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Violence on television. Unpleasant, interesting or morbid?

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Abstracts

[ES] Introducción. Aunque hay gran cantidad de estudios sobre los efectos de la violencia en televisión, son escasos los que indagan sobre el porqué del interés o rechazo que despierta. El objetivo de esta investigación es explicitar el discurso acerca del interés o desinterés de los espectadores por la violencia, sus razones, criterios morales, condicionantes. **Metodología.** Se analizan 16 grupos de discusión realizados en Madrid y segmentados por sexo, edad y nivel educativo. **Resultados.** Se aprecia que los discursos de los espectadores varían del rechazo de la violencia al morbo, pasando por intolerancia, desinterés y autodefensa. Las modalidades ficción o realidad de las emisiones hacen variar estas posiciones de los espectadores. **Conclusiones.** El discurso de los espectadores desmiente el estereotipo de la atracción generalizada por la violencia. El supuesto atractivo emocional por la violencia es dotado de sentido y de dimensiones de aprendizaje, autoconocimiento y reflexión ética.

[EN] Introduction: Many research studies have contributed to the study of the effects of violence on TV, but very few of them have paid attention to the reasons why violence arouses interest or rejection among viewers. The objective of this article is to analyse the discourses, arguments and moral criteria used by the audience to justify their interest or disinterest in TV violence. **Methods:** The study is based on 16 focus groups carried out in Madrid and segmented by sex, age and

education level. **Results:** The study indicates that audience's attitudes towards representations of violence on TV range from rejection to morbid interest, including intolerance, lack of interest and self-protection. These attitudes vary depending on whether the representations of violence are real or fictional. **Conclusions:** The results contradict the popular idea that TV audiences are generally attracted to the TV representations of violence and indicate that this "emotional interest" in violence is actually accompanied by an interest in learning about this phenomenon and developing ethical reflections.

Keywords

[ES] violencia; televisión; análisis de discurso; audiencia.

[EN] violence; television; discourse analysis; audience research.

Contents

[ES] 1. Introducción. 2. Método. 2.1. Estrategias metodológicas. 2.2. Población y muestra. 2.3. Instrumentos de recogida de información. 2.4. Procedimiento. 3. Resultados. 3.1. La violencia ficticia: intolerancia y rechazo, interés y atractivo. 3.2. La violencia real: interés, intolerancia, defensa y morbo. 4. Discusión. 5. Conclusiones. 6. Bibliografía.

[EN] 1. Introduction. 2. Methods. 2.1. Methodological strategies. 2.2. Population and sample. 2.3. Data collection instruments. 2.4. Procedure. 3. Results. 3.1. Fictional violence: intolerance and rejection, interest and appeal. 3.2. Real violence: interest, intolerance, defence and morbidity. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. 6. List of references.

Translation by **CA Martínez Arcos**, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

1. Introduction

Violence occupies a prominent place in the audiovisual media content broadcast every day. The inclusion of scenes of violence on television is very common. Spanish television broadcasts about 20 scenes of violence (in all its modalities) per hour (see Fernández Villanueva *et al.*, 2006). In his analysis of four decades of TV broadcasting, Hetsroni (2007) presents the most striking data: the majority of studies carried out across the world highlight an increase of violence in TV. Other more specific studies have pointed in the same direction (Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya, 2004) while other studies have noticed that the sensationalism and graphic nature of scenes of violence is steadily increasing (Slattery, Doremus and Marcus, 2001).

However, the distribution of representations of violence across TV indicates that the types of represented violence and the format, genre and production style of the programmes in which violence is presented are very varied just like the reception of representations of violence by viewers. We cannot compare the representation of war or terrorism in the news with the violence portrayed in movies and series or the various forms of symbolic violence included in reality, comedy, magazine, game or gossip shows (Imbert, 2006). The amount of violence presented in news programmes and the importance given to this phenomenon in these types of programmes is very high. For Susan Sontag (2003), the key principle that seems to inform the construction of editorials and news content, particularly in television, is "If it is bloody, it must be part of the main news". Some films that have a high content of violence are part of the cultural heritage of the West ("Rambo", "Reservoir dogs",

"Pulp fiction", "Seven", "Crash"). These movies are not only broadcast on television, but their dramatic structure and style are even reproduced in the fictional content created for this medium. In new forms of audiovisual communication, violent content is given a great deal of space. Several websites provide access to images of horror and extreme and raw violence, which is intended for all kinds of viewers. Ultimately, the fact that there is an increase in ratings during the time in which specific TV programmes show scenes or situations of extreme violence has been frequently used to argue that violent content is interesting and motivating for viewers.

