consigned to the excitability of the aesthetic (in Maffessoli's sense of the word) ecstasy[xiii]. The child before TV screen or playstation isn't a being exploring the world actively through its body but is the target of a bombardment of charming images which immobilize it in a sort of apathy (or in frantic activity with a joystick), insulate it from context, prevent it from every inquiry. Together with the perceptive dimension – in the strong meaning we are referring to - the categorial attitude is lost too: the world is no more an object of knowledge but of a sheer hedonistic appropriation, linked with a relentless solicitation of sensory surfaces. As regards this side of the problem—one that Sartori doesn't approach but that can be integrated into his reflection--educational strategies must aim on the one hand at providing children with the intellectual means for a critical consumption of mass-media and on the other hand at educating *visual thinking* [ARNHEIM 1997] through the figurative arts, which permits the restoration of the abstract-categorial aspect of perception. Although these educational actions promote reflection, they act at the level of what we can call a 'pedagogy of perception', whereas there is another side of the problem, which is more attuned to the worries of Sartori's analysis. Recently Ann Sharp has reminded us: « I [am] convinced that philosophical concepts underlie our daily experience and if we want to make sense of the world there is a necessity to inquire about the meaning of those concepts and how they are related to our daily actions»[xiv]. *Homo tele-videns*, losing or even not developing at all the capacity of investigating the web of concepts of our daily life (both at the personal and the social levels), runs the risk of becoming unable to make sense of his own reality, of living in a world that has become divorced from meaning and is reduced to an object of manipulation and domination. An education of and to thinking is necessary then [SANTI 2005; SANTI 2006; STRIANO 1999; STRIANO 2003] through which *homo tele-videns* acquires (again)

the faculty of *inquiry*, the abilities of reasoning and complex thinking, in order to avoid relapsing into meaninglessness and to bolster the democratic (that is communicative and inquiring, as Dewey taught us) way of life. Philosophical practice with children is not only opposed to 'video-culture' but it is also an educational 'strategy' which can face the challenge that the birth of *homo tele-videns* presents to rationality. That strategy will be presented in the next section.

§2: OUT OF THE PLATO'S CAVE, OR RE-EDUCATING HOMO TELE-VIDENS

At the centre of a Philosophy for Children session there is, not a TV screen where a flux of images passes with a hypnotic power of enchantment, but a whiteboard, or better still a sheaf of chart paper. On it the facilitator will *write*. That is the first important point to be underscored in our context. An Italian linguist who developed the ideas of Sartori maintained that we have entered a third phase in the history of human knowledge [SIMONE 2000]. The first phase started with the invention of writing; the second one with the invention of the movable-type printing. Both put value on what Simone calls «alphabetic vision». Alphabetic vision fosters the emergence of sequential and analytical intelligence, which is capable of structured argumentations and is (at) the source of that abstractive attitude which we are currently losing (at least according to both Sartori and Simone). The crisis of *homo sapiens* corresponds to the crisis of the alphabetic vision, which characterizes the third phase: in this epoch writing and reading are shelved and replaced by other (mainly perceptive and emotional, fusion-promoting instead of abstractive) forms of experience and relation with the world, so that thinking and education for thinking tend to become marginalized and neglected. Simone distinguishes two models of culture:

1. Propositional cultures, which put emphasis on the saying, the analysing, the identification of differences, the establishing of hierarchies [SIMONE 2000, p. 135]. Throughout history western civilization has been "propositional," with all its achievements both at the political level (ideas of democracy, personal freedom etc.) and at the epistemic level (in terms of primacy of reason, analysis, science, critical thinking) [*Ibidem*];

2. Non-propositional cultures. Here what obtains is a an experiential (and epistemic) attitude which is *generic* («because it doesn't analyse the content of

thinking into clear elements but limits itself to evoking it globally, leaving it unanalysed and indistinct»), *vague from a referential point of view* («as ... it designates ... only general and undifferentiated categories»), *destructured* («[because] it refuses the structure, both the hierarchical one of the components and the syntactical and textual one, or it uses extremely simple structures; it doesn't use any hierarchy among the information that it presents ...») [SIMONE 2000, p. 130].

Now, «the language of newer generations shows a strong bias … toward the Great Fusion. . . instead of clear words people prefer vague allusion, indirect and generic evocation of shared experiences; there is the idea that it is not important giving names to the things and translating experiences into words or discourse, because people think that what really counts is rather *having* experiences, *remembering them, re-evoking them*, than telling them analytically or translating them into discourse» [SIMONE 2000, pp. 136-7][xv].

