Television Violence: What are we to do?

Victòria Camps

Violence is a phenomenon and an inherent part of human life, as is the need to justify and explain it. To our knowledge, there has never been a time or society that has not been violent, and we have a myriad of stories and myths that try to explain why, because of man, there is hatred and destruction in the world. The biblical story of Cain and Abel tells us within a religious context about the hatred between two brothers and by extrapolation about the hatred among the rest of humanity. The fire that Prometheus stole from the gods illustrates human societies' proven capacity and power for destruction. Violence, together with love, power and sex, has always been the resource most commonly used in literature, cinema and later in television, for telling a story. The exploitation of violence has been and is the most recurrent theme in the entertainment industry.

Even though violence is an almost inseparable dimension of both real and fictitious human relationships, it has nonetheless been a cause of constant concern. There have always been wars and aggression, and some have been considered as the most normal and effective way to deal with conflict, but at the same time, we have had to differentiate and set criteria between just and unjust wars, legitimate and illegitimate aggression. Here we are faced with a clear example of human ambivalence that at first does not accept the status quo, but rather asks: what are we to do? Is what's happening good or bad? Right or wrong? Does it deserve our consent or not? Violence has been a subject of concern and theoretical discussion not just as an

undesirable phenomenon in itself but also for the effects and influence it can have on the behaviour of people who are surrounded by it or who are constantly exposed to it in film or on television. It seems the more fragile and vulnerable members of society, those with the least means for defending themselves from external aggression because of their age, require special protection to keep them away from violence and its influence. All these fears and concerns which, I repeat, are nothing new, are nonetheless further accentuated and verbalised more often because of television: the television of the masses, accessible by all and, whether we like it or not, part of our daily lives.

There is no doubt that television makes real-life violence much more explicit. We could even say that television content is much more violent than the real world, if for no other reason than because it has to highlight the parts of life that make the biggest impression on us in order to gain our attention. It is much easier to impress an audience with murder, misery and tragedy than with things that may not be more common or ordinary but are what we identify more closely with. However, it is not easy to criticise programme content. We live in a world that has made free speech sacrosanct, i.e., it has become a fundamental right that must be upheld and guaranteed, but free speech is often used as an alibi for surreptitiously defending other freedoms and interests that are not based on the individual but rather on the market. In order to directly or indirectly intervene in violent television content in a liberal society, you need evidence to support the belief that television violence is truly counterproductive and damaging, if to no one else but children.

1. The Effects Paradigm

The need to provide evidence to support regulatory deci-

Victòria Camps
Member of the Catalona Broadcasting Council

Tema monogràfic: La violència a la televisió: Què hem de fer?

3

sions rests on a type of scientific fascination that has been a part of the social sciences since their beginnings. Let us not forget that both Durkheim and Max Weber promoted 'value-free' social science, a concept pursued with some doggedness by their successors. The combined fixation with empirical data and the need for evidence gave rise to what is known as the "effects paradigm", the perspective to be used when analysing television violence. The aim was to demonstrate with facts that televised violence is detrimental because it alters human social behaviour and incites people to imitate what they see on the screen. If the research carried out based on the abovementioned paradigm was to confirm the hypothesis that violence is indeed harmful, then regulatory intervention would be to all intents and purposes an indisputable result, i.e., we would have to act in order to prevent an obvious proliferation of violence, not just on television, but in real life, too.

The United States has led the way in constructing and disseminating the effects paradigm. Without giving an exhaustive analysis of the research carried out and the different lines of development involved, I will take the year 1969 as a significant date, as this is when the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on TV and Social Behavior was created by Senator John O. Pastora, who asked the Health and Welfare Department to carry out research into the causal relationship between television violence and human antisocial behaviour, especially in children. Senator Pastora was inspired by another report, *Smoking and Health*, written several years earlier, which had established a likely link between smoking and cancer. So in the same way that smoking and cancer could be proven to be related, instinctively it was possible to link constant exposure to violent programmes with violent behaviour in real life. The Pastora Commission made a series of appearances, and five years after its creation revealed the outcomes of its research:

a) Television is too violent.

b) Adults (and children) spend many hours in front of the television and therefore exposed to violence.

c) Exposure to television violence must have harmful effects and must contribute to antisocial behaviour, even though the effects of television violence are not the same in every child[1].

