TV and Minors: the Reasons for Violence

Antonio Iannaccone

1. **Author information**
   Dipartimento TeSIS – Tempo, Spazio, Immagine, Società, Università
degli Studi di Verona (Italy)

2. **Contact authors' email addresses**
   Iannaccone_Antonio@libero.it; Antonio.Iannaccone@univr.it

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TV and Minors: the Reasons for Violence

Antonio Iannaccone*

Corresponding author:
Antonio Iannaccone
E-mail: Iannaccone_Antonio@libero.it; Antonio.Iannaccone@univr.it

Abstract

Thousands of different questions are centered on the topic of TV violence, especially those concerning young spectators. In everyday life, children, youth and adolescents watch particularly brutal and heightened scenes on TV, which, however, it is not always legitimate to condemn. In fact, if we assume that apocalyptic positions (together with integrated stances) bring nowhere, perhaps it will be possible to give life to a minors friendly television, taking advantage of the numerous existing family mediation and self-regulation strategies. The code teaches it.

Keywords: TV, violence, under 18, self-regulation.

Introduction

In the last decade I had the honour and the pleasure of collaborating with the Osservatorio *Violenza, media e minori* (*Violence, media and minors* Observatory) of the University of Studies of Salerno and with the University of Studies "Suor Orsola Benincasa" in Naples, following in both the universities the evolution of the laboratory of *Monitoraggio dei palinsesti televisivi* (*TV show schedule monitoring*). It was in that laboratory that I was inspired by the precious suggestions and the prompt questions about the relation between youth and TV violence, made by dozens of students interested in the topic.

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* Dipartimento TeSIS – Tempo, Spazio, Immagine, Società, Università degli Studi di Verona (Italy).

The aim of the following essay is to (try to) answer those questions – clearly with the help of a specific bibliography – avoiding both an excessive minimization of the phenomenon, and the production of scaremongerings. And all this from the starting point of a clear consciousness that children and youth are a resource today, and not only in a never to come future. One of the main challenges we must face is that of being on the side of minors, considering them active subjects, with full rights, in society (Cappello, 2004), and, above all, people able to observe it from a new point of view, favoured by television: «every insistence of TV on superficial and stereotyped styles and languages is unbearably benighted. And this is even more evident when we refer to a (...) "hot" television, which never leaves the audience (particularly the under 18, AN), and let them enter and 'surf' its world every moment, hanging between reality and fantasy. In order not to part from real life, but, on the contrary, to read it from new points of view and find the right suggestions to change it for the best» (Gnasso-Parenti, 2003: 46; Gunter *et al.,* 2003). If a serious culture for childhood and adolescence is to be increased, it is necessary to deal with television (Kelly, 1999) and the other media.

Part-time violence on Laocoön

Losing oneself in the many marvels hosted in the Vatican Museums in Rome, one can appeciate a sculpted group representing *Laocoön and his sons*, created by the Greek artists Hagesandros, Athanadoros and Polydoros, presumably between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. The group represents the death of the Trojan Laocoön and his two sons, Antiphantes and Thymbraeus, attacked and grinded by two sea serpents[1], as told in Virgil's Aeneid.

If the poet expresses deliberately Laocoön's screams of pain, the statue does not cry at all: «pangs piercing every muscle, every labouring nerve; pangs which we almost feel ourselves, while we consider – not the face, nor the most expressive parts – only the belly contracted by excruciating pains: these however, I say, exert not themselves with violence, either in the face or gesture. He pierces not heaven, like the Laocoön of Virgil; his mouth is rather

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[1] It is the result of Athena's revenge for the attempt of Poseidon's high priest (or Apollo's, according to some sources) of taking position against the entrance into the city of the Trojan horse. According to another interpretation, the two serpents were sent by Poseidon himself, who punished Laocoön for having married against gods' will.

opened to discharge an anxious overloaded groan» (Winckelmann, 1992[1756]: 43).

