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“Distant” beings or “human” beings: real images of violence and strategies of implication or distancing from victims

Abstract

This work is situated in recent research on the utility or unsuitability of broadcasting factual violence in TV news programmes, as well as the diverse ways of presenting it. Its aim is to discover and make explicit the evaluative-moral mechanisms that sustain the basis of the attitudes of distance vs. implication of audiences to diverse types of factual violence broadcasted in the mass media. On the basis of a discourse analysis of 16 focus groups that were shown violent scenes with diverse degrees of gravity, in a close vs. distant (to participants) geographic context, we describe the discursive strategies that participants use to feel involved in the suffering of the victims of violence or, on the contrary, to detach or estrange themselves. The results show a spontaneous identification and an ethical identification that is related to emotional and moral implication. Additionally, diverse mechanisms of estrangement are evident, such as denying the facts presented in the images and attributing responsibility to the victims. The implications that these strategies have in the moral debate on violence are discussed.

Keywords

TV news programs, TV violence, identification, detachment, discourse strategies

1. Introduction

Since the end of the last century, more or less, the utility of violence in the media has been underscored, not just as a form of witnessing or the presentation of simple information, but also as a tool with which to incite moral debate and the transformation of social values, including, the transformation of viewers' ways of thinking and their very psychology. Following on from the debate provoked by Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the pain of others* (2003), various authors, such as Judith Butler (2010), have contemplated the function of real-life violent images in media broadcasts. Amongst the most important of these is a witnessing function that impels the audience to become involved as

witnesses to real-life events, and by consequence to become implicated in actions that derive from this knowledge. Although the images don't implicate the viewer as a witness in a judicial sense, neither can they completely distance themselves from responsibility by arguing that they "didn't know them" or "didn't know anything about it" (Ellis, 2000, 2009; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009; Rentschler, 2004; Dayan, 2006; Peters, 2001). In much the same way, the identifying function fosters a connection between people that live in different places. Viewers can imagine themselves in the place of the people that they see on the screen. As such, it has a connecting function, bringing people together through the image (J. Cohen, 2001; Benin & Cartwright, 2006; Buttny & Ellis, 2007; Fernández Villanueva, Revilla & Domínguez, 2011a).

In order to frame these social functions properly, some theoretical considerations must be taken into account. Firstly, the communications media are constituted as mediators in the construction of legitimate responses to the events that they portray and, as such, they influence the distribution and construction of ethical and moral values (Silverstone, 2006).

Secondly, the debate on the moral effect of the broadcast of real-life images of injured people is characterised by a number of distinct postures. Some authors underscore the positive functions, such as viewers' reflections on human behaviour and feelings of understanding and responsibility towards others. Under this perspective, individuals contemplate the behaviour of others, as well as their own, which leads to self-knowledge. But, beyond this psycho-pedagogic dimension, the awakening of compassion and empathy in viewers can be useful for social ends. Similar effects are produced in fictional reconstructions of real-life events. Films such as *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004), *Sophie's choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982) or *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) awaken moral reflection about the vulnerability of the human condition. Such reflection touches on notions related to values, sacrifice, helping others or the possibility of improving the qualities and ethical behaviour of individuals (Hartmann, 2011). Even products of pure fiction can be useful for reflexion and as a means to transform the edicts that govern our lives and the suitability of certain moral rules, norms or values. Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) brought to light the phenomenon of transportability, the transposition of fictional problems to reality. On the other hand, the connection -a logical one, if not existential- between what is broadcast and the experiences of the viewer is a key factor in their interest and reasons for watching violent images (Fdez. Villanueva, Revilla, González & Lozano, 2013).

On the other hand, some authors emphasise the negative consequences of the broadcast of violence and suffering, due to processes that lead to the presentation of scenes in such a way as to contribute to a misunderstanding of the facts. Chouliaraki (2006) draws attention to the way that the lights created by the bombardment of Baghdad materially altered the presentation of the scene, as viewed from a distance (aestheticization), making the human consequences invisible (sublimation of damage). Carrabine (2014) views the aestheticization of suffering as an artistic mechanism and a political reaction that impedes an objective and fair evaluation of the scene, and which favours a series of diverse non-moral effects. Reinhart, Edwards and Duganne (2007) signal the danger of distorting the truth; how it can minimize the gravity of the events, encourage passive consumption, narcissistic appropriation, condescension and even viewer sadism. Finally, classical authors such as Huesman (2011) highlight the important negative effects of witnessing real acts of violence, particularly when they deal with violence in the context of the family, the neighbourhood or community.