As we can see, the three points that summarise the conclusions of the report *Television and Growing Up: the Impact of Televised Violence*, are not exactly compelling, but rather ambiguous and very cautious. A headline in the *New York Times* of 11 January 1972 said that television violence had no impact on young people. The analysis method used in the report was created by George Gerbner, director of the Annenber School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, whose team had been studying violence and its possible effects for a long time. Gerbner's definition was not characterised by its complexity and sustained that violence was the explicit expression of physical force (with or without weapons) against one's self or against others, leading an individual to harm or kill himself, or harm or kill others against his own will[2]. Gerbner's team used this basis to analyse the *frequency* and *nature* of violence, the *perpetrators* and the *context* it occurred in. This analysis led to a *violence profile* comprised of two indicators: the *violence index* and the *probability of risk*. The first represented the amount of televised violence based on three categories: frequency, proportion and role of the character. The *probability of risk* estimated the chance of viewers becoming involved in violent programmes, with all the positive and negative consequences that could follow.

It wasn't long before Gerbner's parameters were criticised, not only because of the abovementioned definition of violence and the means used to quantify it. Firstly, the studies had centred on fictional programmes but failed to differentiate between the various kinds (cartoons, comedy, terror, etc.) and did not take into account other programmes, such as news bulletins and documentaries. Furthermore, they only focused on physical rather than verbal aggression, or aggression in the form of irony or humour. Several years later, the National TV Cable Association financed an extensive scientific study, the *National Television Violence Study*, over three years (1994-1997), the sense of which was much more detailed than the report produced by Pastora. This later study was based on the idea that television violence did have risks, even though they were difficult to determine, and that ultimately the aim was to encourage more responsible programming and viewing. The foundations it began from, based on the extensive range of studies that had been produced up until then, showed that violence could have at least three harmful effects on viewers: aggressive learnt behaviour and

attitudes, desensitisation to the importance of violence, and fear of becoming a victim of real-life violence. The report said it was true that not all television violence produced these risks, i.e., programme context and type of audience either increased or decreased the possibilities. The various universities that took part in the study considered one of its virtues to be that it was able to collate the previous evidence and that it would remain the same over time. This evidence came to the unquestionable conclusion that violence was a basic food group in our television diet. Nonetheless, the proposals at the end of the study made recommendations to the television industry, politicians and parents. At the end of the day, the study said, there was the potential to change how we think about television and its effects, whilst helping the different social agents restructure and orientate their own concepts about the medium[3].

The United States may be pioneers, but they are not the only ones who have done research on violence[4]. British television has been systematically producing reports since 1970. Ever since the murder of the child James Bulger in Liverpool in 1993, there have been more calls and pressure to determine and confirm the effects of media violence, especially on children. However, the conclusions were not that different from those already mentioned. A study commissioned by the Home Office in 1995 concluded that research could not prove that viewing violence led to crime, even though the title of the study, *Effects of Video Violence on Young Children*, was not exactly consistent with this conclusion[5]. Nevertheless, as studies proliferate, the definition of violence becomes broader and the subject itself gains greater complexity. It is not just acts of physical aggression that are taken into account, but other elements, such as: a) context; b) aggressive humour; c) intention or motivation; and d) the presence of regret or punishment.

A few decades after the first reports, and seeing that real and fictional violence were rising rather than falling, it became possible to study the behaviour of a group of people in relation to television consumption. The conclusions of this study are not very assuring. A poignant article appeared in the prestigious *Science magazine* in 2002 giving the outcome of a study carried out on 707 individuals over a period of 17 years, where they were interviewed at different times during that period. The outcome of the research, lead by Jeffrey Johnson, left little room for doubt: "There's a bi-directional relationship between television violence and aggressive behaviour"[6]. In effect, people who had watched an average of three hours of television a day as children later became, between the ages of 14 and 16, 60% more likely to be involved in fights and other forms of aggressive behaviour, and at the same time, potentially violent individuals were more likely to watch television. Two professors at the University of Michigan, L.D Eron and L.R. Huesmann, had previously conducted a similar study (1960-1982) with a group of 856 eight-year-olds. These were the conclusions: children who watched the most television at home were more aggressive at school; at age 19 these same children, who had watched more television, were more likely to get into trouble with the law; at 30, they were more likely to be involved in crime and abuse their children and partners[vii]. These results propelled people to become more involved and concerned about the social repercussions of violent programming, and led to increased demands for government intervention, especially in the light of a tragedy such as the James Bulger case, where it was easy to make the connection between what is seen on television and real life.

