

Instability of the imaginary and media power between old new cultural industries

Descrizione

Abstract

There is a strong perception of insecurity in Italy because of various more or less recent phenomena such as terrorism, immigration, unemployment, and then again, an economic crisis, a pandemic and an unexpected war that never seem to end.

Events responsible for serious social instability that, if not well imagined, communicated, and managed distributes cultural and political power to old and new consumer products (re)transforming society into a spectacle perhaps already seen.

Faced with this, no institution seems to have the right tools and an adequate political-economic plan to re-establish an acceptable level of social security, or at least to make citizens perceive this.

Urban sociology in these cases speaks of 'social disorganisation' and this is often followed by 'individual disorganisation'.

The evolution of society, the new electronic and digital media, the phenomenon of globalisation, political-economic changes and the constant and daily representation of crime and violence by the mass media, have strongly influenced human interactions, radically changing the way people relate and communicate, construct and perceive their identity and reality.

It is these processes that characterise social transformations and the growth of human egoism, 'where individuals, in order for violence to be effective, act strategically by striking each other in emotionally favorable conditions' (Collins, 2014).

Introduction

Following the sociological reasoning of the criminologist Randall Collins, in contemporary society, it is necessary for the individual to remain capable of doing what has defined his or her social being in the globalised world, initiating the process of civilisation: that is, overcoming the 'emotional barrier of confrontation and fear' that has developed in individuals with the emergence of a 'culture of contemporary violence'.

The clashes that occur in the interactions of everyday life – on the streets, in bars, in workplaces, in classrooms – end, in most cases, with insults, shouting and threats. Even in the rare cases where physical contact is achieved, the violence is, almost always, incompetent and ineffective. It is not true, explains Collins, that men are naturally violent, ready to attack each other at the slightest pretext. This idea is a 'myth' fuelled by film, television, and novels. Men are filled with great emotional tension whenever they are about to attack or be attacked. For violence to be effective, men must strategically interact to strike under emotionally favorable (environmental, social, and media) conditions.

The contemporary world is portrayed and perceived as dangerous and violent, criminal, where interaction between individuals occurs almost exclusively through new digital communication tools, with an increasing risk of misunderstanding, empathic relationships, and therefore 'communication pathologies' (Marotta, 2014). A society, the post-modern one, where human communication is no longer a means to build and improve relations between social actors, to achieve common goals, but 'a weapon' to prevaricate and 'eliminate' the other and thus achieve one's own personal goals, if necessary, even using violence (cf. Corradi, 2009).

Even today, a large part of modern sociology speaks of sick communication and violence as elements that become not only real instruments of force, but also generative forces of power, which are confused with it: social forces capable of structuring reality and giving it meaning.

There is 'cultural violence' and 'pathological communication' in the society of new technologies and digital languages, the same communication that has enabled man to build relationships. Apparently, the reality in which we live is not at all different from that of the cinema.

Already the Eighth Report on Security and Social Insecurity in Italy and Europe (2015), underlines how we are now living in a feeling and situation of a constant habit of insecurity and crime: it is normal to listen to a news programme of around 30 minutes

with a high number of anxious news items, of massacres, kidnappings where the spotlight always shines only on those who commit violence within a generalised narrative that tends to forget the victim and the family's pain.

Because it is all about putting off 'other people's lives' until we ourselves find ourselves in a tragic situation.

Crime is still at the top of the insecurity agenda: however, the narrative of so-called anxiety-provoking news changes.

1 - The cultural industry of violence

'The pleasure of the violence inflicted on the represented character, transposes in turn, into a violence inflicted on the spectator, entertainment is transformed into tension and effort'. So wrote the two philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor e W. Adorno in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. The two Frankfurt philosophers pointed out that 'the culture industry is, first and foremost, a consensus factory that has liquidated the critical function of culture, stifling its capacity to raise a protest against the conditions of the existing' (Horkheimer, Adorno,1982).

