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# Emotions Elicited by Television Violence

## Las emociones que suscita la violencia en televisión

### ABSTRACT

The effects of TV violence have been widely studied from an experimental perspective, which, to a certain extent, neglects the interaction between broadcaster and recipient. This study proposes a complementary approach, which takes into account viewers' interpretation and construction of TV messages. Social dimensions influencing emotional experiences to TV violence will be identified and analyzed, as well as the way these emotions are construed in discourse, how they are linked to attitudes, ethical dimensions and courses of action. Eight focus groups (segmented by age, gender and educational level) were the basis of a discourse analysis that reconstructed the way audiences experience TV violence. Results show the importance of a first immediate emotional mobilisation, with references to complex emotions, and a second emotional articulation of experiences regarding repetition of scenes (type, classification and assessment of broadcasts), legitimacy (or lack thereof) of violent acts, and identification (or lack thereof) with main characters. In conclusion, the double impact (immediate and deferred) of emotions generates complex narratives that lead to a single course of action characterised by responsibility and guilt, which can only be taken into account by assuming the active role of viewer.

### RESUMEN

Los efectos de la violencia en la televisión han sido ampliamente estudiados desde una perspectiva experimental, que soslaya en cierto modo la interacción entre emisor y receptor. El presente trabajo plantea una perspectiva complementaria que tiene en cuenta la interpretación y la elaboración que los espectadores hacen de las emisiones. Se propone identificar y analizar las dimensiones sociales que mediatizan las experiencias emocionales ante la violencia vista en televisión y cómo esas dimensiones emocionales, que se construyen en el discurso, están ligadas a actitudes, dimensiones éticas y posiciones de acción. El discurso analizado procede de ocho grupos de discusión –compuestos diferencialmente respecto al género, la edad y el nivel educativo–, que se analizaron a partir de las emociones que experimentan ante la violencia en la televisión. El análisis del discurso muestra, en primer lugar, la importancia de una primera movilización emocional, con referencias a emociones complejas y, en segundo lugar, una articulación de la experiencia emocional respecto de la repetición de escenas (modalidad, clasificación y evaluación), los actos (legitimación o no) y los personajes (identificación o desidentificación). En conclusión, el doble impacto de las emociones (inmediato y diferido) genera narrativas complejas que abocan a un único curso de acción caracterizado por la responsabilidad y la culpa, que solo puede tenerse en cuenta asumiendo el papel activo del espectador.

### KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Violence, television, emotions, emotional impact, audience reception, discourse analysis.  
Violencia, televisión, emociones, impacto emocional, recepción por la audiencia, análisis de discurso.

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The majority of studies on TV violence concern the so-called «effects model», which understands effects as the production of ideas, emotional reactions or consequences in behaviour. The most important effects are the emotions viewers feel when watching the scenes, and the effects most closely connected to emotions are fear, anger, desensitisation and catharsis. Fear, as both a reaction and a «cultivated» emotion, as an effect of viewing TV content is the emotion most usually highlighted (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Shanahan, 1999). Research into what causes fear when faced by physical violence has mainly centred on scenes of real-life violence (Smith & Moyer-Guse, 2006) in news programmes (Smith & Wilson, 2002; Wilson, Martins & Marske, 2005), particularly in news on wars (Hoffner & Heafner, 1994) and on the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Saylor, Cowart, et al, 2003). All these studies tend to show the short- or long-term effects in children and adults of exposure to news programmes. Other authors insist on the reactions, behaviour or aggressive feelings aroused that are more typical of the emotion of anger (Anderson, 2004).

Desensitisation to violence as a result of viewing violent TV content has been described as an emotional state of familiarisation with violent images (Zillmann & Weaver, 1999; Cantor, 2002). Desensitisation or saturation are not emotions, rather they are more or less stable states in which the individual experiences a non-reaction, or a less intense reaction, to images which he would have previously reacted more strongly to. In this case, there is a continued psychological process of reducing an emotional state.