2. The Perception Paradigm

Even though we find ourselves increasingly before a range of studies with worrying conclusions, the effects paradigm doesn't quite convince social researchers. In particular, the European university groups have often cast doubts and criticism on the model. To justify their rejection of it, they proposed an alternative paradigm that focused not on effects but on public perception, particularly with regard to children and adolescents, of televised violence. This hypothesis, which says that perception of violence does not depend on the number of violent acts or the existence of an obvious relationship between viewing a violent programme and the viewer's emotive reaction, is questioned from different angles. One of the most recent examples of this research method was the study commissioned by the BBC, *How Children Interpret Screen Violence*[8], which found that other factors come into play (the explicit justification of the violent act, family atmosphere, education and culture) in the evaluation the viewer makes, and therefore the impact violent scenes have.

The collection put together by Martin Barker and Julian Petley[9] is an excellent example of this line of research that considers the causal perspective to be too simplistic and hence erroneous. The book's collaborators began from the unquestionable position that human behaviour is complex and a causal relationship cannot be used to describe it. In fact, they do not really say anything new: Hume and Kant had already posed the same questions in the 18th century and given them a philosophical basis by reinforcing the idea that freedom and determinism are contradictory and antinomous. If we believe human beings are free, we actually mean their behaviour cannot be explained only by the effects of external forces. Approaching research using a method based on a causal connection presents a number of problems, the first being, as I already mentioned, understanding violence as a univocal phenomenon, when in fact the forms and expressions of violence are many and varied and are not subject to the type of analysis that seeks to reduce them to a single form. On the other hand, critics warn about the interests and political consequences of overly simplistic research, saying that what they are actually after are fast solutions and actions. In short, they say, the criticised model is potentially as absurd as resorting to witchcraft to explain natural disasters –an absurd hypothesis because you would first have to believe in witches. Although witchcraft was just a belief, at the time it had dire political consequences[10].

A more empirical study than the previous one, also carried out in the United Kingdom, focused on the programmes of four terrestrial channels and four satellite channels over a four-week period and only excluded advertisements. It analysed the amount of violence, its nature, its justification, the type of aggressor and victim, and gender differences in programmes, including the news, and came to two conclusions: there was not a significant amount of violence in the programmes, but children's programmes were the most violent of all, especially cartoons. The report concluded that this study could not demonstrate anything regarding the effects of television violence or the public's attitude towards violence associated with the various programmes. Nonetheless, it said the different forms of violence and the existence of violence in various contexts and scenarios, and who is involved and how, could certainly be analysed, and that if we could determine what forms of violence particularly concern viewers or provoke strong reactions, it might be useful to find out how frequently it occurs[11].

In short, to not get weighed down with the details, the criticisms of the effects paradigm cover a wide range of objections:

a) It does not take into account other significant variables like social problems that often form the basis of aggressive behaviour. The effects ideologists are generally conservative and 'moralising', which is one way of avoiding more serious issues. Furthermore, there is no such thing as an impartial study. Effects research produces the sought-after impression that the public's concern for violence can be resolved with scientific studies. The culture in the United States promotes this idea, and accepts it without question, because it is more convenient that way. Objective, empirical, independent analysis actually masks deeper social problems.

b) Children are not listened to. In fact, in this theory it is assumed that children and adolescents are vulnerable, incompetent and in need of protection. The maxim "child protection" papers over a concept of childhood that has no foundations.

c) The succession of definitions of violence, even though not as simple as they were at the beginning, continues to be generalisations that are impossible to delimit. So, Browne's definition of the "violent action" film classification states that the purpose of the film is to excite and stimulate the public more than focus on the storyline. The classic example would be *Rambo*. Browne asks: Is *Rambo* just about violence or is it a violent story?

d) The studies carried out seem to come straight out of the laboratory, i.e., they are artificial. The subjects find themselves in situations created by the researcher, which no doubt determines and conditions their responses.

e) Effects studies focus on fictional programmes and not informational ones. They do not allow for interpretation and different meanings of the messages contained in films.

f) In short, research undertaken in the United States, the pioneer in the constitution of the effects paradigm, takes into account all real interests: industry, politics and academia. It is scientifically credible and provides short-term solutions so the government can use them to season their campaigns and policies. At the same time, and paradoxically, the conclusions are too weak to be used for weighty issues and major political reform and so, in effect, the industry comes out on top.

