

## VIDEO VIOLENCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON JUVENILE BEHAVIOR IN THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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*Abstract: The paper analyzes the influence and effects of video violence broadcast by television channels, on juvenile behavior. In a consumer society dominated by the psychology and tastes of the masses, the signs of identity promoted by mass media are the result of globalization and standardization of actions and typologies taken over by the public that is the most exposed and influenced in adopting the presumed marks of success in the consumer society: popularity, image, accessibility, aggressiveness, domination, etc. The argumentation is illustrated with examples of the disastrous effects of video violence on juvenile behavior, namely cases debated in the American and European societies, including situations in the Romanian society.*

*Keywords: global media, global tastes, visual culture, consumer society, violence, popularity, behavior, television*

The psychology of the masses is structured on characteristics of thinking and attitude such as impulsivity, violence, loss of personal identity vanished in the crowd, dissolution of the heterogeneous in the transitory homogeneous collectivity which acts under the sign of the provisory, lack of assuming responsibility. All these reactions identified in the manifestations of the masses are effects of the disorientation and disorganization of the contemporary society, its lack of cohesion, crisis of identity that make people be easily manipulated. Mass-media realize the manipulation of the masses by means of diversion, distorting people's attention from the important problems of humanity and directing them to a collectivity pre-oriented to superficial concerns. By guiding masses' attention to the same direction, mass-media give them the impression that they are a force which otherwise is inexistent at particular level. Supplied with the euphoric drug of the importance of their actions and opinions, the masses pretend to occupy the first seat of the social stage they install in with the whole arsenal of mediocre attitudes and tastes, verbal aggressiveness and violence as a manifestation of the superior numerical force and as an effect of their incapacity to impose themselves in the absence of qualitative merits that don't need brutal assertiveness. All these evidences lead to the notice made by José Ortega y Gasset according to whom the mediocre soul which is the dominant of the moment considers mediocrity a legitimate feature and struggles to impose it everywhere [Ortega y Gasset, 2007, p. 52].

In the following pages we are going to analyze both the ways in which mediocrity promoted by mass-media leads to kitsch behaviors and the disastrous impacts of the video-violence on TV-viewers, especially children, who are the most influential. The multitude of television channel and the extension of global media changed significantly the dynamics of space practices of the youth cultures. Television interprets the young public not only as groups of audience included in the channels schedules but also as a market structure that imposes its own preferences, tastes, and has its own particular channels. For example, famous musical channels establish their programs taking into account the tastes and preferences of the youth community more than the age of the viewers: “the very fact that

MTV addresses itself to a broad, generally youthful section of the American public that ranges from 12 to 34 on up, distinguishes it from earlier rock cultures, which addressed much more homogenous groups, clearly defined in terms of values, age, and social status”<sup>1</sup>. The messages of the television channels address to the youth public seen as a global community made of a mixture of cultural tastes. Based on this evidence, television changed its strategies by taking into account the existence of the street as a property owned by the youngsters, which reflects their attitudes and styles. Television productions dedicated to the young people aim at connecting them to a mass community defined by similar attitudes, expectations, mentality. At the same time, television practices act as factors for ordering teenagers’ time and space, becoming recurrent and ritualized forms of representation.

The relation of the young people with television is quite complex and involves many aspects that refer to their personality and behavior easily influenced. The construction of television as a domestic environment may lead to teenagers’ tendency to escape and run away from such a space close to their families and choose the entertainment places outside their houses. The same time, those who remain isolated inside the house in the company of the TV set are interpreted from the view of a pathological addiction. Their introvert behavior often leads them to the fictional screenplays seen on television, making them avoid the everyday activities in a normal social life. Nowadays mass-media are decisive factors in forming the teenager personality the same time with the decline in the importance of traditional institutions such as family and school which sometimes assimilate the audio-visual culture. Parents should worry about the future of their children and be afraid of what they could become: too many confused and bored kids, depressive visiting the psychoanalyst, suffering from an inner void. The institution of school should react by avoiding and limiting the tendency to fill the classes with TV sets and word processors which encourage the video-kid [Sartori, 2005, p. 124]. The Italian sociologist Giovanni Sartori has analyzed the profile of *homo videns* who is seen as a typical result of the idiocy produced by television, as the information broadcast by television channels is deviated and destroys knowledge and the capacity of understanding concepts and facts. The power of image crushes the symbols applied to any form of cultural life. As a result of the video consumption, *homo sapiens* is reduced to *homo videns* [Sartori, 2005, p.11].

