

Received: 26-05-2012
Reviewed: 16-06-2012
Accepted: 24-09-2012

RECYT Code: 17252
Preprint: 30-01-2013
Final Publication: 01-03-2013

DOI: 10.3916/C40-2013-03-06

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The Notion of Violence in Television Fiction: Children's Interpretation

La noción de violencia en la ficción televisiva: la interpretación infantil

Abstract

In this paper we analyse child viewers' interpretation of television violence shown in television programmes specifically aimed at children. The justification for this work is based on the research that considers that more theoretical and empirical studies need to be carried out on the conceptualisation of violence, and about how much violence is legitimised and the mechanisms by which such legitimacy is constructed. It is aimed at providing a notion of television violence as interpreted by child television viewers which takes these mechanisms into account. The methodology used is based on content and discourse analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with sixteen children under the age of 12, after showing them two sequences of television programmes with types and various forms of fictional violence. The results, as well as providing a conceptual map of the responses, also show how children define and differentiate types of violence. It can also be observed how their reception process is framed by their cultural history and specific reading and consumption experiences, in which contextual narrative aspects play a very important role in children's interpretation of violence. Thus, the results of this study indicate how children give unrestricted significance to violence.

Resumen

En el presente trabajo se analiza la interpretación de los espectadores infantiles ante la presencia de violencia televisiva en la programación dirigida a la infancia. Su justificación se enmarca en aquellas investigaciones que consideran necesario la realización de más estudios teóricos y empíricos sobre la conceptualización de la violencia, y sobre cuánta violencia se legitima y cuáles son los mecanismos con los que se construye dicha legitimación. El objetivo que se persigue es ofrecer una noción de violencia televisiva según la interpretación de los telespectadores infantiles que tenga en cuenta dichos mecanismos. La metodología utilizada se basa en el análisis de contenido y del discurso de las entrevistas en profundidad efectuadas a dieciséis niños y niñas menores de 12 años, después de mostrarles dos secuencias de la programación televisiva con tipos y formalización diversa de violencia de ficción. Los resultados, además de ofrecer un mapa conceptual sobre las respuestas, indican cómo niños y niñas definen y diferencian distintos tipos de violencia. También se puede constatar cómo su proceso de recepción está enmarcado por una historia cultural y por unas prácticas concretas de lectura y consumo, en las que los aspectos narrativos contextuales tienen un gran protagonismo en la interpretación infantil de la violencia. Así, los resultados de la investigación señalan cómo niños y niñas dan a la violencia una significación de carácter no restringido.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Representation, interpretation, childhood, fiction, television, violence, content analysis, interviews.
Representación, interpretación, infancia, ficción, televisión, violencia, análisis de contenido, entrevistas.

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1. Introduction

Concern about violence is a discourse that runs through our society and that relates to collective sensitivity, to social *pathos*. The very notion of violence changes over time and according to the subject of enunciation. Like so many other constructs, it is the result of a social convention subject to negotiation by the various political and social forces. Although the research community is not unanimous, many scholars refer to aggression as a biological basis of human activity, whereas the notion of violence is formed by an attitude due to the intervention of cultural factors. From a psychological perspective, Bandura's social learning theory (1977) enables us to understand aggression as a learned behaviour which can be positively or negatively reinforced. From sociology, Elias (1977) provides us with the evocative image of the taming of impulses in parallel to the process of civilisation. Meanwhile, the historian Chesnais (1982) refers to the «secular process of moral transformation». In line with other writers, such as Fowles (1999), Chesnais relates the forms of violence to the great stages of the process of civilisation, which he specifies as three: primitive and archaic violence (traditional agrarian society), institutionalised violence (industrial society) and mediatised social violence (tertiary society).