The perception paradigm, if I understand it correctly, generally dominates in Europe. The two studies commissioned by the Catalonia Broadcasting Council on television violence were conducted using this second model and supported the conclusions it led to[12]. I personally think this model contains doubts and warrants considerable criticism. It is true that the first model, i.e., the effects paradigm, is simplistic in nature and has all the faults that come from trying to derive recommendations and value judgements based on purely empirical data. It is positivistic and plays on its appearance of being more scientific than any other model. I will deal with this belief in more depth in the next section. The perception paradigm, which is more psychological and contains fewer scientific pretensions, has just as many criticisable defects. From my point of view, the most flagrant is playing down the need to protect children, given their intrinsic vulnerability and fragility. If we look at it from this perspective, i.e., which questions the need to protect children, we would have to conclude that the educational establishment is utterly useless or very much in the wrong. I believe concern about violence and its effects on children are simply another aspect of our concern about education. If we take the assumption that a child distinguishes itself from an adult only in the fact of seeing things differently, and has a different voice and look, I find it hard to understand how, from this point of view, one can justify the task of education.

3. The Weak Points in the Two Paradigms

All research is conditioned by the theories that feed it, but it is impossible to have research without theories. This unavoidable paradox has to make us aware of the implicit defects in the different methods used in each case, in order to avoid falling into the trap of conclusions that are too conclusive and that in the end cannot be justified. We should only give research its due weight and understand it as just another approach and perspective that helps guide regulatory decisions, which will never be absolutely based on the methodology or theory used. I will elaborate by focusing on what I believe are the two weakest points of each of the paradigms described, i.e., the effects of violent programmes and the emphasis given to how children and adolescents perceive violence.

The least convincing point of the first paradigm is the belief that good empirical data is enough to draw conclusions for preparing guidelines and making value judgements. The rationale is the following: we use data and statistics to confirm that some of the children most exposed to television show violent behaviour, and from this fact we come to two conclusions: 1) that the main cause is television; 2) that excessive television violence needs to be regulated. These two conclusions rest on a shaky foundation. The first, because empirical data is never exhaustive, and therefore insufficient to affirm that one of the variables, in this case television consumption, is absolutely responsible for subsequent behaviour. We will always have variables we have not considered, because, as I have said, human behaviour is too complex to be reduced to a few determining factors. If we do not see it this way, it will consequently be hard to believe in freedom.

I would like to stress the implicit mistake of the second conclusion, where action is derived from observational data. I admit that all studies carried out, even the most faithful to the effects paradigms, are very cautions about coming to firm political or legislative conclusions. They do not dare to propose drastic measures, basically because they do not completely trust the absoluteness of empirical data. Nonetheless, we need to clarify something that makes us sceptical about the disproportionate emphasis placed on empirical research. Philosophers have condemned what is known as the "naturalist fallacy", namely, logical fallacy, which leads to recommendations based on observation. In other words, fallacy denounces the error many scientists fall into (especially in social sciences), which is to consider that legal, moral or other regulatory issues can only be resolved by the use of empirical and verifiable data. Hume was the first philosopher to denounce this fallacy, using a surprising example: precepts such as "thou shalt not kill" and "thou shalt not steal", are not "logical", i.e., necessary, conclusions, as there is proof that there are people in the world who kill and steal. Animals kill amongst themselves, and yet we don't say they shouldn't. Animals are not murderers, only man is. Why? Because humanity has accepted the precepts and value judgements that say "thou shalt not kill" and "thou shalt not steal", just as we have accepted other fundamental rights, such as the right to life and property rights. Murder

and other forms of violence against people are abhorrent behaviours in principle, in the sense we want to contribute to life and to human society. We understand that violence cannot be the governing law or the accepted way of resolving conflicts, and it is this conviction, or belief, if you like, that forms the basis of the condemnation of violence, and not the assurance that violence exists.

Let us use a more recent example and perhaps one that is easier to understand. A string of scientific studies and data, in this case somewhat more irrefutable than those connected to violence, have confirmed that smoking causes cancer, i.e., "smoking kills" (as proclaimed on cigarette packets). Now, from this there is no logical deduction that one should stop smoking. If it were logical, i.e., necessary, everybody without exception would make the same choice. But that is not how things work, as the decision to stop smoking depends on different situations and the evaluations and estimations each person makes about how stopping the habit will affect their lives. In other words, the issue is not only about facts, but also about social and personal values, about the usefulness of a thing or the governing principles that create the regulations to act in one way or another.

I do not think these considerations are redundant, as they especially contribute to playing down the value of empirical data. Moreover, if we were able to show that exposure to violence systematically produces antisocial and uncivilised behaviour, the conclusion that it is wrong, and the guidelines we derive from it, would be based on the evaluation we made of the facts, an evaluation which says it is better, or more convenient (for us, for society and for humanity) to set limits on violent programmes, than to give preference to, for example, free speech, or to television operators so they can do what is in their best financial interests. As W.D. Rowland so nicely put it, many communication researchers want to view the issues related to television as simply administrative problems that can be reduced to scientific terms, when in fact, as James Q. Wilson says, "they are moral problems", whose final solution is found in political and philosophical thought[13].