Things are totally different in a P4C session where, on the contrary, writing and reading are crucial[xvi]. The participants begin by reading a text (and an analysis of the texts of the curriculum would be of great significance in this context). During the session, what carries weight for the community of inquiry is written on sheets of paper and remains the patrimony of the community, which has in this way the possibility to preserve the memory of its inquiry. Such way of proceeding belongs to the era of *alphabetic vision*, 'prior' to the 'birth' of *homo tele-videns* and the emergence of the Age of Show Business [POSTMAN 2002]; it is still under the banner of the *exposition*, which is typical of the era of writing and of the printed book:

> Exposition is a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression. Almost all of the characteristics we associate with mature discourse were amplified by typography, which has the strongest

possible bias toward exposition: a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response [POSTMAN 2002].

These *frames* are characteristic of the print-oriented mind, and more generally of mind as far as it is shaped by writing, and it is not immersed in the world of all-pervading visuality. They persist in the P4C session, and are empowered there.

Now, how does the session proceed? What follows the reading of the text? What is written at first on the paperboard (which is a sort of epicentre of the community of inquiry sitting in circle)? In what does the second step of the session – *the construction of the agenda* - consist? Participants in a P4C session begin by asking questions, a move whose importance for re-educating *homo tele-videns* can be assessed by considering some peculiarities of the image *per se*. The image is what it is--it shows itself, it has a high level of iconicity [SIMONE 2000]). Whoever sees a sequence of images always has the impression of understanding at least something. The understanding of images qua images seems quite unproblematic. Furthermore, especially in the case of motion pictures, images place us under a sort of spell. Our critical attitude weakens, we are captivated, enthralled like the protagonist of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* by Woody Allen. As *homines videntes* we risk being overwhelmed by the immediacy of the images, narcotized by a sort of 'un-reflection', and in this position are the very descendants of the prisoners in Plato's cave who watch shadows on the wall and take them as the reality. Conversely, what does it mean to ask a question?[xvii] A question represents the *openness of the experience* [GADAMER 1983]--experience as openness and openness as experience:

- experience as openness: there is experience when we come to know that things are other than we believed, when we don't take them for granted. In order to get

to this we have to pass through the phase of questioning, of asking whether things are one way or another;

- openness as experience: asking questions is to call something into question. The object of the question is open because (and to the extent that) we don't have a ready-made answer--if the question is a real one of course. Asking questions about something is «to put something in the openness of its problematic nature» [Gadamer 1983, p. 420].

For all these reasons, asking questions is «more difficult than answering» [GADAMER 1983, p. 419], as we can often verify in a P4C session, and as Socrates already knew:

> When interlocutors in the Socratic dialogue, embarrassed by having to answer Socrates' pressing questions, want to reverse the roles and claim the supposedly favourable part of asking questions, just then they completely fail [*Ibidem*].

To call something in question can be excruciating because it means to accept the possible failure of our convictions and to realize that what we took for granted could be otherwise. *Pathos mathos*, Greeks used to say: learning is suffering, experiencing the (possible) nothingness of our most deep-seated beliefs. We are really far from the relaxing and narcotic 'experience' of *homo tele-videns*!

In a P4C session, after the construction of the agenda the members of the community of inquiry develop a discussion plan. «The openness of a question does not mean an indefinite unlimitedness» [GADAMER 1983, p. 420]. Every real question has a horizon. In a P4C session the horizon isn't traced through an imperious and arbitrary act but *it emerges from the questions of the agenda through a deliberation of the community of inquiry which reflects upon the questions it asked*. It is therefore a hermeneutic-reflective act: the community of inquiry questions the questions of the agenda, so to say, and recognizes

their sense, the direction(s) where they move. To develop a discussion plan is therefore to take care to guard the questioning as openness to experience, and to preserve it in its horizon. It is to prevent it from disappearing and fading into an indefinite unlimitedness. *To preserve the openness of the question is to be interested in it*. It is to be in the midst of it, to be involved in it. *Homo tele-videns* is never really involved, is never really interested in this strong meaning. He is attracted through the polychromatic and charming variety of advertising. *Homo tele-videns* is *under* a spell, spellbound, bound and compelled to watch the shadows on the cave wall – like the prisoner in Plato's myth. *Homo tele-videns* isn't really interested, he lets the images fade away (through the remote control); on the contrary in a P4C session participants are interested, in the midst of the openness of questioning, and they guard its horizon--they don't let it disappear.

