

ICWAR 2014

Cultural Industries and Symbolic Violence: Practices and Discourses that Perpetuate Inequality

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Abstract

Symbolic violence is an analytical category that permits the discovery of practices that contribute to the reproduction of violence against women. However, due to the subtlety of these practices and the disposition of the oppressed group towards complicity as an effect that is incorporated within the same domination, it becomes difficult to perceive them as oppressive. This concealment of the message of cultural industries and its discourse, based on the sublimation of stereotypes, tolerance towards certain types of aggression and the legitimization of certain power relations, finally constructs a discriminatory message that becomes a breeding ground for violence against women.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICWAR 2014.

Keywords: symbolic violence; means of communication; feminism; domination; Bourdieu.

1. Introduction

There appears to exist a certain consensus over the need to reject and denounce explicit and/or formal gender discrimination that, in addition, is prosecuted within the legislative framework of countries like Spain. However, Western societies, at present, face forms of sexism and/or misogyny and that are much more difficult to perceive with very negative consequences for the consolidation of equality between women and men. These discourses and practices fall within the concept of symbolic violence; an essential analytical category if we are to discover the forms in which

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masculine domination persists and that contribute to reproducing violence against women through the sublimation of stereotypes and roles, tolerance of explicit aggression and the legitimization of power relations and hierarchies, among various other strategies.

Within the socially imposed esthetic orthodoxy, even the roles that are approved as the only desirable ones (normative and homogeneous femininity, exaltation of maternity, sublimation of tasks considered feminine, mythification of certain practices) have become normalized models, which makes it extremely difficult to judge them as the fruits of domination and as such, responsible for gender inequality. These strategies may be found in all intellectual and/or artistic productions, including those produced or broadcast through cultural industries and the mass communication media: cinema, publicity, television and music among others. According to the specialized literature, not only have these strategies not fallen over the last decade, but they have increased.

Recurring messages broadcast by the mass media, their ludic and hedonist nature, the increasing importance of new technologies in peoples' lives, are some of the reasons that create an urgent need for reflection and action against symbolic violence. The present paper therefore offers some keys to identify this violence in the communication media, with the aim of providing tools for the identification and prevention of violence against women, especially useful for those who work in the cultural industries, but also for teachers at all educational levels committed to the eradication of sexism and discrimination.

2. The concept of symbolic violence

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu dedicated his efforts, throughout the 1970s, to setting out a “theory of symbolic capital” (Fernández, 2005, p. 8), a theoretical framework in which the symbolic –art, science, religion, language...- is the basis for domination, because it is an instrument of knowledge, for the construction of a world view. This symbolic capital coexists with cultural, economic and social capital, but its objective is to provide society with frameworks for interpretation that are not seen as oppressive, thereby achieving the adherence of the dominated group. (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 173). In other words, the symbolic is not something complementary or secondary, but something that functions as a principle of exclusion and selection: it is a system of social classification, of an arbitrary or pre-arranged nature, from which consensus is established that facilitates social integration (Bourdieu, 2012, pp. 65-73). Bourdieu argues that it acts like a “magic force” that contributes to the reproduction of the social order. In this conceptual framework, the “theory of symbolic violence” will, for Bourdieu and his colleagues (Passeron, Wacquant, Grignon, Champagne and Chamboredon among others), be a “theory of domination”.

With the expression *symbolic violence*, the author underlines the way in which the dominant group accepts its own domination as legitimate: it employs neither physical violence nor coercion (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). It is a power that imposes “the legitimate vision of the social world” (Fernández, 2005: 12). That symbolic violence exists in everything that is social; the means available to the dominant groups are the accepted and/or desired means. That power granted to the dominant groups is the social cement, in such a way that the subjected groups exercise relations of domination over each other, ensuring the reproduction of such oppression, although ignoring its existence. So, it is necessary to remember that it is not a question of identifying complicity with voluntarism –as this would be erroneous- but of recognizing that the disposition to complicity of the oppressed group is an effect that forms part of the same domination: the acts of obedience and submission, in no way acts of full awareness, are acts of *knowledge* (of a structure) and *recognition* (of a legitimacy) (Calderone, 2004, p. 5).