Thirdly, and lastly, the perspective of the audience is fundamental as they assume an active role before the media broadcasts (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004). In this respect, they choose which images to watch, and which ones they are willing to be affected by. Viewers construct meaning from the visual narratives of violence by applying the same sense of logic and moral thinking as in the rest of their constructions of reality (Shaw, 2004).

In line with these constructions, they position their 'gaze', feelings and emotional reactions. The viewer can face the suffering of others with a sense of moral responsibility, as an aesthetic consideration, with a sense of pity, but without moral responsibility, or even with sadistic feelings (Boltanski, 1999). As Revilla, Fernández Villanueva and Domínguez (2011) point out, the audience's gaze always contains a moral position that differs depending on whether they are faced with fictional or real violence.

In this context, it is particularly important to take into account the processes of identification with the people or situations presented on the screen. Before particular personalities or situations the viewer engages in a specular process (J. Cohen, 2001) whereby, depending on what they watch, they imagine themselves in the place of the other, which in turn stimulates vivid and real emotional processes (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; J. Cohen, 2004). In this respect, anybody can experience feelings or emotions similar to the people presented on the screen and experience the world from the point of view of the other (J. Cohen, 2001).

The distant-proximity dimension is an important element of Silverstone's (2006) theory on the influence of the media in the transformation of public morals. According to this author, the communications media transmit information from a perspective that is conditioned by geographic distance: the geographically remote is perceived as emotionally strange, in the same way that proximity results in familiarity. Based on the position of a viewer in either of these two extremes, two types of undesirable effects can be produced: on the one hand, distancing, estrangement, and avoidance; and on the other, getting too close to the events. When distancing (Orgad, 2011), the viewer denies that they share essential elements with the people involved, although this isn't to say that such elements are interchangeable or that the viewer should think of them as one and the same. However, distancing or estrangement is to a certain degree immoral, in that you deny what humans have in common and therefore deny any obligations to one another. Similarly, Ruiz, Micó and Masip (2012) point to the way in which we distance ourselves morally from others when we see them in virtual spaces, such as on a screen, in what they call the "digitalization of the other". On the contrary, excessive proximity reduces the viewers' capacity to objectively and realistically situate the situation presented, which provokes an undesirable confusion in the relationship with the other, with the corresponding emotional effects.

In conducting this research, our objective is to explore and make visible the evaluative-moral mechanisms that lay the foundations for attitudes of distance or implication of the audience when faced with diverse types of real-life violence in the broadcast media. To do so, we describe discursive arguments and strategies in the context of the broadcast of violence in television news programs, which contain fatal and non-fatal, but very grave, real-life violence in both near and geographically distant places.

In doing so, we give special attention to the arguments and discourses where the audience reduces distance, or brings the event closer, such as those that take place in other countries but are transmitted in Spain. Within this, we also examine those where the audience feels the events are closer to their own experiences, and to which they consequently feel emotional proximity. In agreement with Harré and Langenhove (1999), these discursive strategies represent positions related to the ethics and political ideology of the audience, at least amongst adult audiences. But it is important to bear in mind that children also tend to give greater gravity to cases of fictional violence in programs for infants, if they relate them to their everyday surroundings (Aran-Ramspott & Rodrigo-Alsina, 2012).

Developing a greater understanding of these mechanisms could contribute to an improvement in the presentation of information about real-life violence, with the objective of provoking implication and moral debate about the violence that takes place in all parts of the world.

2. Methodology

The analysis is based on 16 focus groups, a technique that has been used in some of the most important studies on television (Schlesinger et al., 1992; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Boyle, 2005). More recently this technique has been used in similar studies, commissioned by aid organisations, on strategies of denial of requests for humanitarian aid (Seu, 2010, 2011) and in work on the broadcast media's presentation strategies for war conflicts (Orgad, 2009).

The discourse analysis we carried out involved the identification, classification and interpretation of the arguments and emerging discourses, as well as their connection to the social dimensions of the subjects. These discursive arguments can be understood as attitudes that sustain and recreate a way of understanding the world, and more specifically human violence, at the same time as they are converted into social action that justifies certain behaviour. The focus group participants were segmented according to variables that were found to be relevant in other studies on violence in the media. Firstly, gender, as it has been established as significant in the identification and evaluation of violence on television (Schlesinger et al., 1998). Age was also used as a differentiating variable, as it is understood that younger people consume media differently to older adults, which affects how they are influenced by exposure to violence (Callejo, 2014). Being a parent was also included with the objective of capturing discourses about the protection of minors, as the idea that minors are especially vulnerable to the broadcast of violence is widespread (Potter, 2003) and very present in discourses (see Revilla, Fernández Villanueva & Domínguez, 2011). Finally, the groups were held in a large city and in a smaller city due to greater perceptions of insecurity related to delinquency and violence in general in large urban areas (Thomé, 2004), which could generate differentiated discourses related to violence in television news.