What follows the development of a discussion plan is not a conversation but a philosophical discussion. The model of 'discussion' for *homo tele-videns* is the talk show. In the talk show there is no co-construction of knowledge, problems are stated without looking for shared solutions, participants lay emphasis on lived and emotional experience and not on judgement based on reasons, they use generic and de-contextualized notions [LIVINGSTON & LUNT 1994], they don't take context into account [BAUMAN 2005, cap. V], they are insensitive to it (whereas *sensitivity to context* is one of the main characteristics of critical thinking [LIPMAN 1991, p. 121 sgg.]). Participants in a talk show confine themselves to insisting on their point of view; they neither listen nor argue but chat regardless of what their interlocutors say. In reality there are no interlocutors--people engaged in an exchange of thoughts, of *logoi*--but only chatting monads, so to speak, which are not interested, are not in the midst of the openness of the question/discussion, but encapsulated in their own preconceptions and unwilling to confront their own ideas, values, feelings along with those of other people. The talk show is the realm of the *Gerede*, of the chat [HEIDEGGER 1993, § 35]:

The chat is the possibility of understanding everything with no preliminary appropriation of the thing to be understood. From the beginning the chat protects from the danger of failing in this appropriation. The chat, which is within everyone's grasp, not only exempts us from the task of a true understanding but it spreads an indifferent understanding, for which there is nothing more that is undisclosed . . . . It is sufficient to keep on talking groundlessly in order to pervert the openness in a closure. Indeed, what is said is definitely assumed as „saying something", that is, discovering. The chat, *neglecting* to go back to the grounds of what is said, is by its nature a process of closing. This closing is increased by the fact that the chat, because of its presumption to understand from the beginning what is spoken about, prevents from every new questioning and every discussion, by belittling and retarding them in a characteristic way.xviii

Clichés, *idées reçues* and triviality are dominant in a talk show because, as Bourdieu remarks, one of the most important problems posed by television is the relationship between thinking and speed [BOURDIEU 1996, pp. 30-1]. To challenge preconceptions, to show their groundlessness, to deconstruct them and to demonstrate their fallaciousness, to argue by giving reasons for one's statements, requires time, and neither time nor the possibility of building complex arguments are allowed to participants in TV shows, who are in need of putting their messages forward rapidly in order to keep alive the fleeting attention of audience. On the contrary, in a philosophical discussion, whose archetype is the Socratic dialogue, what guides the discussion is *die Sache selbst*, the topic, the subject matter of the inquiry. Every participant is interested in the subject matter, is in the midst of it. He/she doesn't insist on his/her standpoint but takes into account the *sense* of the dialogue, moves forward in the direction of dialogue. This is the *logos* of the dialogue, its inner consequentiality [GADAMER 1983]. For this reason the members of a community of inquiry listen to

what their speech partners say, take into consideration different outlooks, analyse the problems, and seek shared solutions, without drawing upon the repertoire of banality.

Finally, to ask questions, to be interested--that is, in the midst of the openness of question/discussion--is to be in question. We ourselves are in question when we discuss. We self-correct our beliefs and values. Self-correction is what a true philosophical discussion culminates in.[xix]

So far we have been insisting on the analogy between *homo tele-videns* and the prisoners in Plato's cave. But it is noteworthy that members of the community of inquiry, though opposite to the prisoners in the cave and animated by the logos (of dialogue), are not like the prisoner who, in Plato's myth, sees the light of the Sun and recognizes the vacuity of the shades in the cave. The prisoner of the Platonic myth does not free himself autonomously from the chains, he «[is] *compelled* [*anagkazoito*] to stand up, to turn his neck, and to walk» [PLATONE 1997 515c], «[is] *compelled* [*anagkazoi*] to look at the light», he is dragged by force [*bia*] «on the steep slope» in order to be led toward the light of the sun [PLATONE 1997 515e]--a lot of words related to compulsion and necessity recur throughout these famous Platonic pages and accompany the new awareness of the prisoner, who does not really change his condition because he remains subjected to necessity and coercion (to *anagke* and *bia*). Therefore, if we analyse carefully Plato's text from a semantic and metaphorical point of view, what the prisoner experiences is far from a process of emancipation through knowledge of truth, but rather the continuation of his serfdom by other means.