In accordance with Dukuen (2011, 2010), symbolic violence in Bourdieu's terminology, has to be understood as a series of operations, but also as the consequence of those same operations. They are the “in-corporation of particular arbitrary sociocultural practices” (Dukuen, 2011, p. 22). That observance takes place through the recognition of their legitimacy by the actor, through what produces that same incorporation, and rests on “non-awareness of the arbitrariness of what is recognized as legitimate, in other words, of its genesis and its history”, in such a way that the consequence of that symbolic violence will be the “the somatization of social relations [of domination] insofar as they are legitimate practices, their truth both acknowledged and unknown” (Dukuen, 2011, p. 22). Hence Bourdieu and Passeron wrote that: “Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specially symbolic force to those power relations.” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998, p. 44).

Bourdieu never ceased to be amazed, as he himself wrote, by the fact that “the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily.” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 1). He therefore enlarged his paradigm on symbolic violence in *Masculine domination* (1998), because, in his opinion, the observation of how the domination of men over women has been imposed and has perpetuated itself was the best example of his theory, and he argued that it was: “exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channel of communication [...] or even feeling” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 2). Far from limiting itself only to violence exerted by men over women, it is a complex process of domination that affects actors with no regard for gender; for Bourdieu, the very concept of virility, socially constructed in parallel to femininity, is nothing other than a burden. Our sociologist explained that the masculine order is rooted in individuals, to the point where it needs no justification. It imposes itself as evident, natural and universal; it is accepted as perfect and arises from objective social structures, such as the sexual division of work and the social organization of space and time, but also in cognitive structures inscribed in bodies and minds (Fernández, 2005, p. 24).

Masculine domination is a paradigm of symbolic violence, because it exemplifies, without doubt its exercise on the fringes of awareness or free will, in other words, through coercion to which consent is paradoxically forthcoming, confused with the natural order of things. Symbolic force, therefore, “is a form of power directly exerted over bodies and as if by magic arts, alongside any physical coercion” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 54). The relations of domination that socially construct the biological sex are established through differential socialization, culminating in the inferior status of the feminine that all societies share. The formidable persistence of masculine domination, affected neither by the passage of time nor changes in social and political organization over the centuries, contrary to what might at times be assumed, is due to the impossibility of it disappearing through individual actions. It requires “a collective action” that breaks the social contract with regard to the structures that it incorporates, a “symbolic revolution capable of calling into question the foundations of production and reproduction of symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 140; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 148).

In summary, the concept of symbolic violence describes:

a form of violence exercised by the dominant subjects over the dominated, consistent in an imposition of a world view, of social roles, of cognitive categories and mental structures, and therefore, other than the physical. This does not imply that it is softer and/or displaces physical violence in the form of blows, violation and exploitation, or that it has no real effects and remains on an abstract plane; it is simply another formula based on symbolic power. † (Sentamans, 2012, p. 234)

For Bourdieu, declared violence –such as physical or economic- coexists in all institutions and at the heart of social relations with another subtle and refined violence: symbolic violence. The symbolic, insofar as it is not visible and is therefore not assumed to be aggressive or threatening, has more possibilities of imposing itself than direct, open and/or brutal exploitation. In this framework, cultural representations are extremely powerful instruments through which power acts and institutes its own violence.

3. Cultural Industries and Symbolic Violence

Among all cultural representations, the discourses conveyed through cultural industries are revealed as the most problematic in the face of this symbolic violence that we are discussing. The fact that the communication media transmit discourses on reality, “converts narration into a *political act*; since it narrates to form relations, for collective imagination and for the supervision of power” (Rincón, 2006, p. 112; *italics added*). The media construct *informative versions* by picking and discarding events that occur in social reality and that are converted into symbolic representations that for the majority of citizens represent the only possible world (Abril, 2001, p. 50). In short, the social construction of reality, including very especially that affected by the social mass media, is an ideological construction (Beltrán, 1991, p. 14).