On the other hand, it should be remembered that research on violence has a long and rich tradition in communication studies. From the classic theory of cultivation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) to the more modern approaches of neuroscience (Carnagey, Bartholow & Anderson 2007), concern about the effects of media violence has been a constant feature. Furthermore, the emergence of new communication practices, for instance, the use of video games, in which violence is very frequently shown, has only increased the concern about its effects, such as desensitisation to real violence (Carnagey, Anderson & Bushman, 2007). It should also be noted that, inevitably, there is not always a consensus in the academic community regarding the influence of the media (Rodrigo, Busquet & al., 2008). However, the concern about its influence on children is apparent, as a result of which the specialist literature has particularly focused on child audiences. Some writers highlight that the amount of television violence viewed in childhood (Huesmann, Moise-Titus & al., 2003) and adolescence (Johnson, Cohen & al., 2002) favours aggressive behaviour in the future. On this theme, the conclusion is that the long-term effects of media violence have a greater influence on childhood (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). In another vein, as noted by Fernández-Villanueva, Revilla & Domínguez (2011b: 11), other scholars focus their audience research not on what they consider to be «scientific reports on internal or visible physiological states» but on the emotions aroused by television violence in that «these are stories about emotions with cultural meanings, moral evaluations and relationships between emotions and social practices» (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000). As noted, there have been multiple approaches to the phenomenon from different disciplines.

The overall aim of this paper is to understand, from a constructivist perspective, the role of the media in the debate on mediatised social violence, particularly in its representation in television fiction. Authors such as Ang (1996), Alasuutari (1999), Boyle (2005), Tulloch and Tulloch (1992), Schlesinger, Haynes & al. (1998) and Hill (2001) have noted how viewers take a stance and interpret television broadcasts in different ways and, as a result, establish the different ways they are influenced by them, according to their attitudes, identities or circumstances in life. Thus, television shows, designates and labels the presence of violence, but we are convinced that it only makes sense to define the types of representation of television violence if we also ask questions about the value of these categories within social discourse. Therefore, on this occasion, we aim to gain an understanding of the social dimensions involved in child viewers' experience of the violence viewed in children's television fiction.

But is there still anything to be discovered on a subject that has been studied by so many communication departments worldwide? Fernández-Villanueva, Revilla & al. (2008) point out precisely how, perhaps due to the difficulty in correctly assessing the total amount of violence, -including variations in the definitions of the concepts of aggression and violence-, the results of the various studies conducted on this subject have not produced unanimous conclusions. Therefore, they consider that further theoretical and empirical work is called for on the phenomenon of violence on television and on how much violence is legitimated or justified and by what mechanisms such legitimisation is constructed (Fernández-Villanueva, Domínguez & al. 2004). That demand was explicitly re-stated more recently by the same research team (Fernández-Villanueva,

Revilla & Domínguez, 2011b), who specifically stress the importance of gathering viewers' discourse for three reasons, which can be summarised as follows: a) the lack of qualitative, discursive research of this kind concerning violence on television; b) the possibility of linking the results obtained with those related to emotions and effects produced by television violence; c) the viewers' discourse enables us to relate it to the value system of the cultural contexts in which it occurs. This paper forms part of this requirement for a broader perspective of the phenomenon itself summarised as media violence. The study presented here, in the context of a more extensive study dedicated to child viewers' interpretative processes of fictional violence, has the following aims:

- To understand how the interpretation of child viewers is influenced by a number of variables that determine the construction of the meaning of the notion of television violence.
- To provide a notion of television violence as interpreted by the child viewers.

2. Material and methods

With regard to the methodological approach, and according to the last two axioms of «Lineation Theory» (a more multivariate perspective is required that focuses on the effects of a probabilistic nature, and the importance of individual interpretations must be acknowledged), the research has been structured based on a multivariate analysis (Potter, 1999; Morrison, MacGregor & al., 1999). In particular, this paper is focused on the definers of violence based on the question: In what way do the children interviewed understand the notion of violence in the fictional images? The research was conducted as follows. Firstly, an overview was made of the conceptualisation of the notion of television violence, and the main qualitative research on content analysis of media violence and its reception were compiled and studied. A typological theory¹ was defined for the analysis of television violence (Aran, 2008: 303-312), structured on the basis of the categories of violence of Chesnais (1982), Barthes (1985), Galtung (1969, 1996 and reformulated by Reychler, 1997) and Morrison, MacGregor & al. (1999, reformulated by Millwood, 2003), as well as the procedures of significance in audiovisual narrative of Potter (1999), Tisseron (2000) and Buckingham (2005).

