

Multidimensional and Multicultural Media Literacy – social challenges and communicational risks on the edge between cultural heritage and technological development*

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During quite some time, we have been “observing some of the new environments of media exposure”¹ and we may probably say, by now, that the multidimensional forms of media exposure that can be experienced daily through the usage of different technologies and technological devices are not

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¹ Reia-Baptista, 2006.

always signs of correspondent multicultural media literacy phenomena. We also know, from earlier contexts and attempts to combine media, technology and literacy inside different cultural environments of different societies and public communication spheres, that the «empowerment» effect that could be expected to arise from those exposure situations is not always a factor of cultural enrichment and, on the contrary, it assumes too many times the character of some alienation phenomenon or, at least, an alienator mode of media appropriation.

This statement seems to be rather actual for the different younger generations living all over the world among *New Environments of Media Exposure*, such as the internet, mobile phones, different «pod» devices and mobile television, which have become a major and eventually the richest part of the youngsters’ cultural daily way of life, i.e., their wider and multidimensional media cultures built upon their daily media consumption and appropriations, representing, in fact, their main culture.

Still their entertaining, communicative

and social lives also comprehend older media, especially open signal and satellite television, video-games, personal hi-fi devices and films, among others. Nevertheless, their appropriations and usage patterns of these media technologies are in many ways rather specific, so one of the main risks, in a media literacy context, is the danger of generalisation about common patterns of appropriation. However, one general feature in our attitudes towards these media cultural effects has been taking them as they were often ambivalent: television is still seen both as educational and as a drug; mobile phones are perceived both as a nuisance and as a lifesaver; computer games are viewed both as learning tools and as addictive timewasters and film has been looked at since the very beginnings of the 7th art as a medium of great educational power as well as a medium with an enormous range of escapism dimensions. In fact, some results from different research projects² show that these new media environments and their appropriations imply, in a very high degree, multiple dimensions of different usage representing different added values of media culture and literacy. Furthermore, digital television and broad band connections open access to many more channels and multiple mobile devices allowing a much wider usage of music, images, games, communication patterns and on-line cultural migration across different platforms expanding enormously the range of contents – challenges and risks – available in every society, either they still preserve a strong cultural heritage or strive after patterns of fast technological development and adaptation.

² For example like *MEDIAPPRO*, Reia-Baptista et al, 2006.

Within these, at first sight, «old» and «new» contexts, we must be prepared to explore the balance between challenge and risk, that follow along with the opportunities of this new global age, with an open mind, being prepared to learn alongside the youngsters that are already native users of multiple languages and technologies, but also being prepared to share with them our inherited multicultural multidimensional knowledge and literacies related to other general subjects like ethics and civic values.

Such an approach is absolutely necessary in order to achieve a more developed degree of a global stage of Media Literacy, which, in turn, may contribute to a better multicultural and multiethnic human understanding. In the context of global communication in which we all live today, such an adequate level of Media Literacy is, according to many of its most accepted definitions, in fact, rather difficult to achieve without a wide multicultural perspective, but, on the other side, Multiculturalism, how broad or narrow we may define it, is a concept that simply can not exist today without a strong media component, including its most basic elements of media culture.

1 Transmitting cultural heritage and constructing knowledge along with media culture

Probably, as I've said before³, since mankind knows itself as mankind that such knowledge has been constructed and expressed through different narrative layers of mediated com-

³ Reia-Baptista, 2006.

munication, structuring themselves upon another and giving origin to new patterns of narrative strategies along with new communication instruments and media devices such as new gestures, sounds, images, words, languages, discourses and all the new channels of communicative diffusion and exposure, from ancient theatre to modern film, or post-modern mobile audio and video deconstructed messages within computer processing networks, e.g. like «You Tube», «My Space», or «Second Life», i.e. the media in general as we know them in their evolution until today. In fact, when we speak about new media, we are generally speaking about devices that have emerged in our daily life environments rather recently, but that managed rather quickly to reshape some of our ancestral habits of personal communication and our most common communicative patterns of different multicultural media usage. Many times, at a first glance, these new patterns of communication and media usage seem to be so complex that we feel tempted to claim that we are entering, with them and via them, into a new paradigm of personal and social communication. And it may well be so, that is why we must observe and study them from different perspectives and considering their different role within different cultural, social, artistic, industrial, economical and political contexts, but when we observe these new patterns a little closer, we can notice that although they are developing devices and postures upon new complex and differentiated channels and patterns of communication, those very same new environments of media exposure may not have developed, necessarily, so many new narrative functions that would differentiate them from older media. These narrative functions

are, have been and will probably remain to be essential to the processes of collective memory preservation, cultural transmission and general knowledge construction, which represent, all of them, really important dimensions of global cognition processes for any society that aims to develop, along with its citizens, a deep sense of participation towards better and richer concepts of citizenship, either they may be eastern, western, northern or southern cultural related concepts.