† [Translator’s note: works cited in the original article in Spanish have wherever possible been sourced from existing translations in English that appear in the bibliography. All other translations of cited works are solely for the purposes of this article.]

With regard to its relation with violence against women –a general paradigm in which symbolic violence is inscribed in relation to gender discrimination-, in agreement with Radl, we should start from the “ideologically regressive function” of the communication media and more specifically of television with regard to gender roles (Radl, 2011, p. 156). Radl argued that the mass media went further than being mere producers of information to impact “on the production of *symbolic violence* against women, already perceptible in the presence/absence of women and their images in the modern mass communications media” (Radl, 2011, p. 158; *emphasis in the original*). Social reality constructed by the media, supported in the hyper-representation of the masculine as against the total invisibility and/or the sub-representation of the feminine would, for this author, represent a practice of symbolic violence.

As an example, the author offered the results of specific research, completed in 2007, in line with the conclusions of other studies that have been carried out over the past decade (Blanco *et al.*, 2008; López, 2002). It showed that news broadcasts with the largest audiences on Spanish television present a false representation of women and men. It is a “false reconstruction” where, for example, men have a voice in 69% in comparison with women who have a voice in 31% of all news programmes. In other words, “in more than two thirds the masculine collective expresses itself orally in comparison with the female collective, which, while representing over 50% of the population, is not even given the chance to speak in one third of all news broadcasts.” (Radl, 2011, p. 173). This over-exaggerated leading role of the masculine is also found in variables such as the duration of the discourse and its relation to themes considered more important, such as politics and economics. These results were compared with media reception studies, conducted with young people of both sexes of between 13 and 15 years old, who demonstrated the influence that this discriminatory construct had on its own representations of reality.

On these questions, the search for a global portrait of the situation is regularly obtained through the *Global Media Monitoring Project*, set up by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), held every five years, as a global forum with the title *Who makes the News?*[‡] With an interest in the analysis of the participation and representation of women in the news, this study highlighted among its results that, although many media professionals are gathering news and presenting it, they are rarely the subject of that news. From the reports that the WACC prepares, other relevant conclusions may be extracted, among which is the need to recognize the subtle way through which gender representations are constructed. Among these subtleties, exclusion may be mentioned, or the impossibility of listening to individuals and groups that are turned into “invisible voices” that form part of a “non-space” (Abril, 1995, p. 14). The analysis of this problem is, for many texts, a sort of “symbolic annihilation”, a wording coined in 1978 by Gaye Tuchman. This absence for Diezhandino, who used the expression “symbolic non-existence” (2002, p. 680), and for Bengoechea, culminates in feminine invisibility in media reports and in a representation of women as a subordinate and an inferior group, as well as a denigrated and an assaulted one (Bengoechea, 2006, p. 25).

Together with the problem of representation/invisibility, the appearance of women in the mass media, who fit the gender stereotype and assume traditional roles that do not respond to the reality of women at present, impacts on this symbolic violence of which we have been talking. The role that is reserved for women in the media discourse –which goes from how the presenters/journalists appear on the news broadcasts to their presence in the advertising slots– constitutes a representative pattern that society incorporates and normalizes. In this way, the communication media, as agents of socialization, have a responsibility that they relinquish when they fail to reflect on the symbolic violence that emerges from their messages. The cultural industries produce collective imaginaries which, in the case of some audiovisual formats, attain highly charged political values, as much because of the characteristics of their language – which is the case of cinema and its representation of power dynamics– as because of the high number of impacts and their any-time, any-place availability –such as television and Internet–.

Thus, one of the questions that is only rarely raised is in relation to the hegemony of the representation that from images as well as from verbal elements constitutes an “exercise of symbolic media violence built on a naturalization of gender as a convention grounded in biological sex (men=masculinity; women=femininity)” (Sentamans, 2012, p.

[‡] The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) is a non-governmental organization created in 1975 that promotes freedom of expression and information, as well as the democratization of communications. WACC is composed of 850 corporate and personal members, from 115 countries. Further information is available from its website at: <http://www.wacc.org.uk/es/>.

