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CRISTINA LASAGNI

## EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON TELEVISION AND CHILDREN: A SURVEY

This article summarizes a part of a 2003 study<sup>1</sup> co-directed by the author analyzing how research in the major European countries, (France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain) has investigated the subject of “children and television” over the last ten years. With the help of national experts, we selected a sample of 44 pieces of published and unpublished research, mostly carried out between 1990 and 2001 with varying perspectives, objectives and methodologies. The theories, objectives, results and methodologies of this research were analyzed. The study also includes a part dedicated to the European governments’ control and regulation of television. The survey focused on many aspects of the relationship between children and television, but here we have selected only a few areas for attention. Many questions, therefore, however interesting, are not dealt with. This includes structural data (how many hours the children spend in front of the television, who they watch it with, at what times of the day, which programs they prefer, etc.). In this article we will also not deal with the topic of the influences exerted by the social context on the use and re-elaboration of television messages, covered in detail in the study. We will instead summarize the parts concerning some particularly relevant questions, for example television violence, or the effects and functions of television from a cognitive point of view. Other topics were selected, because they are new and important in the field of research: for example television’s role in sentimental and sexual education and in providing a model of sexual identity. The first part of the article consists of a summary of the most important results to emerge from the 44 studies. The second part consists of some considerations arising from the analysis of the European research about some contents, but also from the evolution of fields of research and methodological tools.

*Keywords:* children and television, television violence, television effects, cognitive aspects, selective appropriation, gender models.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey, (“State of the art of studies in Europe and forms of observation and control

There has been serious worry for some time now, about the effects of television and the roles it plays in children's development; this has produced a large amount of research.

The main questions examined here (which sometimes cross over in the same study) concern:

- 1) the presumed negative effects, especially of excessive exposure to television programs and particularly to violent contents;
- 2) the relationship between television and cognitive aspects; in particular how television is involved in children's games and daily imagination;
- 3) the roles tv plays in learning social behaviors; particularly tv's ability to orient children's and adolescents' development in the formation of sexual role models (male and female);

## 1. Television violence

We can divide the research on the relationship between children and television violence according to some main criteria, bearing in mind that the difference between boys and girls will be dealt with in a specific section:

- a) the (little) research that examines the direct effects of television violence on behavior, looking, for example, at the hypothesis of imitation;
- b) the research which examines the children's own perception of violent programs, analyzing, for example, what really frightens children, how much they appreciate violent programs, their opinions and defense strategies;
- c) the research concerning the cognitive effects (attitude formation, agenda fixing, modification of values...), which examine the psycho-social effects (processes involving categories like feelings and emotions, fear and anxiety...).

### *1.1. Violence and aggressive behavior*

As stated above, the European research in the last decade seems less worried about the possible direct effects of television violence on children's

for the protection of minors in the television system") carried out for the Italian authorities for Guarantees in Communication, was co-directed by the author on behalf of the Istituto Testi e Media della Facoltà di Scienze della Comunicazione dell'Università della Svizzera Italiana di Lugano.

behavior (e.g. imitation) and instead mainly investigates its influence in terms of cognition, perception and values. Few studies, in these years, hypothesize a direct and unequivocal influence of violent programs on children's behavior, and generally this type of affirmation is to be found in research in which this is not the specific aim of the research, but a corollary.

This is the case, for example, of a German study which analyzes (though questionnaires) the use of television, videogames and video recorders in a sample of 1,400 children and adolescents. (Glogauer 1993). The author comments with great worry on the quantity of television consumed, affirming that children have become "excessive spectators", who watch television completely without control. In short, children have unlimited access to experience of the adult world, with all its "baseness e psychic abnormalities". In the research, the worry about the aggressiveness caused by this type of consumption is expressed on various occasions, but this effect is only mentioned and never demonstrated directly.

### *1.2. What frightens children and how they protect themselves*

So far we have spoken about "television violence" without going any deeper into the concept. Often, in fact, we tend to take it for granted that this notion is shared, and especially to think that the programs and pictures that worry parents coincide with the same type of programs and pictures that frighten children. In reality, recent studies confirm that different audiences have a different perception and give a different definition of violence; some research tells us that the programs which cause a negative reaction in children are very varied and sometimes unpredictable; they belong to different genres of television, unlike what emerged from parents, who instead tend to define them in a relatively stereotypical manner.

Some British research commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Council asked children to define what frightens them, and to try to recount their reactions. (Buckingham 1994).<sup>2</sup> Many children said they felt negative emotions like fear, disgust, sadness and anxiety when watching television. The programs which produced these reactions belonged to

<sup>2</sup> The study consisted of various phases with interviews repeated with 72 boys and girls (from 6 to 15) and 20 in-depth interviews with the families of the children in the sample.



various genres of television, and sometimes did not coincide with the commonest expectations. It is, for example, interesting that children, in talking about their reactions, make a distinction between the various genres of television. With fiction, the negative reactions are inextricably associated with positive reactions like excitement and pleasure. With non-fiction, the negative reactions are perceived as being necessary for acquiring important information. In both cases, the negative reactions seem to derive above all from identification with the victims rather than with the "butchers".

There are some constants common to both boys and girls. In particular, the programs perceived as being somewhere between pretence and reality are the most frightening. These are the programs in which the distinction between "true" and "not true" is not clearly evident.

In fact the research also shows that children use various defense strategies which help them to avoid or keep negative reactions under control. One of the most common defense strategies, even if it is not always effective, is questioning the "realism" of the event which causes the anxiety. Children say the reactions caused by fiction are very different from those caused by programs in which the frightening factor can be collocated in "real life", thus the defense responses are different. Films or programs with an ambiguous distinction between reality and fantasy tend to generate difficult and ambivalent reactions.

In any case, according to the author, there is no evidence that children who are used to seeing violence on television (playful violence) seem less disturbed by real violence: the "vaccination" effect hypothesized elsewhere does not seem to be confirmed by this research. What emerges instead is the important role of the family in helping children to better manage these disturbing experiences.

Another conclusion is that the effort to elaborate the effects of violence is made through representation of action: the child imagines the protagonist's possible actions to save him or herself, or imagines performing certain actions himself. The actions represented can be isolated (the child says "I would have run away" or "I wouldn't have let him attack me, I would have hit him"), or integrated in more or less complex psychic scenarios (the child says that he would have called his friends or parents to help him fight). Substantially these representations of action refer to four types of behavior: fighting (nearly always referring to the need to protect oneself, but sometimes also for attack), escape, pacification, passivity-submission. Verbalization of the emotions and representation of actions,

however, are not always enough to overcome the state of anxiety produced by images.