With this segmentation strategy we didn't look to recruit participants that were representative of different social classes, but to obtain the greatest degree of diversity and contrast in the discourse. Specifically, half of the groups were made up of younger people aged less than 25 years old, with no children, and the other half with older people aged 45 or more, but with children. Half of the participants lived in a large city and the other in a small city. All the groups were mixed with the same amount of men and women (see Table 1).

Table 1. Focus groups

	Large city (Madrid)		Small city (Salamanca)	
Less than 25 years old	Gr. 5	Gr. 7	Gr. 1	Gr. 3
	Gr. 9	Gr. 11	Gr. 13	Gr. 15
More than 45 years old	Gr. 6	Gr. 8	Gr. 2	Gr. 4
	Gr. 10	Gr. 12	Gr. 14	Gr. 16

Source: own elaboration

The news items presented for discussion (Table 2) were classified according to three dimensions: social or political violence, distant or close violence, and grave or very grave violence¹.

¹We denominate political violence as violence occurring during political rallies, such as protest demonstrations where there are clashes with the police or social conflict, such as the revolts in Egypt or terrorist attacks (Moreno Martin, 2009). Social violence is understood as clashes between groups or individuals in interpersonal or social relationships, such as altercations between groups or individuals. Violence in close proximity is that which occurs within the Spanish State, while distant violence is that which occurs outside of Spain. Grave violence is that in which someone is seriously injured but not fatally, while very grave violence results in a fatality.

Table 2. News items presented for discussion

Video No.	Source	Description	Broad-cast date	Area	Distance	Gravity	Focus groups	
1	TVE (La 1)	Protest march in Barcelona	May 2012	Political	Close	Grave	1, 2, 7, 8, 13, 14	
2	RT	Political violence in Spain	Jul 2012			Grave	3, 4, 9, 10, 15	
3	Antena 3	Terrorist attack Madrid Airport	Apr 2012			Very grave	5, 6, 11, 12, 16	
4	Euronews	Protest march in Italy	Nov 2012		Distant	Grave	1, 2	
5	Telemadrid	Syrian war	Apr 2012			Very grave	3, 4, 9, 10, 15	
6	Euronews	Political violence in Egypt	Feb 2013		Social	Grave	5, 6, 11, 12, 16	
7	Euronews	Murders in Egypt	Jun 2013			Very grave	7, 8, 13, 14	
8	Telemadrid	Riots in Madrid	Feb 2008			Grave	1, 5, 6, 11, 12	
9	Europa Press	Assault in Madrid metro	Mar 2010		Social	Close	Grave	3, 4, 9, 10, 13, 14
10	Telecinco	Murder in Madrid metro	May 2009				Very grave	2, 7, 8, 15, 16
11	La Sexta	Violence toward transvestites	Oct 2009			Distant	Grave	1, 5, 6, 13, 14
12	RCN (Colombia)	Man murders wife in Columbia	Jan 2010				Very grave	3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12
13	Canal 10 (Nicaragua)	Man hits his wife (Nicaragua)	Mar 2008				Grave	2, 7, 8, 15, 16

Source: own elaboration

The moderation of the focus groups was the same for all groups (see Table 3).

Table 3. Focus group moderation

Presentation	Videos 1 & 2	Discussion	Videos 3 & 4	Discussion
2 min.	4-5 min.	45-50 min.	4-5 min.	45-50 min.
Example, Group 3, younger people, Salamanca				
Presentation	Video 2 (PCG)	Discussion	Video 9 (SCG)	Discussion
	Area: political		Area: social	
	Distance: close		Distance: close	
	Gravity: grave		Gravity: very grave	
	Video 5 (PLM)		Video 12 (SLM)	
	Area: political		Area: social	
	Distance: distant		Distance: distant	
	Gravity: very grave		Gravity: grave	

Source: own elaboration

In all the groups the participants were asked about the content of the images in order to provide a basis for the construction of the concept of violence. A second theme was the credibility of the images and the broadcasts, thirdly, the emotions that the images provoked and fourthly, attitudes toward the regulation of media broadcasts. The discursive material was analysed with the help of the software program Atlas.ti 6. The categories come from the

classification discussion themes proposed by the researcher to the groups (Table 4). In the results we present some representative extracts of the arguments and repertoires of the participants.