2.1. Material

Secondly, we then selected the unit of analysis (audiovisual text or «corpus» –two television programme sequences–) and designed the fieldwork. The two sequences were selected from children's programmes, in line with the following criteria:

- a) Aimed at children (sample broadcast on television and designated for children under 13 years).
- b) Presence of violence in the narrative (ritualised and realistic -not real-).
- c) Diversity of types of violence (physical and symbolic).
- d) Different degrees of recognition of this violence (more and less explicit).
- e) Diversity of forms (animation versus actors).
- f) Brevity of the messages and both examples of a similar length.

We evaluated and validated the analytical criteria for selecting the two sequences using two instruments. The first, the typological theory mentioned above (Aran, 2008), facilitated the identification of types of violence by their nature and features (content analysis), and pointed to qualitative aspects considered as contextual (policy influences, variables of the message, appraisal of the message, among others). The second of the instruments facilitated an external assessment of the two sequences chosen by the analysts from the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia, based on the analysis of the qualification (language, theme, conflict resolution, forms and use of violence, personal identity and conflict) and the degree of suitability of programmes for the viewers' age. This assessment proved to be an indispensable contrast in the selection criteria.

The resulting «corpus» was two sequences, each under 2 minutes long, from the cartoon series «Doraemon» (Japan), based on the comic by Fujiko F. Fujio, and the adventure film «Lost in Africa» (UK), by the director Steward Raffill, broadcast by TV3 (April 2003) and TVE (May 2003), respectively. The examples were edited on a DVD in this order. In this phase, we made the final selection of two schools which did not excessively polarise such a quantitatively limited sample. Throughout the school year 2002-2003, a pilot test was carried out in each to observe the suitability of the

selected sequences, the questions and the circumstances of observation. Based on the pilot test, adjustments were made to the evaluation instruments and the procedure was validated.

2.2. Participants

After initial contact with the teaching staff, the selection of pupils was agreed and the procedure was implemented with the study sample during the 2003-2004 school year. 16 questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted on pupils who were in the second (n=8) and sixth years (n=8) of two primary schools located in the city of Barcelona, one state school and one state-assisted private school. The criteria for the selection of participants were established according to proportionality, both with respect to the school (ownership and balanced sociocultural representation) and to the subjects (different gender and age groups but with sufficient verbal and expressive ability), in line with previous research that use these primary education levels as suitable to contrast the verbalisation of perceptions (Aran, Barata & al., 2001; Busquet, Aran & al., 2002; Buckingham, 2005).

2.3. Techniques of information collection

To obtain information on the subjects, two instruments were used: a questionnaire about the television viewing routines and preferences of the subjects and their families, and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire contained 32 questions organised in two sections: the ethnography of media consumption and consideration of television consumption. The questionnaire was useful for introducing the subject in a relaxed manner and shifting the focus onto violence, and above all, providing a context for some of the later responses to the interview as cross-checks in order to discern exaggerations and distortions in the subjects' remarks, according to King, Keohane & Verba (1994)'s scheme of triangulation of qualitative data. The semi-structured interview, inspired by Tisseron's model (2000), is structured into 17 open or semi-directed questions designed to elicit their interpretations of the two viewings containing violence. The question specifically designed to observe the notion of violence is, «What is violence (for you)?», although this specific question was not posed until the subjects themselves made reference to the existence of violence in the examples, thus the answers emerged over the course of the interview.

The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes and were carried out in the morning break. They were always conducted in the same classroom which had video equipment. The work was presented as a study carried out on boys' and girls' television tastes, aimed at finding out their preferences, and without having to follow a format of true or false questions and answers. They were told that the audio recording was made (after receiving parental approval and the consent of the subjects) in order to recall what they told us.

2.4. Analysis of the information

The verbatim transcription of the interviews was then carried out, and the data was analysed. We designed a method of discourse analysis by adapting the procedure proposed by Morrison, MacGregor & al. (1999), and we proceeded to implement it. As a reminder, the indicators of the reception analysis proposed by the researchers are:

1. Primary indicators. These are derived from the social environment or social expectations.
 - a) The act itself (understood here as the violent nature of the act).
 - b) The contextual factors (of the situation portrayed). They qualify the violent act.
- 2) Secondary indicators. The artistic and physical expression of the scene.
 - a) Production techniques. The resources for the staging and performance.
- 3) Tertiary indicators. The emotional response (of the social actors).
- 4) Elements intensifying the emotional response.

