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

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Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. The concept of symbolic violence

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

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

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

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