

Lumen International Conference Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty (LUMEN 2013)

Media Violence and the Cathartic Effect

Maria Florea^a *

^a *Universitatea "Apollonia", 2 Muzicii street, Iasi, 700399, Romania*

Abstract

The study of televisual violence deals with two concepts: the real violence present in informative broadcasts, especially in the news, and the fictional violence present in movies, television movies or in TV series. The real violence present in the news is often justified by television producers through the necessity of a warning that should make the public defend themselves or avoid acts of violence. In reality this act of presenting violence in a spectacular, sensational manner is economically motivated. The competition between channels, the desire to attract audience and advertising determined the presence of violence in a spectacular dramatized manner that first of all speculates human sensitivity and, in order to do this, they recur to sophisticated ways that make the best of the artistic, narrative, linguistic and iconic resources of the televisual discourse.

The catharsis effect mechanism is decoded through that, that in their daily life people are confronted with frustrating situations which can lead to acts of violence. The catharsis offers liberation from these frustrations through imaginary participation in acts of violence and aggression present on television.

The ones who are most exposed to the negative effects of media violence are children who, according to psychologist Albert Bandura, do not have the capacity of realizing if something should be imitated or not because they do not have the knowledge and the values that should underlie their discernment. By watching the same film or television show a child will understand the message differently in comparison to an adult. Therefore watching a big number of acts of violence induces to the child or the teenager the idea that violence can be a normal way of living. The world is seen through Manichaeism; any confrontation has a positive and a negative character, a winner and a loser.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences, Asociatia Lumen.

Keywords: Violence; media; effect; catharsis; televisual.

* Corresponding author. Phone: 040744790286;

E-mail address: maria.florea@tvr.ro

1. Argument

Violence can be seen frequently every day. It doesn't matter if we are children or adults, we can be aggressors, victims or witnesses of an aggression. The genetic material, the family and the social entourage, but also the lack of an authentic cultural and social values system justified by the economical and transition crisis induce panic, incertitude, insecurity that push us towards aggressive behaviour that can be triggered in any moment.

While books, newspapers, the radio and the telephone are means of linguistic communication, the television, whose name, through the prefix "tele", means seeing from afar, brings in front of the public images from every corner of the world and leaves the voice, the word in the background. Therefore "the viewer is more like a viewing animal than a symbolic animal" (Sartori, 2006).

The study of televisual violence deals with two concepts: the real violence present in informative broadcasts, especially in the news, and the fictional violence present in movies, television movies, in TV series (Drăgan, 2007) or in cartoons. Another concept is the symbolic violence.

The real violence present in the news is often justified by television producers through the necessity of a warning that should make the public defend themselves or avoid acts of violence. In reality this act of presenting violence in a spectacular, sensational manner is economically motivated. The competition between channels, the desire to attract audience and advertising determined the presence of violence in a spectacular dramatized manner that first of all speculates human sensitivity and, in order to do this, they recur to sophisticated ways that make the best of the artistic, narrative, linguistic and iconic resources of the televisual discourse.

When analyzing such an act of violence we need to keep in mind not necessarily the quantity, the broadcasts number that contained violent content, but mostly the way they were presented, the verbal and iconic sceneries, the signification of the acts of violence.

2. Catharsis effect and media

The sociologists' studies (Rieffel, 2008) have identified three theories regarding the framing and the approach of the media violence in television:

- a. The aggression theory that includes four types of effects:
 - The catharsis effect through which the aggressive and violent urge is released;
 - The effect of social learning, of getting close and imitating the violent act and the violent "heroes";
 - Unrestricted – encourages the aggression trigger and the violent act without any restrains ;
 - Stir and imitation that represents the direct instigation towards violent behaviour.
- b. The desensitization theory that has two types of effects:
 - The individual emotionality is reduced to stimuli represented by acts of violence and as a consequence indifference towards real or media violence appears;
 - Violence becomes common which means that the reactions to the surrounding violence is attenuated and even accepted;
- c. The fear theory that includes two effects-processes:
 - The incubation process that consists in the progressive settling of the feeling of fear and insecurity;
 - The cultivation phenomena that has as a result the mistaking of "world reality" with "media reality" which has a high content of violence.

The catharsis effect mechanism is decoded through that, that in their daily life people are confronted with frustrating situations which can lead to acts of violence. The catharsis offers liberation from these frustrations through imaginary participation in acts of violence and aggression present on television.

