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Understanding Dramatization of Pain in Crime Coverage

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Abstract

In this paper we start from the analysis of several cases of criminal reports on Spanish television with the idea of detecting problems associated to journalistic practices based on dramatization of the information and its consequences on a persuasive level. We focus also on the transcription of frames that leads to make sense of the facts through new interpretations, on referential, metalinguistic and metacommunicative levels. Preliminary results show that the problem has to do with the following aspects: hipervisibility, hyperrealism, redundancy in the micro, hegemony of the present tense in speech, creation of *non-places* (atopic spaces, places of passage, of rapid transit), creating of *neo-places* as alternative spaces, *collage* effect, etc. Mixed and multidisciplinary methodology allows us to address the issue from different perspectives. Our research team seeks to introduce new points of discussion on the question of the dramatization of information seeking, at the same time, the practical application of the results.

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Keywords: Information; crime coverage; dramatization of pain; crime perception; post-television; reality TV.

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1. Introduction

In order to know the origins of crime news in the media, we must go back to European chapbooks, from the late sixteenth century, before the mainstream press. They had great success during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These chapbooks contained literary, historical and religious texts, with supernatural events, epics, romances, lives of saints, stories, natural disasters, miracles and news about bandits and criminals. Thus, these sheets became popular and the first written expression of crime coverage. It was called the "Literature of the poor" because its affordable price and its easy transport and procurement. It had similar structure to news current events, trying to impress and seduce through a structure based on exaggeration, sentimental and tearful exacerbation. Barata (2003, p. 16), quoting Caro Baroja, provides us with a useful perspective:

Stories that make the genesis of journalism before the advent of mass media are the first written expression of the criminal and popular event, with narrative forms passing oral to written culture, from verse to prose. Crime appears obsessively, along with other relationships related to supernatural events, medieval epics and natural disasters; they were "the flower of popular fantasy".

The chapbooks gossiped about crimes of passion, horrible revenge and regret. They were accompanied by engravings and illustrations, to attract attention and readability. They also emphasized the most gruesome aspects to provoke the audience: seven stab wounds, detailed one by one, the suffering... They had a fast style of reportage and current news. They reached the twentieth century and lived with mainstream press, the next step in the history of information on crimes.

Mass media news events began with *The New York Sun* in 1833, which published news about violence, sex, human interest and the first suicide of a man in the street. In 1835, *The New York Herald* followed it, with popular content, stories about people in big cities, entertainment and sensationalism. The sales were numerous and faced the two newspapers in a battle to sell more copies.

If the first battle staged *The New York Sun* and *The New York Herald*, then *The New York World* and *The New York Journal* followed them, owned, respectively, by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. The first opted for sensationalism and the second opted for the tabloids' techniques of deception, unproven hypothesis and exaggerated facts, stoking the lower passions.

Pulitzer and Hearst also fought for the best artists and editors, who created the most shocking headlines. They liked the bizarre and aggressive, exaggerated or distorted events. And in the case of Hearst, no matter whether they were invented facts, in some cases. Meanwhile, Pulitzer did conserve some ethics and used only facts, but with a sensational tinge.

At the same time, in Europe, the criminal story surfaced and newspapers increased with cases that became very famous: Troppman Case (France, 1869), the Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon and Jack the Ripper (UK, 1885) or the Fuencarral Crime (Spain, 1888). There is a large scientific and academic literature on the famous Spanish case, as explained by Barata (2003):

The crime of Fuencarral Street revealed a new way of narrating the crime reports that also provoked the formation of a new media culture on crime. With renewed forms and an excessive treatment, the press made the murder of the widow a matter of great public interest. As Pío Baroja (1949) explains in his memoirs, crime became famous not for its own sake but for the repercussions in the press.

The big criminal cases alarmed societies in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. The press spread the most horrible crimes and incidents becoming the latest weapon to compete for business readers. According to Barata (2003):

At the dawn of the modern criminology, a new communicative reality began to consolidate in Europe with the emergence of mass newspapers. With the same impetus that Lombrosian positivists new criminal carved figure, journalists spread the horrific cases that did shake the society of the late nineteenth. Knowing criminological and criminal news seemed to converge in the formation of a new perspective on crime and illegalities. A new culture appeared around the crime and with it the first reflections on the role of new media.