The central role of the family also emerges in a German research project analyzing the behavior of children (between 8 and 13) towards the violence in news and reality tv. (Theunert, Schorb 1995)<sup>3</sup>

Children need help to deal with television information correctly: the results of the research show that only a few of them are able to relate to the contents and means of representation of television information. In particular, those parents capable of developing ways of critical consumption of television information transmit this attitude to their children, leaving them space for decision; in this way they offer their children support in the development of autonomous media competence. On the other hand, those parents who have an uncritical attitude towards the information offered, but who try to protect their children by stopping them from seeing information programs containing violent images, in the belief that they are still too young to understand the news, do manage to keep them away from this violent content, but risk developing in them greater fear of the world. The events they cannot witness, but which they sometimes glimpse, appear obscure and frightening. Insecurity and fear of reality, already present in this age group, are reinforced by this behavior of the parents which does not help the children to deal with the experience of fear.

### *1.3. The family, fairly unaware*

Nearly all the research agrees with the central role of the family in the relationships that children develop with television violence and, more generally, with television. At the same time, one of the most common points of agreement in the European research is the criticality of the relationship parents-children-television, of which we will mention only a few aspects here.

<sup>3</sup> The study was carried out by the Institute for Media Pedagogy, Munich, on behalf of: Institution for New Media of Hamburg, and Bavarian Center for New Media. The phase of collecting the children's sensations was conducted by showing them sequences from the news, information broadcasts and reality tv. To make it easier for the children to express their emotions, the authors symbolized a series of emotional reactions on cards using a well-known cartoon character. This method made it possible to record the children's reactions and to collect the motivations for the reactions.

First of all, it seems that parents know very little about the relationships their children have with television. An Italian study compared parents' and children's answers and showed how little the parents knew about the quantity of television watched, about the ways it was watched, and about who the children preferred to discuss tv with. (Corchia 1993)<sup>4</sup> Parents are often convinced that their children watch less tv than the children themselves say; what's more, they are quite distracted and do not know exactly what their children really watch. Moreover, many parents (45%) are convinced that their children make comments about the tv mainly with them, whereas the children indicate their parents only in 14.4% of cases.

This lack of awareness does not apply to all the children's free-time activities: the answers concerning play, drawing and sports are fairly concordant, whereas the most dissimilar are precisely those about television and reading. One hypothesis is that children tell their parents they watch less television than they really do, because they have interiorized the conviction, widespread amongst parents, that television is harmful and should not be watched for long periods. The research in fact often shows parents delegitimizing and condemning television entertainment, and worrying about the spread of violent behavior or cultural homogenization. As a reaction, many children may have interiorized an attitude of condemnation towards television programs (particularly for entertainment), which co-exists incoherently with their curiosity about and appreciation of these same programs. In other cases, the children adopt an attitude of false conformism, they continue to share their interest for and appreciation of television with their peers, but they hide it from adults.

Parents' worry takes on a form which we could define as "stereotyped control" in the sense that it censors sex and violence, but there is no control over other programs. (García-Muñoz 1998)<sup>5</sup> In particular, children do not have to ask for permission to watch tv or certain programs. The only control declared consists in the censorship of television images of "sex and terror". While parents speak of the concept of "terror" as a micro-genre of fiction, however, some children extend it to information

<sup>4</sup> The study involved a sample of 326 children. The data was gathered using a questionnaire for the children and one for the parents to investigate the situation in which preadolescents watch television, the place tv has in children's free time, the attitude and awareness of the parents.

<sup>5</sup> The main objective of the research is to analyze children's habits while watching television programs in the family context. The sample is composed of 57 boys and girls (aged 6 to 11) who are interviewed in depth.

programs and journalistic investigation as well. Apart from the cases mentioned, the intervention of adults is practically registered only when the children's television choices interfere with those of a parent. Cartoons especially are not controlled; parents do not watch them with their children, and thus have no idea of the real contents, but trust the genre, considered "for children". Class differences exist: in general parents of lower-middle classes are less careful of what their children watch. This tendency does not apply to cartoons, for which no noticeable correlations were found. Finally, parents expressed concern over advertising. Their fears were of two types: fear of the continuous demand for the products advertised, and the repercussions on the family budget, but also fear of the life models offered by advertising.

The role of the family is central in the child-tv relationship, also from another point of view. Social differences (according to all the research, an important element in modulating children's use of television) are expressed particularly in terms of the family's cultural capital. Here we will restrict ourselves to a brief mention of a complex and many-sided relationship.

Television is used by children of all social backgrounds; what changes is the way and intensity of use. For example, what distinguishes consumer behavior on a social level is neither the fact of watching television, nor the fact of watching it often, but rather the fact of watching it for long periods.<sup>6</sup> Structural data too indicate that on average, there are more televisions in less favored families and, especially, more televisions in their children's bedrooms.

The family's cultural capital is also important as regards alternatives to television: inviting friends home, after-school activities, playing with parents. A lot of research from different countries agrees: children declare that television is not their favorite pastime and if they could, they would spend their free time differently<sup>7</sup>. It is precisely in this, the provision of alternatives, that socio-economic class becomes a fundamental variable. It is undoubtedly in the integration of the media into family socializing, however, that the most interesting differences emerge: what distinguishes the family with a high cultural heritage from the less advantaged one is certainly the amount of television watched, but also, and above all, the substantially different role of the television in everyday dynamics. In the

<sup>6</sup> *"Bambini e Televisione"*, Istat 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Just to mention a few, Muñoz and Pedrero 1997; Lurçat 1998.

former case, for example, the television is turned on at precise times, to watch chosen programs. Part of family ritual, between meals, takes place without it; television has a role in family life, but a limited one, and other free-time activities like reading, listening to music, seeing friends, going out, etc. involving the various members of the family, including minors, are more numerous. In less advantaged families, the television is nearly always on when a member of the family is at home, even if it is often watched absent-mindedly while doing other things: eating, homework, etc. In short, in these cases television appears closely integrated into the intimacy of the family and all family routines.

#### *1.4. Television violence, psycho-social and cognitive aspects*

Research into effects has also investigated the repercussions of television violence in children's reactivity-passivity towards the images seen. The results of a study with psychological tools in France affirm that children faced with violent images express more "de-mobilizing" emotions (three times more than the others), traceable in some way to passive states. (Lurçat 1989).<sup>8</sup> This would therefore seem to be confirmation of worries about the "passivizing" effect of television violence, and here we would like to recall fears of the risk that "spectator-like" attitudes may not be limited to watching television, but may become a code of perception and more generalized behavior.