The term catharsis comes from the Greek word *katharein* which means to clean, but also from the term *kathares* which means purity, cleanness. The catharsis is defined as a sublimation of emotions, liberation of

passions through art. From a psychiatric point of view, the catharsis is a therapeutic effect obtained through a release of a repressed feeling.

Wolfgang Michaelis argues that when dealing with the catharsis hypothesis we must differentiate between two directions. The first belonged to the Greek philosopher Aristotle who claimed that man purifies his/her emotions by representing his/her own problems in the tragedy. This idea was taken by the Austrian psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud who tried to demonstrate that the inner pressure decreases once an aggressive act is completed.

The second direction in the catharsis theory was laid down by Konrad Lorenz, a well known Austrian ethologist, who won a Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1973. Lorenz sustains that the probability of doing new acts of violence is smaller after an aggressive activity. All these studies have shown that there are a series of variables that influence the cathartic effect. The experiments made have shown considerable differences determined by sex, based on hormonal reasons, but the conclusion was that the pressure can be cut back through friendly behaviour or through liberation.

Another theory argues that the aggressive acts lead to catharsis only when they are accompanied by rage (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2009). The lack of emotional implication, also known as cold aggression, increases the probability of the aggressive act to repeat itself. On the other hand, the pressure produced by instigations is cut back if the instigation seems to be justified. Eibl-Eibesfeldt claims that the tendency to attack is also minimized by the presence of a third person who determines the cease of insults. The concerned person is pleased, especially when the mediator tells him/her that the aggressor has been punished.

3. Violence as a TV show

Researches regarding the consequences of television aggression and violence have proven that the feeling of isolation common to big TV consumers has increased, the tendency to redraw from reality has become stronger and the phenomenon of alienation from the community of those strongly depended on media has become more pregnant. This research had as basis three premises: the cathartic effect thesis, the violence elicitation thesis and the consolidation effect thesis.

The most criticised are the aggression and violence displayed in entertainment shows where the violent act is promoted as a justified normal component of civilised models.

Other studies draw the attention on the fact that violence is much more baleful when it is repeatedly displayed in TV broadcasts or articles. Thus the influence of violence present in the products displayed by mass media is an insidious step-by-step cumulative process whose effects are neither directly visible nor immediate.

The television channels, which are always in search of rating, exploit isolated conflicts that are of no importance, but which shock through the trivial language both parties use.

Most of the tabloid shows in the Romanian television (*Happy Hour*, *Acces direct*, *Drept la țintă*, *Can Can TV*) emphasize the confrontations between two or more so called stars leaving behind the causes of the conflict and through a mobilization effect the scandal is presented as an “event”. This kind of coverage often becomes some sort of publicity, even if it’s a bad one, some so-called stars resorting to media so as to remain one way or another in the public’s attention.

For a pertinent analysis of the violence displayed in entertainment shows and especially of the symbolic violence we should also bear in mind the **mental contagion** (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998) which establishes the spread and generalization among the masses of a psychical state, ideas, attitudes and feelings. This display has a more or less involuntary character and acts especially on the unconscious level. Among the psychical states spread through mental contagion we encounter panic, anger, exaltation, etc. The levelling of the interior mood is accomplished through three mechanisms:

- a. Imitation – the tendency of each person to do the same things as the others;
- b. Suggestibility – a state in which people become receptive to the images, directions and statements of others;

- c. Circular reaction – a process in which others' emotions are felt by someone with a bigger intensity, after which they are rapidly resent to others who feel them even more intense.

Nowadays television encourages **empathy** which is a phenomenon of cognitive and affective approach towards a concrete subject (in our case, the viewer) that goes until the point of identification and role substitution. Empathy can be defined as “the substitute imagination through which a person assumes the perceptions, judgments and emotions of another person in a determined situation from a series of situations” (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998).

Violence results from the fact that the viewer assists to a scandal unrepresentative for the public and whose base isn't solid enough.

In other situations false representations are created around certain subjects through the generous space they're allocated. Although the event is an obscure one and the protagonists have no authority in any domain, the techniques used by the producers give importance to the moment and leaves the viewer the impression that the subject is truly relevant. Furthermore through repeated display, provoking headlines and spectacular images the subjects remains in the viewer's mind although his/her interest in the matter may be minimum.

