

RECEPTION AND SPECTATORSHIP STUDIES: FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS TO UNDERSTAND STUDENTS AS VIEWERS OF AUDIOVISUAL RESOURCES

*ESTUDOS DE RECEPÇÃO E DA ESPECTATORIALIDADE: FUNDAMENTOS PARA COMPREENDER O ALUNO
COMO ESPECTADOR DE OBRAS AUDIOVISUAIS*

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical essay aims at discussing issues that help understand students as viewers of audiovisual materials, based on principles from Reception and spectatorship Studies. Choice of this theme is due to the wide use of audiovisual materials in teaching, although by not maintaining observance of how students relate to the audiovisual work, rich knowledge about how the teaching-learning process is constituted is sometimes lost. In addition, Reception and spectatorship Studies represent an axis that contributes to understanding this dynamics. Throughout elaboration of this study, there is a discussion about the active character of the students' reception, proceeding to the understanding that reception is a place that interacts with other spaces within a communication process and, finally, understanding that students are differentiated viewers.

Keywords: Audiovisual resources; Teaching; Student.

RESUMO

Este ensaio teórico discute questões que colaboram para compreender o aluno na qualidade de espectador de obras audiovisuais, a partir de princípios dos Estudos de Recepção e da Espectatorialidade. A escolha desta temática se dá pelo amplo uso de recursos audiovisuais nas práticas de ensino, considerando que por vezes, ao não manter a observância de como os alunos se configuram e se relacionam com a obra audiovisual, perde-se um rico conhecimento sobre como se dá a constituição do processo de ensino-aprendizagem. Já os Estudos de Recepção são um eixo que contribui para a compreensão dessa dinâmica. Ao longo da construção deste estudo, discute-se o caráter ativo da recepção do aluno, prosseguindo para o entendimento de que a recepção é um lugar que interage com outros espaços dentro de um processo comunicacional, e finalizando com a compreensão de que o aluno é um espectador diferenciado.

Palavras-chave: Recursos audiovisuais; Ensino; Aluno.



INTRODUCTION

This theoretical essay will discuss issues that contribute to understanding students as viewers of audiovisual resources in the field of teaching, using for this some principles from Reception Studies aimed at emphasizing the receivers' activity. However, without centralizing them or distancing them from the other places that are part of the communication process, as some limits are imposed on the receiver's power (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1995).

Choice of this theme is due to the wide use of audiovisual materials in teaching practices although, by not maintaining observance of how students are configured towards an audiovisual work and relate to it, rich knowledge about how the teaching-learning process is constituted is sometimes lost. Research studies that dialog between the communication and education areas show this reality, indicating that there is little interest in analyzing the viewers qualities (PASTOR JR. and TAVARES, 2019).

Although there are studies that demonstrate the dichotomy of audiovisual effects on students, these do not intend to identify the associated circumstances. This underlines the importance of considering studies that go beyond the video and the effect, in line with an investigation of media reception, as proposed by some scholars (CAPUTO; ROUNER, 2011; SLATER *et al.*, 2014).

This lack of knowledge about the particularities attributed to the production of meanings by students is related to the way in which teachers understand the functionality and efficacy of video resources. The trend is to blame the video, the student, the limited class time, and that they may not be the true source of the failure with regard to not meeting the educational objectives determined for the video. A series of elements go beyond these reasons and explain the contributions of videos to teaching. Nevertheless, they can only be identified by learning the students' perspective.

Do we really know students as viewers of the video resources used in the teaching process? How can we know or conceive them as viewers that also differentiate themselves for being students? What would be useful for teachers to know so that they can better understand the logic of the students' functioning when watching a video? In Reception and spectatorship Studies, these questions find a theoretical field capable of helping teachers to better understand students, in order to conceive them as permeated by diverse situations that exert impacts on the

experience of watching a video, as well as the meanings produced from it.

The field of reception studies according to Rezende *et al.* (2015), constitutive issues of this experience, such as those involving the social and cultural contexts. However, they go beyond this general situation by wanting to “rescue the subjects' initiative and creativity and the complexity of everyday life, as meaning production spaces” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1995, p. 54). Very close to Reception Studies, the field of spectatorship, they propose, according to Mascarello (2023, p.23) “to think about the complex dynamics of relations between spectators and films, focusing on spectators, even if they can (and should) be aware of the effects of reception contexts and situations”. They investigate aspects closer to human existentialism, such as the psychological, cognitive, identity aspects mobilized in the encounter with the audiovisual.