There is a meaningful textual clue to how Plato's myth of the cave, if it is read without interpretative embellishments, opens a gap between philosophizing and freedom, between inquiry and emancipation, between democracy and education. When real objects (and not their simulacra) are shown to the prisoner (still dazzled and blinded by the light of the sun), he is *compelled through questions to answer what it is* that

he is seeing (the Greek passage reads as follows: *anagkazoi eroton apokrinesthai oti estin* [PLATONE 1997 515d]). The five words of the Greek text signalize the terrible truth of the myth of the cave (and perhaps--following Popper's famous attack on platonic thought--a distinctive feature of Plato's philosophy). Questioning--the very nucleus of P4C, and inquiry--which should be moved by *eros* (whose name seems to echo in the Greek verb for questioning/inquiring: *erotao*xx), are perverted and transformed into an instrument of coercing into answering [*anagkazoi apokrinesthai*], which is not, in spite of its root ("*krino*", to judge, to discern), an act of judgment and discernment but rather submission to pressure, necessity, and compulsion. And all this happens because knowledge in the platonic myth is not a cooperative research, nor communication and sharing of experiences, nor--as Dewey taught--an inquiry tightly linked with a democratic way of life, but it is an act of subordination to the Truth and its 'guardians' (the philosophers kings). It is the attainment of a definitive and ultimate dimension (the essence, the *tí estín*, evoked in the quoted passage by the expression '*oti estin*') that renders un-thinkable every further inquiry.

While Dewey's philosophy/theory of education (which is at the source of P4C) weaves together the notions of **inquiry** (an inquiry which is always open and becoming because there will always be indeterminate situations to be approached, new problems, and there are no final answers or essences), **democracy** (as *great community* [DEWEY 2002]), and **education in thinking**. The platonic myth of cave, on the contrary, inaugurates a tradition of thought and a way of thinking that has dominated western civilization over centuries and that, under the banner of the ultimate knowledge of essences, rejects every idea of cooperation in the activity of knowingxxi, denies every emancipative value of philosophizing, and perverts it into a means of domination:

> Philosophical education [in Plato's *Republic*] has a definite political function. *It puts a mark on the rulers, and it establishes a barrier between the*

rulers and the ruled … Platonic wisdom is acquired largely for the sake of establishing a permanent political class rule [POPPER 2003, p. 157].

Education for critical thinking is, therefore, banished from platonic ideal polis:

> What are Plato's institutional demands regarding his highest form of education? They are remarkable. He demands that only those who are past their prime of life should be admitted. "When their bodily strength begins to fail, and when they are past the age of public and military duties, then, and only then, should they be permitted to enter at will the sacred field …" namely, the field of the highest dialectical studies. Plato's reason for this amazing rule is clear enough. He is afraid of the power of thought. "All great things are dangerous" is the remark by which he introduces the confession that he is afraid of the effect which philosophic thought may have upon brains which are not yet on the verge of the old age» [POPPER 2003, p. 141]

We are really far from the *ethos* of P4C with its idea that we have to educate children in philosophy since an early age, that this education takes place within a community of inquiry and it is not a lone activity, and that, by so doing, we can bring them up to be free, conscious and reflective citizens of a fully democratic society.[xxii] Re-educating *homo tele-videns* through P4C is, therefore, not only to counter the 'anti-meditative situation' of our times but to set Plato's prisoner free or, better, to let him free himself by his own efforts (together with his fellow-inmates). [xxiii]

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[i] M. Striano, *La filosofia come educazione del pensiero. Una conversazione pedagogica con Mathew Lipman*, in «Scuola e città», 1, 2000. Throughout this paper the focus is on the connection between democracy and education (in the age of 'video-culture') and therefore a crucial role will be played by Dewey's idea of democracy as «a mode of associated life, a conjoint communicated experience» in which «recognition of mutual interests [is] a factor in social control» and what takes place is «change in social habit, its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse» [DEWEY 1916, cap. VII, § 2]. I won't dwell upon an investigation of the differences in the theories of democracy of Dewey and the other authors (such as Popper and Sartori) I'll take into account.

[ii] In an important book Maffessoli wrote about an *éthique de l'estéthique* of which the most meaningful characteristics are: challenge to the role of rationality in the process of knowledge of reality and the prevailing of *jouissance* as main way of 'appropriation' of the world; the emergence of a sort of tribal feeling that emphasizes the sharing of emotions (and not therefore the fact of being involved together in an inquiry) as playing an essential role in the establishing of the community; the dominance of a hedonistic approach to reality instead of thinking and the critical attitude. Summing up: «le frivole, l'émotion, l'apparence ... toutes choses que l'on peut résumer par le mot esthétique ... ont profondément modifié la politique, la vie de l'entreprise, la communication, la publicité, la consummation» [MAFFESSOLI 1990, p. 11].