The research aimed, amongst other things, to delve deeper into the relationship between exposure to violent television images, defensive strategies and behavior. For this, the authors worked from the supposition that violent images produce "psychic disorganization accompanied by anxiety and shame" in people who watch them. The question is therefore: what means do children and adolescents use to defend themselves and to reconstruct their experience?

<sup>8</sup> For example a child faced with violent images who says "I wouldn't have let myself be attacked" or another who declares about neutral images "I would like to be as calm as that with my friends" show "mobilizing" emotions. On the other hand, if a child says "you have to obey, that's all" or "there's no point in fighting back", he is instead revealing "de-mobilizing" emotions. The research was carried out in successive phases, with a total of 421 personal qualitative interviews with children aged between 4 and 6. Three aspects of the relationship between children and television were investigated: the first regarding children's games inspired by television programs, exchanges with adults who watch tv, children's preferences about different free-time activities. The second aspect dealt with the impact of television violence on children who have not yet learnt to read. The third aspect concerned children's ability to judge what they see on television.



A first interesting result concerns the fact that children appear not to particularly appreciate television violence: half of those asked to comment on “neutral” images said they appreciated them, sometimes emphasizing a particular piece, while less than a sixth of the children asked to comment on violent images explicitly expressed pleasure. Even if we do not just observe the first emotion expressed verbally, but the dominant emotion, whether verbal or not, the effects caused by violent images and those caused by “neutral” ones are very different. Among the children who saw violent images, the general dominant emotion was anxiety, and during their interviews their “affective tonality” was higher than in the other cases. This situation can be explained by the fact that children faced with violent images experience unpleasant psychic states, which they try to turn into less disturbing states. On the other hand, children who enjoyed “neutral” images do not need to turn this feeling towards other situations.

Another very important question is how violence is inserted into the value and cognitive systems of children (attitude formation, agenda fixing, modification of values...). For this field of reflection, it is a question of investigating, not so much the effects that violent television can produce from the point of view of behavior, but the effects of a cognitive type, on ways of thinking and on attitudes.

The questions that are asked concern, on the one hand, children’s capacity for understanding television content and, on the other, their re-elaboration in different contexts. The cognitive approach presupposes that the individual-spectator takes on an active role in constructing and ordering the information content of programs. The hypothesis is that children’s reactions to television and the meanings assigned to it depend on many variables of a cognitive type – for example the knowledge of conventions and formal codes in terms of genre, narrative formula – and are also linked to the socio-family context.

### *1.5. “Normal” and appropriate violence*

One of the fears investigated in the research into the effects of television violence is that children may, with time, consider models of aggressive behavior “normal” or appropriate. A Spanish study analyzes the influence of television violence on children’s social and intellectual development to understand, not so much whether children are violent themselves, but more if they start to think that violence may be a solution to problems in

real life, given that this message emerges frequently in some kinds of fiction. (García Galera 1998)<sup>9</sup> From the results, it emerges that 33% of the sample does not stigmatize violent behavior seen, but defines it as "normal". The author signals the fact that for a significant group of children violence is perceived as acceptable, and hypothesizes the risk that it might be habit-forming. The alarm is therefore not so much for directly imitative behavior, but rather the risk of moving terms of reference. When extreme violence is perceived as being "normal", any lesser form of violence may appear inoffensive, and not be stigmatized. The research, however, indicates how television's degree of influence can be modulated by a series of variables: age, sex, family context, social class, etc. also in this regard.

An analogous worry inspired a UNESCO study in German circles. (Groebel 1998)<sup>10</sup> The fear expressed by the author is that youngsters may consider aggressive models of behavior appropriate responses to be applied if necessary in similar situations. Again the risk evoked is that of making aggressiveness and violence banal. From an emotional point of view, violent fiction develops mechanisms of identification with the hero (in particular for boys) and fascination with that type of behavior; it also generates fear (mostly among girls) and contributes to the development of a negative image of the world. According to the study, in fact, representations of violence create problems mainly when aggressive behavior leads to positive results, or when it is presented as obvious and normal. This study too highlights the close link to family and social conditions in the long-term development of a propensity towards violence among boys, however, and shows the media rather as a channel for already-existing aggressive tendencies, offering indications for behavior and perceptions.

<sup>9</sup> The author is a lecturer at the Faculty of Information Science at the University Complutense in Madrid. The research sample was composed of 452 boys and girls from Madrid, divided into two groups (one which watched a fiction with violent contents and images and the other a "neutral" program). There were three stages: the children answered a closed questionnaire on socio-cultural elements. After answering, they turned the paper over and watched the program (20 minutes). After watching, the children had to complete the second part of the questionnaire, for about 15 minutes.

<sup>10</sup> The research investigated the ways children watch television, the functions, and the effects, particularly as regards whether aggressive behavior increases because of the media. The UNESCO study especially considered the possible cultural differences, the real violence in the children's environment and the different levels of technological development in the various countries. For the UNESCO study, a questionnaire was prepared and translated in all the countries. Around 5,000 boys and girls from 23 countries over the world took part. The scientific analysis of the results was carried out by Utrecht University.



More generally, the importance of the family and environmental context in the elaboration of the contents of television emerges in almost all the studies.

A British study is particularly interesting, because it is based upon an unusual methodological approach, starting from the hypothesis that the influence of a pervasive medium like television is manifested through processes that are for the most part unconscious. Thus, according to the author, research methods based on conscious responses are totally inadequate, in particular when working with children's imagination (Bolton 1998, unpublished). The study therefore adopts an indirect approach, which analyzes the children's imaginings through stories that they themselves tell and write, following the hypothesis, of a psychoanalytical matrix, that invented stories supply a key for accessing unconscious processes, in the same way as dreams. The author arrives at the conclusion that there seems to be no direct cause and effect relationship (or no direct *influence*) between children's habit of watching violent programs and the stories which they tell for the researchers. It is rather a dialectic involving other factors (particularly family conditions, emotional relations) in a dynamic in which television content is used to express a state of mind. Generalizing, one could say that what children see on television has a greater probability of becoming part of their imaginings when it is more closely connected to their own lives (coinciding feelings, unconscious identification with a character).

Another interesting conclusion concerns the relationship there seems to be between a family life rich in opportunities to communicate, and a decreased propensity to use some aspect of one's own experience as a spectator in making up a story. This is regardless of the fact that those children who were more stimulated in the family sphere watched a lot of television too. This phenomenon, which the author defines "psycho-cultural", is described as a system which includes what a child gets from its environment and what it gives back as an integrated, interactive, semi-permeable story, able to make space for new perceptions.

## 2. Television and cognitive aspects comprehension ability, selective appropriation, reinterpretation and uses

The questions asked in this field concern, on the one hand, children's ability to understand television content and, on the other, the ways in which these contents are re-elaborated in different contexts.