Therefore, having as a preliminary argument that, as teachers, we know little about viewer-students in teaching situations, this essay addresses this theme from the thesis that Reception and spectatorship Studies represent an axis to contribute to understanding this dynamic, in which students are a starting point for research but that they unfold into various study dimensions during the investigative path. Thus, based on documentary research and consultation of books and articles on Reception Studies and spectatorship, the text is initially structured in the discussion of the active character of students' reception, proceeding to the understanding that reception is a place that interacts with other spaces within a communication process and ending with the understanding that students are differentiated viewers.

AUDIOVISUAL ACTIVE RECEPTION PRINCIPLE

The meanings produced by the students from the contact with audiovisual resources in the educational process will only be better understood when the notion of passive reception is actually denaturalized by teachers. In developing the Coding/Decoding communication model, Hall (2003) criticizes the conception that meanings are fixed and homogeneous, contesting the idea that every message produced by the sender, with its senses, would be the same one captured by the receiver. Consequently, communication would be a unilinear, unidirectional and transparent process in which the process axis is the message.

Going against the conception that the production of meanings is a passive event requires certain

familiarization with a more expanded view of the reception process, in which the receivers/students are

[...] individuals who establish an active relation with what they see and are not mere decoders of the message, as they produce meaning and adopt a stance. An active response in the sense that they can adopt different stances in relation to what they see. Not only accept but also oppose or negotiate that content; they can even accept some parts and reject others (REZENDE, 2021, p. 377).

It is only possible to give emphasis to the students as active in their production of meanings based on understanding that videos are not the central objects of the reception and educational process. Based on Worth (1981), the belief in universality and the potential of films as a medium that communicates to all people, given the assumption of certain psychological superiority of images over words, are limitations that impose difficulties on the educational process in evaluating the teaching-learning process. A study on the audiovisual area in science teaching “Shows that non-learning is understood as a failure of the material and not as the possibility for students to actively produce senses that escape the intended objectives with the uses of films and videos” (REZENDE *et al.*, 2015, p. 145).

To conceive students as active receivers, teachers must also supplant the idealization of being information transmitters with a central position in the teaching-learning process, believing that the meanings produced by the videos and validated by them will be sufficient to achieve a given educational objective. In this same sense, of considering receivers as blank slates, the field of communication has been grounded for a long time on a mechanical model in which it was believed that “to communicate is to convey information, a meaning already ready, already built, from one place to another” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1995, p. 40).

However, in the educational and communication areas alike, various critiques were targeted at centralization of the information sender and at the passive role expected from the receiver. Starting from Martín-Barbero (1995), the appraisals turn to the confusion of meanings resulting from this centralization, which mix meaning of the message with the one of the process and communication practices, as if they were the same. Opposition to the mechanistic model of the communication process shows a conception that, when

transposed to the field of teaching, favors the understanding that - unlike the blank slate symbolism - students bring with them ideas that preexist to the experience with the audiovisual material. Such view is also a result of the discussion proposed by Schröder *et al.* (2003), who, when describing the communicative process, indicate that the meaning attributed by people to the media message is never limited to what the sources intend and is always enriched by the realities that people bring along with them.

It is important to emphasize that, based on the understanding that students produce their own senses, educators should reflect on situations in which the objectives proposed for educational practices related to audiovisual are not achieved. The knowledge that the meanings of those producing audiovisual texts, of teachers as mediators and of students as receivers, can be variable should be the basis for educators to rethink the way of using audiovisual materials, considering not only use itself but all aspects involved in the production of meanings by the students.

RECEPTION AS A PLACE IN A COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The importance was briefly exposed of recognizing the active nature of meaning production by the students when watching audiovisual resources in the educational context. It is then necessary to understand the nuances of this production of meanings, which takes place in a place inscribed in the communication process – reception – which interacts with other elements of the system, rethinking it. This way of understanding reception departs from the remote mechanical model that, according to Martín-Barbero (1995, p. 40), characterizes “reception as an arrival point of what is already completed”, not allowing space for any activity by the receiver.