Let's move onto the defects I said I also see in the perception paradigm, which focuses on children's and adolescents' perception of violence. If the conclusion is that we need to set limits on violent programmes, it is because we believe children and adolescents need protection.

Excessive television violence is not so much a concern for adult viewers, who are free to watch what they want. Children, on the other hand, have to be taught and sensitised so they too can choose freely and with some criteria to go by. Child protection is another ethical and legal precept we have come to accept as fundamental. Nonetheless, it is a precept that becomes a little ambiguous within the context of the perception paradigm. Theorists who claim to especially take into account children's perception of violence also say that intervention in children's lives is always somewhat paternalistic, and could in fact be counter-productive. The underlying hypothesis is that a child is not a "passive viewer" of television (just as an adult isn't either), but rather an "active interpreter"; and a child's interpretation will no doubt be influenced by the type of school they attend, their family and friends etc., and not just by the media itself. It is precisely because a child's world is elementary that if something is to be done, this line of reasoning goes, it should be to foster critical thinking in children rather than change programming.

Not all defenders of the perception paradigm are as anti-interventionist and liberal. For example, one of the most prestigious researchers in the field, David Buckingham, does not support the idea that children should be left in front of the television without any sort of intervention. He says the question is not whether we should intervene or not, but rather *how* and *where*. Both parents and children need help in discriminating. Educational strategies need promoting, and the classification and symbols of movies need to be more detailed and transparent. In short, his idea is to make education a priority when it comes to watching television.

My disagreement with this particular idea, as with the previous one, is not emphatic, but rather depends on how conclusively each of the underlying theories is expressed. In favour of the model, one has to point out that in order to educate, it is essential to understand the peculiarities of those who are to be educated. However, understanding that children are not adults and therefore treating them as minors does not necessarily equal radical paternalism. Having said this, neither is it a good idea to exaggerate an attitude of excessive complacency about what we could consider - always from our adult point of view, remember - "the world of children". This is a position that would easily support the current trend towards a "weak education", i.e.,

another example of the postmodern weakness of thought and the convictions of our globalised and liberal times. Intervention is essential in children's habits, as it is unavoidable if we want to maintain the etymology of *education*, which is to try and bring out the very best in people. In order to influence children's behaviour, it is not enough to teach them to read and write in the audiovisual language, or to transmit moral principles or teach them to see through critical eyes. It is important to provide a favourable learning environment, as children and adolescents would otherwise find themselves in a sea of confusion, with such contradictory messages that it would be hard to establish any consistent ideas about what to do and how to react. It would be futile to instil values that say people's relationships must be pacific and conflicts should be solved by communication if the messages on TV (one of the most important focal points of socialisation) or in videogames are totally alien and contradictory to the ideals transmitted. If we have reason to believe everyone should be educated, the school curriculum should prioritise certain fields of knowledge over others, and if we have reasons against allowing children to smoke, drink or drive cars, then why don't we have reasons enough to demand that programmes broadcast during children's and adolescents' prime times be in line with educational goals? I hope it is not because we are not really sure what these goals are.

The detractors of the effects paradigm add that children may perceive violence quite differently to the way adults perceive it, or even how adults think children perceive it. That is why it is important to analyse the way children see things, as we might arrive to the conclusion that violence is not as pernicious as adults tend to think. For now, and from what I know of studies conducted that were based on this hypothesis, there is not much difference between what children think and what adults think they think, i.e., they tend to condemn certain forms of violence and feel fear and anxiety about other types, just as their parents do. Therefore, children's perceptions do not seem to be very different from adults'. However, I don't think the main argument is this, but rather the unavoidable authority of those whose task it is to educate. Regardless of a child's perception, the educator has to teach the child to perceive violence as something bad and damaging to harmonious coexistence. Another question is how to establish the best strategy to convince them, i.e., through prohibition or critical commentary. Something in-between is probably best, i.e., neither complete prohibition nor purely critical commentaries of a reality that, in the end and for children, is much more attractive and motivating than the classifications that disqualify them. The only thing strict prohibition generates is a desire for the prohibited object, but criticism of this persistent reality that does nothing for the attitudes we want to instil through education will never be very effective, either. If, as Hannah Arendt said so eloquently, education is always about teaching something, it is impossible to educate without guidelines, without teaching to discern right from wrong[14].