The nineteenth century and the popular press carried the treatment of criminal events to an unusual success (Barata, 1999, p. 45). It is the time of the papers focused on the subject, explaining their titles perfectly: *The Police Gazette* in London, *La Gazette des tribunaux* and *Le Petit Journal*, in France (Vigarello, 1998, p. 171).

These changes became more evident with the publicity of criminal proceedings. As Barata (2003) explains, the secrecy that characterized the judicial system of the Old Regime disappeared and the public could see, for the first time, the court action. In Spain, trial was imposed by law on September 14, 1883 (Varela and Alvarez-Uria, 1979, p. 1960). Also, the law endorsed the postulates that a hundred years earlier had already formulated penal reformers as Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, for which there is no true justice without public trial and that advertising is the soul of justice (Ferrajoli cited in Barata, 2003).

Today, the situation continues the same: media want to win audience and money, therefore the attention of the public with accidents and crime reports. TV also does it daily, almost since its early years. Already in the 60s, the first television programs reconstructed the events depicted and crime reports: *XY ungelöst* (ZDF, 1967), *Investigación en marcha* (TVE, 1970), *Crimewatch* (BBC, 1984), *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC, 1987), *America's Most Wanted* (Fox, 1988), *Cops* (Fox, 1989). They look for the spectacular and play with the basic fear of the audience to be the victim of a crime.

Many academic authors have studied and analysed the reasons of the continued success of crime news. Fuentes Osorio (2005, pp. 1-2) explained:

Media are responsible for reporting on the events that happen around us. Our knowledge of the local, national, and international reality depends on its conversion into news. The media also convey ideas. The knowledge of the different assessments of an event and the various proposals for interaction with the same depends on their inclusion in the news.

According to the author, media allow information and the shaping of public opinion, have assumed the role of presentation and discussion forums of the main social problems, select the events that are going to become news, and then, set news to be the subject of social debate. Media encourage debate through opinion articles and editorials that have different approaches and perspectives of analysis and problem solving, and propose measures to resolve it with the category of experts (Fuentes Osorio, 2005, p. 2).

Meanwhile, Barata (2003) believes essential to study the phenomenon from the Sociology point of view:

We believe that the study of mass media and crime must necessarily go together with a sociological and cultural reflection on society, for example about the individuals to whom it is addressed the media glare. We cannot speak of informative speech without referring to the power of enunciation that is at the origin of the formation of public opinion. But more than that to talk about the crime story is talking about the fears and desires of social feeling.

Therefore, the criminal phenomenon occupies a very important part of the communicative activity. The main reason is that violence always draws the audience, from the punitive shows in the squares of large cities from the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, when those street performers disappeared but mass media were born to replace them (Fuentes Osorio, 2005, p 3). The main issue here is to question the consequences of the concentration of the crime coverage in the media. According to Fuentes Osorio (2005, p. 3):

It can have a positive effect: the vision of certain crimes can see that there is a "social problem" [...] It is also capable of producing and directing a public debate with different approaches to the causes they face and courses of action that have been presented as existing by the media. However, after this ideal image a negative reality is hidden: the media attention on this issue (which especially ensures the attention of the audience) is reflected in a report that, in respect to the proposed solution of the criminal event, is inaccurate, not plural and adulterated by the particular interests of the media and those who control them.

The danger is that media present a distorted criminal reality, exaggerating the severity and frequency of certain events, while other everyday crimes are sentenced to the realm of the exceptional. They do not simply recognize and present the "social problem", but actually build and communicate a virtual image that does not match the real thing. Thus, media contribute to the emergence and reinforcement of cognitive errors in the auditorium (Fuentes Osorio, 2005: 3).

In addition, the constant emergence of crime reports in the media favors its importance in the public agenda and creates social awareness about the crime. However, the actual crime and its evolution did not confirm that this media visibility bring improvements. When the criminal reality becomes news it can be distorted, creating pictures of problems that cannot match the real problems and sometimes become political and propaganda weapons, as they divert attention from more serious structural problems. Therefore, the event information is never innocent. Fuentes Osorio (2005, p. 5) summarizes this idea in two reasons.