Interest in violence is parallel to the social concern felt towards its effects. Polls and opinion surveys continuously indicate that viewers are concerned about the amount of violence presented on television. In Argentina, the COMFER (2009) survey found out that 75% of viewers considered that the level of violence broadcast on TV is "high". Moreover, 75% of Americans believed that there was too much violence on TV and 50% believed that violence on TV was harmful (Comstock and Scharrer, 1999, p. 267). According to the UPC Pan European Christmas Survey (2004), which was carried out in eleven European countries, two-thirds of viewers want violence to be banned on television during the Christmas holidays. In Spain, 65% of the people consider that TV is harmful to children and adolescents when it exalts violence, while 70% believes that the broadcast of violent content during children's TV hours is never justified (CIS, 2000). For the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (*Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya*) (2010), the excess of violence is the fifth most important problem of Spanish television.

The public authorities have not been unaware of this situation and have commissioned studies and expert committees to examine the problem of TV violence and its effects (Kriegel, 2002; *Comisión especial sobre los contenidos televisivos*, 1993-95). These studies have resulted in campaigns to reduce the amount of violent content and in laws and regulations to protect the public, particular minors.

The difference between the large number of studies on violent TV content and its effects and the small number of studies dedicated to investigate people's motivation or interest to watch scenes of violence is striking. Moeller (1999) and Dean (2003) speak of the pornographic gaze and Friday (2000) of the demonic curiosity. Tait (2008), in his analysis of the users of the Ogrish website, points out that viewers' gaze on extreme violence has been examined in a very reductionist manner, which associates viewers' motivations to pathologies, immaturity or immorality, and condemns a priori that gaze.

From the perspective of viewers, Livingstone (1998), Morley (1992), Moores (1993), Brundson (2000), Boyle (2005), Schlesinger *et al.* (1998), Hill (2001), Shaw (2004) and Tait (2008) highlight the peculiar ways in which viewers give meaning to representations of violence and connect them with their own adventures, their life situation, identities or demands of the situation. A relevant perspective in the study of viewers' interest in violence is offered by Edwards (1999), who refers to the expression of feelings in general. For him, the emotional stories can be very varied and show great flexibility and richness of nuances, since they are not 'scientific' descriptions of pure and easily differentiable processes, but games of metaphors and "located" expressions of narratives at the service of the action. The meaning of viewers' interpretation is necessarily built in the framework of a social discourse, which is a non-independent narrative production of a language that transcends the individuals who speak it.

The objective of this article is to empirically determine, based on viewers' discourses, which are the rationale, moral criteria, determinants, and limits on which audiences' interest or disinterest in

violence is based. The study investigates the discourses that confer meaning and underlie the motivations, reasons and justifications to the viewing of violence on TV. Two studies are especially related to our perspective. Shaw (2004) points out that even fictional violence plays a role in viewers' construction of references and frameworks to understand violence in their own lives and, more importantly, in the lives of others. The findings of Tait (2008) highlight the complexity of viewers' discourses about extreme violence on the Internet and invite us to examine the motivations that underlie the interest in violent content from a more complex perspective.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodological strategies

This study is based on the qualitative and interpretative perspectives that characterise research in the social sciences (see Alonso, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Gordo and Serrano, 2009). Within the diversity of methods and qualitative orientations, the objectives of the research and the novelty of this approach in Spain recommend the use of a method that allows access to the different discourses that circulate in society about violence on television. The research studies that have examined the social discourses about violence on television are virtually non-existent but it is agreed that the use of focus groups as an open and little-directive method offers great possibilities in this context. Some of the advantages of the focus group as a research method are that it gives access to the specific context of media usage and allows researchers to capture the narratives of the participants. In addition, the discourses of these focus groups represent the social group to which they belong, which significantly reduces the influence of the researcher (Callejo, 1995). On the other hand, as Alonso (1998) and Kryzanowski (2008) point out, the structure of the focus group makes the group's discourse to resemble the prototypical social discourse. The way in which the discursive positions are articulated within the group is similar to the way in which they are articulated outside the group.