4. What Are We To Do: Intervene Or Let Things Be?

In accordance with what I have said until now, the moral rejection of violence and our duty to educate are the two ethical principals upon which legislative decisions against what we believe to be excessive violence are based. Beyond scientific studies that prove violence is indeed detrimental, the driving principle is that "we reject violence". At the same time, and without questioning that children also have rights, we believe that "education is absolutely essential in order to instil basic democratic values and the rule of law", values we summaries today under *civil rights*.

Undoubtedly, the issue is not the discussion of these two principles, but determining when violence is excessive, unsuitable and "gratuitous", and how do we go about educating to create a reaction against it? It is problematic, especially as there are no clear-cut formulas. However, I would say it is a good thing there aren't any, unless we want to put paid to our freedom to make appropriate choices in each situation, even at the risk of being wrong. It is no use hiding behind escapist subterfuges like the ones that say there is no point in opposing violent programming, as real life is just as violent, or even in teaching children not to do certain things, when it is precisely those things adults perpetrate with a far less degree of scruples. What good will it do to prepare children for a world that's not real? some educators ask. As far as I know, there is only one answer, i.e., that is the whole purpose of education, to not only prepare a child for the world as it is, but also teach him to reject what isn't right with it.

The French Minister for Culture and Communication commissioned the philosopher Blandine Kriegel to prepare a report on television violence (*La Violence à la Télévision*), released in 2001. The document doesn't discuss the causal relationship between perceived violence and aggressive and antisocial behaviour in detail, but it does say that attempts to establish a causal relationship only produce limited or partial results, and in any case, we cannot go much beyond a statistical relationship, anyway. Nonetheless, the report says, "we would be wrong to ignore the social consequences"[15], seeing as, if nothing else, too much TV violence cannot be good for building civic awareness, although it is obvious that violence has become more and more commonplace in both the media and society itself. It is also obvious that exposure to violence has psychological effects on children, i.e., it generates fear, anxiety and shame. However, the main philosophical argument is that violence results in a loss of "aesthetics", i.e., a loss of the principle or conviction that "there is no need to show it all". In line with this tradition, Kriegel ventures on a definition of "gratuitous" violence as violence with no purpose, "deregulated" and likened to "terrorism". A violence, in short, that shakes the foundations of society and could lead to "its naturalisation", i.e., a belief that violent actions are simply natural. This would mean a regression to the natural state that Hobbes wanted to demonstrate as irrational and unsuitable to the survival of man and society.

I have to admit I am not very happy about taking "gratuitous" violence to mean "deregulated" violence. For one thing, it assumes there is regulated violence, e.g., war, which is not gratuitous. Kriegel here would make one of the mistakes that supporters of 'perspectivism' on forms of violence condemn: that only fictional violence has been taken into account, and not, for example, violence that appears on the news, when the effects are studied in children. "Gratuitous" violence is a part of fiction and has been cultivated in films such as *Clockwork Orange* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. Understanding it in those terms implies that real-life violence is never gratuitous, and therefore is not as detrimental as gratuitous violence might be for society.

Let's go back to the arguments and principles that support a certain amount of television intervention in order to reduce violent content. These days any intervention or attempt to regulate the media gets bad press because it is seen as a violation of free speech. Kriegel is aware of this, and rejects the 'free-speech' argument using the only irrefutable counterargument, i.e., market dependence. "Television violence neither reflects the free speech of the creator or public demand but rather is a product of a global marketing system. It acts as a cultural incubator and contributes in the long term to the devaluation of the world"[16]. Kriegel laments the weakness of French legislation compared to, say, its British counterpart: only 20% of French films have some sort of restriction placed on them, compared to 80% of British films. We need to classify everything, and we need to review the classification criteria. We need to do away with complexes and prejudices and boldly admit that to depend on market interests is not freedom at all. Making us believe that television is a means of free speech when obviously it is supported by advertising is nothing more than sophistry. So too is using free speech to legitimise the broadcasting of programmes that only contribute to the demise of man. Hence the *pseudo-debate* against intervention is effectively *hypocritical.* I say pseudo debate because it wants to avoid a debate, and hypocritical because it appeals to free speech while hiding a dependence on the market, which, if anything, restricts freedom of choice.