Numerous and heterogeneous are the reasons why the sculptors may have decided not to reproduce those cries in marble; the one I chose is the most interesting for the purposes of my essay: if truth and expression represent the first rule of art, this cannot assign an invariable last to what could be thought as temporary. «So it is with a cry. Pain, which is so violent as to extort a scream, either soon abates or it must destroy the sufferer. Again, if a man of firmness and endurance cry, he does not do so unceasingly, and only this apparent continuity in art makes the cry degenerate into womanish weakness or childish impatience (destining it to eternity, AN)» (Lessing, 2007[1766]: 30). Because nobody cries and suffers forever, even Laocoön.

What do a statue and Greek mithology have to do with the relation between television and minors? They are strictly related, and the joining link corresponds to the part-time violence perpetrated on Laocoön, the same violence sculptors decided not to destine to eternity, but which, on the contrary, will always accompany our existence, never leaving it, as explained by Piromallo Gambardella (2004: 39) through Dadoun's words (1993): «the whole human life, in every of its fundamental stages, is marked by violence: from its coming to life through the violent act of being expelled from maternal whomb, to the subjection to the incessant (thus violent) flow of time that slowly tears the body apart, to the last supreme violence inflicted on human beings, death».The same «violence/non-violence connection cannot be brought back to a binary logic of division and expulsion, but to the "inclusive" view of those who consider both the words part of an inseparable twist. If the first was "expunged", we would slip in the space of new artificial paradises, where the "damned part" would be concealed between the folds of approval, however continuing the secret silent imposition of its indestructible symbolic power» (Piromallo Gambardella, 2004: 12-13).

I hope the students in my laboratories first of all have understood this: we cannot fight violence (in every of its shapes, even the media one[2]) hoping that it will be forever erased from everyday life (and from minors), because

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[2] Violence has «always characterised every kind of society, mingling with myths, religion, politics, customs, rituals. Today, however, it has become strongly pervasive, since it is reflected *ad infinitum* on billions of TV screens and monitors, thus producing a (...) progressive multiplication effect» (D'Agostino, 2004: 9). The image «is an exhibited presence which does not refer to anything else, as violence that shows itself without any other guarantor than the same itself; that is why violence and image are inseparable in their link. Images let us enter the abyss, remain outside it, fire up passion, distorting things, act as exceptions, as "scandals", completely ignoring the context» (Piromallo Gambardella, 2004: 11).

this will mean clinging to a pipe dream. However, if the phenomenon cannot be removed, it can be at least reduced, circumscribed, and it is this awareness indeed which should encourage us to hinder it with the means and tools at our disposal.

To the roots of evil

It is years that «more and more brutal, detailed, heightened scenes follow one another in bombarding the minds and the eyes of (even young) spectators» (Imbasciati, 1998: 82) on the screen of our TVs, but it is obvious that TV violence is not always to be condemned[3]. Talking of that, Salzano (2004) introduces a dichotomy between *blow-image* and *absolved image*: the aim of the first one is that of shocking, amazing, capturing the spectator's attention, it conveys a careless excitement[4] – which seduces, obsesses the spectator without making him feel the need of pondering the meaning of that view – then an evasive, recreational, "beautiful" violence (Piromallo Gambardella *et al.*, 2000); the second one, on the contrary, reveals a violence that is not an end in itself[5], which encourages reflection, analysis, critique, fosters the consciousness raising about the existing, helps metabolising reality (even if through its dramatic and sometimes scandalously spectacular representation), thus restoring the right distance from the cruelty of some events, without ignoring them or being surprised by them.

It is necessary to absolve the image that «awakens our moral awareness and, if anything, suspect the gaze lingering on the indecent code of gratuitous

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[3] «Images of violence can produce many effects: that of fortifying against any weakness, that of making apathetic, that of helping the acceptance of inescapable things» (Salzano, 2004: 124). It is «very difficult to ascertain the real reasons which bring people to search for certain forms of entertainment instead of others and to get pleasure from them. The perception is not always truthful, because we are not always fully aware of the reasons which bring us to choose and to prefer certain contents» (Gili, 2004: 165).

[4] Although they are dated back to the end of last century, Sigurtà's words (1998: 294) are convincing even today: «in the majority of cinema fiction, even in some products intended for TV a priori and in some comics (*Dylan Dog,* for example), violent death presented again and again seems to be the only content of the product, however the most important, so slight and background are the supporting elements which generally were its significant and validating prelude».