Firstly, one regarding the economic interest that drives the media business and its screen quotas (provoking the reduction of news quality due to not-enough verified sources, the trivialization of events, the use of wrong terminology); all in all stressed by the constant flow of information (and the creation and deformation of events in order to produce emotions). Secondly, because information is not innocent: media not only reflect and transmit daily events, but they are also instruments of persuasion and propaganda. Nowadays, there is no doubt that, they mainly contribute to the consolidation of established values and the support of the socioeconomic and institutional status quo.

León (2009, p. 15) proposes a classification of such programs based on their content that we find very useful. He distinguishes five main categories:

- Accidents and crimes. The author cites two documentary series that are issued since the 80s: *Crimewatch* and *Cops* but there are previous programs such as the German *XY Ungelöst* broadcasted on ZDF since 1967.
- Social help. The pioneer was *Queen for a Day* that NBC broadcasted between 1956 and 1964.
- Interventions in the lives of people. "They teach ordinary citizens to manage their own lives and solve problems" (León, 2009, p. 15). The examples are many and varied: from programs that explain to women how to improve their image to those who help couples to find a house.
- Coexistence and personal relationships. The most popular is *Big Brother*.
- Artistic training. Participants learn to act, dance, etc...

In this paper, we will focus on defining the characteristics of the first type of programs: those focused on crime, violence and, in general, on everything anomic and shocking. These spaces constitute a category in itself. However, there are programs that do not fall within this classification but are essential to be analyzed because such events have a special role in them: the magazines. Monica Gómez Martín (2005, p. 2) calls them "the hybrid genre par excellence" because they include a variety of genres, contents, treatments and approaches. In Spain, the main morning magazines such as *El Programa de Ana Rosa* (Tele 5), *Espejo Público* (Antena 3) and *Las mañanas de la 1* (TVE) devote a significant part of its nearly four daily hours to broadcast such issues.

2. Case studies

In this part we analyze the crime news coverage in TV in Spain (Antena 3 y Tele 5) with special attention to the following aspects:

1. Mechanisms of dramatization and spectacularization of the information
2. Analysis of the de-formation (hypertrophy)
3. Perception and effects

2.1. Discourse construction and perception in no-serial coverage

First, we will focus on information about sporadic news about different events that have taken place at some point in the past. We will analyze three different murder (or missing person) cases shown in the same day in *Espejo Público* (Antena 3).

- 1) **The Cristina Bergua's case:** The coverage begins with nearly 15 minutes dedicated to the disappearance of Cristina Bergua 17 years ago. A recreation of the case is made in order to incriminate the boyfriend of the girl and awake curiosity about the causes of the disappearance. After this retrospective, journalists and collaborators will conduct an interview with the parents of the missing young girl.

Image 1: Retrospective, recreation of the case. Text: *The boyfriend is the prime suspect in the disappearance*



Source: *Espejo Público*, Antena 3 TV

From here on, journalists and experts focus on building a hypothesis about the guilt, concentrating on the following:

- Conflicting relationship of the couple: the girl was going to end the relationship on the day of the disappearance.
- Current status of the suspect: in jail for a drugs crime.
- The boyfriend is accused of lying because the journalists don't believe his testimony. However, the boy was never charged with anything because no incriminating evidence was found.
- Nacho Abad, one of the journalists, addresses the audience stating that "someone knows something and this is not the murderer". His hypothesis: there are accomplices, who will not talk.
- Journalist second hypothesis: the boyfriend did not take part in the search of the girl at the time of the disappearance: that means, he knew he would not find anything.

To better understand the information provided, it would be necessary also to analyze the text under the images accompanying the news:

- Police suspicions about boyfriend and friends.

Image 2: Archive images. Text: *The friends could be hiding data of the disappearance*



Source: Espejo Público, Antena 3 TV

- "The boyfriend is the prime suspect in the disappearance".
- "It took 11 months to start looking for my daughter in the landfill".
- "My daughter was going to break up with her boyfriend before disappearing".
- "Friends could hide data about the disappearance".
-

2) **The Malén Ortiz's case:** After that, the program spent about 13 minutes on the case of the disappearance of Malén Ortiz. Most of it was dedicated to the recreation of the case. The report also includes an interview with the government delegate to the Balearic Islands. The rest of the time was for comments of the experts invited.

Image 3: Review of the Malén Ortiz's case. Text: *We discover the latest data of the investigation*



Source: Espejo Público, Antena 3 TV

Images 4 and 5: Reconstruction of the case.