In the United States, the debate on the effects of television violence has translated into a confrontation between the entertainment industry and supporters of greater regulation, or self-regulation. The Action for Children (ACT) association prepared a declaration in 1968 that encapsulated all the social concerns regarding the issue. The point of the declaration was summarised in the slogan, "Children First, Profits Second". Child protection, it said, was a fundamental duty and the right of children a basic aspect of the "public interest" that President Herbert Hoover was the first to mention in connection with broadcasting, and which has since become the essential condition to use in connection with broadcasters, in accordance with the 1934 *Federal Communication Act*. Initially, *public interest* meant *public property*. In other words, there was a connection between interest and property with regard to the train, telephone and radio, but television was different, basically because television in the United States has generally been privately run. Television has always sought the public for the sake of its advertisers. As I said earlier, television programming rests on advertising support.

The defence of free speech therefore carries little weight. Nonetheless, this argument was used by Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Pictures Association, to reject even self-regulation devices like the *V-Chip*. Valenti says the chip has nothing to do with parental responsibility, and as we know, any reference to the first amendment is sacred. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission produced a report about the media in the United States that started with the question, "Is the Freedom of the Press in Danger?". The previous year, the FCC produced *The Blue Book*, which examined the balance between free speech and social responsibility, in which it was clear that the FCC didn't care much for public interest. However, the book failed to make a big impact. On the other hand, in 1970 when the debate on broadcast violence started to gain momentum, the very same FCC shamelessly declared that public interest hindered free speech and that the market was enough to determine public interest. Any concern for children was transferred to toy manufacturers and food producers. Anything that interfered with sales was seen as pure censorship[17].

5. The Tunnel Vision of Violence

I have mentioned more than once in this article the implicit trap of considering limitations on violent content as a type of censorship, and therefore a wrongful violation of freedom. Not only are content creators seen as victims of illegitimate interference but viewers' freedom of choice is considered to be affected as they have less to choose from. Moreover, some people see screen violence as an artistic expression that reveals aspects of our world which, were it not for the media, we wouldn't see. Such is the case with the atrocities of war or the casualties of famines and poverty. From this point of view, violent videogames or comics could help people with their emotional imbalances, or could placate their sense of impotence. Fear, hunger for power and anger are emotions we need to learn to control and, because we don't want to experience them in our lives, we can access them through fiction or the experiences of others. That way, being faced with the pain or perversion of others can produce revulsion in us that further rejects purely destructive emotions. The possibly therapeutic effect of violent content is one of the favoured arguments used to support the complacent "let it be" approach.

It would seem that the people who want to stifle the debate do not realise that accepting unfettered violent content is nothing more than shutting one's eyes to a form of expression, i.e., a condition often called "tunnel vision". As I said at the beginning, violence has always been the easiest way to entertain, and it continues to be so in increasingly blatant forms, with progressively crueller and more gruesome images. This is for one simple reason: violent content is easier to sell than any other type. Violence is a universal language that doesn't need translation or interpretation, which everyone in our globalised world understands and which easily transcends all cultural barriers. It doesn't take a great effort or much intelligence to decipher violent actions. The broadcast industry knows perfectly well that violence is the most efficient way to capture and manipulate an audience, especially a young one.

The old television adage "if it bleeds it leads" responds to people's craving for blood and guts, because at the end of the day they are simple stories that are easy to understand. Resorting to what is simple and easy is a requirement of the broadcast industry, which has taken up and run with the idea that "a picture is worth a thousand words". However, simplicity and superficiality reinforce stereotypes and clichés, and a lack of nuances undermines values such as tolerance, a culture of peace and the need to mediate in conflicts. We have become used to using euphemisms like "action movie" or "horror movie", which hide the real intention behind these productions, i.e., to excite base instincts and passions rather than tell a story. When it comes to educating children and teenagers, getting them used to simple messages is the worst way to instil in them a culture of hard work, deeper reflection in their studies and general knowledge.

The commercial monopoly of broadcasting content is so obvious, beyond what any past or future research could affirm, and the most indisputable proof is that we have delivered our "cultural environment to a marketing operation", as George Gerbner says. The overabundance of violence is not due to a particular type of viewer addiction, as some people would have us believe, but rather the low cost of these types of productions and their potential for slotting in advertisements during prime time, a concept

especially designed to offer these products. Thus violence ends up being the "psychic air" breathed in constantly by children and adolescents. The proportion of the broadcast space taken up by violence has turned our symbolic stage into one filled with murders and criminals, i.e., an environment of cruelty, crime, profanity, perversion and senselessness that may yet erode our sense of society by displacing or eliminating positive values. Huesmann supports this idea when he says children these days develop "cognitive scripts" that guide their behaviour by imitating their media heroes. They internalise scripts that use violence to resolve conflicts or to escape the pressures and demands of a competitive and aggressive society.