These studies have not focused on the interaction between television and viewers, viewers' interpretation of television, its broadcasts, and the aims and social significance of the same scenes of violence. However, the same identification or perception of violence varies depending on viewers' characteristics (Barrios, 2005), which leads us to believe that the construction processes of the meanings of violence are important.

We can identify an «interactionist» orientation, which insists on the social construction of emotions (Harré & Langenhove, 1999), which emphasises the structural and communicative dimensions of emotional discourses. This perspective emphasises language and discourse, viewed as a key element in the social construction of emotion, delimitation of its content, significance and social consequences. It considers emotions as a means of communication. The language of emotions is very varied and flexible. It is a set of metaphors and «situated» expressions, of narratives at

the service of agency, understood as the scope of action that subjects have in their cultural contexts (Wertsch, 1999), with legitimisation of one's own or others' actions, and with power. Discourses on emotions are the telling of emotions. They are not scientific reports on physiological, internal or visible states (Buttny & Ellis, 2007). Instead, they contain cultural meanings and moral assessments.

Consequently, the objective of this study is to understand the social dimensions of emotions towards violence from a constructivist viewpoint. We aim to understand the social dimensions influencing emotional experiences to TV violence, and the way these emotions are construed in discourse, how they are linked to attitudes, ethical dimensions and courses of social action.

### 1. Material and methods

The discourse analysed comes from eight focus groups, with people of various ages, gender and educational level, who were invited to talk about violence on Spanish television. The composition of the groups was decided on the basis of the most relevant differences we expected to come across, although invariants were looked for in this first analysis, so no differential analyses will be conducted among the various social categories. Finding common discourses in such varied groups backs the assumption that they are widespread in society.

The focus group technique is especially suitable when phenomena need to be examined or interpreted in the terms people use to give them meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), when a collective discourse on an object as «social» as television broadcasts needs to be reconstructed (Callejo, 1995). The groups, consisting of subjects with similar characteristics, although not natural groups, produce a discourse which represents the collective the individuals belong to, and their differential characteristics emerge in the researcher/observer testimony. The researcher/observer's task is to ensure the study subject is discussed without influencing symbolic group production. It is the group itself, with the structure created in the context of the research, which controls, emphasises, penalises and hierarchises the interventions and the discourse contents (Fern, 2001; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

In this text, we construct a spectrum of feelings and emotions as they are named, and we interpret which emotional states they are related to, and what they refer to in the social context in which the viewers live. We present an analysis of interpretive repertoires

(Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 2001; Potter, 2003), understood as consistent language units linked with each other, which refer to the understanding, relevance and enjoyment of violence. Furthermore, the context of the viewers' positions was interpreted and the discourse organised as clearly and as structured as possible, in connection with the content and the social implications that the reception of violence in the various programmes may have.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Emotional mobilisation: its first significance

The first significance of emotions experienced when watching violence is construed on the basis of the importance of first reactions, the first outlines of significance which structure the viewers' discourse. If we summarise the wide range of words with which they are referred to, the term «impact» clearly stands out. The word impact, jolt, shock in the dictionary, but also effect, mark or impression which the impact or shock leaves, is a manner of verbalising the emotional effects, even strong emotional effects, but it does not qualify the type of emotion felt.

«I still have the image imprinted on my mind of a district here in Madrid, of that girl, Irene, with a leg torn off by an ETA bomb. I'll never forget that. Nor many others. You start to forget them... If you put red dots on the map of Madrid, you would be amazed: twelve policemen in the Plaza de la República... There's always one image that stays with you more than others do. Perhaps because you were younger and she was a child. But, many of images of that type have a huge impact on you» (Adult males, basic education).

Violent images «have an impact», i.e. they cause emotions, they mobilise, they awaken emotions with various levels of intensity, which, in general, are high. That intense emotion has two dimensions or qualities: on the one hand, the content of the emotions is negative, since, fundamentally, it is fear, anger, surprise and sadness, but, on the other, feeling an intense emotion is attractive, and even pleasurable.