[5] Just think that «children like action movies, but not exaggerated violent scenes, with blood, death and so on; they appreciate scenes, even strong scenes, which they perceive as part of a certain context, but they do not like any excess» (Santini, 2002: 203).

hyperrealism and blow-image (...) seduction» (Salzano, 2004: 137), which, if taken to the extreme, could leave room to feelings of blame, disgust, rejection – especially from children (even though they are surely able to distinguish reality from fiction[6]) –, such as, for example, in the case of the killings overdose we bump into in many films, which make excessive use of murders, even though the plot does not ask for them as essential (Bertolini, 2002).

Besides the killings, however, there is a violent and rhizomatous world to be discovered and investigated (Gili, 2004: 174; Montanari, 2007; Murray e Murray, 2009), given that the «media representation of violence reveals itself through many shapes: it can be blood violence (murder, wounding), body violence (aggression, blows, rape), psychological violence (isolation, disconfirming), violence in communicative interactions (verbal attacks, calumny), in social relations (exploitation, desertion), falsehood violence. It is of extreme importance not to give consideration only to the most clear expressions of violence, such as blood or body violence, or to restrict ourselves to count the number of homicides» we watch on TV.

But why media broadcast violence - in its many shapes - instead of avoiding it? Because of a number of precise reasons and aims (Gili, 2004): the *purport of testimony* of violent images (those we can see in breaking news and information), that would be a tribute to truth, in order to show things " just as they really are"; *violence necessary to art,* to which the importance of truth and a certain adherence to reality are not essential, but necessary to the structure of the plot is a violent situation; *openness to reality*, or better, to situations different from what we are accustomed to in everyday life (media tell us the world, but also many other imaginary worlds, and the adventure of knowledge also contains - besides many other things - violence, up to the extreme borders of possible experiences). Moreover, violence *educates* (restoring and reaffirming the importance of disobeyed social rules), *mobilises* (moves public opinion, arouses a moral reaction) and, therefore, *sells* (Piromallo Gambardella *et al.*, 2004). That is why on TV «there is violence[7], a silent violence that asserts its

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[6] Young spectators «are fully capable of making a proper distinction between the two alternatives: for example, it is almost generalized the distinction (...) perceived between death on a cinema screen and death in an informative programme (...). They know (...) that something is watching a film where someone's death is represented, "because it is known that he do not really die", another thing is watching a "live" death because in this case "you know that those people are really dead"» (Bertolini, 2002: 326).

[7] «For the same reasons according to which action sports such as soccer are considered funnier than static sports like chess, it is easier that TV gives more room to uprisings, bombings, earthquakes, massacres and other blood events than to stories of people fighting against violence» (Aronson, 2006[1972]: 60).

invisible presence through the dazzling visibility of images where everything merges and mingles»(Piromallo Gambardella, 2004: 11).

At this stage, another important question is to be raised: what drives people to search for violent contents voluntarily? Even in this case the reasons are various and connected to many factors (Gili, 2004): from the search for excitement and the overcoming of routine and ordinary life, to the emotional identification with the contendings; not to forget *the pleasure of forbidden* (the possibility of adventure, thanks to imagination, beyond the bundaries allowed by moral and social rules[8]), adolescents and young males that – in a real rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1981[1909]) – expose themselves to violent contents to prove themselves and their group of self-control of being able to rule fear, when watching horrifying scenes. Moreover, moving our eyes from fiction productions to the violence described in news formats (newspapers and breaking news), crimes, disasters and wars attract us because of our desire to sound the deeps of perversion and wickedness in human nature, always hanging between a sort of emotional identification (that "pity" which comes from the natural fondness we feel for other people) and the satisfaction for our state (It may be that my life is not the most lucky and desirable in the world, but it is certainly better than those deserved to many other people), with a consolatory purpose about our life conditions.