4. Conclusions

The drama that television puts in some cases is also amplified through repeated references to a child's emotional trauma; such a subject is extremely sensitive and rapidly attracts the viewer's attention. Through an aggressive approach of the subject the viewer is, one way or another, involved from a psycho-affective point of view and the symbolic violence comes, first of all, from the fact that such broadcasts practically impose viewers to respect the so called *feeling rules*. According to Arlie Russel Hochschild (Chelcea, 2007) this type of rules foresees what emotions the viewers should feel in certain situations. These rules don't refer only to the adequate emotions in concrete social situations, but also to intensity (from strong to weak), orientation (positive or negative) and time (short or long).

The symbolic violence comes from the fact that the viewer is exposed to a form of cognitive manipulation. Deciding on a certain type of emotion management strategy depends on the gender (man/woman), social class (inferior, middle, high) and age (young people, adults, old persons). In this negative circumstance it is obvious that the broadcast's producer resorts to catharsis.

Tabloid shows in the Romanian audiovisual media often present incidents or even accidents as sources of entertainment. Some dramatic situations are made to seem ridiculous and even if victims could have been involved, they are presented as an amusing fact. In this kind of cases displayed on TV, the moderator and the guests' attitude is often detached and they are usually smiling during the entire broadcast. The viewer's feelings are stimulated by the description of the way the incident took place and the reporter's story “from the scene” (Drăgan, 2007) leaves the impression of a special event, although the information is useless and the filming team are acting more as figurants. In such cases of local and personal importance and of no public interest the symbolic violence results from the fact that the incident is presented in an amusing manner using jokes that have a sexual connotation and an inadequate language from a journalistic point of view, making references to alcohol consume, for example, and emphasizing the material aspects. It goes up to the point when an incident that could have had devastating effects is practically trivialized and we assist to an attenuation of people's reactions. In addition a desensitization materialized in a decrease of individual emotions to stimuli is produced and, in consequence, also a certain indifference.

The American social psychologist, L. Festinger, had as a goal to analyze the process by which someone confronted with a message or some information that contradicts his/her values changes his/her opinion - **cognitive dissonance** (Ferreol, 1998). Therefore it is assumed that every human being is in need of a cognitive coherence. When due to different reasons this coherence is broken the subjects suffers from psychological disorder which produces “decreasing strategies”. The tension relief can be made by changing beliefs, by attenuating the differences towards someone else's opinion or by refusing information that contradicts someone's own beliefs.

Psycho-sociologists speak about **conformation** when an individual, in our case the viewer, changes his/her attitude or behaviour in accordance with the norms or values presented in the mass-media. In the case of our theme this notion is used to designate the process and the result of the pressure that the mass media exerts on the viewers to determined them to share certain beliefs and thus to follow the norms and models prescribed. Thus a certain homogeneity is created (Ferreol, 1998). The more attractive a group is, the more likely it is for every member of that group to change his/her point of view and behaviour in accordance with the transmitted norms (formal or informal). Social control is assured through conformism. Individuals conform to the norms and values they are exposed to because they could consider that if they don't do so they would risk being punished while conformance brings them rewards. The one who breaks the norms has to deal with antipathy, hostility, gossip and even ostracisms. Instead the one who conforms obtains appreciation, popularity, prestige and others refer to him socially as being a "good", "normal" man.

Media violence and especially the televisual one can be understood only when we can figure out the logic of the spectacular entertainment, when we allow for the television's own nature and, last but not least, when we know the mental and cultural structure of the public.

References:

- Chelcea, Septimiu. (2007). Sociologia emoțiilor – teorii culturale, *Sociologie românească*. volume V, no. 2, summer.
- Drăgan, Ioan. (2007). *Comunicarea, paradigme și teorii*. București: RAO International.
- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus. (2009). *Agresivitatea Umană*. București: Trei.
- Ferreol, Gilles. (1998). *Dicționar de sociologie*. București: Polirom.
- Rieffel, Rémy. (2008). *Sociologia mass-media*. Iași: Polirom.
- Sartori, Giovanni. (2006). *Homo videns, imbecilizarea prin televiziune și post-gândirea*. București: Humanitas.
- Zamfir, Cătălin, & Vlăsceanu, Lazăr. (1998). *Dicționar de sociologie*. București: Babel.