Table 4. Audiences repertoires and argumentative strategies in the relevant analytic categories

Analytic categories	Argumentative strategies and repertoires
Proximity/distant (physical-emotional)	1. I-we (identification-involvement) 2. Others (estrangement-indifference)
Emotional involvement	1. Spontaneous: cognitive (acknowledge), affective (suffer) 2. Ethics: situational risk, structural vulnerability, domination
Non-involvement	1. Denial 2. Normalization 3. Stereotyping and dehumanisation 4. Blaming the victims 5. Lack of understanding of the context

Source: own elaboration

3. Results

The results are presented in three parts. In the first section we consider discourses related to differences in the experiences of witnessing violence on the television on the basis of subject distance from the victims. In the second part, we look beyond the distance variable to analyse the repertoires that are used to show emotional involvement with the violence and its victims. Finally, we present the discourses that justify or explain the lack of involvement with the violence and its victims, particularly when it is more distant.

3.1. *Physical proximity, psychological closeness and emotional involvement*

The proximity that the viewer feels to the events presented to them, be it geographic, social or psychological, has a strong influence on their reception, their impact and on personal reflection. Proximity affects the interpretation of what is seen, how meaning is constructed and perceptions of the credibility of the images. The credibility of the information is a basic premise and depends on whether it is coherent and fits with viewers' knowledge of the country. As such, the images portraying events in Spain were already known to the participants, but were considered significant, for example: the terrorist attack on the trains in Atocha train station, Madrid or the political protest demonstrations in Barcelona.

Geographical proximity and credible information produce emotions, feelings and moral debate. They also produce fear, sadness and compassion, as well as reflexion about the causes of such events and how to avoid becoming a victim. At a wider level the subjects also consider how to avoid that such violence happens at all. In almost all the groups a political discourse was generated that considered questions of security, citizen rights and appropriate policy responses. The origin of the participants' emotional reactions lies in transference, the view, or fear that happens to others could happen to oneself. It is the first level of transference and the most spontaneous. In reality it is experienced vicariously and is a self-protecting or egoistical response. For example, as the following extract shows, the difference is clear when comparing a violent non-fatal event in Madrid metro with a fatal event in Brazil:

(M²) I think that the first one impacts me more because the first one is something that, I don't know, like it or not, it could happen any day and it could happen to me, it's something more, everyday.

(Group 13, Salamanca, younger people)

² (M) denotes man

On the contrary, simply distancing oneself from the events can reduce emotional reactions, the impact of feelings of fear or disgust, by simply ignoring it. Distance makes the transmission of emotions and transference of the representations of suffering to the self more difficult.

(M) as it's in Brazil, I don't know, it's as if it doesn't affect me, well, I mean it's bad, I know it's bad and all, but it doesn't make me feel anything...
(Group 13, Salamanca, younger people)

Proximity is such an important influencing factor over emotional reactions that it has a greater influencing effect than the gravity of the violence. The viewers were more affected by a terrorist attack in Madrid, where there were no victims, than an event in Egypt where the police beat a man, whilst he lay naked and defenceless on the ground, simply because it occurred in a geographically distant place.

(H) Well as they are close, well more so [Spanish event], the Egyptian one less so, because they are there, it's like the war in Afghanistan, you see the images, but they don't affect you.
(Group 6, Madrid, older people)

These alternate interpretations can be explained by the process of identification (and the transference of the gaze) that the viewer engages with, not just from "others" to "me" but from "others" to "one of us". A notion that is interchangeable as long as their emotional effects are concerned with one's sense of self. Insofar as the sense of "us" is situated in the identifications and values of the subject and is of such great importance to the construction of an individual's identity at times of war or conflict (Güney, 2010), what the collective or "us" suffers is interchangeable with that of the "self". This is true as much in the case of kinship as for other social categories, such as groups, ethnicity, nation and situation (Güney, 2010). In this sense the viewer establishes a polarity that brings together the cognitive and emotional.

As such, the proximity-distant dimension is extremely influential in the processes of identifying with the victims in the production of emotions and feelings while viewing violence scenes. While proximity facilitates involvement, distance produces indifference, estrangement and lack of emotional involvement. To the extent that emotions can affect moral debate, these dimensions are fundamental for a transformation of corresponding values, as we will see in the next section.

3.2. Discursive strategies that humanize victims and implicate audiences in their suffering

There are also discursive strategies that viewers use to show empathy with geographically distant victims. These discourses, which imply emotional involvement, can be classified into two categories: a) spontaneous implication motivated by self-protection or mechanisms of fear when viewers imagine themselves in the same situation; b) ethical involvement based on values, responsibility and a moral evaluation of the event.