[iii] First of all **critical thinking** *relies on criteria*, that is, rules of judgment. It is therefore diametrically opposed to the chaotic and shapeless succession of images of the video-culture, for which we can use all the adjectives by which Lipman describe uncritical thinking: «[Uncritical thinking] is flabby, amorphous, arbitrary, specious, haphazard, and unstructured. The fact that critical thinking relies upon criteria suggests that it is well-founded, structured, and reinforced thinking» [LIPMAN 1991 p. 117]. Secondly, critical thinking is *self-correcting*, and therefore it is deeply different from the hypnotic assertiveness of many images of video-culture. Thirdly, critical thinking is *sensitive to context*, whereas the flux of images captures within a separate and phantasmagorical context upon which audience has no control (apart from remote control!). **Creative thinking** is self-transcending and generative, it gives rise to what is new and original, creates by thinking what is yet to think. Critical and creative thinking are two sides of the same coin [LIPMAN 1991, p. 86] and therefore the novelty to which creative thinking gives rise is not the unusual, exciting and spiced 'stuff' with which video-culture has to provide its audience in order to keep its attention alive (which is based mostly upon mere sensoriality), but it is the creation of new frames of thought, the invention of new theories, speculative innovation, and the discovery of new fields to explore. **Caring thinking**, in the interpretation of Echeverría (to which I'll refer because of his emphasis on democracy), has as an object that «los niños y adolescentes vayan construyendo un proyecto personal (¿qué tipo de persona quiero ser?) y un proyecto social (¿En qué tipo de mundo quiero vivir?) La construcción y asimilación de estos proyectos personale y social, dentro de un marco democrático, encaminados a la acción congruente entre el pensar, el decir y el hacer, serían el producto más importante del desarollo del pensamiento valoral en la comunidad de diálogo» [ECHEVERRÍA 2004 pp. 70-1, n. 20]. Caring thinking is especially meaningful in the age of video-culture. First of all, as Postman proved, TV advertisements are often like of religious parables [POSTMAN 1997, pp. 36 sgg.], they are not simply the source of commercial information but propagandize an ideology, or better still, an axiology of consumption which occupies the place deserted by other gods and other values. Educating caring thinking seems to be one of the most effective ways to equip children and adolescents with the skills to reason on the question of values, without succumbing to the sirens of consumerism. Secondly, 'talk show culture', which has a powerful impact on the world view of many young people, has an «intrinsic tendency ... to present the life of human beings, its essence, as an aggregate of individually lived problems which demand an individual solution and the use of resources which are owned at an individual level» [BAUMAN 2005, p. 180. My translation in English from the Italian version of Bauman's text]. On the contrary educating caring thinking within the framework of the community of inquiry acts for the acknowledgment of the political – and therefore public – dimension of problems and of their solution, and can counter-balance the depletion in meaning that politics and the practice of democracy are undergoing in recent decades.

[iv] Putting emphasis on the opposition between the practices of P4C and those promoted by video-culture doesn't imply that I agree completely with a *thermostatic view of education* [POSTMAN 1983], which cannot be discussed here in its theoretical foundations.

[v] Carrying on his controversy against the epistemology of Logical Positivism, Popper recognized that Neurath was the most lucid and enterprising member of the Vienna Circle. On Popper and Neurath as representative of two opposite epistemological approaches, see *cfr*. ZOLO 1986.

[vi] On how in the last phase of Popper's thought, after the end of the *brief century*, TV replaced communism as the arch-enemy of the open society *cfr*. BOSETTI 2002.

[vii] K. R. Popper, *Cattiva maestra televisione*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 2006.

[viii] The translation from the Italian version of Popper's text is mine. Italics mine.

[ix] The entire *Introduction* to MERLEAU-PONTY 1995 is devoted to showing how the empiricist perspective and the intellectualist one converge (since both consign to oblivion the *Lebenswelt*).

[x] Hayek explicitly refers to the *Gestaltpsycologie* and mentions Merleau-Ponty's *The Primacy of Perception*, but he seems to move rather toward a 'mentalist' interpretation of perception than toward an investigation of *embodiment*

(which is, in our opinion, a more promising direction of inquiry). But it is not possible to dwell here upon an analysis of Hayek's epistemology.