The way mass-media influence juvenile behavior involves many complex aspects related with teenagers’ grow-up process and their permanent oscillation between the adult and childhood world that challenge their stability and emotions. Television acts within a particular domestic environment that can easily influence teenagers’ behavior due to the models they assimilate as the best to be followed and expressed in everyday activities. Nowadays more and more adults (parents, teachers, sociologists, etc) express their panic towards the commercial information and domestic entertainment consumed by teenagers, having as a result violent replies to the way they assume the models seen on television. Many of the movies and programs broadcast on TV are full of extreme violence seen by teenagers as a normal way of acting in the direction of gaining power, control, leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, E.A., *Rocking Around the Clock: Music, Television, Postmodernism, and Popular Culture*, in Skelton, Tracey, Valentine, Gill, *Cool Places – Geographies of Youth Cultures*, London & New York, Routledge, 1998, p.34

and domination. Moreover, the aggressive characters that play violent roles in movies are often rewarded as a result of solving dangerous situations and consequently teenagers tend to copy the negative behavior that can turn them into heroes imposed in front of their friends, colleagues, etc. By constantly watching violent movies, cartoons and other forms of TV programs the child gradually becomes insensitive, is marked by fury and fear and strengthens his defending instinct against any potential danger. He also becomes a victim of his will to dominate and destroy, as he sees that these are the actions which give power to his negative heroes. The rates of homicides and robberies committed by teenagers are often results of their watching violent TV programs. Together with other additional causes such as drug consumption, prostitution, delinquency, school dropout, dissolution of the family and stigmatization of single mothers, the addiction to watching violent movies increases the aggressiveness of the introvert child. The sociological studies that explain the phenomena of crime and delinquency mention the deficiencies in the family and educative dysfunctions, the constant deterioration of the emotional climate and the lack of communication between the members of the families, parents' incapacity to control their children as elements with negative influence on minor's behavior, which under certain circumstances may lead him to act deviously and commit serious offenses [Banciu, Rădulescu, Teodorescu, 2002, p.418]. The legislation referring to video programs should also protect the fragile mental universe of children as they are so easily influenced by the scenes watched on TV especially when they are not properly looked after by their parents or catch the moment to break the interdiction imposed to them watching certain violent programs. An example linked to the influence of TV programs on children's behavior is that of the horror film *Child's Play 3* which was suspected of having been the possible source of inspiring the brutal murder of James Bulger, 2 years old, in February 1993, in the United Kingdom. The killers, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, who were 10 years old at that time were said to have imitated a scene in the movie. Such an example justifies the assertion that under the pretext of the mass entertainment, mass-media encourages the deviated actions of the public included in a confused society reflected like in a mirror by the nature of the programs broadcast on TV or other media channels. Instead of the classical traditional fairytales and stories animated by princesses and animals attributed with human features that were supposed to inspire children noble feelings, nowadays they are reading or watching screenplays populated by monsters, terrible creatures, devils, forces of evil imagined by technology, mortal viruses and other destructive elements acting in closed spaces from a world of machinery, in which the leading concepts are those of power, control, violence, destroy, challenge, etc. In such a world suffocated by competition and mental pressure and with no help coming from parents and authorized institutions, the fragile mind of the child is at permanent risk and may become a victim of the illusory mass culture and entertainment consumed with no discernment.

The same time with broadcasting information and facilitating access to events and worldwide communication, mass-media display new types of myths imposed by the mentality and attitude adapted to the pattern of the consumer society. These kinds of modern myths replace the traditional interpretation of the moral qualities and virtues due to the features of the contemporary attitude to the priorities in the mass civilization. The legendary heroes of the classical stories are replaced by the protagonists of the new forms of cultural

expressions, including singers, sportsmen, public personalities strongly mediated, celebrities whose existence recompose the successful biographical stories that impress teenagers in the middle of growing-up process. The patterns of the consumer society impose new criteria of judging the values that are interpreted in terms of image. Apart from the successful stories of the famous public personalities who made history and are real models of behavior, the mass-media also focus on the overnight celebrities appeared in the spotlight of the camera due to their controversial love affairs, public scandals, outrageous press declarations, etc. They are grouped in the elite of the popularity formed from the instantaneous stars of the entertainment industry, TV assistants, beauty queens, etc, who gain popularity due to their massive presence in the statistics and number of appearances in TV shows, interviews and details from their private life. Mass media are responsible for bringing into the public's attention patterns of behavior that can be easily assimilated as illusory cultural models to be followed by teenagers. Children and teenagers are easily impressed by the glamorous halo of their idols often without making any difference between the real values and qualities of a notorious personality and the quantity and statistics that are relative in case of a popular but superficial and illusory star. Notoriety is an attribute of a solid status implying knowledge, respect and admiration accumulated in years of work and contributions to the cultural heritage, whereas popularity may be a temporary benefit and fragile status imposed by ratings and statistics, which can be lost as soon as the celebrity made overnight by the mass-media disappears from the public's attention. The preferences of the consumer public regarding entertainment propose and promote new status symbols who can decline as fast as they climbed the celebrity ladder, as they are unproductive elite. The representatives of such unproductive or irresponsible elite are persons with no institutional power and no responsibility in front of the community, characterized by a charismatic appearance, attitudes and lifestyle that can become models for certain categories of people who identify with them [Eco, 2008, p. 349]. The celebrities in the unproductive elite of the popularity are promoted by the mass culture as it represents the tastes and preferences of the mediocre consumer public in search of a facile access to high standards or status that do not characterize them. Mass-media and especially television exploit the resources of image that serve a spectacular entertainment seen as a possible way of living by the public who confuse it with the real life. Sometimes even the parents are those who tend to encourage their children to copy the models seen on TV instead of protecting them from becoming victims of an obsessive illusion which distort their sense of reality and lead to attitudes and behavior inappropriate to their age. For example, the beauty contests organized for children tend to turn them into kitsch copies of the adults whose replies and attitudes they try to imitate. In their search of glory and desire to promote their kids and make them famous, mothers register their little girls in pageant contests, forcing them to follow a strict schedule which implies stress in countless make-up hours at the end of which they look like artificial baby dolls wearing uncomfortable gowns and tiaras, aspiring for the crown of the winner princess. They are victims of their parents' irresponsibility, who deprive them of the real childhood and try to educate them in the culture of image which sells. An example of such a victim is Jonbenét Ramsey, an American six years old girl beauty pageant contestant, murdered in 1996, found strangled in the basement of the family house. There were several different hypotheses supported by mass media and experts. One of them sustained that the little girl was killed by