Text: *We discover the latest data of the investigation*



Source: Espejo Público, Antena 3 TV

In this case, journalists and invited experts, again, stress on one of the possible scenarios: the family of the young girl as the main suspect.

- 3) **The Marta del Castillo's case:** The total time spent on the case review of the murder of the young Marta was 5.57 minutes. The report focuses specifically on the P300 test on Miguel Carcano, the confessed murderer who, however, refuses to reveal where the corpse of the victim was left.

Image 6: The P300 test. Text: *Exclusive: Revealing the dumpsite where Marta could be buried*



Source: *Espejo Público*, Antena 3 TV

In the program participated also an expert in geo-radar (Luis Avial) who was commenting the possible location of the body based on the test results of the brain analysis. The journalists of *Espejo Público* managed to present new hypotheses from the results to which, surprisingly, they had gained access immediately.

Image 7: Possible location of the corpse. Text: *Revealing the dump where where Marta could be buried*



Source: *Espejo Público*, Antena 3 TV

The important ratings that these programs achieve are related with the interest in the authentic, the real, which replaces the lure of the plausible, credible. They claim to offer the truth: there are no actors or scripts. The camera lens simply reflects life itself.

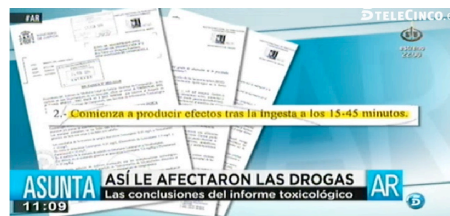
However, this idea of simply being a mirror of reality is an illusion under which lies a careful creative act. TV does not represent reality but designs its own. This is how the viewer takes "as reality something perfectly manipulated (in objective terms) by the media, that is, totally controlled as a narrative form outside the more or less spontaneous evolution of the story that is being built before our eyes" (Imbert, 2003, p. 31). To identify this creative act it's interesting to analyze what

kind of speech these programs use, from verbal and nonverbal language of the conductor, collaborators and protagonists, to the images, shots and types of music. This last element is essential, as it contributes to "create a mood" (Postman, 1991, p. 106).

2.2. Discourse construction and perception in serial coverage

To analyze these questions, we will focus on the Asunta's case, the murder of a minor allegedly carried out by her parents through drug poisoning and asphyxia. On 17 March, one of the collaborators of the Ana Rosa's program explains all the questions related to a report on the crime, in particular, how the drug (Orfidal) was supplied. She also says that some witnesses saw Asunta Basterra with her father before, and that she was walking upright, implying that at that time she would not be completely sedated. The hypothesis of the collaborator: Asunta was sedated afterwards. Finally she stressed that the girl didn't die by the effect of drugs but by asphyxia.

Image 8: The report on the drug poisoning. Text: *How she was affected by drugs. The results of the toxicology report*



Source: El Programa de Ana Rosa, Tele 5

The next day, the program displays images of Asunta and the trial of her mother, Rosario. The journalists report that they have had access to previously unseen footage of the latest movements of Rosario and Asunta. They focus on the mother and her statements and videos recorded by security cameras showing that Rosario was the last person seen with Asunta before being found dead.

Image 9: Statements of the mother.



Source: El Programa de Ana Rosa, Tele 5

In the recording, the mother explains that she was accompanied by Asunta in the car but that statement is rejected by the judge. The judge shows the images captured by the security cameras of a bank in front of their house and also images of her car passing through a gas station. At the moment of showing these images, she rectifies her first declaration. We should recognize that this situation could force the audience to emit a premature verdict.

Image 10: Images of the bank's security camera. Text: *How she was affected by drugs. The results of the toxicology report*



Source: *El Programa de Ana Rosa*, Tele 5

Image 11: Images of the bank's security camera. Text: *The plan to poison her. The drug was supplied gradually.*



Source: *El Programa de Ana Rosa*, Tele 5

At the minute 11.17 the program shows images of security cameras near the garage. In these images we can see that the car is occupied by two persons so it is suspected that at that time Asunta might already be sedated.

Image 12: Images of a security camera.



Source: *El Programa de Ana Rosa*, Tele 5.

The next day, the program announces: "Six months without Asunta" offering a review of the entire hypothesis, the one followed by the police as well as the media. Once again, the audience can see all available images of Asunta.