The aim of this work is focused on the notion of violence and its qualification as interpreted by child viewers, therefore our analysis is concentrated on the primary indicators, i.e. both on the violent nature of the act and the contextual parameters that are observed according to the type of television violence presented (Aran, 2008) and to previous research (Gunter & Harrison, 1998; Potter, 1999; Morrison, MacGregor & al., 1999; Buckingham, 1996, 2002; Busquet, Aran & al., 2002; Millwood, 2003). Taking these previous studies into account, the resulting general catego-

ries were: 1) Type of violence; 2) Intensity of violence; 3) Representation of violence; 4) Motivation for violence; 5. Definers of violence that appear in the story related to the perception of the participants.

During this phase of the research, we followed Taylor & Bogdan (1996)'s stages of data analysis relating to discovery, coding and discounting, including the cross-checking of the results. The reliability between the different external encoders (two researchers in the fields of psychology and social anthropology) was estimated according to the percentage of consistency, following Holsti's procedure (1969). The percentage of reliability between encoders obtained was an average of 86 and a range from 72.1 to 98.2. Almost all the variables were in the range of .80 to .85, which is generally considered good (Riffe & al., 1998). According to Cronbach's alpha procedures for calculating inter-rater reliability, the remaining 14% was resolved by discussion and consensus.

3. Findings

The descriptive results set out below regarding the children's discourse on the notion of violence in fictional images refer to the type of violence, the intensity of the violence present, its representation, the motivation for the violent acts represented and the definitions of violence that are proposed. The categories selected were combined with the characteristics of the participants, such as sex, age and type of school ownership, giving overall results and differences that were only significant in relation to age.

3.1. Type of violence

We present, using illustrative examples, those categories of the typology already described in which the research subjects provided significant information. On this basis, in the types of violence, all the subjects discriminated between types of violence in the images. The distinctions they made relate to the following dimensions of violence: physical violence (killing); verbal violence (insults) symbolic or cultural violence (differentiation between the good and bad people) and private and collective violence. The latter even includes types of institutional (wars) and structural violence, in line with Galtung's concept (1969, 1996).

In addition, the subjects make distinctions between forms of violence, essentially between real and represented. None of the subjects confused the two sequences viewed with reality or considered it to be the truth instead of a representation. But they also recognised formal violence, the codes of the audiovisual language (sound intensification, visual attention to detail...).

Lastly, in relation to perception, the subjects of the research showed a negative perception of violence (when the act is perceived as bad), a neutral perception (when the appraisal of the violence is relativised in accordance with its form) and a positive perception (when it is interpreted that the action has a noble purpose).

However, the resulting perception of violence of the subjects analysed was much more complex than this first typology. In the sections below (3.2 to 3.4) we observe in particular how the subjects establish other distinctions that relate to both contextual and socio-cultural aspects of the violence.

3.2. Intensity of violence

Under this variable, the subjects express considerations of severity according to a relationship between the recognition of actual damage and a subjective perception of the violence. Within this section, we can distinguish various criteria. With regard to severity, the subjects clearly identify physical violence (intentional assault and battery). With regard to regulation (understood as the institutional parameter) they recognise violence that is unlawful, punished by the state. As regards the means, they distinguish between violence with firearms, sharp instruments and blunt objects. Lastly, in relation to the perception of the intensity of the violence, they differentiate mild (argument), severe (insults) and extreme violence (shots).

3.3. Representation of violence

The subjects differentiate between plausible and implausible representations of violence. Plausibility refers here, in Aristotelian terms, to the attributes of possibility, as opposed to veracity which refers to the attributes of truth (plausibility of the factual). Subjects ascribe what they saw

to a format (cartoon, film) and an audiovisual genre (humour, adventure), which implies that they tacitly generate different expectations for them in relation to those production and narrative conventions. They distinguished between ritualised and realistic types of representation (they were all representations; they were not shown examples of real violence or violence in the news). Fairly spontaneously, the subjects make comparisons between the types of fictional violence represented and real situations with violence. These situations relate, particularly, to events they have experienced or discussed at home and at school (family arguments, neighbourhood disputes) or seen in the news (child abuse, the war in Iraq).