The culture industry thus becomes an instrument of persuasive communication and manipulation with a precise social function: to create obedience, to recognise in the media audience a role of passivity in close continuity with the hypodermic theory (cf. Wolf, 1987). In the modern web and communication society, there is also a profound change from a structural-linguistic point of view: the structure of a film and its language, as well as that of a newspaper, become almost identical: from the representation of the criminal's profile to the over-detailed description of the scena criminis.

This gives rise to a transformation in the social figuration and thus in the perception of the change in the socio-cultural system; an exemplary ground for a concrete understanding of this hypothesis could be that special literary form that is the crime novel.

As is well known, it 'takes its cue from crime and elects the criminal as its protagonist a doubly heroic man who challenges not only the danger of action, but also that of judicial sanction' (Savinio, 1971). This perception of the crime is particularly

compatible with the metropolis and its anonymity, which offer the most favourable framework and the most suitable staging for the crime itself.

The most convincing narrative knot to understand the difference between the social figurations of deviance in the past and the one in vogue in the contemporary album consists in the realisation that in detective novels, as in TV series of all latitudes, good always wins in the end.

Savinio again effectively describes this value dynamic as a two-voice fugue, in the contrapuntal development of two obligatory elements: the crime on the one hand and the detective on the other.

In contemporary figurations, the epilogue is essentially reversed.

The very structure of the TV series (and in its time also part of the dramas), which seemed immutable in its function of restoring social order, is oppressed by an excess of depiction of violence to the point of making any final dissolution precarious.

This happens most clearly in the pages of newspapers and in the sequences of television news – programs: crime news dominates as such. To have value with news operators as well as with the public, it must claim a double characteristic: to eliminate any push for explanation and thus have a reassuring function on the public.

In fact, the story must never be accompanied by its conclusion.

The ending must be missing, thus compromising any hope that in the restless conscience of modern readers' goodness will be restored as a permanent aspiration of the human soul.

2 - Reproducing evil

What has been described leads one to think that we are facing an abrupt reductionism of the communicative and socialising power of the word. Alessandro Manzoni, in describing the plague, set in the seventeenth century, attacked the Babylon of the world's discourses and reasoned, with extraordinary epistemological force, on that set of linguistic games opportunistically invented by a society to avoid telling the truth about evil and its contagion: when Evil becomes visible to everyone, the cunning denomination of 'malignant fevers, pestilent fevers' is invented.

Some questions could be raised at this point: why do some events become more events than others? From the Cogne trial onwards, for example, how many murders by murderous mothers have there been in Italy? A few dozen, but none have had the same resonance as Cogne.

What is communicated to the audience is not a fact but a spectacularised narrative.

As Walter Benjamin argued, the moment an act or an identity becomes reproducible in a mass perspective, it inevitably changes in nature, as what changes is not only the depiction but also the substance. A tale with protagonists, antagonists, twists, and flashbacks, which do not always actually have a happy ending, but little does it matter: the viewer is, in fact, used to knowing evil and this habit only reinforces (not increases) the sense of insecurity and fear that has long been part of the individual and modern society.

A narrative that often does not follow any temporal logic, that puts aside the concept of privacy and freedom, in order to reach a high number of clicks and dominate in the world of journalistic marketing. The criminologist Meluzzi recognises two main factors that feed this type of mechanism: that of the mystery mystery storytelling (from the very beginning it is extremely difficult to understand what the truth is and how that fact happened) and that linked to the mediatised criminal trial, which has inevitably curved the mechanism of the formation of justice and opened the door to a public that is not always ready and interested in legal situations (cf. Meluzzi, 2014).

For Benjamin, the moment an event or act becomes reproducible in a mass perspective, its nature changes because the depiction and substance changes (cf. Benjamin, 2000).

This created a quest for the news, for the 'media scoop' at all costs, dangerously anticipating judicial outcomes. Information, therefore, has been conveyed through short articles or announcements, losing that noble objective of accurate and balanced information and giving way to real 'media trials' and 'spectacular news' of crimes, rapes, and terrorist attacks that take on more Hollywood resemblance than that of sound information.