As we have seen, a lot of research looks into the development of children's understanding of television according to the hypothesis that children's reactions to television and the meaning given to it depend on variables of the cognitive type – knowledge of conventions and formal codes in terms of genres, narrative formulas – and socio-family context. In this sense, it is assumed that children are actually much more active and sophisticated television users than is generally thought.

On this topic, we would like to indicate some British research starting from previous studies, according to which fewer than 50% of children in pre-school age understood at least 50% of the programs they watched, despite the fact that these were, in the broadcasters' view, appropriate programs for their age group. (Clifford et al. 1990)<sup>11</sup> One of the premises on which the research is based is that what children get from their television experience essentially depends on what they themselves bring to it. In this view, children are not passive receivers, but active selectors of experience, in the sense that they consciously select what they want to see to satisfy different and particular needs and moods, and give their own meaning to the program's contents.

The suspicion is that adults tend to ignore both the significant differences that exist in the capacities of children to elaborate information, even between age groups that are very close, and how some variables linked to the cognitive development of children can inhibit or augment the influence of the mass media. The research therefore aimed to measure understanding, evaluation and the effects of television programs on perceptual and cognitive levels, using an approach derived from experimental psychology, first measuring immediate reactions to a series of programs, and then the cognitive impact that exposure caused. The main variables considered were: the ability to understand and remember the content of the programs, the impact of those contents on relative areas of knowledge and convictions, and the role played in learning by variables like age, sex, language competence and viewing habits.

As far as comprehension is concerned, boys and girls emerged as perfectly able to follow the plot in programs of fiction. For the scientific programs, children can effectively learn from television and remember, at least in the short term, without substantial differences for age, for format, or

<sup>11</sup> The research was commissioned by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The sample was composed of a total of 326 children and adolescents in London, who were tested using quantitative and qualitative tools.

complexity of the program. Children and adolescents were shown to be able to remember about 60% and to understand about 50% of the material for the tests. Gender did not seem to have much importance in any of the cases examined, not even in scientific learning where the girls had identical progress to the boys (in contrast with the widespread stereotype that they are less able in this field). One very important variable was personal experience, which played an important role, particularly in the verdict on the realism of the contents, and the successive elaboration of the same.

As for changes in perceptions and convictions, the analysis of the report with the fiction gave contradictory results: the fact that some of the children's perceptions and convictions remained unchanged while others were radically altered suggests the hypothesis that exposure to television tends to stabilize convictions on aspects of the world that are drawn from numerous sources, while it tends to modify the less solid ones.

As for the scientific programs, the gain in cognitive terms was clear, as in the case of television quizzes which showed a clear increase in knowledge related to the subjects dealt with in the questions and answers in the quiz itself. This was confirmation of the fact that children and adolescents can learn from television, even when the information is embedded in a context of entertainment..

### *2.1 The use of the imaginary on television in daily life*

The use children make of the imaginary on television in their relationships, the relationship between this and the "old" traditional games, and the transfer into everyday life of what they have seen on television are another sector for investigation. Remaining within the conception of children as an active audience able to select, interpret and rewrite what television offers according to their own needs, an Italian study inquired into the use children make of the imaginary on television in their relationships. (Salvadori 1997)<sup>12</sup>

The aim was to identify the relations between reception, interpretation and communication mediated by "television language" in pre-school

<sup>12</sup> The research involved around 150 four- and five-year-olds. The tools were: structured questionnaires for the parents (on their children's viewing habits and their own attitudes), interviews with small groups of children, observation of their behavior while watching cartoons together, collection of the children's drawings about their favorite cartoons and scenes, observation and recording of their comments and dialogs between the children while they were drawing

age children. The results tell us that television is used as a source for images, stories and characters that can represent desires, fears, conflicts, images of oneself and of others, and make them more easily shared between peers. With regard to traditional games, it is interesting to underline that a lot of research shares the conclusion that television, with its language and characters, participates in children's worlds integrated into traditional games, and not replacing them.

The hypothesis of the individual and selective appropriation of contents, as opposed to the more commonly believed idea of homogenization, is confirmed by the fact that also when the same episode is watched by children together, each child chooses a different favorite scene, not necessarily connected with the main theme of the narrative. The children are equally interested by central or peripheral events in the narration, since the preference is expressed according to their own interests.

A German study analyzes the function of daily soaps in the life of youngsters and adolescents. (Götz 2000)<sup>13</sup> This project too starts from an approach which considers the appropriation of the media as an active and subjective-sensual process, which can be described as constitution of sense. In this, individual problems, the social context and individual history of the person interact. Through the reconstruction of sense relations, it is possible to know what people draw from the media, and how they incorporate them into their imaginations and interpretive models. From the research it emerged that many children and adolescents declare that they recognize themselves in the characters in the series. In the case of an important group of girls and some boys, the most important meaning of the relationship with the soap was in the "reflex" function. These children and adolescents (especially girls between 11 and 16) feel they recognize themselves in a specific character, and express themselves with assertions like "she is like me" or "she is almost like me". In their descriptions of themselves, moreover, they often use the same terms they use for describing the character they admire.

Another typical appropriation is the para-social relationship with media characters. In their imaginations, adolescents have a relationship

<sup>13</sup> At the base of the research, there is a study with 401 children and adolescents from 6 to 19, carried out by means of a questionnaire for the older ones and interviews for the age group 6-13, followed by focus-groups and in-depth interviews

with the characters in the soap, and imagine that they are friends, or that they have a love relationship with them. A variation on the relationship with the medium is the feeling of being part of a group: the feeling is that of knowing all the characters personally and of being their friend.

Another function of the soap which emerges is compensation, and consists in the fact that the soap becomes a sounding board for their feelings and imaginings. The soap is used to fill an emotional void, to compensate for inadequacies they experience or difficult social conditions, and could play an important role in daily life, helping them to overcome difficult moments. The ritual appointment every evening is calming and can mask, at least for a while, problematic experiences. In this case, the calming function lies precisely in the structure of the genre, in the fact that it is a daily, secure and ritual appointment.

### 3. Other functions of television: emotional education, education in sexual identity

Television, along with other media, has specific, age-related functions for children and adolescents, allowing them games of projection, identification and compensation. As children grow up, therefore, programs offering role models for the two sexes become progressively more important. Also for this particular function, the conclusions common to a lot of research are that the medium- and long-term effects usually exist in a complex relationship with other influences like the family, friends, school, and their own experiences. This does not mean that the effects of television should be underestimated, it contributes strongly to socialization; in particular it dominates over other forms of learning with regard to aspects of reality that are extraneous to the child's direct experience, or in continuous comparison with extreme emotions like passion, hate, etc.