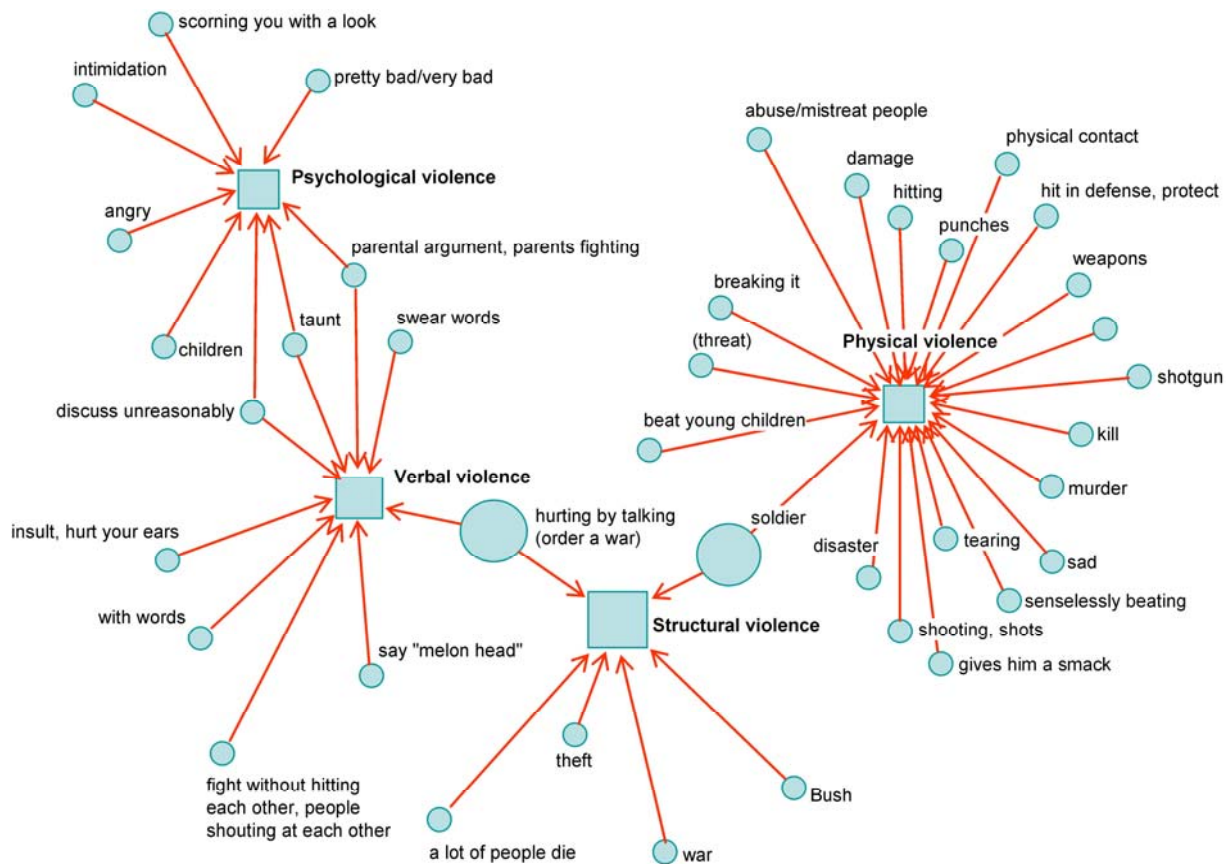
3.4. Motivation for violence

The concept of motivation for violence includes the arguments relating to the aggressor's objectives, which the subjects attribute to them based on the use of the violence and on their need to make sense of that violence. It is shown here that they distinguish between the use of instrumental violence (violence as a means), when they consider that there are reasons for carrying out the violence, and an expressive use (violence as an end), when it is perceived that lasting damage to the victim is sought. Lastly, it was established that the subjects in the study look for a meaning to the violence. Along these lines, they recognise reactive violence when the violent actions are committed in self-defence, or for other characters, as a response to a previous attack.