Identification of this first aroused emotion extends in a continuum which ranges from allusions to simple reactions or emotions, such as nervousness, anxiety, disgust, repugnance, horror, sadness, anger, violence

(ire), unease, to other more complex, but immediate emotions (powerlessness, depression), sometimes accompanied by very clear physiological correlates (your stomach contracts, sobbing, wanting to flee), or immediate actions (changing channel, turning off the TV, getting up from your chair).

However, the discourse contains another dimension of the impact: intense surprise, experimenting with one's own limits, curiosity peppered with anxiety and expectation. It is a need for knowledge, which wonders about the irrational or sinister, and surprising nature of mankind, including oneself. On the one hand, we want to understand, give meaning to the violent acts occurring around us, which may affect us, but which elude understanding

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with daily parameters. On the other, we want to know how far our own emotions can take us.

### 2.2. Structuring elements of emotions towards violence

The dimensions which structure the construction and experience of emotions are: the type of scenes, their classification, legitimation or delegitimation of the acts, identification or lack of it with the characters.

The type of scenes, i.e. whether they are real-life or fictional, can modify the emotion radically, which may transform from unpleasant to pleasant. Fictional violence can be enjoyed, and this enjoyment is recognised and accepted. But it has to fulfil certain conditions, some in connection with meaning, with logic, and others with legitimation. Fictional violence must be connected to a tale. It must mean something to viewers. It must be «well placed» and sequenced, and linked to the plot (i.e. not repetitive or absurd). It must be limited in intensity. Not all violence is enjoyed, for example the most sadistic.

Viewers take control of the emotions by classifying and assessing the scenes. By breaking down the scenes into episodes and the smallest units, viewers classify them into series: «War violence», «news about abuse», «reports on harsh reality», «gender-based violence», «violent films», etc. The classification organises the viewings and intervenes in the formation of emotions, which already depend on the series they are included in. Some scenes are understood as repeated, since, although they are not the same, they are of the same series or the same type. Repetition modifies emotions, because viewers can anticipate what it concerns, and they can select what they want

could frequent. Close geographical contexts (Spain, Madrid), contexts viewers can identify with (i.e. conflicts between groups for young people) generally substantially modify the emotional effects to emphasise the importance of feelings and the strength of the emotion aroused. Viewers are moved by what they associate with (by displacement). The similarity of the problems found in fiction is the source of feelings, effects and emotions. The ability to put oneself in another's shoes, take their place, merge some aspects of yourself with the person watched «commits» them, involves them and they feel with him. In the discourse analysed, this process leads to a targeted, specific sensitisation involving the actors, or situations, with similar experiences, and with whom the viewer can identify (Buckingham, 1996; Schlesinger, Haynes et al, 1998; Kitzinger, 2001; Boyle, 2005). Legitimation and identification are somehow always present in the explanation of viewers' emotional response (Buttny & Ellis, 2007), whether reference is made to real-life or fictional violence.

### 2.3. The emotional impact produced by the perception of violence

The content and the type of emotions betray how variable they are when we compare the emotional impact of violence perceived as real with fictional violence. Whilst real-life violence emphasises the emotional impact of negative content, fictional violence keeps the memory of extreme experience alive.

The emotional impact of real-life violence can last for a long time, since it leads to a feeling of powerlessness, fear for the future, a need to flee... The emotional impact of fictional violence is much shorter, centring on almost physical experiences as a result of the level of tension, interest, surprise and fear, although, at times, it can approach or exceed some people's tolerance limits. «Yes, I like to be afraid, to feel violence, to feel bad, that has happened. And then you laugh with your friends, but you end up thinking: Do I like seeing violence and fear?» (Young males, university students). One of the most pronounced differences between the perception of real-life and fictional violence is, therefore, how long the emotional

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to see and how much of it they will see. To a certain extent, they can decide how they will be impacted. A third dimension is the legitimation or delegitimation of events. Viewers can accept or even enjoy violence, or classify what they have seen as non-violent, when they believe that it is legitimate, that it has served a purpose or has some social function. Violence which solves a problem or something bad is considered acceptable or pleasurable. This is recognised without any problems in fiction, but not when it refers to real-life scenes.