The focus group analysis is part of the tradition of discourse analysis (Íñiguez, 2009; Potter, 2003), which aims to identify the social discourses in their context of use, through the identification of the interpretative codes or discourses that are used in the social interaction with a variety of purposes.

2.2. Population and sample

This study is based on the discourses expressed by the participants of 16 focus groups (whose sessions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes), which represented the different social sectors in terms of age, sex and education level. The focus groups participants were local people from Madrid. The structuring of the focus groups based on the previous criteria allowed us to achieve the maximum level of diversity in terms of discourse, i.e. theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the point where it is unlikely that the increase in the number of groups will result in the emergence of new discourses, ideas or opinions.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The 16 focus groups had the following structure. They were divided in two blocks, where the groups 1 to 8 were part of the first block and the 9 to 16 of the second.

programming and “sells” a lot. In addition, they assume this is more intense in Spain in comparison to other countries. Morbidity involves pleasure in addition to mere interest in enjoying negative and destructive things. Morbidity is an ambivalent motivation, which is usually not explicitly acknowledged, and is instead projected on others, in a process that is similar to what Davison (1983) called the “third party effect”. It is manifested as a liking for disputes and confrontations between people, a liking for scenes of destruction, degradation or dismembering, a desire to look into the negative undertones of everything that happens, and a desire to see the strongest, most rugged and most primitive aspects of human behaviour. This morbidity is characteristic of the interest in real violence because only this type of violence reflects the true dislike and repulsion that the concept represents. This pleasure mixed with horror reminds us of what has been called the pornography of violence (Tait, 2008).

Yes, but also the morbidity caused by autopsies, the evidence and all that stuff.

(Males, 19-25 y/o, non-university-educated, not exposed to images of violence)

Ultimately nobody likes it, but it generates morbidity... like when you see on the news that something happened in some place and then you go to that place to see what happened... and this is because they present this news about, let's say, a fire at 1 am and then again at six in the morning... because they know that we will see it at one time or another.

(Males, 40-55 y/o, non-university-educated, not exposed to images of violence).

4. Discussion

Violence on television, either fictional or real, attracts viewers. This interest and attraction is subject to certain conditions. Not all the violence is attractive. The interest has a lot to do with the connection between the scenes of violence and viewers' own lives. Viewers are interested in what they can understand, in what is related to what they know and in what they believe that can actually occur. They are not interested in what is disconnected from reality, what is too surreal, or what has been shown repeatedly. Interest and impact derive from the link between violence and subjective experience, not only from the severity of violence. That is why real violence is in principle much more interesting than fictional violence: because it is always closer to the viewer's reality. This result is consistent with the results obtained by many other studies. Aran *et al.* (2003) show that even children reject scenes of real (although not so explicit) gender violence much more than violence in films. Children relate the violent actions depicted as real with real situations of social conflict which may affect them. As a result, the impact that these scenes can have on their lives is related to their life experiences (Busquets and Ruano, 2008).

Other studies on the effects of violent news (Unz *et al.*, 2008) highlight the predominance of fear and other moral sentiments that are not produced by fictional content. Within these studies, the ones on the effects of the images of terrorism, in particular about September 11 (Dayan, 2006), highlight the emotional, social, legal and political impact that fictional images could have never achieved.

News stories about acts of real violence have an important, preventive and comprehensive social utility. Campbell (2004) shows how the photographs and videos of real bloody and terrifying events have enormous emotional and mobilising effects and also function as icons, as representatives of the prototypes of the incidents of violence that are characteristic of a conflict or a particular social

structure. These effects can be noticed in all armed conflicts like, for example, the wars in Iraq and Bosnia, and in images of violence within a society. In fact, the censure of some of these events by the media has to do with their enormous emotional and cognitive effects and the effects of the representation of the distribution of social power. In the words of Charadeau (2006, p. 253) they are "symptom images", i.e. images that recall other images which together build a reality; they are the symptom of the situation between different social actors and the future of a conflict.