So, let us then observe some significant cases of factual media literacy construction, from an historical and a multicultural point of view, to see if we can draw any relevant conclusions that may help us to understand the media cultural processes, challenges and risks, that we may be facing in these new media environments of our daily mediated life.

2 The case of Thomas Edison, the cinema and the educational technology paradigm

Since the very beginning of film history that film enthusiasts of all kinds, but specially industrialists and other film enterprisers, have been rather optimistic about the large possibilities of using films in educational environments. Thomas Edison, for example, is supposed to have said in the early twenties: "I believe that the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system and that in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use of textbooks."⁴

⁴ As quoted by Cuban, 1986, p. 9.

As we know today, it did not happen exactly that way. But, in spite of the failure of the prophecy, there are many other links and connections that have been established between motion pictures and education until our days, and I think that this process is faraway from being accomplished. Those connections are not always clear enough, or so well known in the cinematographic and educational fields, whose agents are, generally and intuitively, aware of the existence of some links of mutual influence, but who do not act so often, at least consciously, in consequence of their presence and their implications as major factors of different processes of acquisition of media literacy.

It seems, then, that there is at least one good reason to do some research within this field, or intersection of fields – cinema, media and pedagogy in a broad sense, which means to improve our knowledge about those patterns of influence. But I believe that there are a few other reasons too. Some of them presenting quite a number of really specific and almost palpable characteristics that assume great importance for the global communication processes, and therefore educational and cultural, going on in our modern societies, of which, cinema, television, video, books, pictures, texts, sounds, computers, records and other mediatic devices are integrated parts. To research and study this complex mediatic body is a task of great actual importance for a better definition of the field of media literacy as well as major factor for a wider understanding of the modern aspects of multiculturalism.

We do already know since a long time before, from the field of Educational Technology, that a film, when screened within a specific educational context, may assume some

very peculiar pedagogical aspects according to its screening forms. We know, for example, that the same cinematographic sequence on a celluloid film strip and on a video tape required different screen situations and offered different pedagogical approaches. We also know, from the fields of Communication Sciences, that any film, as a mass communication medium, although screened within a non-specifically educational context, assumes always some general pedagogical aspects, which maybe called the pedagogical charge of film. These aspects are mainly of two different kinds: a supposed educational effect of a general ethic character and a real educational effect of a, mainly, semantic character. This means that films and television, probably, have been teaching us under the former century many different messages, interrelated with their content and form, that have been more or less good and more or less bad according to the existing predominant moral norms, but it means also that films and television have been teaching us, definitively and continuously, new and more complex reading ways to decode those messages. We have, in fact, learned under the years to understand more complex film texts and we have accomplished, at least in the western world, what we can call a developed 'film culture' in the sense that Béla Balázs gave to the term – a bunch of cultural codes that comprehend our reading skills of the 'form-language' and that condition our ways of understanding the filmic messages⁵.

We can, then, ask ourselves what happens when films are screened in a completely new communication context - the multimedia one? Do the pedagogical dimensions of

⁵ Balázs, 1945, p. 34.

film remain as present and general as they have been until now, or will it increase even more? Will the semantic aspects take over completely? Will the ethic aspects require new forms of classification of the filmic multimedia messages? Will our film culture change? And how? Will we need a new film educational approach? Or a new media literacy concept?

I think that we'll have to observe how these questions have been raised before, under the development of our film cultures and to observe how they are reflected now, in the new multimedia context, analysing and testing some examples that may help us to infer some answers.