233). As well as “naturalizing” the subordination of the feminine to the masculine, cultural industries reduce women to certain roles and forms of representation; they repeatedly appear as victims, gender violence is ignored or converted into a spectacle, they are presented as sexual objects, the relations between people of the same sex are seen as problematic, specific information is relegated to the periphery –news sections of less prestige-, and corporal images are used as the sole value of feminine success.

So, the invisibility of women, their representation in stereotyped ways, the xenophobic and populist treatment that is meted out to women from the southern hemisphere, and the emphasis on malign desire and sexist spectacularity are examples of symbolic violence exercised on communication spaces and the products of cultural industries, as Isabel Moya explained:

I define symbolic violence towards women as the reproduction [...] of a sexist, patriarchal, misogynist discourse that relies on prejudices and stereotypes to present reality and the social processes in all areas; the reproductive and the reproductively, the public and the private, the basis of the economic structure and the sociocultural superstructure. A discourse that uses its tools and expressive mechanisms to present women according to the canons of androcentric ideology, associating it with roles, value judgements, conceptions and theories that “naturalize” the subordination of women and what is considered feminine. Flexible devices, which readapt to social mobility and rely on shared myths, representations, imaginaries in a relation in which they are presupposed, as they lay the foundations of those expressions of the conscience and social subjectivity, but are at the same time the referents that shape them. They weave a fabric of signs, symbols and constructions of meaning calling to media resources that go from the selection of a certain platform and expressive mode to *merchandising* and the conception of certain public spaces. (Moya, 2012, s.p.)

The problematic issues of this type of violence, as Bourdieu teaches us, arise above all from the difficulty of identifying these practices as violence and a discriminatory message that is a breeding ground for violence against women. The consensus and the social complicity explain that despite the years over which feminist and gender studies have been calling for change, not only has change not taken place, but that the majority of messages from the cultural industries appear to be advancing in the opposite direction.

4. Conclusion

As with any of the other forms in which violence against women manifests itself, symbolic violence is a way of exercising control, but is characterized by its role in the naturalization of female subordination. The messages that the cultural industries broadcast are defined by their offer of a portrait of stereotyped, sexist women who hide reality. In the media reports, women either have no presence –despite their numerous and prestigious appearances in many spaces such as the academic and the scientific-, or appear in an improper way. The emphasis on discourses that define women as carers, the obsession with physical appearance that presupposes that beauty is a synonym for success, the negation of vital alternative projects to the orthodox ones, the demonization of feminine homosexuality, all offer a construction of symbolic violence that turns the cultural industries into accomplices in the oppression of women and the exercise of violence against them.

The prejudices of society itself –including the very employees of the cultural industries-, slide into the products that they prepare and disseminate, in such a way that their role as socializing agents and reproducers of models, values and behaviours –legitimized by society- amplify problematic and oppressive dimensions that prevent the eradication of the discrimination that women suffer. The training of those who will in the future dedicate themselves to cultural industries becomes essential, but it is also urgent to train students in critical reading to guard against sexist and oppressive messages. On this point, we recall that Bourdieu explained the role of the complicity of the oppressed group in the consolidation of the oppression. If symbolic violence is defined in messages, signs, icons and values that transmit relations of domination and inequality, that naturalize female subordination, it is necessary to incorporate a proactive attitude that eradicates the idea that these messages are neither violent, nor have any responsibility for gender oppression. In fact, it is necessary to incorporate, as a principle, that symbolic violence is a control strategy that prevents society in general and women in particular from rebelling against patriarchal injustice.

Acknowledgements

This research was developed within the framework of the “*Violencia de género y cultura popular: representación y recepción* [Gender violence and popular culture: representation and reception]” project, cofinanced by the *Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad* of the Government of Spain and the European Social Fund (Reference 115/12). It is also a result of the multidisciplinary Grupo de Innovación Docente de la Universidad de Burgos para la Calidad de la Educación Universitaria desde la Perspectiva de Género (GIDCEUPG).

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