Therefore, violence intrigues, fascinates, *is liked* but, «in developmental age and more in general, media violence "effects" (in particular those produced by TV violence), just as other effects on social and cognitive development, can be understood only within a dynamic system of variables interacting one another: besides the quality and quantity of TV fruition and the nature of its message, the social ecology of TV usage, together with the characteristics and dynamics of the family, the interactions with the group of mates (...), the whole sociocultural background, the age, the sex, the intelligence and, above all, (...) the child's or the adolescent's personality[9] (...). In addition, it is to underline the fact that, from a wider social perspective, TV effects on the growing of violent behaviours, especially in the developmental age, cannot be compared to those connected to other social factors, much more powerful in this sense, such as poverty, lack of education, exclusion and

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[8] «It belongs to this category (...) the desire for rebellion, of destroying every opposition which produces frustration and resentment, such as all the red tapes which imprison and "force" our life» (Gili, 2004: 172).

[9] The effects «depend on the subject, too, on his character, culture, on the way his mind works in that moment, then on all the circumstances connected to the context (...) which act as variables, too, in the regulation of how his psyche works» (Telzrow, 1993[1987]; Imbasciati, 1998: 84).

family breaking up; It is not understandable the idea of considering television responsible for the results of these factors, which involve far more complex social responsibilities» (Varin, 1998: 64-65).

The idea of observing the relation between violence and minors through a camera may not be the decisive solution; however, it could represent a good starting point.

Minors and TV regulations

As underlined by Colombo (2003), if in the past television tended to strengthen the family unit, uprooting the habit of the head of the family (or of all adult males) of going out in the evening to pubs or other meeting places, today it plays an *individualizing* and *fragmenting* role in the family, due to the habit of having a television set in every room[10]. Therefore, no wonder many parents watch (and make their children watch) TV massively, being quite indifferent to the choice of violent or too explicit programmes - despite being sure that TV is bad for children, since there is a lot of violence and sex, and little culture (Bertolini, 2002).

But the medium in question could not and should not act as a baby sitter (Winn, 1984[1984]). In fact, television – says Buckingham (2004[2000]: 54), quoting Elkind (1981) – «is not characterized by the "intellectual barriers" typical of older media, because no specific ability is required in order to understand it. Through an extreme simplification of the process of acquiring information, it introduces children to experiences reserved only to adults in the past (such as, for example, scenes of violence or sexual intimacy, AN)». Therefore, it would be better for adults to share the experience of TV fruition with their minors (joint use), establishing rules and boundaries to that use (restrictive mediation) and talking with them about the contents transmitted by TV and other media (Livingstone, 2010[2009]: 271).

Meanwhile, in order to produce a television close to children and youth's needs, strategies of family mediation are not sufficient, but the intervention of

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[10] «The adult-minor relationship focuses on the crucial issue of the choice of the programmes which can be watched, especially prime time shows. *Negotiation* between the programmes preferred by minors and those preferred by their parents is the most correct approach to the question. From the starting point of this difficult negotiation, different approaches divide; They can, on the one hand, give rise to open conflict, after an attempt of the parents to control the situation, and, on the other hand, they can lead to the use of another TV device (every family owns on average at least three TVs) or to the acceptance of the most persuasive proposal (…). If the process of choosing a programme accepted by everybody in the family fails, this can become a disruptive element» (Paci, 2004: 25-26).

other adults[11] proves to be necessary; we are refferring to media operators, those who work in TV, people who are as responsible as young spectators' parents. This is a responsibility which is first exercised through the oservance of the rules written in our *Codice Tv e Minori*[12] (*TV and Minors Code*, 2002), according to which public and private TV companies – acknowledging minors' right to a normal and complete development, together with the prohibition of submitting them to arbitrary or illegal disturbances of their privacy and to every kind of violence, damage, mental abuse, exploitation – undertake to control television scheduling from 7:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. (watershed), especially by establishing a pre-watershed between 4:00 and 7:00[13] p.m. in the show schedule, even though Rai – Radio-televisione Italiana – extended it to 8:00 p.m.*,* when they signed the *Contratto nazionale di servizio 2007-2009* (*2007-2009 Service National Agreement*), and they also undertake to produce TV shows of high quality and pleasant entertainment, capable of fostering the development of minors' critical sense (instead of falsely sweetened or wisely bland and boring programmes); thus avoiding damaging or harmful images, (it is not a coincidence that the document deserves a substantial attention to the participation of children to TV programmes).