«We always have the fight against evil. If you see the bad character kill, you feel very bad, but if you see the good one defending principles, things, your view is different: such as the triumph of good over evil» (Adult males, basic education).

Finally, identification or lack of it with the characters, which is measured by the viewer's physical or psychological distance from the actors of the violence. We understand physical closeness to be the scenes that occur in places viewers know, frequent, or

impact lasts. With fictional violence, the emotion is consumed immediately: it is enjoyed or rejected. If it is repeated, it responds to the repetition patterns of other cultural and leisure acts: if the effect produced is pleasurable, then it is re-experienced, but with the loss of the surprise factor, and, if it is an effect shared with other stimuli, with less intensity than the first time. If the violence is real, the situation is very different. The emotional impact is combined with new impacts and impressions producing singular effects.

As in the extensive literature on desensitisation, the effect of the repetition of images figures widely in the discourse of all the groups. Phrases such as «one image makes me forget the previous one», «so much violence makes us numb», «we like images that are more shocking than the last», etc., demonstrate the importance of considering emotional reactions taking their repetition into account. Nevertheless, the effect of the repetition is neither unique nor uniform. We have detected at least five possible consequences.

1) Accumulated emotional impact. The new impact comes on top of the previous one, and it is added to it, producing an effect that just one scene would not have. Viewers react emotionally when they are impacted on several occasions, with repeated scenes or of the same type. «Well, we are going to feel it, but it all depends on what they show us. If we see it once a week, it's not the same as if it's on a channel all day. I saw what happened at Atocha in the morning and I said «God, what a slaughter». And it didn't have such an impact on me. But I watched it on the TV all day, and in the end I was crying because of so many images one after another, so much pain... And luckily I didn't know anyone there, but I ended up feeling as upset as anyone there» (Young males, university students).

2) Reducing the intensity of emotions. In this case, the previous impact «buffers» the effect of the new one. Instead of accumulating it, it is absorbed. The original impact remains, but repetition only reactivates its presence with less intensity than the first time. «I think they are the same feelings, but less intense, in other words you are always going to feel rage even if you've seen it throughout the year, but it isn't the same because when you see it for the first time, it is something new, something you have never seen, it is shocking» (Young women, basic education).

3) Becoming normal, routine. The buffering in this case is not limited to the intensity of the emotions aroused, but it also affects their cognitive production. Repetition makes you feel that the violence cannot be changed, that nothing can be done about it. Conse-

quently, viewers disassociate themselves from it and accept it. The emotion is controlled and does not form an attitude towards the facts presented by the images. «I feel numbed by it, I am numb, because I see it every day. I only see one news programme a day and I am numb. I know what they're going to say tonight because it's the same as it was yesterday. In the beginning, it has an impact on you, like that Allah business that's happening at the moment [they are referring to the demonstrations and disturbances in the Islamic world after the publication of caricatures of Muhammad in a Danish newspaper], but after they've been saying it for a week... It's like football for women, all the matches seem the same, 22 blokes running about» (Adult males, university students).

4) Fictionalisation of the images. In some cases, the first step towards accepting the perception of images as normal is by starting to consider them as fictional rather than real. It is seen as a self-protection strategy in view of the difficulty of accepting something which is incomprehensible or unacceptable as «normal». The real-life image is viewed as if it was a film, which makes it possible to distance oneself from the characters. «I remember those bombs which looked so small... but then you imagined the dead people... and it's like... God, I'm looking at a corpse... but now they show you them all the time and... One more or less... it becomes a film» (Young males, basic education). Naturally, desensitisation tends to mainly occur when the incidents are far removed, they do not endanger us, or those suffering them are psychologically distant. No instance of fictionalisation or desensitisation occurred with the images of 11-M, for example.