However, it is indispensable not to fall into the trap of intending receivers as the ones who produce meanings autonomously, given a disproportionate decentralization within the communication process. Both the production and the message are elements that guide reception, limiting it from dictating infinite interpretations of the same message. According to Martín-Barbero (1995, p. 56), it is impossible to separate production from reception, indicating that “much of reception is somehow unscheduled, but conditioned, organized, touched, production-oriented, both economically and aesthetically as well as narratively and semiotically”. In turn, regarding the message,

Morley (1996) describes that some internal structures and mechanisms of the text provoke certain interpretations and preclude others.

A systematic way to advance understanding of the receivers' activity is to start by appropriating Hall's (2003) reflections on the relationship between reception and message-production in the Coding/Decoding Communication Model. Its proposal is to oppose the traditional research studies on the communication process which consider that every message produced by the sender, with its senses, would be the same one captured by the receiver. In other words, the author disagrees that communication is a unilinear and unidirectional process in which the process axis is the message.

Thus, the development of a more complex communication process is initiated, in which it is understood that the production of meanings is constituted by various determinations. The model has circularity between production and reception of a message in which the producer (coding) tries to capture it and send it in a more singular and closed way, understood as preferential meaning. At the same time, as an active being, the receiver can shuffle the meaning deliberated by coding, distancing or not from a preferential interpretation (HALL, 2003).

Thus, both at the production and reception moments, messages are not transparent practices, as they are multi-referential and their interpretation occurs based on various systems of sociocultural references that can differ from the producers' (HALL, 2003). Consequently, the production of meanings from audiovisual materials by receivers becomes diverse, depending on the referential characteristics of the groups that are not necessarily equal to the coding.

The Coding/Decoding model helps understand that the students' interpretations can be equal or not to the preferential meaning. The interpretation correspondence degree is enunciated by Hall (2003) when he indicates the existence of different interpretation stances, categorized as dominant, negotiated and opposed. In dominant interpretations, the receivers have readings that are very close to the preferential meaning of the text. In turn, in opposed interpretations, the receivers produce a reading that is contrary to the preferential meaning. Finally, in negotiated interpretations, the receivers show readings that position them between the preferential and opposed stances.

In the same sense, Morley (1996) indicates that messages prefer certain interpretations but that they are polysemic; in other words, they are not limited to a single

reading. However, his research advances by expanding the knowledge about Reception Studies beyond the ideological character of Hall's model, in which it is permeated by the logic of the determination of meanings by the dominant group. The author does not admit the assumption that culture is an automatic imposition of social stance since, within the limits imposed by the social contexts, each person takes on various characteristics. Consequently, within the same subculture with different socioeconomic origins there are individuals with different readings. Coding or interpretation would be more related to the social stance, added to the different personal discursive stances, and not directly to the one related to classes.

Based on this perspective, it is understood that, depending on their subcultural education, students can have interpretations that differ from those believed as equivalent to their social stance. It is also possible to understand that the individual and varied experiences take place within a given and structured social context. This is why it is necessary to resort to a cultural map of the viewers, which allows observing their cultural repertoires and the symbolic resources available to the different groups (MORLEY, 1996).

Continuing with the advances in the field of Reception Studies, when developing their Multidimensional Reception Analysis Model, Schröder *et al.* (2003) consider the sociocultural structure in a more encompassing way based on a holistic perspective. Both producers and receivers of audiovisual resources have in themselves a communication collection that is rooted and based on their individual and community histories, of the social and cultural groups to which they are linked. Therefore, people's social experiences are conditioning factors for the production of meanings. In the same sense, Morley (1996) and Schröder *et al.* (2003) indicate that a person's sociocultural capital originates from their inclusion in categories or social stances, based, for example, on gender, wage level, age, gender, ethnicity and race, among others.

Understanding the holistic model as the interrelationship between the dimensions of text, discursive practice (text production and consumption process) and sociocultural practice is useful to understand that, within a communicative event, each dimension exerts an influence on the others. Conferring emphasis to this characteristic, Deacon (2003) states that certain determinations of the productive side can be conditioning factors for the production of meaning by the viewers.