her mother, Patsy Ramsey, in an access of fury. Girl's father, John Ramsey, was also suspected of sexual abuse on his daughter and murder. Another scenario speculated that the girl was killed by a criminal sexually obsessed with the child. The investigative journalist Stephen Singular suggested the existence of a connection between the murder and the industry of child pornography. According to his presuppositions, the crime was committed as a result of the girl's popularity due to her beauty pageant experience, as she represented the perfect profile of a child dragged into the world of child pornography. Instead of protecting their children against the dangers and risks unavoidable in case of intense mediation, parents who encourage them to aspire to becoming famous unconsciously expose them to an early boosted sexuality which makes children potential victims of not only aggressiveness but also mediocrity.

An example, local this time, for the effects of popularity is that of the famous girl Cleopatra Stratan, who recorded her first album when she was only three years old. There were controversies on this case and her father, Pavel Stratan was accused that he exploited his little daughter in order to make money. The psychologists came down with a lot of criticism in 2010 when the artist expressed his intention to throw up on the musical scene his two years old son Cezar. The specialists drew attention to the imminent stress that would exhaust the child in case of exposure to a work inappropriate for his age. The little boy had even a Facebook account and it seemed that his father wanted him to get accustomed to the market strategies from an early age. His sister, Cleopatra appeared in the famous video *Ghita* looking like a copy of an adult woman, wearing make-up and fashion clothes, huge glasses and having a studied bored posture in accordance with the message of the text in which she expresses her discontent about her boyfriend's indecision. The image of the perfect baby star was completed by the musical doll Cleopatra, sold together with the accessories and clothes identical with those worn by the child singer in the video, functioning with battery and reproducing the famous melody. The doll was also available on the Internet and sold in a box which reproduced the suitcase carried by the girl in the video. The publicity was performed by Cleopatra Stratan herself who appeared in a short clip in which she invited children to the launching of the new product in a mall. The song was then the pretext for many parodies in the comic sketches but the case constituted evidence and an appeal to adopt the law project of the Ministry of Labour also requested by the European Union, which mention that parents of artist children should obtain a permit issued from the Children Protection Service. The document is released based on notes from the psychologist, the director of the school in case the child is a pupil, the parents' declaration in which they mention the period of time their child works (for example, children with ages between 1-5 years old are not allowed to work more than 2 hours a day, with stops).

In addition to the case of children imitating the adults we have the reverse example visible in the way some of the pseudo-stars look when they try to express an artificial innocence and act like false baby dolls that turn them into kitsch persons. It is the case of TV assistants and women in the show business who display only a decorative role, dress and act like barbies, are present in scandals and don't have the qualities to recommend and represent them in the elite of values. They represent the preferences of the masses and are patterns of mediocrity as the characteristic of the moment, imposed everywhere as the masses destroy any thing that is different, special, individual and doesn't conform to their profile [Ortega,



2007, p. 52]. Image is exploited as a resource meant to gain supremacy and enters the discussion about the playful element and terms of competition seen by Johan Huizinga as defining the contemporary globalized culture and public life in which seriousness becomes a kind of play [Huizinga, 2007, p. 312].

### Conclusions

Globalization has created new means of communication and came up with new ways of mass information that gave credit to simultaneous action and thinking. The same time, modern technology has attracted and sustained the possibility of democratic cultural expressions, which together with social, political and economic changes have consequences on everyday life and young people's projects, propose and even impose new behavioral patterns assimilated by children and teenagers, as well as models of formal expression and image prototypes. Teenagers and children all over the world communicate between them by means of a personalized system of international cultural references, everywhere recognized: sports shoes and outfits, performing computers, and other items that are consumer signs that indicate their affiliation to a particular age and style group. Music and film channels are part of the television schedules, which along with their broadcasting information and access to the latest trends in terms of fashion, also promote models assimilated by teenagers and children in their eagerness to become popular in their groups. The examples mentioned in the article are only few from the list of image negative impacts over children's behavior and an alarm towards parents carefully selecting the programs watched by their children as well as the models they propose for their children's future.

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