5) Reaffirmation. In some cases, the effect of the more shocking images does not wear off. It is very persistent, inevitable, and the subject believes that it «will always be there». The images arouse the same feelings with the same intensity. The impact reactivates with every new viewing. The example refers to the images of 11-M.

«I saw them four or five times [the images of the terrorist attacks on 11 March 2004 in Madrid], and every time I saw them, they had the same impact on me, I don't know, a feeling of anger and sorrow, powerlessness and wanting to cry. I felt that every time I looked at the images, it didn't change» (Young women, basic education).

## 2.4 From emotions to ethical attitudes

The impact produced by watching real-life violence on television is essentially emotional, but it

has attitudinal and behavioural consequences. The «educational» discourse, the positive function of showing violence to make people aware of conflicts and of the «horrors» of reality, is oft repeated on television. «If she was older, it wouldn't affect you as much. But it is still just as hard. An older prostitute is still the same, but it doesn't affect you as much. And they are images you have to see to become aware and decide to take action. These are images that try to get people involved and out onto the streets and doing something» (Young women, university students).

It can mobilise people by making them aware of what is happening in society outside their immediate context. The images provide awareness and information with a veracity that forces viewers to feel an agent in this situation. «I don't think TV violence is a bad thing. It is necessary to make society aware of what's going on. Because you go out and live in a bubble, but when you see it directly... that's what I think, anyway (...). It's to inform you: they are real-life events which happen, and people need to know about them, to report them to the police or whatever» (Young males, university students).

Arguments on the role of images in the formation of ethical attitudes are not the same across the board. Intuitively reproducing the various effects caused by the repetition of watching real-life violence, the participants' discourses vary, ranging from the effectiveness of the mobilising impact to paralysation due to saturation. On the one hand, as we have seen, the effectiveness and need to show violence to make people aware, denounce, be responsible or propose social changes was defended. The simple dissemination of information, the fact that the information circulates, is explained, demonstrated, and is present in interaction is considered positive. Knowledge and testimony seem to be a necessary step for taking responsibility for something, to start something that transforms the conditions in which violence emerges. On the other hand, scepticism is evident on the effectiveness of the images to transform anything, and they are viewed as an unnecessary emotional appeal to viewers which is too harsh and leads to saturation, desensitisation and «non-productive» guilt, i.e., only punitive without any transfer into social action.

«This crudeness, which, starting with the parents, affects me. That crudeness of seeing so many images, so much reality... Or even what there was before, when someone saw another fight and intervened, helped people. Now people ignore it, they have got used to it, it is so every day that... For me, that

crudeness really dehumanises people a lot, because they're showing them all day... again and again» (Adult males, university students).

Ethical attitudes produced by watching serious real-life scenes of violence are responsibility and guilt. Allusions to these attitudes are expressed in words such as responsibility, pricking one's conscience, doing your bit, need to do something, etc. Responsibility is a short-term mobilising attitude. It arises when people perceive that something can be done. Guilt, on the other hand, is linked to helplessness and powerlessness. A more detailed analysis of the social implications of the two attitudes needs to be conducted.

«You see it and say: I cannot do anything. It makes you live with a feeling of guilt. People are dying in the world because they kill each other for political reasons, and I cannot do anything about it» (Young women, university students).

An emotional impact forces viewers to be active, to take on the role as a witness to the violence, or to reject this demand.

### 3. Discussion

Research on the emotions aroused by the perception of audiovisual contents has examined the physiological correlates in more depth (Morris, Klahr & al., 2009) or the identification of short- and medium-term effects (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). However, the results obtained in the research presented reaffirm a line that complements these results: viewers are not passive, nor are they isolated when producing emotions, especially as a result of the perception of these contents (Pinto da Mota, 2005).

