

HOW THE MEDIA AMPLIFY FEAR

Out of our television sets comes an unending stream of crime news, a steady drip of foulness and contamination. The filthy slime of family violence, madness, abuse of helpless children and "diminished responsibility" floods our TV sets every day. It eats up whole newspaper pages (a whole page, an "honour" for a few). It is invading the "protected time bands" of TV, saturating the minds of young television viewers of all ages with the wickedness of murky, unmentionable events.

The media understand mass psychology and its mechanisms well and exploit these needs only too well. They avidly search the news for a sacrificial victim (anthropologically speaking, this has meant a woman or child since the beginning of time) and quickly set up a media rite around this sacrifice. The media needs to grab public attention, and perhaps some people want things to be this way.

A recent survey carried out by Censis for the European Union, entitled "Women and media in Europe", reveals that it isn't pure chance that women are shown on TV news programs primarily as victims of crime (67,8%). Women appear to be fragile beings, much more at risk than men of violence and injustice, bruised in body and soul. It's a sort of upside-down reflection of the image of the splendid young women we see in the worlds of advertising and entertainment.

The attention of television viewers and newspaper readers is captured by macabre details such as splashes of blood, post-mortems carried out by the Scientific Police Unit and the testing of biological liquids. Unsatisfied with the stream of disturbing details, readers and viewers avidly watch late evening programs, which go into further detail. The next day's conversations dwell on the most atrocious parts of the events: "He struck him/her repeatedly, 50 wounds, how could he do it? It was his son/mother/a family friend".

An emotional distance from the event provides comfort for the indignant, with statements such as "I just can't understand it, how could a father/son do something like that?". Of course we'd never do anything like that; we're better than that. Just as well.

Morbid or not, curiosity about crime has complex roots, but the way we use our curiosity certainly feeds it. It helps us to distance ourselves from absolute evil, reassuring and telling ourselves that we are normal, we are lucky, that our misfortunes are "bearable". Otherwise why would "those others" do it, those people who are swept up in/overwhelmed by dramas without redemption, who thus end up by being the stuff that the curiosity of normal people preys on?

The woman-victim intrigues us and fills us with curiosity. She is a powerful symbol in the public imagination and probably only the child victim has greater media appeal. A Censis survey ("*Au revoir les enfants*") carried out by RAI (Italian State Radio and Television) which analysed 452 public service television newscasts and programs for two months on the theme of how minors are portrayed, showed that in 47,4% of cases they were shown as victims of murder. A very small proportion of total viewing time is dedicated to subjects such as childhood hardships, be they societal problems, sickness, poverty, adoption problems or exploitation at work. And as for other topics (accidents, illnesses, wars) they take up just 10% of the time.

What the media likes to focus on most are images of the wretched child from Cogne, the angelic face of poor Tommy, or Erika's unfortunate younger brother in Novi Ligure, children who are crushed, physically destroyed in horrible ways, brutalized by mad or despicable people. Note that handsome little Tommy's wide-open eyes became a media icon, something that did not happen in the other cases cited above. According to the survey carried out by Censis for RAI, the images that accompany these services dwell morbidly on the description of details



(30%), a way of spectacularizing the news. And the media invent an actual code, building a virtual "file" in the minds of the viewers. They use "alarm bell images" to create an immediate connection in the mind of the viewer. The images of the Cogne villa, for instance, were shown at the beginning of television reports as well as newspaper subtitles in over 70% of the news services regarding the case.

Television news and reports centred around the event itself in this case, with only 15,3% making any reference to the wider problem, demonstrating that the news is not able (or does not want) to analyse events at a deeper level. There is no intention of making problems of violence against women come to the surface; instead the news dwells on a single woman and the violence she has suffered, zooming into her bruises and wounds. The networks and complicity involved in paedophilia are not exposed, but the abuses that a small victim has suffered are reconstructed in minute detail. The news even goes as far as to say, even when there is nothing to report, that "There is no further news".

In an Socratic fashion, the media teach us to recognize the dormant spectator at the Coliseum within us. After all, if we are emotionally involved by a "strong" story, we lose less time thinking.

Authoritative overseas research explains that if we are scared it is also because we see too much crime on TV. This way the world looks hostile and seems ready to annihilate us.