Violence has undoubtedly always been the easiest resource to entertain with, a resource that, as we have just seen, is being further exploited by global broadcasters that have found the key to a universal language in simplification. The point I have been trying to make here is that even though there has always been violence, it is not enough to close our eyes to it and let things run their apparently inevitable course. The title of this article features the question "What Are We To Do?" - a question that forms the basis of ethics. Understanding the world in order to change it has been the aim of not only science and technology, but of morality too, as from the outset it questions the rightness and justice of the things that happen.

If to give an answer to the ethical question we have to wait until we obtain irrefutable data, we would be putting off the answer until kingdom come. It would be absurd to conclude, on the one hand, that the phenomenon of violence doesn't exist because we can't systematically prove that it has a destructive effect on people's behaviour. What to do with television is a civic issue, not a scientific one. Given that protecting children is a required duty, it would be foolish to not let ourselves be guided by institutions which, on the other hand, seem irrefutable. It is one of these institutions that leads us to believe that totally unfettered violent content can only contribute to instilling a violent outlook in our society, and the fact that the media systematically uses violence to capture children's attention cannot be good for either socialisation or education[18].

So from the start, we have an affirmative answer for the main premise: excessive violence is not good for people's socialisation and education. The second premise is that

there is no doubt that television is too violent. As Aristotle said, practical syllogism ends in action: we need to transform the mindset of some of the media, as the issue is too important to leave up to market interests.

Notes

1. LIEBERT & SPRAFKIN (1988); ROWLAND (1983).

2. G. GERBNER, in COMSTOCK & RUBINSTEIN (1972), pp. 28-187.

3. *National Television Violence Study* www.ccsp.ncsp.edu/execsum.pdf.

4. GUNTER & HARRISON (1998).

5. BARKER & PETLEY (1997), pp. 47-52. See in the same book the article by Martin Barker criticising the report on the Bulger case by Elizabeth Newton, *Video Violence and the Protection of Children* (1994), pp. 27-46.

6. JOHNSON, et al., (2002), pp. 2,468-2,471.

7. HUESMANN L.R. (1986).

8. Research by the BBC, BBFC, BSC and ITC (September de 2003).

9. BARKER & PETLEY (1997).

10. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

11. GUNTER & HARRISON (1998), pp. 281.

12. Cf. Carles LÓPEZ I CAO (dir.), *La representació de la violència a la televisió (How violence is depicted on television) (2000)*, Jordi BUSQUET (coord.), *Infància, violència i televisió (Children, Violence and Television) (2002).*

13. ROWLAND (1983), pp. 294-295.

14. ARENDT, Hanna (1996).

15. KRIEGEL (2001), pp. 18.

16. KRIEGEL (2001), pp. 20.

17. See this excellent book by the president of the FCC under the Kennedy administration, Newton N. Minow (1995).

18. This is one of the ideas the White Paper entitled *Education in the Audiovisual Environment*, recently published by the Catalonia Broadcasting Council, expands on thoroughly

Bibliografia

ARENDT, Hannah. "The Crisis in Education", *Between Past and Future*. Barcelone: Península, 1996.

BARKER, Martin & PETLEY, Julian (publishers), *Ill Effects. The Media/Violence Debate*. London: Routledge, 1997.

GERBNER, George, "Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions", G.A. Comstock and E.A. Rubinstein, (*publishers*), *Television and Social Behaviour*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972, pp. 28-187.

GUNTER, Barrie & HARRISON, Jackie, *Violence on Television. An Analysis of amount, nature, location and origin of violence in British programmes*. London: Routledge, 1998.

How Children Interpret Screen Violence, BBC, BBFC, BSC, ITC (September 2003).

HUESMANN, L.R. & ERON, L.D., *Television and the Aggressive Child: A Cross-National Comparison*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1986.

JOHNSON, Jeffrey G., et. al., "Television Viewing and Aggressive Behaviour During Adolescence and Adulthood", *Science*, vol. 295 (29 March 2002), pp. 2,468-2,471. Research by the BBC, BBFC, BSC and ITC (September 2003).

KRIEGEL, Blandine, *La violence à la télévisión*.

LIEBERT, Robert M. & Joyce Sprafkin, *The Early Window*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1988.

MINOW, Newton N. *Abandoned in the Wasteland. Children, Television and the First Amendment*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995.

ROWLAND, Willard D., *The Politics of TV Violence*. London: Sage Publications, 1983.