82. The bodily construction of medico-scientific expertise: medicine and bodies in Italian talk shows

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Introduction

This presentation aims at analysing a new phenomenon inherent to the process of public (re-)construction of medical and scientific expertise. More specifically, I intend to point out the increasingly salience played by the body as a source of medical and scientific authority within the context of visual media representation.

Hans Peter Peters (2008: 133) writes: “The analysis of how scientific expertise in the media is constructed is an urgent research field”. I intend to approach this topic in a cultural and qualitative way, by combining studies of science and technology communication with an analysis of visual medical culture as well as the qualitative study of television programming and, more specifically, of talk shows. My first assumption is that medical and media technologies are representational tools that produce meaning at a specific moment. Several theoretical and historical overviews of the intersections between medicine and culture, as well as other cultural investigations of medicine’s visual culture, have shown that viewing instruments and techniques, especially the motion picture, have played a crucial role in the emergence of a distinctly modern mode of representation in Western scientific and public culture. This research has pointed out how the ethics of seeing could affect the framing of medical issues. According to Hugh Crawford (1998: 42), “(medical movies and documentaries) underscore the troubling epistemological relations of optical technologies and people – of looking, looking through, and being looked at. Such relations seem transparent... but they are instead fraught with complexity and produce by their very transparency an unacknowledged and overdetermined way of viewing and acting in the world”.

This representational mode, geared to the decomposition and reconfiguration of bodies, is usually associated with the regulation and control of the body, the modifiability and perfectibility of the body in combination with the medical knowledge. I would like to apply this analysis to the construction of scientific expertise, which, as studies of science and technology communication have demonstrated, is radically different from a transparent translation of scientific knowledge. In this sense, it would seem very useful to shift from the analysis of medical movies and documentaries to general communicative spaces where implicit conceptions about science and society surface more neatly.

This observation led me to analyse talk shows, which, according to the numerous cultural commentators of this TV genre, are a peculiar form of public sphere based on conflictual situations, where diverse social groups discuss, negotiate and dispute (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). One of the recurring oppositions on which this TV format is constructed is the opposition between experts and lay people. In this sense, I think that STS-oriented research on the construction of the role of scientists as public communication experts may be complemen-
tary to a qualitative research on talk shows focused on issues of voice, expression, and other features of the performative reconstruction and deconstruction of scientific expertise.

The Bodily Reconstruction of Medico-Scientific Expertise in Italian Talk Shows

With this methodological and theoretical background, I analysed two seasons of the two most important Italian “talk shows of social and political debate”, Porta a porta and Matrix. Both have a similar, typically Italian, format in which topics of general interest, such as political issues, murder cases, national events (such as San Remo song festival or the Pope travelling outside Europe), social and lifestyle tendencies and, of course, science and medicine, are debated by politicians, journalists, celebrities, witnesses, and, of course, scientific and medical experts.

These formats are very popular in Italy and run in the time slot just after prime time on 3 or 4 days a week on the two most important networks (RAI 1 and Canale 5) of the two Italian dominant TV companies RAI and Mediaset. Different from other talk shows, they are oppositional but very polite, the cast is heterogeneous, but also well aware of TV behavioural rules – for example, there are very few lay people, since their role is usually played by celebrities.

Let’s look at a couple of examples of the crucial role played by the body in the public re-construction of scientific expertise. The first is drawn from a show devoted to cosmetic surgery and diets. An obese journalist takes part in a week-long medical weight loss treatment in a very prestigious and expensive clinic. In this short documentary we see the journalist having a medical examination, exercising, hanging around in swimsuit and a bathrobe. He reports his physical feelings at the dining table in front of a very light dinner, when he checks his weight and so forth. Afterwards, he appears in a collar and tie speaking about diets more as an expert than as a patient.

The second example regards the effective construction of scientific authority in a discussion on “euthanasia” through the indirect exhibition of the body of one physician who is at the same time affected with lateral amyotrophic sclerosis. Here are two passages: the introduction and a later clear-cut disagreement.

BV: Mario Melazzini is the head of oncological day hospital of Maugeri Foundation Maugeri of Pavia, but for five years he has also been affected with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. What does this mean?

MM: Well, good evening first of all. This means being a prisoner of your own body. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is a neurodegenerative disease which acts upon the motoneurons, i.e. the brain cells which send impulses to voluntary muscles, and hinder their work. All that is voluntary is inhibited, from very simple hand movements to more complex movements which allow swallowing, the articulation of words, breathing. Practically, someone affected with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, if not adequately supported, will die in 3, 4 years in 85% of the cases.

BV: Excuse me, excuse me, Dr Melazzini. What chance do you have to get better?

MM: Zero, nowadays.
BV: May I ask you, may I take the liberty of asking you, since you are a physician and know your situation better than anyone else...

MM: ... sure...

BV: ... how many more years may you live?

Figure 1. In corpore vili: A journalist in a weight loss clinic

In this introduction, the physical condition plays a crucial role, as in the next one, where the authority of Melazzini stops an argument between two politicians for and against euthanasia.

BV: Your argument is that feeding is not therapeutic obstinacy...

LS: That’s the point. Feeding, eating, doing ordinary stuff... like a child, a person who is not able to do it...

MC: Certainly, it’s natural, with a tube stuck down your throat!

LS: Well, eating is natural, breathing is natural, drinking is natural...

MC: ... you should have asked Welby¹: that was his question: “Is really natural having your throat punctured?

¹ Piergiorgio Welby was a political activist who, affected severely with muscular dystrophy, in the last three months of his life led a political battle for the right to die, inaugurating the debate on euthanasia in Italy.
LS: ... Welby wouldn’t suffer, it won’t hurt much...

MC: … that was his question!

MM: Excuse me, Honourable Santolini, Melazzini wants to answer Cappato… please.

MM: Pardon me, I would like to make some remarks and reflections (hhh)², we should not forget that even those, who are called by my colleagues (hhh) cases or patients, are first and foremost human beings and individuals like (hhh) Giovanni Nuvoli, who I had the pleasure and the honour to meet last Sunday (hhh). Well, it is important to be clear on the meaning of the words (hhh), otherwise it seems that people who have a tube in their throat, and it is not a tube, it is a simple (hhh) probe in the trachea which allows people to breath and live; (hhh) is sometimes done consciously, on others it is imposed, (hhh) but what is demonized is this technology...

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Figure 2: The introduction of Melazzini.

² Breathing.
The Scientific Authority of Bodily Authenticity

To conclude, I would like to stress the importance of the body in scientific public discourse and especially in the construction of medical expertise. This is particularly clear in Italian talk shows of political and social debates, since they are a format that is very close to the public sphere, especially when they speak of medicine. How can we read this media phenomenon? To put it crudely, authenticity is replacing authority in the television public sphere, especially when a decision about biotechnology is warranted (Brown and Michael 2004). As these two cases show, in TV public spheres the body is a valuable source for the rhetoric construction of a authenticity, or, in other words, for making scientific expertise seem warmer, more concrete and less detached.

Bibliography