3 - Cultivation theory...today

This constructed social scenario, this way of relating and communicating, and this way of representing crime and criminals, have made violence and insecurity become part of the public and its system of perception and cognition.

The curious spectator-citizen takes an interest in and participates in the trials and investigations, impatient to complete that convoluted crossword puzzle but with such a low capacity for empathy, for compassion towards those who have suffered a violent act, as to render them almost non-human; there is a constant adaptation to such communicative dynamics; the public appears paradoxically tamed, obedient, modeled according to the media content (cf. Gerbner, 1971).

Continuous violent and immoral messages can foster identification with negative or antisocial characters and emulative behavior (cf. Popper, 2002): the suggestive action is all the more subtle the less overt the communication is, which can suggest specific responses in the viewer or reader, without them being aware of it.

This activates what is called a 'cultivation process', i.e. a continuous, dynamically developing process of interaction between messages, audiences, and contexts (cf. Gerbner, 1971).

Gerbner carried out various studies between the 1960s and 1970s on the effects of television on the population in the United States, dividing the audience into three categories: low-User (those who watch less than two hours of television a day), normal-User (between two and six hours a day) and heavy-User (more than six hours a day).

Analysing the third group, the scholar formulated his thesis of cultivation, namely that the massive use of the medium of television does not have an immediate effect on thought, but in the long term produces a 'cultivation' effect and causes a change in the perception of reality, making the viewer live in a world modeled on what is broadcast on television (cf. Bentivegna, 2008).

It is crucial to identify a television mainstream that can be depicted as a commonality of world representations and values, identified as a result of high television exposure. In addition, the media (including cinema) have lately been creating an array of questionable superheroes (e.g. Marvel heroes), which no longer allow for a clear separation between good and evil, increasing the level of perceived insecurity. The

culture industry is introducing new imaginary figures that will change the very image of the hero fighting evil. In fact, after the success of crime series such as CSI (2000 – 2015) and Criminal Minds (started in 2005 and still running), which attempt to describe the techniques of criminal psychology and how these are applied by the federal police to fight crime and build a profile of the offender, at a certain point the crime scene began to be seen no longer through the eye of the detective, but with that of the offender. The TV series where this change of perspective can be seen is, for instance, Dexter (2006 – 2013), where the protagonist is a Miami forensics technician, who as the episodes pass seems more like a murderer than a servant of the law.

An interesting fact emerges in the new crime series: there is no longer a categorisation of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ characters. Thus, the stereotypes of the protagonists are dismantled, which can be even more curious for the viewer’s attention depending on the cases and personal stories, the actors are almost justified by the audience if the evil action is aimed at achieving a greater good. The case of the series Dexter is emblematic, indirectly one understands the countless murders of the protagonist, who instead of arresting wanted persons prefers to kill them.

It is no coincidence that in recent years there has been a visible increase in series following this different perspective devoted to mafia history, drug trafficking, and the underworld in general. The Sopranos series (1999 – 2007) paved the way for a new era in crime series typology: the crime seen by those who commit it, not by those who pursue it.

4 - The evil in the digital

The Internet and digital media also have their ‘dark side’ in that they have not helped to limit this phenomenon; on the contrary, according to former Bureau agent J. Douglass, the new criminality has grown in parallel with the emergence of new technologies and modes of communication (cf. Douglass, 2008).

There has been a shift from an identifiable communication with electronic media, to an ‘anonymised’ communication with digital media where information and users often have no source, no identity, there is a flow of communication that has a beginning and moves quickly within a reality that has no end, where all human behaviour is filtered.

The web and social networks have made us all active citizens within a virtual space where we receive news in real-time, discuss it, compare it, share it, and delve into it without limits of time and space (cf. Menduni, 2009). Multimedia and the new virtual representations differentiate the new media from the traditional ones and also affect culture and behaviour, increasing the identification between model and target audience and the construction of self-efficacy, what is offered is extremely similar to reality.