3.5. Definitions of violence

Lastly, based on the results, we note –coinciding with contemporary research, such as that of Fernández-Villanueva, Revilla & al. (2008)–, the variability of what subjects understand as violence, depending on those viewers' values and the mechanisms of identification they trigger with the perpetrators and victims. As a graphical summary of the definitions of violence provided by our child viewers throughout the interviews, we have represented these in a Visone concept map (see Molina, 2006), based on the proximity of the words in their responses and the frequency with which they are mentioned. Here, the size of the concepts relates to the number of references by the children. The thickness of each definition (the lines) represents the number of references by the subjects. The most strategic nodes are those which form a bridge between different nodes. The squares relate to the types of violence. Given the importance that subjects gave to verbal and non-verbal (psychological) expressions, we have shown these two categories separately.

Figure 1: Definitions of violence



Some key aspects of the conceptual map are:

- The children clearly recognise forms of direct violence, both physical and psychological (and verbal). They also express indirect violence by reference to the power of words of political leaders as instigators of wars (structural violence).
- Physical violence has the largest variety of definitions, notably «kill», followed by «hit» and «abuse».
- Structural violence encompasses various references to the concepts of «war», «Bush» and «theft».
- The importance of the nodal intersections is highlighted, indicating the links between the children's definitions of violence as significant relationships in their discourse: «soldier» (physical and structural violence), «hurting by talking» (structural and verbal violence) and «arguing unreasonably», «taunting» and, especially, «parental arguments, parents fighting» (verbal and psychological violence).
- The most unpleasant violence for children was arguments between parents in cartoons, divided between psychological and verbal violence (as attributive connections, the subjects highlight «son», «parents» and in other types of violence, «Bush» and «small children»).

To summarise, the views presented by the subjects underline how they establish motivations which justify, mitigate or increase the seriousness, even beyond an absolute value of violence or its restricted conceptualisation. As a result, all the subjects recognised mortal (as a consequence) violence in the examples as the most serious (feature film with actors), but the majority (10 subjects), were most upset by the parental argument, a form of symbolic violence which is represented in a ritualised (cartoons) and plausible way.

The children in our study indicate, as a majority definition of violence, the most restrictive meanings, those which are confined to the notion of physical and direct violence. We attribute this choice as being in line with criteria of visibility, economy and social use (we recall that restrictive

definitions are the most frequent in common usage). However, the children also mentioned the broader definitions, by way of comments on inequality -age inequality, in weapons...-, disproportion and verbal or psychological humiliation.

We shall now seek to clarify the relevance of some of these contextual factors of the violent narrative in the framework of television fiction. According to the research findings, the main primary indicators of violence are:

1) The act itself, understood as the violent nature of the act: a) If mechanisms of identification with the victim or situation are triggered (attribution of a violent significance to the act when the child identifies with the victim, for example the main character, Novita, or with the situation, for example, arguments within the family); b) If the attackers are «the good guys»; c) The probability of it being based on a true story.

2) The contextual aspects: a) The narrative genre (subjects effectively attribute the stories to a type of genre which in their conventions may imply an explicit presence of violence, often of a serious nature); b) Unfair or disproportionate violence in an unbalanced relationship between the characters (the perceived seriousness of the violence increases when it affects minors or victims who are considered by the subjects to be «vulnerable» or «innocent»); c) Gratuitous violence (for example, when there has been no previous provocation).

Other indicators appear to a lesser extent, also in the act itself, where the children are moved or disturbed by the representation of pain or injury (visual representation of the consequences of the violence).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of our research show how children define violence with a not necessarily restricted significance. From the analysis of the interpretative processes carried out on a sample of fictional television violence, the children participating in the study showed how the reception process is framed by a cultural background and specific reading and consumption practices, in which contextual narrative aspects have a major role, especially relating to the perception of proximity displayed by the subjects. Logically, the size of the sample does not permit an extrapolation of the results, however, in addition to the emergence of dimensions considered important by other scholars, a typology of analysis of television violence was found and implemented, which enables the fundamental factors of its perception by child viewers to be organised and to study in-depth the narrative nature of the experience of viewing violence on television. This reinforces the direction of research in the past decade focused on indicators of media influence which, as noted by Jacquinot (2002) have been undertaken with the intention of raising the awareness of as many decision-makers and stakeholders as possible, but are difficult to transfer to the «daily activity of the media» (Jacquinot, 2002: 31).