#### 3.1 *Emotional and sexual education, gender models*

The topic of television's orientation functions, and in particular that of "emotional education", is central to a French study analyzing reactions caused by a television series aimed specifically at adolescents, *Hélène et les garçons*<sup>14</sup> which was a great success and gave rise to considerable debate in

<sup>14</sup> The series, shown by the network La TF1 in the late afternoon from 1992 until 1994 had extraordinary results in terms of audience: some episodes were watched by 90% of viewers between the ages of 4 and 14.



France. (Pasquier 1998). The contents of the series are neither violent nor dramatic; its critics did not accuse the program of causing aggressiveness, or of disturbing the youngsters, but rather of not representing reality sufficiently, of presenting a world without conflicts or problems, in short of offering an excessively idyllic vision of the world.

The research used various tools, among which was the analysis of 7,000 letters, a small part of those sent by the young viewers to the actors in the series, and especially to the main female character. These letters were considered completely unique material about television consumption in that they were not opinions, testimonials, and representations prompted in the context of research, but were instead the result of spontaneous initiatives, and therefore freer in terms of content and form. Moreover, they were written by boys and girls of different ages, and spoke both about the series and about the writers' lives, thus offering an extremely rich source of elements referring to family, social and environmental contexts too. As well as the letters, the research methodology used participatory observation with a sample of families, and questionnaires with 700 students at middle and high schools in Paris.

The research investigated the place occupied by television in children's lives, and the relationships they form with the characters in the television series they watch. In particular, it aimed to analyze the role that television fiction plays in the learning process of affective life, its function in accompanying the first sentimental experiences, and the strategic position it occupies in the new definition of sexual identity.

What emerged from the letters was a high level of identification among adolescents with their heroes' sentimental universe; they were perceived as models, especially in problems of relationships, almost never instead for anything concerning sexuality. The heroes of the series were perceived as "experts in problems of couples, not as experts in sexual practices". This dimension was not evoked or declared, as if it were a secondary aspect in the life of the couple, apparently not very interesting in the construction of a "grammar of loving feelings".

The research phase carried out through participatory observation allowed the identification of the complexity of negotiations in families around the screen; both those between children and those between parents and children. It emerged, for example, that among spectators of the series studied some viewers watched in a favorable, sometimes even encouraging atmosphere, while others watched in an atmosphere of hostility, and this could have influenced viewing attitudes.

Fathers in particular appeared distant. Few saw the series, not even an episode here and there and, even when they heard them speak about it or noticed the posters in their children's rooms, showed little interest as it was a program defined "for children" and "for girls". The mothers' attitudes, on the other hand, appeared more complex, and most of them were explicit about their opinions of the series and its characters, whether positive or negative.

The most interesting case is that of the mothers who expressed a negative opinion of the series. These belonged mostly to the middle or upper classes. It is here that the discussion between mothers and daughters appeared liveliest; the aspects discussed concerned both the form and the contents of the series. On the one hand, the criticisms were about the "poor standard of acting", the flatness of the dialogs, the use of recorded laughter; on the other, the mothers criticized the fact of "seeing boys interested only in their girlfriends, girls worrying only about how to get boys to like them, as if this were the sole objective of a woman's life." Moreover, the attitude of this group of mothers showed a certain embarrassment about their daughters being interested in the series, given that they considered it low quality and a vehicle of *petit-bourgeois* female role models.

Still on the subject of emotional education, a British study focused in particular on the topic, divided into two areas, of sex and sexuality on television: a) how children interpret and react to the representations of the act of sex they see on television; b) the definitions that children give about what is appropriate and what is not for themselves, and for children in general (Davies and Kelley 1998).<sup>15</sup> For the first question, the study showed how material for adults on television can represent the "forbidden fruit", towards which children showed a mix of embarrassment, affectation, and moral disapproval.

In this case a difference between boys and girls emerged clearly: for the latter, in fact, observing sex and love in programs like soaps and sitcoms could be useful as a rehearsal for future (hetero)sexual identities. Boys instead seemed more ill at ease, with differences according to age: among the smaller children, rejection of the "adult" material was stronger than among the older children who aspire to freedom, associated with being adolescents. The smaller ones were therefore more inclined to show disgust rather than fascination, while the older ones appeared decidedly curious.

<sup>15</sup> The qualitative part of the analysis was based upon interviews and activities with small groups of children of ages varying from 6-7 and 10-11 from London.



Children know the definitions adults give to things that are appropriate or not, even if, when they talk, they tend to project censorship and the negative effects of television onto smaller children, or children in general, never onto themselves.

In general, the analysis suggests that in discussing reactions to television, children tend to interpret a “game of identity” based on the affirmation of their own supposed maturity. These discussions too serve to reinforce the normative definitions about what it means to be a child, and also about sexual identity. We have seen how the media, and television in particular, fulfil certain specific functions of psychology related to age, allowing the games of projection, identification or compensation at each stage.

A German study investigates how children and adolescents relate to some programs that offer role models in general, in particular reality shows and talk shows (for some years now massively present in German television scheduling) (Hasebrink et al. 1999).<sup>16</sup> The study analyzed how far the perception and evaluation of reality are modified in adolescents (aged 12-17) who watch these types of television frequently, and not just occasionally.<sup>17</sup>

In general, adolescents with a higher level of education rarely integrate these programs into their reconstruction of reality; this was, however, often the case with those interviewed who had a lower level of schooling (particularly among girls, or younger children). While boys are more distanced, and focus their interest on the entertainment aspects of the genre, girls get more involved in events and look for guidelines for relationships in them.

<sup>16</sup> The qualitative part of the research consists of: a) group discussions with a total of 120 adolescents, b) individual interviews with 53 selected adolescents – on one hand “fans” of talk shows, on the other occasional viewers – c) further in-depth interviews with 28 interviewees who defined themselves as “fans” of talk shows. The quantitative part interviewed 657 adolescents (12-17) on their relationship with talk shows, their reasons for watching them, their perception of the topics and the protagonists, and also on different aspects of perception of reality. As preliminary data, the study analyzed the format of a talk show and elaborated the data from the GfK Institute (1997 and 1998) on the penetration of talk shows in the age group being examined.

<sup>17</sup> The authors emphasize how adolescents' relationships with these genres cannot be separated from those with the rest of the programming. Habitual viewers of talk shows manifest equal preference for soap operas and programs dealing with interpersonal relationships. Talk shows, however, are clearly not particularly popular with adolescents: only a small percentage mention them as preferred programs, while the first place is usually occupied by series and soaps (in particular for girls) and action series (mainly for boys).