In order to indicate how the holistic model is devoted to the inter-relation property, Schröder *et al.* (2003) present the dimensions of a communication event as follows: the first dimension of the communication process has to do with the communication product itself. In the second dimension, this communication product is seen as the result of discursive practices that link producers and receivers, in which the former operate mainly in the organizational contexts of the media, whereas the latter navigate more strongly in everyday life contexts. Finally, in the third dimension, the communication processes around the concrete communication product are understood as inscribed in sociocultural processes (economic, political, social and cultural forces) that enable media reception.

By transposing knowledge to the teaching practice, meaning that the production of meanings is multidetermined, it is possible to adopt a perspective towards students considering them as receivers who are not isolated when inserted in a communicative process. It is possible to apprehend that the production side, as well as the film text, conditions its readings, but without disregarding that it carries with it certain baggage that is beyond its inclusion in a socioeconomic process or context. It is important to consider its integration among the various social stances that emerge during reception, demonstrating an identity, either fluid or fixed, that intervenes in the reading processes.

Regarding this identity, despite being one person, variables can be presented, depending on the social field in which we are inserted, such as school and home (SILVA, 2000). The various meanings produced by the students, who express identity, are due to their different positions in different moments and places. This indicates that the determination for the production of meanings is not limited, given the different reference systems adopted.

Paradigmatic changes of identity have been taking place throughout history, how to be defined historically and not only biologically. As well as the idea of coherent identity, which according to Hall (2006) is an illusion, given that “[...] we are confronted by a bewildering and changing multiplicity of possible identities, with each of which we could identify ourselves - by least temporarily” (HALL, 2006, p. 13).

Given all these issues related to the communication process, it is important to reflect that the reading process also integrates the students' individual experiences, not ruling out that they are subjected to the contribution of social construction. When analyzing the

reception process under this approach, it is not intended according to Mayne (1993) to consider receivers as decentralized entities but to understand that, even under various sociocultural circumstances, they present contradictory modes when watching a video.

In line with the same author, considered an exponent of the field of spectatorship, various values are invested when watching a film, which can be related to the individuals' biography. The question is that life stories can show social stances where a shallow reading can homogenize people. The discussion around gender (characteristics belonging to and differentiated between masculinity and femininity) is a good example of this discussion, as it led to understanding that people cannot be definitively closed into categories, given that the gender paradigm has long been questioned as a standard that defines the way in which a viewer reads. Based on this perspective about gender, it can be seen that other differences such as sexual, racial and cultural can ground the reception process.

The students' perception of contradictory readings can be understood from the understanding of their life stories, which may not be following predefined models of categories such as gender. However, understanding them in this heterogeneous way requires from those who observe them the ability to question models, which in general are constructed according to a Western idealism characterized by a male, Eurocentric, heterosexual, white and Christian world. The criticism made by Mayne (1993) is not about the existence of a positioning, but about the immobilization of spectators at a point. Therefore, spectatorship is a complex and controversial field when it raises questions that show how the spectator is misunderstood, largely because of the obsessive concern in these categorizations.

Several explanations can be presented for the diversity of readings of the same video, being associated with several factors, such as those based on Social Psychology, which explain the difference in the processing of media messages. The load of affective and cognitive involvement with the media and the genre of the film, identification, previous experience and familiarity of those who watch the narrative can be mentioned (CAPUTO; ROUNER, 2011). Others, validated by the field of Communication, in which Orozco (2014, p.35) identifies that “the processes of interaction with audiovisuals are always mediated”, constituting the production of meanings of messages. The author, who proposes a model from a multimediation perspective, cites the age group, social class, ethnic, gender, identity,

scenario and interpretation communities, as examples of mediations that allow the student:

[...] to signify, de-signify or re-signify the fields of meaning that are brought to them through the various means and types of discourses [...] broadening or restricting understandings (which means that) a message produced to generate something does not always arrive in a good term, since it will be up to her to cross the stormy waters of dispersed mediations (OROZCO, 2014, p.10).

This discussion is a pillar for not merely surrendering to textual analysis as a way to portray the viewer, disregarding the actual reception circumstances and conditions. In considering it a “result of the discourse, viewer and viewing are alien and immune to the variations in historical and sociocultural vicissitudes (gender, ethnicity, race, etc.)” (BAMBA, 2013, p. 31). Students must then be understood as people who question the world and textually-constructed individuals, given that their identity construction is not absolutely under the same coding. From this perspective, the polysemic character of film texts that come to be considered as “habitable by historical viewers” is validated (MASCARELLO, 2006, p. 87).