Image 13 and 14: Text: *Six months without Asunta. Parents remain the prime suspects. The motive: was she an obstacle?*



Source: El Programa de Ana Rosa, Tele 5.

Conclusions

Reality TV expands and proliferates in the late 80s and early nineties of the twentieth century but it's a macrogenre that is already present from the beginning of television itself. In fact, for Neil Postman, one of the major defects attributed to reality TV and television itself, decontextualization, lack of background, connections and implications, precedes both and it's already present in the way of processing information derived from the convergence of telegraph and newspapers in the nineteenth century (1991, pp. 68-70).

Gonzalo Abril (1995) considers the reality TV boom in the late 80's has a direct relationship with the progressive individualization and privatization that, following Pierre Chambat and Alain Ehrenberg, derive from the increase of the unstable, transitory situations:

In this situation of fragmentation in which the temporary and the uncertainty multiply [...] the imposition of clear rules of authority [...] loses meaning and legitimacy [...]. In revenge, autonomy becomes a constriction of mobs – it's not only a choice or an aspiration – for pointing and acting in a fragmented society. It weakens individuals who carry on responsibilities held at one time by collective bodies [...]. This widespread generalized uncertainty [...] make nowadays difficult to discern the borders of a private and public space whose contents are really difficult to be defined. Hence the widespread privatization of the public: the individual is the sounding board for all (Chambat and Ehrenberg in Abril, 1995, pp. 95-96).

In the same vein, Imbert (2003) notes that the crisis of History, ideologies and politics is at the root of the multiplication of the different formats that this macrogenre covers. The most popular are the reality show and talk show but it brings together very different spaces that have a set of features listed below and that will be explained later in this article:

1. Limitless want to see.
2. Morbid curiosity, sensationalism, entertainment, drama and "extimity".
3. Coexistence of opposites.
4. Illusion of authenticity.

5. Present the television as rescuer and substitute for other powers.

In addition, the protagonists of the events and actions are real, ordinary people, and the thing that interests from them is their intimate, personal life. So, regardless of dealing with murders, robberies, education or relationships the emotional component clearly dominates.

We have tried to briefly define what is reality TV and how it arises, but as we will see, it's a complex task. Experts believe that it's difficult to delimit precisely due to one of its main features: the hybridization of genres (Leon, 2009, p. 14), that is to say, mixing informative genres as the interview or chronicle with others from fiction in entertainment programs.

Aggression and violence have been present in human life since its inception. However aggression is "a natural instinct in all animal species" that is directly related to the conservation of the species while violence "is the psychological pressure or abuse of force against a person for the purpose of achieving goals against the will of the victim" (De Puig, pp. 141-142). Having made this distinction, it is important to note that the reasons for the aggression and violence have been interpreted differently depending on the field of study. There are three main lines of research of the phenomenon: the instinctivistic developed by psychoanalysis, ethology and sociobiology, the environmentalist supported by social learning theory and the theory of frustration - aggression and constructionist that highlights the importance of socio-historical context (Ibáñez, 2004, pp. 140-142).

When considering the interest and attraction of individuals by the violence depicted in the media, authors like Imbert (1992), Zillmann and Bryant (1996) or Peñalva (2002) have taken into account the three research lines already mentioned. All of them point that this type of media discourses allow viewers to satisfy their morbid curiosity in a safe manner and, at the same time, establish similarities and differences between their situation and that of the characters in the stories.

In this context, we detail the features of television programs that focus on these issues and that are common to reality TV in general and the so-called neotelevision.

1. Limitless want to see

There is an obsession for "wanting to capture in situ the morbid detail or emotional outburst, constantly seeking the passionate effect, the compassionate dimension [...]". It is "a desire to see without limits (nor space, nor referential nor symbolic, nor ethical)". The television becomes the "all-powerful eye, omniscient, from which nothing escapes" (Imbert, 2003, pp. 63, 70-71, 101-102). It is usual that wants to enter "into the interior of the protagonists, exposing their deepest secrets" (Castañares, 1995, p. 112).

2. Illusion of authenticity

The important ratings that these programs achieve are related with the interest in the authentic, the real, which replaces the lure of the plausible, credible. They claim to offer the truth: there are no actors or scripts. The camera lens simply reflects life itself. However, this idea of simply being a mirror of reality is an illusion under which lies a careful creative act. TV does not represent reality but designs its own.