3.2.1. Spontaneous implication/identification

In the first case, emotion is instant, perhaps provoked without any moral reflexion. Imagining oneself in the same situation is sufficient enough to empathise, as it provokes feelings of fear or emotional distress that the viewer sees as corresponding to the victim's experience. This argumentative repertoire frequently recurs when faced with violence in close proximity (Aran-Ramspott & Rodrigo-Alsina, 2012).

(W³) But it could have been you or me.

(M) That's why I said 'poor things'.

(W) The government, it doesn't happen to the government, it happens to us, ordinary people...

(Group 6, Madrid, older people)

Along the same lines, spontaneous feelings of impotence are also evident, which signifies identification with someone that the viewer is unable to help. This brings the audience to a basic feeling of solidarity with distant suffering, but also the offer of help that the audience would hope to receive from others if they found themselves in a similar situation. This posture connects with J. Cohen's idea of "commotion", which is to feel the same as or in the same way to the person presented in the images (J. Cohen, 2001).

(W) ... many people that are interviewed later, you can see the anger, the pity, the impotence that they feel, it's evident, I mean, it's the impotence of the person who is suffering.

(Group 16, Salamanca, older people)

3.2.2. *Ethical implication / moral identification*

In this repertoire, emotion and involvement are based on moral values or ethics. The content of the event is evaluated from a moral perspective in which the (il)legitimacy of the suffering is determined. Hence, moral evaluations lead to empathy with the victim. We have identified a number of variants within this category, that we call *ethical involvement*.

Firstly, the defence of universal human values is established in the emotional identification with violent events when they are interpreted as situations that no human should have to suffer. Even though the situation is geographically distant, the images of a young man in Egypt getting beaten by the police while lying naked on the ground (video 6) are received by the audience as being in close proximity and provoke an emotional and moral involvement. The argumentative strategy on which this attitude is based is an emotionally painful identification with a situation of defencelessness that could be experienced by anyone. As such, the audience extend the same principles to a distant situation that they would apply to themselves.

(M) No, but what I want to say is, imagine, that, the guy is already naked, he's on the ground, he's defenceless.

[...]

(M) There's no right to beat him like they were beating him.

(Group 6, Madrid, older people)

This is, most likely, a similar argument to the one that brings the western viewer closer to the victims of state repression in Arab countries that would normally be perceived as distant. The perceptions of injustice, defencelessness, and dehumanisation that were evoked by witnessing the event created strong emotions among the viewers, at the same time as they expressed a moral condemnation of the aggressors. As such, it can be said that there are prototypical situations of injustice that people can understand and prototypical suffering that they can identify with.

Secondly, the ethical principle of protecting the weak is manifest in the identification of structural vulnerability of those victims that are most susceptible due to their own lack of physical strength or social resources. Children are somewhat unique as they are frequently

³ (W) denotes woman.

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felt as emotionally 'close', even if they are geographically distant (Aran-Ramspott & Rodrigo-Alsina, 2012). Identification, and, therefore, implication with suffering are accentuated for people who have children and most especially for mothers. Women also appear to be more attentive or to give more importance to the wellbeing of kin: a child, a father, a brother, etc.

- (W) Who doesn't take an airplane, who doesn't take a train, who doesn't take the metro, who, if it's not you it's your child, your husband, your brother, your sister, your father, I mean...
(W) Of course, but we don't think [about ourselves], we think about our children.
(W) It's logical, as a mother.
(Group 6, Madrid, older people)

Thirdly, interpersonal dominance, abuse of power, and submission are rejected as situations of inequality that provoke suffering amongst many viewers, who perceive the violence as being framed within a context of relationships of dominance and submission. This is the case with gender-based violence, even if it is in another country, particularly when enough information is presented to make the vulnerability of the victim evident. The scene in which a husband hits his wife in broad daylight (video 13) provoked feelings of sadness, worry for the victim and reflection about how some people become submissive to others.

- (W) It makes you feel pity and it makes you feel impotent because...
(M) She is totally defenceless in that environment. I mean, the man, I don't know if it was her brother, husband or whatever, but he comes along, he hits her, everyone is watching and she says, maybe she thinks that she deserved it, I mean, I want to say she's totally defenceless, and maybe she isn't even conscious that a man can't do that.
(Group 13, Salamanca, younger people)

Association with personal experience facilitates the perceived closeness of geographically or emotionally distant situations. Empathy and identification are aided when the viewer feels that they belong to the same category as the victim. Affinity of experience favours reflection about oneself on the basis of the experiences of another similar person presented in the images. Women, above all older women, seem to be more affected than men by gender violence and child victims.

