The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 22 – Idols and Icons

A re we falling, in the prevailing media environment, into a new form of idolatry? Umberto Eco (one of the few living Italian writers that are known internationally) asked that question in his weekly column in l'*Espresso* newsmagazine on May 20, 2004. The opportunity for his comments was offered by a single episode, but the subject has much wider implications.

Extended online debate had been generated by his criticism of a "historical" movie. [1] A worrying fact emerged in those discussions. People weren't perceiving the difference between what was "pictured" in the movie and real-life facts. They were reacting as though they couldn't tell that the actors weren't the characters in the story and that they were seeing fiction, not an impossible "documentary" of what had happened long before any camera could record it.

As a single case, this could be set aside as an unusual warping of perception. But, as Umberto Eco observed, it's a symptom of a widespread disease. One of his students commented: «*maybe we should revalue the iconoclasts.*»

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The debate on "icon worship" goes a long way back in time. In the eighth century a.d. religious images were forbidden in the Byzantine Empire, while the Roman Catholic Church admitted them, "as long as they don't become idolatry" (which, in fact, they did and they still do – but that is benevolently "tolerated" as long as it doesn't interfere with doctrine.) There are many earlier and later examples, in several different cultures, of opposing or accepting image worship.

Modern "iconoclasts" are often people who use reasoning, not violence, to fight prejudice or question dogmatic "truth" – but there have been, and there still are, those who indulge in physically smashing or burning "idols" or whatever they think symbolizes something that they don't like. [2]

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1 It was Mel Gibson's gory movie, *The Passion of the Christ.* But the problem, as we see it here, doesn't relate to that or any other specific case.

2 To this day, there are religions and ideologies that make extensive use of "icons" (or "avatars") while others think they are heathen or diabolical – and so they destroy or forbid whatever they consider "heretic" or evil in their own beliefs, and also someone else's religious or cultural symbols, as well as unrelated works of art and architecture.

This is a real problem now, as it was in history. We still see all sorts of behavior where an object (a statue, a picture, a symbol, an amulet, a talisman) is worshipped instead of what it's supposed to represent. But there is another syndrome that is worth considering, even when religion (or a variety of superstitions) isn't involved. Umberto Eco suggests *«careful consideration of modern man's attitude towards the media environment, that is no longer seen as the (accurate or distorted) representation of things, but as the Thing Itself. That is the secular form that idolatry takes today.»*

So reality fades or disappears, it's replaced by fiction. This problem is quite complicated, it deserves a few pages of additional comment.

Only a few of the things that exist or are happening can be perceived directly. And even when we "see with our own eyes" we can't always understand the meaning of what we think we are seeing. There is always large margin of interpretation – and for a large part of the things that "we think we know" we depend on what someone else is telling us.

It would be complicated to get into the subtleties of gnoseology or epistemology, but the problem of knowing and understanding is crucial in all philosophies, as well as in basic psychology. The plain fact in daily life is that we need to understand what things are, or what is happening, beyond the appearances and the different, often contrasting, ways in which we receive news or information. With the constant risk of misunderstanding – or confusing representation or reporting with actual facts.

It is, anyhow, a serious problem that our perceptions are influenced by habit, prejudice, clichés and banality. And that there is a "homogenization" of the dominating culture, where stupid or irrelevant ideas can prevail for no good reason, other than the fact that they are repeated too often. But that "images" replace facts is an added distortion.

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There has always been, long before there were debates and conflicts on "iconography", a confusion of image and reality. A picture of a buffalo on a cave wall was a work of art, also a magic ritual and a totem. But no cave dweller confused the image with the living animal that was out there, within reach, as a threat or a prey.

Now the situation is very different. Not only because we "see" every day things that are happening in remote places or that, anyhow, we can't verify directly.

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Even in a system where there is a lot of information or representation that we can't verify, there are tactile and environmental perceptions that help us to tell the difference. When we read a book or a newspaper, it's physically obvious that printed words are a means of knowing what someone has written. If there are pictures, we have a clear perception that they aren't "the real thing."

When we go to the theater or to the movies, there is a material separation of the audience from the actors on the stage or on the screen. We can be strongly involved with the story, but we know that we aren't "in" it. [3]

There was a change when we began to have "audiovisual" media at home. Everything seems to be "close." We started, with radio, to have confusing perceptions. "Soap operas" were quite deliberately designed to be more like eavesdropping than Shakespearean theater. (And now it's the same with television sitcoms – even worse with gossip or "peep" shows.)

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3 In the case reported by Umberto Eco, people were confused while they were looking at a movie – or remembering what they had seen. This appears to indicate that the reality-fiction misperception can go so deep as to confuse people even in those circumstances.

Radio reporters did all they could to "make us feel that we are there." People were encouraged to call radio stations to discuss their personal problems or ask all sorts of questions – though only a few were involved, that added to a feeling of "closeness." Now "neighborhood" stations have a smaller share of the audience, but dialogue with listeners (real or fake) continues to be part of the radio environment.

And there was, of course, the famous story of Orson Welles's radio adaptation, in 1938, of Herbert George Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds*. Many listeners believed that there was an actual Martian invasion. Several were terrified, some fled their homes. (A real world war was in the making, but the aggressors didn't come from Mars.) Obviously it's even more so with television. And it's gone to the extreme (or is someone going to dream up something worse?) with so-called "reality shows", that have nothing to do with "reality." [4]

It can also happen the other way round, when something "true" is perceived as "false." Forty years ago, in 1969, it was found that some people didn't believe that man had set foot on the moon. Television reporting of the moon landing was, necessarily, a mixture of direct viewing and simulation. This caused perceptive confusion. Especially with "underprivileged", or otherwise hostile, people there was a feeling that it was propaganda and what they were showing was a fake.