In addition to all this, it is to underline that broadcasting stations untertake to guarantee, during prime time, the broadcasting of programmes appropriate for the viewing of the whole family and, during pre-watershed,

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[11] The task of educating/instructing minors cannot «be delegated exclusively to parents any more, since in today society there is an "educational polycentrism", where family, school and institutions are primarly involved (...), but which also media oparators cannot elude, as media are to be considered real *education instruments»* (Spangaro, 2011: 18-19).

[12] Our *Codice di autoregolamentazione Tv e Minori* (*TV and Minors self-regulation Code*), also known as Codice Gasparri, was signed on 29th November 2002, at the Ministero delle Comunicazioni (Ministry of communications), by the exponents of Rai, Mediaset, La7, MTV Italia and the associations of the main commercial broadcasting stations. The document refers to the previous *Codice di comportamento nei rapporti tra Tv e Minori* (*TV and Minors relations behavioural Code*, or Codice Prodi) dated back to 1997, extending and updating it.

[13] The choice of confining the watershed to that period of time (because of parents' impossibility to accompany young spectators in television use) arouses many doubts. In fact, in the last four or five decades, minors' everyday life has radically changed (Buckingham, 2004[2000]), with TV placed in a varied cultural consumption shortlist: young people watch television, but they also do other activities, such as surfing the net, going to the cinema, listening to radio, reading books and doing their homework, doing sports, going out with friends. This means that, besides adults, even children do not watch TV between 4 and 7 p.m.. As a consequence, what is the meaning of creating a watershed to adress it to a ghost public?

national TV companies with more than a mainstream channel adopt strategies in order to broadcast contents specifically intended for young spectators on at least one of their channels.

To this end, there is a Comitato ministeriale di applicazione del Codice (ministerial Committee for the application of the Code), which collaborates with the Commissione per i servizi e i prodotti dell'Autorità per le garanzie nelle comunicazioni[14] (Commission for services and products of the Regulator for communication) and precisely which has the task of verifying possible violations of principles and rules[15] and of adopting measures[16], if necessary.

Therefore, the Codice Tv e Minori (TV and Minors Code), is not to be considered a sacred text to which it is imagined that TV operators must swear eternal devotion, but a handbook which can become operational only if those working in television prove to be provided with moral sense (Calderaro e Soldani, 2014). As underlined by Peters (2005[1999]: 412), the «story of Theseus tells us everything we need to know: coming back home after the killing of the Minotaur, Theseus forgets to use the code previously agreed with his father Aegeus. A black sail should have shown his death, the white one, on the contrary, his triumph. When Aegeus saw a black sail on the horizon, he believed that Theseus was dead and decided to put an end to his life too, by throwing himself from the cliffs into the sea (called Aegean from that moment

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[14] Agcom (established in 1997 with the law nr. 249, operational from July 1998) has the function of regulation and surveillance in the areas of telecommunications, audiovisuals, publishing and mail service. Likewise all other authorities provided by the Italian set of rules, it accounts for its work to the Parliament; morover, it is composed of the following authorities: the President, the Commissione per le infrastrutture e le reti (Infrastructures and networks Commission), the Commissione per i servizi e i prodotti (Services and products Commission), the Council.

[15] It is legitimate to underline that many of the rules in the Code are quite ambiguous - then open to subjective readings - given that they refer to concepts difficult to define. Moreover, the document under consideration - in contrast with what happens in other countries such as France, UK, Holland and Spain - focuses on the safeguard of under 18s, without considering any distinction between the various age groups (children and adolescents have different needs, for example).

[16] The Committee (in cooperation with the Authority), in case they identify any violation of the Code, can fine the broadcasting station and order to modify/interrupt/delate the programme or the programmes, stating the timing and the ways of its fulfilment. The Committee is one of the few examples of control - in the field of communication - born from a self-regulation system, later supported by a government legislative co-regulation (for more information, see the websites *comitatotveminori.it* and *sviluppoeconomico.gov.it*).

on)». What is the moral teaching of this story? It is that this is what happens if someone forgets to apply the code.

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