In fact, one of the main risks is the difficulty of perception and discernment between the 'real reality' and the virtual-media reality, which also affects the private sphere, influencing the beliefs, values, and behavioral models that guide our daily lives, in a process of 'cultivation' that begins in childhood.

Electronics, information technology, and the Internet have decisively changed the *modus operandi* and *vivendi* of businesses, ordinary citizens, but also of those who carry out criminal activities. Anonymity, slangs, the speed and brevity of information, encrypted data, the construction of different personalities online, and the insertion and sharing of files of any kind, favour the implementation of illegal actions involving even individuals who, in the absence of a screen and an Internet network, would never have had the courage to carry out certain actions (cf. Lorusso, 2011). Paradoxically, it is therefore precisely those who use chatrooms and social networks who feel free to commit crimes, their imagination on the net no longer has any boundaries. In years past, we were in a sense forced to interact through eye contact, body language, and physical appearance. On the net, interaction is much faster, and often instrumental: we go from one chat or e-mail to another, and the lack of limitations, and self-control have made cyberspace a deceptive place and violent cyber-behaviour.

According to a recent study by the American sociologist David Finkelhor, the victims of cybercrime today are mainly minors and contact with their perpetrators occurs mainly online, by chatting in confidential chat-rooms and specifically, through instant messages (10%) and e-mail (5%) (cf. Finkelhor, 2008).

Furthermore, after the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) in London discovered how social networks, chats, and tweets, had suddenly become means of propaganda and recruitment of terrorist criminals with more than 27 thousand active accounts online. 'Without communication, there would be no terrorism' stated Marshall McLuhan some fifty years ago. When McLuhan expressed these thoughts, the Internet did not yet

exist, CNN did not yet exist, and the global information network was in its infancy compared to today. Cyber bullies, cyber paedophiles, cyber terrorists, these are the new criminals acting on the Net, exploiting the new digital languages to implement persuasive and manipulative communication strategies for their own interests, to harm people, to destabilise institutions, and to steal data and private information. This is the violent and criminal side of contemporary communication, these are the modern 'criminal-superheroes', who do not always have a name or a face, but who still function and intrigue in the media.

5 - Conclusions

Deviant cognitive-media, virtual and social realities where there are no more boundaries and the risk of distortion and learning of certain behaviours and languages become more and more concrete. There is also an obvious problem and confusion regarding the identity and role of the victim and perpetrator: who is the good guy and who is the bad guy?

Because, if the media language used always and only focuses on the turbulent past and the psychopathologies of the criminals as if to justify it, it may be a twist in a fictional story or in a manga comic, but it cannot be a real fact, where characters are real subjects. The message that the viewer, already disturbed by the event, perceives is that the 'poor' killer is not so responsible for his act because he is ill or because he has learnt from friends and family about certain behaviour.

One cannot, therefore, cover up or justify attitudes or behaviour, just for the sake of audience. The perception of such risks is still very low, but the possibility of what is now perception becoming concrete social fact is getting closer and closer. This now common way of communicating, representing, and recounting certain phenomena and individuals by the media and the viewer's uncontrollable and excessive curiosity to learn about violence at all costs, is thus also present on the web without limits and safeguards.

This condition only reinforces that individualism, that aggression, that desire for domination and control over others that characterise human relations and the beginning of a new 'culture of violence' (Gallino, 2006).

It is therefore not only a communication-relationship problem, but also a profound educational and cultural problem.

There is no longer a single cultural center, but a plurality of very often contradictory and different value options, or better still, a plurality of sub-cultures (often deviant and violent) defined as a subset of cultural elements, shared by the elements of a group, understood as an internal relationality more consistent than an external one, that place themselves in open or concealed opposition to the norms and values proper to the dominant culture in which they are embedded.

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Campi meta