One of the arguments that are introduced in the moral debate is a concern about interventions (or lack of) by others who are present during the violence. In these cases, there were some reflections on the behaviour that the viewers would hope for should they themselves have to go through something similar. The specular nature of the introspection is clear in this situation, when they put themselves in the context and place of the violence they have just seen. The transference of the gaze (Tisseron, 2003) is produced, in this case, from the viewer of the scene to those that were present during the act of violence and who didn't intervene. We could call this process: identification with 'non-intervening' witnesses.

These results are particularly interesting because they give place to an ethical debate on the conditions in which it is desirable to mediate or interfere in aggressive incidents. Additionally, it highlights that this problem transcends the specific ambit in which the violence takes place and becomes a universal problem that might be considered in any context of violence. All of this brings into question the idea of a vision of desensitised violence and points to the conclusions of Ellis (2009) and Alberro (2011) in that the media increases the social representation of the 'other' in increasingly varied situations. They raise awareness of aspects of reality that are increasingly detailed and distant, which forces viewers to be more aware of the 'other' as well as provoking self-awareness.

3.3. Discursive strategies of distancing and emotional estrangement

Discursive strategies of distancing and emotional estrangement from violent scenes and victims are the basis of mechanisms for avoiding not just unpleasant emotions but also moral responsibility. This attitude of distancing coincides in large part with what has been called habituation or desensitization to violence. In Huesman's best known work (see Huesman, 2011), this effect correlates with both the quantity of violence seen and repeated viewing, regardless of the nature of the scenes as real or fictional, nor whether the depicted violence is considered legitimate or reprehensible. Our analysis shows that the moral evaluation of the violence seen by the audience is a fundamental dimension that conditions desensitization. When the images deal with violence in close proximity, but also illegitimate, desensitization is not produced (Fernández Villanueva, Revilla & Domínguez, 2011b). Indeed, the opposite effect may be produced, repetition, such as in the case of the broadcast of news related to the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, can lead to empathy and identification.

From our point of view, this isn't a question of habituation, but distancing, lack of reflection and moral implication. In accordance with this perspective, repeated exposure isn't necessary; distancing or desensitization can be produced from the first exposure and even beforehand. As such, the viewer adopts different strategies, not just interpretative but also preventative.

The first of these strategies is *denial*: don't look, so as to avoid emotion. Denial implies an attitude of active diversion of attention to something else that isn't sad or unpleasant.

(W) Well it depends. There are days when I turn off the telly and there are days when I stop watching the news. It depends on how you are feeling, including emotionally. [...]

(M) You don't turn it off, but there are times with some of the news, in my case, especially when there are children, well, things that affect us more, that you hope will change to something else [another news item] quickly.

(Group 12, Madrid, older people)

This is a self-protecting estrangement that evades suffering, consoling but not necessarily moral. It is based, simply, on avoiding the unpleasant. It doesn't allude to any responsibility for others or their protection, or any contemplation of notions of justice or altruism.

Other estranging or distancing strategies are linked to moral arguments. They utilize rationalizing discourses based on socially acceptable and defensible repertoires from a moral-logic perspective. Within these discourses we can distinguish normalization or naturalization, stereotyping and dehumanization, as well as the attribution of blame to victims and a "lack of understanding of the situation".

Normalization means seeing violent events as routine and natural. Seeing, without involvement. This stance is justified by arguing that one "can't get involved in something that happens everyday". This repertoire normalises and naturalises violence, generalising its existence, justifying a lack of emotional involvement, and avoiding the emergence of empathy and identification.

(W) Everyday, someone dead in some country.

(M) Yes, it's just as important as one victim... it's a person, as a hundred in Syria.

[...]

(W) Like he said, we're used to it.

(M) Used to it, and because it's faraway.

(Group 9, Madrid, younger people)

Lack of involvement primarily manifests itself when suffering is geographically distant, whereas, it's much more difficult to remain distant when suffering is understood as being

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geographically close. In relation to the terrorist attacks at Madrid airport and political demonstrations in Barcelona we didn't observe any habituation or distancing strategies. This is similar to what Van Der Molen and De Vries (2003) call “consolation strategies”, which signify a lack of concern due to a perception that the event is distant and unlikely to affect the viewer.