For example, TV programmes about child abuse (Kitzinger, 2000) or gender violence show the prototypes of the aggressors, the protocols for assistance, the sequence of consequences, the effects, the moral codes used to understand these cases, and the consideration of the aggressors. They also provide diagrams to understand the events. The abused women and children can understand and qualify their own experience and, as a result, learn to act: "they allow viewers to put a name to their own experiences and to seek support" (Boyle, 2005, p. 171). Because they perform this social role, these programmes have been generally regarded as positive and have been promoted by the feminist movement and the organisations supporting the victims. In this sense, this confirms the somewhat positive function of the representation of real violence.

However, the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred in many cases, in such a way that interest and motivation depend on the references to actual or potential personal experience. Viewers cannot avoid suffering when they watch TV representations of the visceral and physical experience of pain and sadism and consider these scenes as possible scenarios. Fictional representations can also be useful for viewers' construction of their own references and frameworks for understanding violence. This is what Tisseron (2003) calls the "transfer of the gaze", which is the transposition of the fictional events to the past or present, even forgotten or unconscious, experiences. A well-made film about gender-based violence also allows spectators to develop, understand, anticipate and morally evaluate their own experiences and those of others and thus may become more interesting or shocking than a documentary about a distant war. Depending on viewers' own experiences with violence, they become interested in fictional violence and respond with feelings of anxiety, fear or enjoyment, as Kitzinger (2001) has shown.

Understanding is one of the first attractions of violence. This is another interesting result. Effects theory emphasises the emotional and behavioural effects, but does not mention much about the cognitive effects. The analysed discourses, on the other hand, highlight the interest for understanding the events in order to be able to draw conclusions, and to avoid and anticipate these sorts of situations. Viewers' interest in understating is also aimed at understanding themselves, their personal emotional limits, their tolerance for violence and their moral feelings. Here, it is important to keep in mind that images play a role in the creation of knowledge (Fdez. Villanueva *et al.*, 2004) and have the ability to powerfully reflect death and violence, which the practice of story-telling does not have. Images by themselves are not responsible for the narrative power, but in many circumstances non-illustrated narratives cannot lead to the evidence of the horror (Campbell, 2004).

Understanding is necessary to sanction or justify, convict or acquit. This is because the media do not only represent acts of violence, but also offers prescriptions to feel and act (social attitudes) towards them. TV texts always present claims of legitimacy, and attempt to make viewers see certain scenes from a particular ethical perspective (Domínguez and Fernández Villanueva, 2009). Therefore, viewers' interest extends to how the representations are sanctioned and the attitudes with which they are treated. The semiotics of representation and discourse that accompany the scenes of violence are mediated by the attitudes of the producers and the feelings they intended to produce in viewers

(Chouliaraki, 2006). We can also say that there is an interest in the justice of the actions and their moral consideration, interest for sanctioning or justifying the various behaviours in which violence is manifested. The mere representation of suffering already reflects an attitude of sympathy and the desire to denounce violence. For victims, the depiction of their suffering expresses acknowledgement. For the perpetrators, the images are accusatory and disapproving (Dayan, 2006).

Again, this interest was clearly shown towards real violence, but also towards fictional violence, particularly when it is represented with sequences and prototypes that have the potential to become real. The aim of punishing the "bad guys" in movies is to reinforce the pattern of moral legitimacy in violence. The moral order that sustains the social order designates what is just or unjust in each act of violence and that is what viewers are interested on. An interesting example in this regard is the controversy caused by the film "Crash" (Barker *et al.*, 2001), which forces viewers to deal with issues of pornography, morality, violence, censorship and media effects.