It is interesting to note that many of those interviewed stated that some topics should not be dealt with in these programs, for example intrusion into the private sphere, sexuality and pornography, and it is precisely those habitual viewers who declared that not everything should be possible.

Adolescents differ in the ways in which they comment on the claimed closeness of these genres to daily life, to reality: some define these programs as "staged" or as "performances", and also give the negative image of daily life prevalent in this type of program an interpretation which turns it on its head: many adolescents say they are happy that "reality is different" and that "things are better for them".

The research shows how differentiation in television consumption begins between the seventh and eighth year of life: boys opt for action films, girls for family series and talk shows. Successively, with puberty, contact with the opposite sex becomes more and more important in social life, an importance that girls accept and recognize: the topic of man-woman relations is widely treated in series.

Advertising in particular offers models, and has orientation functions for other areas: fashion, life styles, means of expressing oneself; even before starting school children develop an impressive knowledge of brands, but also competence in fashions and the "right" groups. The authors recall that medium- and long- term effects are, as a rule, related to social and family environments.

The topic of the role that television fiction plays in the process of defining sexual identity is examined more closely in the French study we have already widely illustrated: "*The culture of feelings*", which looks at the relationship between adolescents and a very famous television series aimed at them (Pasquier 1998).

In terms of gender differences, participatory observation revealed how boys and girls watching the series with their families showed very different attitudes. Boys, as far as could be observed, quickly understood that they should not show particular interest, inasmuch as the series dealt mostly with things from the field of female sentimentalism, and showing interest could "threaten their masculine identity with the female members of the family". Girls, on the other hand, did not hide their love for the program and the fact that it aroused strong emotions in them. They found it romantic, because it transmitted a reassuring message: men need women and vice versa, love is the most important thing in the world.

When they watched the program, they preferred to do so with other girls with whom they could share their pleasure and emotions, and showed no embarrassment for loving the television series.<sup>18</sup>

Boys' favorite characters (not only in the series studied) and their reasons for the choice had three main characteristics.

First of all, their favorite characters are nearly always male, free from the bonds of fixed couples and are chosen from series where sentimental themes are secondary. The second characteristic is that these characters are loved, not because they are good-looking, but because they have transgressive roles. Heroes chosen by boys are people who appreciate the pleasures of life, are more street-wise than intelligent, rebel against the social order and authority. What the boys like in them is their ability to "cope" in unfavorable situations; not necessarily winners, their boldness always pays off in the end. The thing that those interviewed said they most appreciated in their favorite characters was their humor, a criterion which was not much evoked by the girls interviewed. According to the interviewers, this latter motivation depended on the fact that the reference to humor allowed the boys to show less involvement in the fiction. "Laughter is a less compromising demonstration than crying, and it is socially possible for a boy to show interest in love stories, if they are presented in a humorous way, rather than in a more obviously sentimental way."

The choices of adolescent girls are very varied. The first conclusion is that most of them (54%) prefer male characters. Secondly, the choice is closely connected (especially among the younger ones) to physical aspects: "they say they are physically attracted by some male characters, or that they admire the beauty of some female characters", even though a character is never loved solely for his or her appearance: "niceness and the ability to dedicate themselves to others make the difference between the attractive and generous (the most popular characters) and the attractive but hard or selfish (the less loved characters). It could also be noted that older adolescent girls are also interested in characters marked not only by physical aspects, but also by the fact of living through problems (those who struggle with alcoholism, or have difficult family situations, etc.)

The analysis of the letters sent to the characters in the program showed firstly that most were written by girls, who showed great interest in couples and in problems of relationships. There was a high degree of

<sup>18</sup> We can compare these attitudes with those (described earlier) of parents: distant fathers and more involved mothers.

identification with the sentimental universe represented by the series: fear of the first kiss, the boy loved in secret, the hope of meeting a man forever, anxiety about never finding love. Most of the letters that talked about the writers' own loving feelings evoked thwarted, impossible loves with obstacles, however, not from the outside, from parents or the social context, but particularly from the difficulties of communication between the two sexes and understanding the other's feelings.

In Germany too, the above-mentioned research on "The meaning of the daily soap for children and adolescents" (Götz 2000) looked at how television series contribute to the formation of sexual identity. The daily soap takes on a special meaning for girls between 10 and 15, and it is rare for this type of program not to constitute evening entertainment for several years (for many of the girls for a third of their lives). The reasons why so many girls appreciate this genre are numerous. First of all, while male characters dominate in most program scheduling, especially for children, the numerical relation between male and female is often equal in series. The reality for girls, but especially their imaginations and search for orientation can therefore be better reflected here than in other television programs offered<sup>19</sup>. The particular meaning of this genre for girls is, however, still more closely linked to socialization between the sexes. Adolescence, in particular for girls, is in fact marked by growing attention to their own sexuality, and to the attraction they start to exercise. Many series seem to portray just that same agitated sentimental world, and girls find a sound box to test themselves, and to relate to their emotions. A problem can arise, warns the author, from the fact that characters, even when they are apparently innovative, rarely offer a real in-depth view of problems.

Another German study, significantly titled "Teachings and episodes about life", investigates the model function of television, and in particular of fiction, for boys and girls from 9 to 15. (Theunert, Gebel 2000)<sup>20</sup> After confirming that these youngsters are "fussy" (it seems that few series

<sup>19</sup> This consideration appears to be confirmed also by a British study (Chambers et al 1998) which shows how the central group of "action" cartoon viewers are boys aged 5 to 7; "action" cartoons are not successful with younger girls who find them "boring", with the exception of the series *Jumanji*, which girls in general appreciate, perhaps because of the presence of a strong female character.

<sup>20</sup> After analyzing the contents of some series, the study interviewed 514 children and adolescents aged between 9 and 15 from various regions of Bavaria, and carried out in-depth analysis with 20 boys and girls.

suit their tastes), the study shows that boys and girls of the same age show quite different television preferences. It attributes this difference, amongst other things, to the differing moments of the phase of puberty, which is enough to distance boys and girls in their biological development, but also in their interests and orientations, still more than in childhood. The two sexes grow closer again with the beginning of adolescence, and their changing tastes and propensity for serials reflect these similarities and differences. Useful stimuli for “the learning of life” are sought in the whole range of serials, in particular in soap operas, whose contents match adolescents’ search well, especially for girls, for whom they make up a sort of study object for relationships. As for the type of serial fiction, girls prefer daily soap operas, whether dramatic or sentimental, while boys prefer the comic and ready-packed skirmishes of comedy sitcoms.