Stereotyping and dehumanisation requires a view of the victim that is enabled by poor knowledge of the circumstances in distant countries. The victims are just members of certain social categories: a woman who has been hit becomes “just one more case of gender violence”, as if there were no subject in the event. This type of phenomenon or violence can be seen as somewhat endemic in other countries, incurable and perhaps a result of factors that are differentiated from those that result in violence in close proximity.

(M) And what surprises me most is the ease with which these things happen.

(W) Well, we don't know if gender violence there, well I suppose it is, well that it's very common or...

(Group 13, Salamanca, younger people)

Thus, the reception of such images could provoke surprise or disgust, but not fear or identification with the victims. In response to the news item about the murder of a woman in a hairdressers by her former husband (video 12), there was only one comment of puzzlement, and one comment about the ease with which it could happen, but no emotion or empathy for the suffering. The vocabulary used by viewers negates any emotionality, by using abstract and depersonalized terms. For example, some viewers argumentatively construct genocide as a response to attacks by the victims, or a news item is represented as having “extreme” content. The media can contribute to these depersonalising strategies when they censor images or select them in such a way as to avoid the emotional. As Chouliaraki (2006) points out, selecting or censoring images contributes to a healthier vision of a “sanitized” war, devoid of malevolence.

A third disconnecting strategy is the attribution of blame to the victim, a role reversal, whereby the victim is the cause of the violence, a strategy that coincides with that highlighted by Orgad (2009). In this case, approbation of the aggressor's actions is frequent, and even identification with him/her. In relation to the incident in Egypt, previously cited, one of the discourses disengages with the victims suffering based on ignorance about the events preceding the attack.

(M) No, but what I want to say is rather that the guy that was lying naked on the ground, we are saying ah ‘poor guy’ and all, but, imagine him beforehand, that...

(M) He was a terrorist.

(M) Thirty-five minutes before he had had an AK-45 and he had killed thirty-five people that were passing by in the street that had nothing to do with it, right? We should think about that.

(Group 6, Madrid, older people)

In this sense, it's crucial that truthful and detailed information is clearly established by the media, along with attribution of responsibility to the aggressors or the victims, so that there is no misunderstandings related to the roles of those involved in the violent event. Hence, violence is very much mediated through moral evaluation and it is relatively easy to distort the attribution of responsibility or blame in function of how the media present it.

The fourth and final strategy observed is a lack of understanding of the situation. Difficulty comprehending what is happening is frequently used as a distancing strategy that justifies lack of implication. For some there always seems to be insufficient information to become emotionally involved. This strategy is similar to that described by Bruna Seu (2010),

which refers to justifications for not helping when NGOs ask for humanitarian aid: “I don’t help because I don’t understand, because I don’t know the context of the problem”.

(M) The problem is that we need to see the whole context of the situation, not just one person, if not, he might have come, as you said before, with others, others, so you have to know the context. If they only show you one image then, you say, ‘there are ten policemen against one’ but maybe it’s like what happened in the United States and they’ve killed a whole school, those kids who go, they go in with a machine gun and kill everyone in the class and the police arrive and they come out all guns blazing and the police kill them.

(Group 6, Madrid, older group)

An insistence on a lack of understanding of this context may be more an excuse than a reason to support estrangement. Sometimes viewers compare the potentially emotional events that they were shown to other events that are completely different and argumentatively unrelated. The brutal attacks by Egyptian police, which have been widely documented, are compared with the reactions of the police after the attack at Columbine High School in the United States or the police actions in response to the school kidnapping in Beslan, Russia.

These distancing discourses find concordance with an interpersonal attitude of indifference when faced with distant events (Frosh, 2006). The consequences of such distancing is the promotion of a type of moral argument that disconnects and disables any sense of responsibility for the victims. Frosh (2011) called this “phatic” or empty morality, an attitude of distant knowing; a type of attention to the matter at hand that doesn’t lead to any emotional connection. Knowing without ‘knowing’, without acting, without response. Phatic morality, as such, is a barrier to ethical sensitivity and an impediment to proximity.

All of these argumentative strategies contain vocabularies, reasons and excuses that are socially acceptable, learnt through socialization and that are inserted into moral dimensions. According to S. Cohen (2001), they are interpretative denials, based on a construction of meaning that modifies the importance of the background of the event through misrepresentation and twisting the facts. Thereby, the viewer denies any need to become implicated with the victim.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In order to construct their positions, when faced with images of violence, viewers activate processes of representation of the victim, including moral evaluations of the situation and comparison with their own personal experiences. This does not relate exclusively to cognitive processes of knowing, but to the intervention of an evaluative-moral dimension, a judgment of the event, the facts and its context.