It is important to emphasize again that, even after the discussion on heterogeneity of the viewer, the holistic perception of the entire communication process should not be eliminated since, according to Bamba (2013, p. 52), when “exploring the tensions between the intentionalities of the producing instances, the expectation horizon of film works and the autonomy of the viewing instances, the purpose is to highlight different types of viewing”.

STUDENTS AS DIFFERENTIATED VIEWERS

In addition to the perception of students as heterogeneous and active individuals and elements of the communication process, it is also possible to perceive them as different viewers from other people, who are not inserted in a teaching practice. When characterizing the context as one of the shaping elements of the production of meanings, Reception Studies agree with the perspective that, in the school context, an individual will make different film readings, depending on the viewing space in which they occur.

According to Odin (2005), the display context of an audiovisual material exerts an influence on how viewers experience it, resulting in different interpretations. Analyzing the display context is fundamental to understand the strength of certain institutions related to the context, such as schools, which can be sources of imposition of readings, and which may have the ability to differ from the determinations of readings existing in the audiovisual materials.

This model developed by Odin (2005), referred to as the Semiopragmatics of Cinema, emphasizes that a given context can intend or demand up to nine modes of reading, identified as follows: spectacular, fictionalizing, fabulous, documentary, argumentative, artistic, aesthetic, energetic and private. Among these, the fabulous, documentary and argumentative modes are the ones that best characterize the experience of watching audiovisual resources in the school context and clarify aspects of the production of senses by students (REZENDE *et al.*, 2015).

It is important to consider that, intrinsic to the school context as a conditioning factor of the reading modes, it locates various indispensable elements that differentiate it from other contexts. An important piece is the appropriation of the audiovisual work by the teacher, who, according to Rezende *et al.* (2015), can modulate the student's perspective in various ways. The teacher acts in this way as a mediator who, through speeches, actions, manipulation and adaptation of the works, collaborates so that use of the audiovisual material dialogs with the premises of the disciplinary content.

In addition to directing the teacher's actions, it is worth bringing to light that the environment itself in which the audiovisual work is watched already emerges as a contextual differential. The practice of watching together with other students can be understood as a co-viewing practice, characterized by Sá (2018) as activities among people that occur while watching a media together. The analysis of these practices highlights the importance of interaction between students, including the teacher in this dynamic, at the viewing moment for the production of meanings. In this way, it is possible to understand that the practice of watching together, commonly found in the classroom, is a complex social activity permeated by the sharing of sounds, opinions and dialogs that will contribute to construction of meanings by the students.

The notion that reception spaces or moments exert impacts on the students' reading modes clarifies how film reading is likely to differ with changing environments, student groups, and reading uses and

expectations. It is also important to consider that, although students are doing a film reading directed to disciplinary content, it does not prevent the interpretive investment they employ from being endowed with other institutional determinations, other than the school's, with family and religion as examples. In summary, as argued by Bamba (2013, p. 35), a “cause and effect relationship or a direct homology between textual and contextual determinations” should not be expected. Scheduled readings exist and can be followed by students, while they may also not cooperate with the reading instructions.

CONCLUSIONS

In this text, it was sought to outline the contributions provided by Reception and Spectatorship Studies to education, when this latter appropriates audiovisual materials as educational objects; and, more specifically, the collaborations generated by the understanding of the production of meanings of audiovisual materials by students.

The diverse knowledge of Reception and Spectatorship Studies, which is fundamental for using audiovisual resources in the school context, proposes problematizing the students' role as receivers of audiovisual messages. This knowledge is not interested in maintaining the understanding of the students' passivity but, rather, to make alive the notion that they are active receivers of audiovisual materials and, thus, to be able to produce meanings.

The reflections generated by Reception and Spectatorship Studies in education encourage educators to ask new questions; to examine naturalized discourses and knowledge and their implications for educational practice with audiovisual resources. Drawing the attention to the display context becomes a necessity to better understand the senses produced by the students in contact with the media. Finally, the complex field in which this production of meanings takes place shows that educators in the education area need strategies that can cover this entire scope. In addition, they should use reception as an opportunity to evaluate the process of using videos in the educational context.

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