The role of television programs in the process of identity construction is exactly the topic dealt with in an Italian study carried out with ethnographic methods through a field experiment in some elementary schools in Bologna, among children in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The results underline the differences between boys and girls clearly, arriving at the identification of a *gender model* for television consumption. (Callari Galli, Harrison 2000-2001) Both from the questionnaires, and from the field analysis, in fact, it appears that gender difference is a sort of macro model intersecting all the others (identity, consumption, relations between the generations, violence and self affirmation) as well as an essential identifying reference through which boys and girls construct different typologies of reading and television viewing. From this research too, like the French one mentioned above, it emerged that boys and girls demonstrated perfect social awareness about “appropriate” consumption and tastes for their gender: through their statements about television, boys and girls expressed opinions, hopes, and emotions in keeping with the construction of images of themselves that were coherent with their sex.

A *male* and a *female model* of television viewing were therefore identified.

The *male model* was characterized as tending to be rigid and oppositional, seemingly defined almost exclusively by contrast with the female model. The male universe seems fairly uniform for tastes and programs, a universe distanced from what are defined as “girls’ programs”, able to identify them according to specific metatextual competences (the role of feelings, for example) and devaluing them. In their favorite programs, attention focused on the struggle and performance of the characters



(reflected in group games inspired by the most popular cartoons, Dragonball and Pokemon), that often become a means for affirming their own ability and social power.

The female model emerges as more flexible and dialogic, and is defined through the continuous dialectic of belonging to and distancing from both the male model and the traditional female model. The girls interviewed, in fact, had no problem choosing as their own programs that boys considered theirs, like Pokemon, Digimon or Dragon Ball, but also appreciated elements considered "traditional" to the female sex: cartoons where there are feelings judged by boys as "girlish" (cartoons which often have female characters who are anything but romantic or passive).

Girls therefore, apparently without any problem, straddle two universes which are in any case defined only from the boys' point of view. Many girls declare they do not like cartoons they consider too romantic or sickly-sweet, and keep their distance from stereotypical representations of femininity. This position seems to illustrate the lack of an exclusive terrain just for girls. Instead the terrain appears fragmented, and not homogenous, and the common features are represented by a "leap ahead" towards more adolescent themes, or by a personal re-elaboration of the television contents common to the two sexes.

This research too shows how the attention of female viewers seems to focus on interpersonal relations from an early age. Emotional bonds are at the center of attention: friendship, love and affection in the widest sense. The cartoon or program is used socially, also by means of role play, as a social initiation into experiences of life. Boys and girls have partially discordant representations also as regards violence on television. The former are frequently enthusiastic about the fights and fighters in Pokemon and Dragon Ball, while the latter show aversion to the same contents. A limit and point of contact for both is the image of blood on television. In the cartoons mentioned above no blood actually appears, while it is present in telefilms (for example *Murder she wrote*), which are not greatly appreciated by boys, exactly for that reason: it is an element which "shocks". Moreover "ugly things" are not appreciated; these are often seen in television news, which, also for this reason, is not much liked by very young boys or girls.

A French study also identifies differences between the sexes in the reactions caused by violent images. (Tisseron 2000)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Serge Tisseron is a psychiatric and psychoanalyst. The research was carried out

According to this study, carried out in a psychological key, no difference emerged between children from different social backgrounds in the ability to construct a discourse about images. A difference between the sexes was noted, however, inasmuch as girls tended to speak more than boys in the interviews after seeing violent images. The author believes that at that age girls have a greater capacity for verbal elaboration than boys, but that they put it to use especially in moments of danger. The hypothesis is that after being subjected to intense psychological tensions as a result of violent images, girls more than boys try to overcome them by talking, whereas when they are subjected to neutral images, which tend rather to produce pleasant sensations, "this more intense linguistic investment is not necessary."

#### 4. Some emerging issues and some elements for discussion

This section is dedicated to some considerations arising from the analysis of the European research, and from the literature on the subject. These are elements for reflection that we offer for discussion.

##### *4.1. Some "banal" daily violence*

The topic of television violence has always given rise to serious worry in both public opinion and in the field of research. What does "television violence" mean, however? We can divide the not inconsiderable research on this subject into two parts: a very small part which questions the very concept of violence, and the largest part – nearly all – which seems to take shared meaning for granted.

In the first case, some research has tackled the subject by asking the children to define what frightens them, or what they consider is violent, and

between 1997 and 2000 with a group of 100 children aged 11 to 13 attending schools in the Paris region. To study both the individual and collective effects of violent images the methodological system aimed to detect a series of variables to interpret by means of psychological tools. The research took place in three successive phases: a) presentation to groups of children of recorded sequences containing neutral or violent images); b) collection of their verbal and non-verbal reactions, through personal interviews; c) collection of their verbal and non-verbal reactions in group situations with participation in role play. The definition of a grid for the original collection inspired by projective methods allowed the same codification to be applied to all the reactions in the two situations (individual and group) so they could also be transformed into statistics.



asking parents what they censor, because they think it is too violent for their children. In this case too, however, the research remained ideally situated within a definition of violence related to the most common and in some ways stereotypical concepts: scenes of aggression, blood, etc.

It is surprising that the research does not deal with other types of television violence, which are today more widespread than ever. Examples of these could be the verbal violence present in talk shows or reality tv: in programs in which discussion turns into fights, in debates that become exchanges of insults; whenever lack of respect for the interlocutor, not listening, continual interruptions, and systematic determination to prevent the other from speaking are the norm. These are obviously very violent models of behavior, because they involve an idea of relationships based not on comparing ideas, but on overwhelming any opposition, recognizing the law of the strongest, of the one who shouts loudest.

To make the situation worse is the fact that very often the person presenting the program – and thus invested with a type of “pedagogical” role – does not even seem to show disapproval of this type of behavior, let alone to limit it, in the name of the price to pay to the laws of entertainment. The risk is that a spectator, particularly a very young one, is authorized to think that these are “normal” relations, right because so frequently proposed by television, and never censored.

In the same way, even though in fields more difficult to identify, other subtle forms of violence populate television and are not thematized and investigated. An example of this is the violence which consists in making a spectacle of pain or in the invasion of people’s private spheres. Another is showing the conflicts between couples, or parents and children which are often violent and with exchanges of insults. They are produced in virtual arenas in which the audience rages against one of the contenders, and is invited to express judgments and condemnation.

Let us think too of those programs which show debased and offensive female images (and male ones), and which, however, are not considered “violent” and harmful, and therefore are not censored by parents, because they “are not frightening”. In the same way, those programs based on the public exposure of emotions, actions, and scenes from life, until recently considered strictly personal, are not considered violent. It would instead be interesting to reflect on what it means to propose models of behavior in which everything is exposed, and there is no space for the private, the secret, the unavailable.