3. Morbid curiosity, sensationalism, entertainment, drama and “extimacy”

In these programs the "strong references" have a special role. For Imbert (2005) these "strong references" matches with the three S: sex, blood and sensationalism (in Spanish, *sexo, sangre* and *sensacionalismo*). In some cases, we may also include the M for death (*muerte*). Objects are selected "for its extreme characteristics that encourage voyeurism (the pleasure of just seeing) and feed the morbid curiosity (the desire to see more and more)".

All (content, images, paralinguage, conductor, music) is at the service of sensationalism. Content and form desperately seek "tear effects" of "melodrama" (Abril, 1995, p. 98). The images and testimonials are usually mainly of three types: violent, painful and emotional.

The viewer is attracted towards these unpleasant events because they connect "with deep and hidden tensions and drives [...] Television seduces because it's a mirror [...] of the inner reality of the beholder" (Ferrés cited in Imbert, 2003, p. 45).

It is easy to identify with the protagonist "because he is us, any of us" (Castañares, 1995, p. 116). Mari Luz Cortés' case offers a good example of this. We all could be the parents of this little girl murdered by Santiago del Valle. All, as Irene Suárez and Juan José Cortés, Mari Luz's parents, would feel anger toward the man who killed her daughter and would like to increase prison sentences for pedophiles.

These protagonists of the stories have no compunction in talking about their feelings or providing details of their private life. It seems natural to reveal them to camera. It is what the psychiatrist Serge Tisseron, following Jacques Lacan, calls "extimacy": "the movement which leads us to hold a part of our inner life, both physical and psychological [...] It consists in the desire to communicate things from the inner world [...] If people want to externalize some elements of their life is in order to get over them, *a posteriori*, interiorizing them otherwise, thanks to the reactions they cause to their neighbors" (Tisseron cited in Imbert, 2003, p. 199). Expressing emotions and the most intimate details becomes a standard practice. Television exploits it to the point of erasing the line between the private and the public sphere. In the past the deepest feelings and thoughts of a person belonged to his/her private life. Now they belong to the millions of viewers who follow the program. Television justifies this action arguing that expression of emotions is part of the essence of being human. However, it seems hard to believe that the expression of emotions and their effect is similar when we reveal it in private, to the nearest people, that when we face the camera lens, before millions of strangers.

4. Coexistence of opposites

The former point, where we discussed how images and testimonials are usually violent, painful and emotional, leads us to consider the coexistence of opposites. Therefore a union of opposites occurs: on one side are the pain, death and violence, and on the other the love and life. Is a "schizoid world" in which "desire and repulsion, attraction and rejection" (Imbert, 2003, p. 79) coexist.

5. Television as rescuer and substitute for other agents of power

TV develops the role of rescuer that, far from simply reflect what happens, shows events that it has caused "because they wouldn't occur without it" (Castañares, 1995, pp. 110 and 111). The case of Brazilian political and conductor Wallace Souza is an extreme example of what we discussed.

To increase the ratings of the crime reality show that he hosted, *Canal Livre*, he organized the murders which he later reported (León, 2009, p. 19; Vargas Llosa, 2009). In Spain, we have a recent example less frightening but also distressing also related to the Mari Luz Cortés' case: the one of Isabel García, Santiago del Valle's wife, who confessed in *El Programa de Ana Rosa* (Tele 5) something she hadn't said in court: that her husband had killed the child.

This case reflects the tendency of television to replace other agents of power, often the judiciary and the security forces, thus implying that both are unable to fulfill their duties.

This is how the viewer takes "as reality something perfectly manipulated (in objective terms) by the media, that is, totally controlled as a narrative form outside the more or less spontaneous evolution of the story that is being built before our eyes" (Imbert, 2003, p. 31). To identify this creative act it's interesting to analyze what kind of speech these programs use, from the verbal and nonverbal language of the conductor, collaborators and protagonists, to the images, shots and types of music. This last element is essential, as it contributes to "create a mood" (Postman, 1991, p. 106).

Preliminary results show that the problem has to do with the following aspects: hipervisibility, hyperrealism, redundancy in the micro, hegemony of the present tense in speech, creation of non-places (atopic spaces, places of passage, of rapid transit), construction of neo-places as alternative spaces, and the collage effect.

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