A novel aspect of viewers' discourse about their interest is witnessing, i.e. to be able to say that something happened, that an event was real. This type of viewer involvement is what derives social consequences from the representations offered on the screen. Therefore, this is a form of political participation, since it implies a reaction to what is on the screen (Rentschler, 2004; Ellis, 2000, 2008), which has a close relation with the moral order. The interest for real violence is therefore connected with interest in witnessing acts. Zelizer (2002a and 2002b), Sontag (2003) and Rentschler (2004) emphasise the role of the witnessing function in the case of collective massacres, such as the Holocaust or certain acts of terrorism, assuming a function of remembrance and reaffirmation of the moral condemnation. But witnessing may have a double function: it can simultaneously be a collective act of grief or a collective participation in the perpetration of violent acts against others (when images are used to legitimize violence). This is the case of public executions or lynching, which are common in history.

It is precisely this combination of the effects of knowing, the testing of the limits of our own behaviour and the behaviour of others, and the moral evaluation derived from all this which explains the intolerance and, sometimes, the rejection towards many scenes, especially those that are very raw and are related to viewers' experiences. When this rejection and intolerance occurs, we cannot speak of a lack of interest, but rather of a defensive and protective attitude towards the discomfort produced by such negative human actions. Witnessing violence may involve confronting once again those feelings and unspeakable events that had been already forgotten and rejected. Intolerance and rejection can be explained as defences against a censored behaviour which, after having gone through the process of socialization, is perceived as disgusting.

The other side of the coin lies precisely in the tolerance and enjoyment of violence, which is a gaze that does not fit into the hunger for knowledge, or the desire to know ourselves, to evaluate and to witness. This is the "morbid" gaze. The fundamental interest of this gaze is pleasure, the enjoyment of the horror. In principle, this would be an amoral, or rather immoral, gaze because it would enjoy the opposite of what morality prescribes: empathy towards the suffering of others and suffering when faced with death. However, we cannot conclude that viewers who are interested in these scenes only have this pleasure-seeking gaze. It is possible that most of these "morbid" viewers also have an underlying interest for knowing what is considered to be a taboo, for knowing the limits of reality and cruelty and, ultimately, for knowing the rationale behind human behaviour. It is the pleasure of ignoring social conventions, in particular the conventions about what is forbidden to see. According

to Cherry (1999), this may be due to the fact that violence has been very censored, especially among some groups, such as women, children or young people.

All the points outlined above highlight the relation between viewers' interest for violence and their life experiences. Therefore, interest for violence is supported by one represented community in which there is an imagined other who suffers, in a similar way (or similarly speculated) to the viewer, whose suffering is morally evaluated. This represented and imagined community is built not only with images taken from reality, but also with representations of possible images, in the case of fictional violence. This produces what we called the transfer of the gaze, i.e. the metaphorical transposition of the fictitious images to possible real images. And the same operations that occur with real violence occur in this transposition, naturally when the script or the representation allows it. Depending on the moral values of the spectator, fictional violence can produce the same emotional effect produced by a real event which can make spectators suffer or enjoy with the victim or the aggressor. And this is where the interest for fictional violence lies. Its foundations are the desire for knowledge, self-knowledge, witnessing, legitimation and pleasure. All of this is mediated by a reference to personal experiences and by the construction of an imagined other based on which it is possible to understand the effects, feelings and consequences of violent acts.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, spectators' discourses deny the popular belief that contends that there is a generalised interest for violence. Interest for violence is not so monolithic, since there is also disinterest and rejection, as well as many variations and types of interest that depend on the types of violence represented on the screen.

On the other hand, viewers' discourses describe the emotional interest for violence as an interest with meaning and dimensions of learning, self-awareness and ethical reflection. The boundaries between interest and enjoyment are difficult to establish, but we can say that they are different attitudes and that the most common are related to interest and not enjoyment or, at least, that the rationale behind the interest for violence implicitly includes useful dimensions that are interesting in the subjective experience of viewers, either to understand others or themselves, to develop feelings or adopt the feelings of others in a vicarious way through the identification with characters.

It is worth to further investigate what is called morbidity. This pleasant motivation perhaps did not emerge in our focus groups because it is socially censured and thus participants, as representatives of the external social discourse, also censured it. However, there are some indications that may contain elements of non-reprehensible interest, related to knowledge and understanding. In any case, it is necessary to establish what level of intensity and frequency of the interest for violence could be classified as morbid and to examine more the dimensions of pleasure in order to determine whether the interest is unacceptable negative or abominable.

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