#### *4.2. From the immediate effects to the long-term influence*

This second consideration regards the close study of the concept of "effect" and its evolution over time. The discussion about the effects of television has caused a noticeable shift in the field of interest over the last few years. Research in the past concentrated above all on the need to investigate the effects that television produced on opinions and behavior in the short term. The main worry centered on the hypothesis that television violence could bring about imitative effects on children's behavior. At this point, however, it is necessary to underline how we have found no evidence to confirm direct and unequivocal imitative influence on children's behavior in the research analyzed.

For this reason too – to extend the field of investigation and try to understand the deep dynamics produced by television consumption – the tendency is to move from the analysis of short-term influence and effects, which can be observed in the laboratory or through field observation, to another area of analysis: that of cognitive influence and of long-term effects. This is an area in which both the processing dimension of communication, and the constant interdependence with other factors, like the family and cultural and social contexts, come into play.

In this perspective, the questions concern the social construction of reality as caused by the media, strictly related to the process by which individuals appropriate the media's symbolic representations: the problem of dependence on the media for knowledge of social reality, the topic of accumulation (of imaginings and communication), and of the difference between episodic memory and semantic memory. They also concern a topic that cannot leave us indifferent, that of the new generations for whom television has been a powerful agent, not only for socialization and knowledge, but also affective and emotive, from the earliest years of infancy.

It is also clear how, from the point of view of research methodology, this new perspective creates new problems. It is in fact a question of investigating influences that settle with time, and so any analysis must have a longitudinal direction, capable of perceiving movements, accumulations, changes.

It is also a question of investigating phenomena that no longer happen directly, or only in behaviors, but above all systematically and on a cognitive level. In these cases then the most frequent social research tools may prove inadequate, and psychological tools must enter the fray, tools

capable of investigating the subjects' cognitive activity, and their dynamics behind the elaboration and settling of knowledge.

#### 4.3. *Television a new transitional object*

Shifting attention from the short to the long term also involves the analysis of the particular relevance of the television's role in daily life. On this subject, we would like to indicate an approach which inquires into the relevance television has taken on in people's lives, starting from the emotional significance it can have. According to Roger Silverstone, television has *colonized* some fundamental premises of human nature, to which it succeeds in giving the awaited answers. (Silverstone 2000)

The questions posed in this theory are many, and we will just mention them briefly. They go from the need for trust, for that "ontological safety" of which Giddens speaks, to the need in daily life, for an ordering and reassuring routine, to the role of *framing* of this routine which the media take on.

Some authors hypothesize that the reasons for the importance of television in people's lives should be investigated with psychoanalytical tools, and can be understood using as a basis the theory of *transitional object* which Winnicott<sup>22</sup> treats.

The hypothesis which attributes a fundamental role to television in the development process of children seems particularly interesting in the light of the topic under discussion, in that television represents a central tool in the process of a child's distancing from his mother, considered decisive for the future balance of the individual.

According to some authors' suggestions, (Young<sup>23</sup>, Silverstone) television in fact occupies the space left free by the first transitional objects – the mother's breast, and later objects like blankets and toys – in the child's distancing and identifying processes. Summarizing Winnicott's thinking briefly, we can say that a fundamental key to the successful development of the individual consists in the child's ability to separate from the mother, an ability conditioned by the quality of the attentions his environment is able to offer him, especially from the point of view of reliability and growth of trust. The child's distancing implies the emergence of a space in which this separation process can take place, an intermediate

<sup>22</sup> Winnicott 1965; Winnicott 1974.

<sup>23</sup> Young 1986.

area between the child and the mother. It is in this space that the first objects that are neither himself nor his mother touch the child's perception: a toy, a blanket and these objects set to work the imagination and capacity for play; they make up the first symbols, the first creative acts.

The first time that a child feels attachment for an object – the transitional object – this becomes the center of great emotional and cognitive efforts. It is the first time the child “recognizes” something other than himself and his mother, and this becomes the center of a powerful affective energy. This object turns into a “magic” object, a consolation which reassures, is a defense against worry, and becomes of vital importance for going calmly to sleep. The transitional object takes the place of the mother's breast, but is also the object through which the child starts to distinguish between himself and his mother, between the real and the imaginary. The transitional object is therefore a material object which has an elective value for the child (particularly at the moment of going to sleep); it is different from future toys, because it constitutes an almost inseparable part of the child, whilst still being the first possession of something other than himself and his mother for the child. Winnicott connects to this moment of experience the individual's future capacity to commit himself to a creative activity in the field of work, of the arts, of the imaginative or scientific, but also to the development of identity and confidence.

Now, if we take into consideration the idea suggested by some authors according to which television today occupies the space left free by the first transitional objects and becomes a transitional object itself, we can understand the emotional load invested in it.

But the next question asked by Silverstone is what makes television such a potentially meaningful transitional object? Its availability, first of all. Television becomes a transitional object in that it is constantly available, or is used (consciously or not) as a baby sitter, a maternal substitution, while the parent is occupied with something else. For the simple fact of being there, therefore, with sounds, voices and images which can be seen as protective and reassuring.

Another element of its power lies in the fact that television is “eternal”, that is that it resists all the child's attempts to “destroy” it. According to Winnicott, in fact, the creation of the transitional object follows a sequence which sees the child trying to “destroy it”, at least in his imagination. As long as it resists these attempts, however, the object can be adored and the child can depend on it for his safety. Now, television is

exactly all this: it is not eliminated even when it is turned off, because as soon as it is wanted, it is there again, in a constant flow which can be relied upon.

The hypothesis which sees the television as the transitional object of the new generations is very strong and gives rise to a lot of questions. Here we will look at only one. We have said that the transitional object is an "intermediate" object where the child's passage towards the outside is practiced. What can be the meaning of the fact that the child has a very strong and emotionally significant relationship, which excludes some senses (touch and smell) and over-stimulates others (hearing and sight)?

There is more. What lies behind the fact that the transitional object, the thing that should activate the child in the development of his creative capacity, autonomy and imagination, is a medium like television? How does the capacity for invention, for elaboration alone, for autonomous play, produced by the relationship with a teddy bear or a piece of material change when these things are replaced by the television, an instrument which requires little creative capacity for use?

This suggestion - that television becomes one of the first substitutes for the mother, with all the emotional consequences that may ensue - seems interesting for reflection on the child-television relationship, starting not so much, or not only, from the contents of the programs, but rather from the role that television as such plays in daily life, in time and in relationships with other people. In the light of this, moreover, the power of the medium in exercising some functions becomes a little clearer - reassurance against loneliness, "welcome", consolation, relaxation, etc. These functions have their roots in primal needs, and constitute one of the reasons why television is such an important presence in so many homes.

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