Two types of position were observed in the reception of violent images and the suffering of victims: distance and proximity. Distancing, in its various forms (denial, naturalisation, stereotyping and dehumanization, blaming the victim, lack of understanding) reduces the possible range of emotional responses to the news items, and to a certain extent also reduces the humanity of the victims. However, most of all, these strategies imply an attitude of simplified contemplation, routineness, normalization and acceptance of the status quo in which the viewer doesn’t feel much concern for the events they have witnessed.

Proximity means a reduction in the psychological distance to the victim and their denotation in categories that are similar to those of the viewer in terms of conditions and characteristics. It also humanises the suffering of “another” and facilitates understanding, it generates feelings of concern, compassion and sorrow for the victim, as well as reflection on the causes of the events and ways to avoid them. It’s a basic form of implication and

responsibility. This doesn't presuppose an immediate mobilization toward social transformation, but it does give place to an introspection that recreates the conditions of the lives of others, whereby the viewer can imagine (moral imagination) new and more socially just circumstances. References to the illegitimacy of suffering are constructed out of visions of situations that viewers recognise, and that could be experienced by them, and to which they apply the norms of basic justice or injustice equally to any human being.

This reference to illegitimacy has little to do with the aestheticized or abstract attitude highlighted by Boltanski (1999) or Sliwinski (2009). Neither is it related to sentimentalised voyeuristic consumption (Silverstone, 2006), nor the acceptance of violence or justification of aggressors' actions. Rather, it is a moral condition that becomes evident amongst viewers when they prepare themselves and the argumentative terrain so as to take a political or ethical position.

As such, it is concerned with placing a *responsible distance* between them and the suffering of others, which is created by and favoured through the mediation of electronic technology and the representations of broadcasters. As such, it can be used to analyse mediation and to facilitate and preserve the public's capacity for action. By adopting an attitude of inclusion and respect for the human beings that they transmit, broadcasters can increase empathy and emotional implication with different classes of violent and geographically distant situations. This is not to question objectivity, but to insist on objectivity together with a uniformity of representation that doesn't alienate the broadcasted events from the viewer's own experiences. As such, it requires a presentation of violent events in such a way as to facilitate empathetic understanding.

Reflexive processes that are provoked when distance is perceived as close, impels a comparison between human beings and facilitates the conclusion that human dignity is relevant in all circumstances, as are the norms that protect the vulnerability of individuals who experience suffering, abuse and a loss of rights. This encourages the idea of humaneness and inalienable rights that extend the basic rules of respect and rights to any member of the human race.

Regardless of where violence takes place, having witnessed the deprivation of rights and suffering, individuals can produce, although not automatically, an affective understanding that we might call “pre-political”, which could influence the decision making of governments towards the protection of said human rights. Although we can't talk of responsibility in the sense of a judicial witness, the viewing of suffering can provoke, at the very least, an “impassioned engagement with the images”, to take from Sliwinski (2009).

Media broadcasts should connect events in distant countries to similar ones in close proximity. Such transmission strategies would be desirable as they create association between those that suffer in distant places with the experiences of viewers and their social milieu, which brings victims closer to viewers and awakens feelings of responsibility and attitudes of identification. Similarly, the censoring of images isn't desirable as it protects the aggressors and hinders empathy with victims. Feelings of indignation and sorrow for victims are necessary. However, media broadcasts should be realistic, not consoling, they should be contextualised and explanatory, and, of course, directed by moral principles that defend the prevention of human suffering and concern for others.

Media presentation and broadcasting strategies have a strong influence on the production of emotions and identification. As such, viewers' strategies of implication that we analysed lead us to a conclusion about suitable forms of presenting violence. It requires avoiding the broadcast of images that favour distancing, such as stereotyping or dehumanisation, and an insistence on objective representations of suffering. To do this the media should avoid prejudices that create distance and dehumanise and seek out commonalities between human beings. It is the things we have in common that facilitate emotional mobilization and that generate suitable proximity.

This conclusion means that the proposal of a moral dimension to the regulation of the broadcast of violent images on television, that takes into account not just the gravity or amount of violence broadcasted, and the time of broadcast, but also the way in which the victims are presented in the images. They should also consider for whom and why we regulate the broadcast of scenes of suffering and consider that regulation is not just for the protection of children or the sensibility of the viewer so that they don't “suffer”. The fundamental objective of broadcasting and regulation is the search for the most appropriate way to encourage a sense of responsibility for all human beings, irrespective of location, and to avoid suffering.

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