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Elisa Giomi and Sveva Magaraggia

Relazioni brutali. Genere e violenza nella cultura mediale [Brutal relationships. Gender and violence in media culture], Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017, pp. 240

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Identity and differences are seen as the effects of relationships, technoscience – thus media – as the expression of male instances. This work is to be read as a thoughtful investigation to which Science and Technology Studies feminist scholars have much contributed. Giomi and Magaraggia have focused their attention on media products starting from the classical assumption that, in order to narrate the social world, media draw conceptual and linguistic tools from the same social world, and, by narrating it, they also build it in a certain measure. Within this framework, the authors relate gender violence, gender order, and media representations one to the other, in order to support the idea that violence representations contribute to the process of gender status, and that gender representations supply the construction of violence. They show how this double process is achieved between different media objects gathered around two discursive knots, i.e. violence against women and – on the other hand – violence performed by

women. The acknowledgement of these two elements gives back the idea of violence as of a complex, relational, and collective phenomenon – against the simplistic approach to media representations. The authors thus detect a red thread inside media discourse by following the perspective by which media take part in the articulation of phenomena and contribute together to our perception of reality. Thus, they confirm the existence of a representation policy that informs *media production practices*. They get to this point, by using a framework related to the social constitution of the feminine. More precisely, the authors look at the violence developed within the family and the couple transversally to social classes and geographic areas through the magnifying glass of a tradition of studies that interprets them, not as a residual phenomenon, but as a *function* suited to keep the social arrangement as it is.

Such perspective includes in some points issues that seem to anticipate a certain degree of an interdisciplinary perspectives. For instance, they mention researches that take into account the consequences on the fetus of the stress of women that undergo violence during pregnancy. Reference is also made to the need man has of a mirror-woman able to give back an increased image of himself; they quote Virginia Woolf as well as Jessica Benjamin, psychoanalyst, when she writes of male narcissism bound to female sight (p. 34 and following). However, what they actually focus on, in the volume, are the aspects of violence linked to the topic of gender – meant as the organized sphere of practices and relationships that defines the forms of manliness and womanliness. Intimate violence is thus interpreted as a way to keep power, or as the consequence of feeling vulnerable, where elements like body, sexuality, various aspects of dominion, and their social representations are fundamental.

Public space versus domestic dimension as the cradle of gender violence, romanticization of intimate violence, reduction of the perpetrator to victim of the same violence (seen as a disease that afflicts the same relationship of the couple), normalization of violence. These are findings that confirm what shown by literature, also the international one, and that in Italy have been recently denounced by the report of the parliamentary commission on femicide (Senato della Repubblica 2018).

The sources taken into consideration for the research have been the Italian press, infotainment shows, television series, as well as movies and pop music, by following the narrations of violence and about women in order to draw data to be analyzed.

Among the most interesting contributions the book provides the debate with, is the consideration of those controversial aspects that enliven the public sphere related to the need to shed light also upon abuses suffered by men (Bandelli 2017). Part of such reflections on abuses suffered by men shows how the violence of women on men is often interpreted in such a way to mitigate its extent and therefore denying that the woman criminal has acted autonomously, intentionally, and consciously – be it in a law case,

be it by public opinion where women are always justified as being affected by mental diseases. The book thus shows how media create a specific interpretative pattern: women's violent acting is represented in strong contradiction with the mainstream idea of femininity and they link it to tendencies like being mean, sexually deviated, or mad. What ensues is a diminished female capacity of action.

When women are instead narrated as being intentionally violent, the exceptionality frame is activated, together with a contrastive comparison with *true women*, who are violent because they do not know how, or they are not able to, avoid it. The number of violent heroines has grown in fiction with features previously typically associated to men (physical strength, courage, the use of weapons), they are represented as pathological and, through a fetishization of their body, are led back within the dichotomy passive-female/active-male. When, instead, the gender binary distinction is questioned, it is questioned through a masculinization of the woman's body that inflicts violence. Thus, a further contribution to the articulation of the female as the object of violence emerges. Such further contribution favors therefore the reproduction of structures and hierarchies.

Giomi and Magaraggia try here to make the role of media visible in the perpetuation of an asymmetry. Anyhow, in order to understand such asymmetry better, it would be useful to think not only to the contents. The social work of the media is not reducible to the mere spreading of meanings – something that complies also with perspective of the authors. It is partly a process close of what Latour means when he speaks of mediation by which the same elements of mediation are transformed. This happens also thanks to the same development through a network of relationships, an aspect that is not highlighted by Giomi's and Magaraggia's approach. Moreover, if it is true – as conventional studies have taught us – that media contribute to the formation of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, values, rules, behavioral models, it is anyhow difficult to imagine how their contents alone can directly structure the reproduction of a configuration of the world. It is difficult to think of them as docile tools pre-set for the attainment of specific interests to give an answer to the self-preserving needs of society. The output cannot be foretold by the input in a mediation process (Latour 2005, 39). What is thus interesting to keep in mind are the various elements and moments in which that mediation process is articulated.

We should think of the competing mechanism between various sources, of the information overload for the public, and of the need to offer news that should cause alarm, for example (Castells 2009). There are also elements like newsworthiness criteria that contribute to the gap between reality and what media covers, as much as the spectacularizing processes that answer various needs that involve the mere description of events and situations. Some of the aspects that come from the study of the contents of the media can thus be at least partly an unforeseen effect by the socio-technical acting that produces them. To know them for what they are could

show greater adequacy of the actions by the institutions to reach the objective to contrast violence. Moreover, the study could be further developed by including the sphere of the public that cannot be so neatly separated by the one of production/circulation (Couldry 2012) – since research related to the de-codification of violence on women is not that consistent and since the studies on sexual objectification in the media show that it is a process which could trigger violent phenomena, as highlighted by the authors. Imageries themselves could offer opportunities for a breach or at least for contrast. The point is that there are no autonomous media texts (Couldry 2000) although they are often studied as separate, as abstracted from all. The observation of the social stereotypes and representations crystalized by the media implies the risk of a textual determinism already underlined by Cultural Studies.

Finally, if on one hand the reading of the book confirms how media contents are of great importance to understand some aspects of our culture, on the other it elicits the issue of the adequacy for media research of the assumption of an analytical separation between the contents, their fates, and the various levels of instances that articulate their agency. The overcoming of such assumption is also clearly related to the issue of how to join competences and resources to succeed in describing the relationship between media and gender violence through a perspective related to various mediation processes (Boczkowski and Siles 2014).

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