Even if we aren't overwhelmed by idolatry, totally reversing "being and appearing", we constantly run the risk of distorted perceptions that make us believe the unbelievable or disbelieve the obvious.

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It may be necessary explain, at this point, that I have no grudge or prejudice against television. It can be used well and, when it is, it's a wonderful means of information and entertainment. Though it has been around for half a century, we have seen only the beginning of its development. Technical opportunities that have existed for years, but are only marginally used, could open the way for considerable innovation, with more selective and flexible programming.

But it's a fact that television is the biggest single source of warped perception, with image prevailing over reality. And that is a particularly serious disease for those (unfortunately large) parts of the population that scarcely use other media.

Our perceptive system is instinctively capable of handling metaphoric representation. A flat picture, ten inches high, on a screen, is "decoded" as a full-size, flesh-and-blood person (close-ups, typical of television syntax, help to enhance that perception.) [5] Television language is often construed so as to make us "feel" that those people are with us – or we are where we see them. Fake interaction, with a tame or nonexistent audience, is deliberately used to make us believe that "ordinary people" are actively involved. So we get into the habit of thinking that an artificial environment, designed for appearances in a TV studio, is the world we live in. [6]

Also in reporting the picture is warped. What happens every day, but we don't see, appears nonexistent. What is seen through the lens of a camera (and edited in several ways) is perceived as "true" as though we were there watching with our own eyes.

When we read a newspaper, we know that we aren't "seeing", what we get is someone's report of what happened or of what someone else had to say about it. In television, we are confused by the notion that "seeing is believing." Image becomes reality. What is on television is "real", everything else doesn't exist.

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4 Dieter Hildebrandt, a German television author and presenter, said:
  «We believe only what we see. So, with television, we believe everything.»

5 Some people think that it got worse when television changed from black-and-white to color. It could be actually true.

6 In a *New Yorker* cartoon, many years ago, a man was under the rain replacing a flat tire. His child son
  was looking at him through the car's window. And the father was saying *«no, we can't change channel.»*

"Icons" becoming "real" isn't a new notion. It's been part of legend, folklore and literature since the beginning of human history. The myth of Pygmalion, the picture of Dorian Gray, the Golem, Don Juan's "stone guest", the legend of Slappy Hooper, etcetera. But we know that those are myths, fairy tales or narrative fiction. [7]

Our everyday familiarity with television confuses our perception to the point of making images more "true" than reality. And this happens also when what "we think we know" comes from other media, that are influenced by television and "homogenized" by ways of thinking that prevail even when they aren't deliberately forced by controlling power systems.

The idols are conditioned by idolatry as much as their followers and fans. Not only professional television personalities, but also people who "happen" to become "famous", lose touch with humanity. Almost everyone they meet is trying to relate to their "icon", not to whatever they are as human beings. They become prisoners of their "image." They feel quite comfortable in a cozy secluded cavern, visited only by other "celebrities" and their cronies – and they believe that it's the world where everyone else lives. There doesn't seem to be any effective treatment for this syndrome.

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We don't need to become iconoclasts – or iconophobes – to solve the idolatry problem . Images, when used properly, have always been useful communication tools – even when they aren't great works of art. But it would be important to train people to understand what they see, read or hear.

I was lucky enough, when I was at school, to have some good teachers, who made me learn how to "see" art, how to understand history, and how to doubt my own thinking as well as everything else, no matter how loudly it is proclaimed or how "authoritative" may appear whoever is claiming to "tell the truth." But basic learning isn't enough. This is an endless process. Our mind needs daily exercise to stay as alert as it needs. A basic subject of education should be intensive training in how to read, listen and see, how to get behind the surface of mass media as well as neighborhood gossip.

A society dominated by passive, drowsy idolatry can be convenient for those who manage the idols, but a system based on ignorance and stupidity is self-destructive (see chapter 18 on the vicious circle of stupidity.)

I must admit that I feel an "iconoclastic" temptation, not only when I am watching television, but also when I see all sorts of image manipulation in newspapers – or the internet. Even when an image, per se, isn't misleading, there can be deliberate or "absentminded" confusion in the context.)

But obviously no form of expression is to be abolished, censored or repressed. Misunderstandings can be due to prejudice in the mind of the viewer (or reader) as often as they can be blamed on the author. And challenging every one of those absurdities would take more time and effort than any one of us can possibly afford.

What's important is to know how to tell the difference between repetitive nonsense and meaningful thinking. It's unlikely that anyone will be kind enough to teach us how. We must be obstinately self-educating and self-critical. And we should never forget that some "idols" may be lurking in our own mind (as we saw in chapter 13.)

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[7] There are also examples in movies, such as a character jumping out of the screen in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) or a giant Anita Ekberg "materializing" from a billboard in Federico Fellini's episode in *Boccaccio 70* (1962) or the "Marshmallow Man" in *Ghostbusters* (1984) – and several other variations of the same idea. But these, too, are clearly dream or fiction, metaphoric symbols, that can't in any way be confused with "real life."