[xi] These characteristics are suitable mainly to what Umberto Eco called *neotelevision*, born «with the multiplication of channels, with denationalization, with the introduction of weird electronic devices» [ECO 1983, p. 163]. The world of *neotelevision* is, in Postman's words, a *peek-a-boo world*, «where now this event, now that pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense, a world that does not task us, indeed does not permit us to do anything. It is like child's game of peek-a-boo entirely self-contained and endlessly entertaining» [POSTMAN 2002, PP. 98-9. My translation from the Italian version of Postman's book].

[xii] Some of Postman's ideas can be placed side by side with Maffessoli's idea of *jouissance*: «What I deplore is not that television entertains, but the fact that it made amusement the natural model to represent experience. Television keeps us in constant contact with the world, but it does it with a face whose eternally smiling expression is inalterable. The problem isn't that television entertains but that all topics are presented as amusement, which is a completely different thing » [POSTMAN 2002, PP. 107-8. My translation from the Italian version of Postman's book].

[xiii] Within a different theoretical framework, much more focused on the role and the significance of information, Postman draws a similar conclusion, speaking of *pseudo-context* in reference to telegraph and photography (the forebears of television in his theory):«A pseudo-context is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But it is a use that leads neither to act nor to solve a problem nor to change anything. It is the only use left to information that does not have any real connection with our life ... The pseudo-context is the last refuge, so to say, for a culture that is choked by irrelevance, incoherence and impotence » [*Ibidem*, p. 97. My translation from the Italian version of Postman's book].

[xiv] STRIANO & OLIVERIO 2007 (a cura di), *Philosophy for Children: una via educativa alla filosofia. Intervista biografico-teoretica ad Ann M. Sharp*, in «IRIDE», XX, 51, agosto 2007, p. 258.

[xv] It may be superfluous to point out the affinity between what Simone calls *Great Fusion* and Maffessoli's *éthique de l'estéthique* (cfr. *supra* n. 2).

[xvi] «[P4C] feeds bias toward philosophical inquiry and, therefore, it deals with critical thinking (autonomous and logical reasoning, de-contextualized language etc.). From this last point of view "Philosophy for Children" shows its inclination toward written language » [COSENTINO 1997].

[xvii] I'll draw here on some wonderful pages by H.G.Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1960 Second Part, II, 3, c). I used the Italian translation by Gianni Vattimo (Milan 1983). The translation in English is mine (and from the Italian version of Gadamer's work).

[xviii] «Das Gerede ist die Möglichkeit, alles zu verstehen ohne vorgängige Zueignung der Sache. Das Gerede behütet schon vor der Gefahr, bei einer solchen Zueignung zu schietern. Das Gerede, das jeder aufraffen kann, entbindet nicht nur von der Aufgabe echten Verstehens, sondern bildet eine indifferente Verständlichkeit aus, der nichts mehr verschlossen ist … Das bodenlosen Gesagtsein und Weitergesagtwerden reicht hin, dass sich das Erschliessen verkehrt zu einem Verschliessen. Denn Gesagtes wird zunächst immer verstanden als "sagendes", das ist entdeckend. Das Gerede ist sonach von Hause aus, gemäss der ihm eigenen *Unterlassung* des Rückgang auf den Boden des Beredeten, ein Verschliessen. Dieses wird erneut dadurch gesteigert, dass das Gerede, darin vermeintlich das Verständnis des Beredeten erreicht ist, auf Grund dieser Vermeintlichkeit jades neue Fragen und alle Auseinandersetzung hintanhält und in eigentümlicher Weise niederhält und retardiert» [Heidegger 1993, p. 169]. English translation is by me from the original German text.

[xix] In a P4C session there is a last phase, evaluation, which is not taken into account in this paper.

[xx] What I'm maintaining here is not that the Greek verb *erotao* stems from *eros*, but that in the verbal form we can recognize an echo of this word. In other words: the 'etymological' statement is rather based on a misreading *à la* Geoffrey Hartman (or other deconstrutionist critics) than on philology.

[xxi] It is worth remembering that in the platonic myth prisoners are represented speaking with each other either about visions that are devoid of reality [515b] or in order to laugh at their fellow inmate who saw the real objects [517]. No mention of co-construction or sharing of knowledge is made in the text.

[xxii] On the political implications of P4C (and therefore the connection between childhood and philosophy) *cfr*. KOHAN 2005.

[xxiii] It is not possible to dwell upon a topic which is strictly related to what we are saying: emancipating Plato's prisoners (in the plural because it is a cooperative-democratic process whose centre is the community of inquiry) or,

in other words, bridging the gap between philosophy and democracy, knowledge and education, requires a deep reflection on the meaning of childhood [KENNEDY 2006].