To conclude, we will attempt to outline some of the aspects which, in our view, still need to be included in the analysis of television violence and viewers' interpretation of it. The analysis of television violence is, even today, still based on a restrictive conceptualisation of the notion of violence, understood as the physical expression (and in some cases verbal). Contributions are rarely made from content analysis that broaden the spectrum to the cultural and structural dimensions of violence. The definition of violence once proposed by George Gerbner continues to be the standard framework of reference. We recall that Gerbner (1972: 31) defined television violence as: «the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed. The expression of injurious or lethal force had to be credible or real in the symbolic terms of the drama. Humorous and even farcical violence can be credible and real, even if it has a presumable comic effect».

It is on this definition, which should be considered within the restrictive definitions (Aróstegui, 1994), that most of the descriptions and content analyses conducted to determine the characteristics of violence on television today are still based. It is specifically this restriction of the term to the physical expression that we consider to be out-of-date and inadequate for understanding the current complexity and diversity of violence and its media representations.

In contrast, the second part of Gerbner's definition seems to us to be very much up-to-date, since, in relation to the violence depicted, it is in the area of the «symbolic terms of the drama». In the context of these fictional representations of violence on television, we must therefore observe it

according to the conventions of the genre which underpin the narrative rules of television discourse. The audiovisual genres define the interpretative margins for the viewers, and those margins in turn fluctuate according to the interpretative weighting that each viewer assigns them. Within the conventions of the television genre there is a series of contextual factors which qualify the act of violence. Each viewer, in turn, frames these variables within their knowledge and experience of television narrative (media skills) and in the context of its reception (relevance of the medium within the social interaction as a whole).

Lastly, movements which form public opinion and the expression of the transgression of limits through social alarm come into play. Here we must contemplate media practices in the broader sphere, the social and political context that governs the actions and perceptions of social order. It will be this discourse of order which will redefine what we understand by violence. Thus, to return to the beginning, the circle is complete. In this sense we have been able to see, on the basis of the questionnaires and in-depth interviews, how, in the interpretation of fictional violence, social norms coexist with family and community values, as well as individual sensitivities. As Fernández-Villanueva, Revilla & Domínguez (2011a) conclude in their research, viewers are neither passive nor isolated in generating emotions, especially as a result of the perception of that content (Pinto da Mota, 2005).

As a final reflection, we would like to underline that both the notion of violence and the discourses that are constructed on media violence are of an historical, changeable and often institutionally coercive nature (Foucault, 2002). At the outset our research aimed to examine the concept of violence in television fiction according to the interpretations of child viewers. However, we have moved from the analysis of a concern, from the analysis of a discourse that refers to the collective sensibility –to «social pathos»– as we stated at the beginning, to an analysis of production of the discourse, which refers to power and management of that social space. Often, the media act as amplifiers of the presence of violence in the real world, too often magnifying it. But they can also act virtuously in two directions: firstly, giving public prominence to the presence of silent violence, tacitly accepted by society, and secondly, the media allow the debate on violence to be opened up beyond scientific and political discourse and, despite the risks of co-operating with a certain alarmist reductionism, encourage the involvement of social agents. As Cecilia Von Feilitzen (2002) affirms, the media are in many ways a prerequisite for public debate and for the functioning of today's society, and it is not always possible to differentiate between the media and society, because communication through the media also means participation in society. This participation makes the most sense if it is built on media literacy, particularly in the audiovisual field, which considers young viewers as active participants.

Notes

¹ The expression does not refer here to a certain typology but to «the group of mechanisms and operations that allow the discourse analysed to be classified in different ways, and the series of epistemological procedures that would lead to the selection of one typology or another» (Pérez-Tornero, 1982: 60-61).

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