

Guido Gili, **La Violenza Televisiva, Logiche, Forme, Effetti**, Carocci editore, 2006, 196 pp, €18.80 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Piermarco Aroldi
Università Cattolica of Milan

Violence has always been a companion to human history, and through the ages it has managed to sneak into the different forms of narration (either oral, written, musical or visual) and spectacle: from Greek tragedies to Shakespearian drama, from the grand operas to the fables of Perrault and the Grimm brothers. Such is one of the objections often put forward by media professionals when accused of pushing violent contents. This argument joins several (often contradictory) others, held in the face of media violence by researchers, producers or by the public opinion: positions ranging from an unconditional condemnation to an absolution due to the fact that media violence would be no more than the reflection of social reality, to a defence of the cathartic role played by the representation of violence.

The issue of the relationship between real-world and mass-mediated violence - a controversial but remarkably living one (although its origins stretch far in the past, as the debate within media studies dates back to the late fifties) - is what Italian sociologist Guido Gili lingers to investigate here, focusing on the particular form of violence currently exercised by the television medium.

Let us anticipate that the author puts forward an interesting thesis, according to which the violence *on* television exists alongside the violence *of* television - that is to say, a "specific violent construction of reality," which, as we will see, can take various forms. As television tells what's happening in reality, it introduces some modifications through the manner and the context violence is represented into, thus affecting its meaning and acceptance. In this way, the author proposes a partial overcoming, or at least an integration, of the reviewed approaches to the media studies (through the development of field studies and researches relative to both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this representation) mainly focusing on the issues of whether television violence "corresponds" to real-world violence and of whether exposure to violent media contents concurs to the violence in the social context. But let's follow the author's trail.

In order to demonstrate his thesis, the author begins from way back; by reconstructing, in the first chapter, the history of "represented violence" (that is, a violence deeply different from, while at the same time deeply intertwined to, "performed" violence) from the ancient times to the present day, in order to understand the differences and similarities between the violent narratives of the past and the current narratives of television violence. What was the meaning of violence in Greek tragedies, Shakespearian drama or in fairytales? What was its context and what social functions did it perform? To this purpose, Gili proposes to classify the past forms of represented violence as either *heroic* violence, *tragic* violence, *pedagogical* violence or *salvific* violence, as a premise for stating the impossibility of a serious analysis of present-day television violence without analogously placing it in a context providing a better understanding of its meaning and of the specificity of its characteristics.

The core of the book follows three chapters analyzing television violence, articulated around the fundamental elements of the communicative process: message, issuer and receiver, effects.

In the second chapter, violence is thus considered primarily as content, through a meticulous description of its several forms, embodied in the various television formats: information, fiction (movies, TV-fiction and animation), talk/reality shows, and advertising. The analysis then moves on the possibility for a conceptual distinction between violence *on* television and violence *of* television, meaning with the latter the "specific form (forms) conferred to violence by "the logic of television," that is to say, the particular construction of meaning performed by television" (p. 94). For Gili, this construction can assume three possible configurations: (a) the *violence-show or spectacularized violence*, which is the most visible and most criticized one and can range from a purely aesthetical and self-boasting violence (either in fiction or on the news) to the aesthetics of suffering and mercy, to aseptic violence or "that particular syntactic and rhetorical construction that 'sterilizes violence'" (p. 95); (b) the *lukewarm violence*, a soft, not-too-explicit form of violence (or sexual content) scattered over the TV schedule within information, entertainment or advertising, "not making too much noise" and compatible with the generalist audience; and (c) the *violence of the "monopoly of the word,"* that is, a "monopolistic, private use of television, that can, and does, take place even in situations of political and communicative pluralism" (p. 98).

But why there is violence on television? The third chapter tries to answer this question, through both an in-depth analysis of the reasons (implicit or unspoken) behind what seems to be a constant of television communication, and a separation between the point of view of "television-makers" and that of the receivers. The author examines the motivations pushing authors and producers to diffuse - and audiences to accept and appreciate - programs with violent contents. The point here is to move beyond the individual options of "creators" and "receivers," and to investigate how television violence is tied on one side to the mechanisms of news-making and of the cultural industry, and to the social and individual differences among viewers in terms of motivations, practices and reception contexts on the other.

Finally, the author tackles the effects – cognitive, affective and moral – that television violence can have over the viewers' minds, emotions and behavioural patterns, without renouncing an inquiry on the consequences it produces over institutions and on the influences over culture and society. In this last chapter, Gili presents and discusses the various competing theoretical perspectives in media studies, beginning with an understanding, should its recollection still be necessary, that media "are not mere channels or terminals for content transmission, but are also frames for the representations of the world as well as true symbolic environments that people do inhabit" (p.13).

Eventually, the author returns to his opening question - a question media studies have always sought an answer for: What is the relationship between real and represented violence? The author offers an interpretative framework that situates the various theoretical positions within four macro-perspectives: the first one is that of "*representative realism*" (since the medium is a mirror of the social world, television violence reflects and represents real-world violence); the second one is that of "*mediated compensation*" (given that violence in real-world social relations has diminished and that suffering and death are less and less present in daily life, while at the same time being realities that cannot be completely removed from the scope of thought and experience, media offer a compensation through an

unprecedentedly over-abundant supply of violence and death); the third one is that of "*social learning*" (since media products are the ones influencing society and behavioural patterns and not - as in the two previous perspectives - vice versa, television violence eventually becomes a model and a multiplier for performed violence; this argument is held by theories and social positions coming from a variety of cultural and ideological backgrounds, though it is widely successful among psychologists, educators, parents, and viewers associations); finally, the "*catharsis*" perspective (media violence allows one to confront and control her/his own fears and anxieties, as well as to "dissipate" hostility through a vicarious experience of violence - a "relief valve," as many media professional like to think).

Building on this reconstruction of the debate, the author reiterates the necessity to recognize not only the violence represented *by* television, but the specific violence *of* the television, further deepening his thought on the light of some considerations. First of all, the centrality held, alongside with the degree of violent content in the message, by the relationship dimension of television violence, that is to say, "the particular modalities of audience interpellation" (p.163), from the "rhetorics of crisis" to the "monopoly of the word": forms of violence that are scarcely thematized and less noticeable, but more wickedly subtle. Moreover, while violence can constitute a text's central topic, it can also work as a background element, scattered and diluted across various programs, thus resulting even more relevant since television consumption is often characterized by being unfocused and performed in a state of psychological relaxation. Finally, Gili recalls the distinction between single programs and television flow, with two implications: the first one addresses research, suggesting it should not tackle violence on the basis of the single texts alone, but should assume television as a unique world of meaning; the second one helps in orienting the public debate, as it remarks how television must be interpreted as a cultural system - an apparently pluralistic one, but nonetheless one in which, through the very logic of the flow, everything comes out as "similar, equivalent and fungible," thus pushing a relativistic vision of the world (p.165).

Readers are dismissed with an invitation to endorse (especially for the young and their families) a pedagogy of the "inner defences" able to strengthen the viewers' communicative competences and thus predispose them for a critical and sensible television consumption.