The physiological correlates of emotions cannot be denied, but the language with which they are presented and told in social life is not just a way of naming them. The terms and narratives of emotions reveal a structure, a story, a mode of constructing them and a specific cultural context (Hong, 2004, on the emotions of shame and guilt in Taiwan). In fact, emotions have been considered a communication interface, so they partly depend on the recipient of them (Fernández-Dols, Carrera & Casado, 2001), and they may lead to conflicting interpretations when facial expressions are intentionally modified (Russell, Bachorowski, & Fernández-Dols, 2003). A more complex aspect of communication is verbalising the emotions experienced, since it means constructing something that was not previously delimited either physiologically or verbally, and which depends on those involved in the interaction, the fellow participants

or recipients of the telling. For example, it has been proved that group production of the emotions caused by violence takes place by controlling the discourse of some children towards others, and it is explained by the immediate context in which they are found, i.e.: the classroom (Tisseron, 2003; Lacasa, Reina & Albuquerque, 2000). Emotions are a public phenomenon, which is why it is important to use methodologies which maintain this basic aspect of emotions.

Consequently, cognition is an inseparable dimension of the emotion. People have a prior assessment, probably intuitive, of the context which is going to affect the emotion experienced and expressed. However, at the same time, emotion impacts on the later production of the significance of what has been viewed, and the understanding of the situations seen on TV modifies the emotions experienced (Smith & Moyer-Gusé, 2006). The relation is one-to-one interaction. Unz, Schwab and Winterhoff-Spurk (2008) show how the feelings of fear and anger generated by violent news are complemented by sadness and powerlessness when it is perceived that the violence has been intentional, and the victims are recognised as innocent.

Emotions not only have the capacity to modulate and activate various cognitive dimensions, but also various action tendencies (Muramatsu & Hanoch, 2005). Viewers' agency is revealed in both their active role of perceiving the violent contents and in the consequences of this perception. Viewers, immersed in a (immediate and general) context, establish a differential relation with what is perceived depending on how close it is and the importance (Scherer, 1993) attributed to it. And, furthermore, with the importance they want to attribute to it. Consequently, «avoidance» viewers, those who avoid being exposed to violent news (Unz & al., 2008), do not generate the feelings of compassion, pity or responsibility which those who are exposed repeatedly to information on violent events do, thus further highlighting the complex importance of repetition in the perception of violent contents. The unavoidably contextualised production of what has been perceived leads directly to reflecting on what should be done, what would be the most

appropriate thing for a viewer to do in connection with what has been seen (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). The connection between emotions and social action is influenced by moral criteria on justice and it is connected with the same viewer's relation with social reality and perceived (or desired) possibilities to change it, resulting in true «moral emotions» (Rozin, Lowery & al., 1999).

The discourse on emotions encompasses «situated» concepts with a complexity of feelings that is only decipherable with viewers' previous experience. The «impact» of violent images is more than emotional activation, or behaviour after viewing includes awakening from a process that leads to

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reflection, thought, the production of ideas, arguments, and conclusions based on individuals' personal or social experience.

According to Linde (2005), the effects of violent images are unpredictable. Many of them include victims' pain and suffering or death, which are assessed in a specific context of values and social standards. Emotional discourse is a narrative recourse that accompanies emotional activation. When people or groups interpret that they have been harassed, traumatised or humiliated, emotions are a fundamental recourse to construct the injustice of the situation, and assess the past or current situation among the participants. The emotional impact goes beyond reactions: not only does it express physiological sensations, but it also involves the individual and others in the responsible action.

Despite the research already conducted into the perception of TV violence, many of its consequences on viewers are still unknown. This research has highlighted the complexity and importance of repetition,

but its role needs to be studied in more depth, specifically, the relation between the voluntary or involuntary nature of being exposed to the repetition. More attention also needs to be paid to the importance of agency with regard to initiative in the structure of emotions in a group, so that the key factors behind it can be determined, as well as to how permanent the resolve to take social action is, etc. All these unknown entities demonstrate the need to continue with this type of research.

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