In fact, Edison was not the only one with rather optimistic visions for the development of a film pedagogy, and one could think that at least some of the more obvious structural connections would have been normally established between cinema and education. In fact, we cannot say, in a general way, that there were many stable institutional links between the different nations' cinematographic industries and their educational systems during the silent era, and although that early optimism has grown along with the development of the technologies and with the world wide promotional development of the cinema, in practice, it was only in the countries with a rather strong and early cinematographic industry, like U.S.A. and France, that a more durable connection between cinema and education could be established. In the U.S.A., for example, Larry Cuban tells us that there were published some early catalogues of educational films "listing over 1,000 film titles that could be

rented by schools"⁶ and that Thomas Edison, again, owned an early rental film library⁷, while in France, Robert Lefranc informed us that there were installed 28 000 silent projectors of 9,5 mm in french schools at the end of the thirties⁸. An exception must be made, here, for the late Soviet Union, since its national cinematographic industry was deeply connected, in a formal way, to many instructional and cultural authorities and committees of the new country from the very beginning of the revolution, in fact, it became officially dependent from the ministry (people's commissariat) of education in 1919, as Jay Leyda tells us in his *History of the Russian and Soviet Film*⁹, an example of those connections can be observed, in the early thirties, in that unique experience of film pedagogy that was developed by Alexander Medvekin's, among others, 'CINETRAIN'¹⁰.

At this stage it may be advisable to establish some cultural differences between pedagogics and ethics, since this is, still today, a major topic of discussion between cultures and nations.

3 The case of John Grierson, still the cinema and the ethics of documentary

Ethics is an item that has been always present in the general history of the cinema but espe-

⁶ Cuban, op. cit., p. 12.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Lefranc, 1981, p. 153.

⁹ Leyda, 1960, pp-121-126, p. 142.

¹⁰ Medvekin, 1973.

cially in the history of Documentary. It is very much so today and in a much wider degree than we may imagine, from daily TV news to general documents and reports, implying a rather variable literacy approach in each context. This fact turns often the documentary film product into an axiom, i. e., the film document, like any other real document, is, or should be, a true document. The common presence of this axiom gave birth to some sort of a wide generalized but unwritten system of ethical principles, in other words, almost some sort of a global deontological code system for documentary films and filmmakers. In fact, the manipulation possibilities of such a system have always been many and quite different in nature, but they usually share a specific characteristic in common: the document's educational aim. And here, I am obviously not concerned with strictly didactic definitions of the documents' educational aims, but with a much wider and general definition which comprehends any intention to depict something in its real context for any specific purpose.

The strong pedagogic potential that is inherent to the former statement was profusely invoked in the work of John Grierson, both in films and writings, in ways that allude often and rather clearly to the different ethical aspects that are connected to the educational value of the cinema and establishing, necessarily, further connections between that value, or potential, and a much wider social, cultural and historical context.

Grierson thought that the second world war happened, also, because education had failed to form the human mind to order human affairs of that time and gave us the idea that a new concept of education would be necessary for the modern times. As a mat-

ter of fact, he dedicated, while the world was still at war, an all part of his book *On Documentary* to the educational problem, part IV – 'Education: A New Concept'. He wrote in the beginning of the first chapter of that part: "I suspect we have held on to concepts of education fit for the last century but no longer for this and have therefore failed to create the mental qualities and capacities our generation has needed."¹¹

Then, he advances some perspectives, trying to define what kind of new educational concept he had in mind: "I merely mean that education is the key to the mobilization of men's minds to right ends or wrong ends, to order or chaos; and that is what education is. If men's minds have not been mobilized aright, the educational process has not been good enough. If, on the other hand, men's mind are in the future to be mobilized aright, it means an increase in the wisdom and power of the educational process. So, looking beyond the immediate, the greatest task of our time is not one for soldiers but one for educators and, because of the nature of the problem, it is certainly the hardest task they have ever been set."¹²

So, what we have here is a very powerful statement produced in the middle of this century, with the world in a deep general crisis, by a major profile of documentary, aiming at very wide conclusions and establishing some very strong connections. First, Grierson states clearly that education is an ethical process that can choose between 'right ends and wrong ends'. Second, he states that the educational process has not been 'good enough' and needs to change, requiring more

¹¹ Grierson, 1946, p.122.

¹² Ibid., p.123.

'wisdom and power'. If Grierson lived today, I believe that he would replace the designation 'wisdom and power' with something more precise about information and a more efficient capacity of communication, or he would eventually name it just plain Media Literacy and Empowerment.

Such a statement implies indeed a main request for educators within different cultural contexts and we could say that many educators all over the world have produced similar statements not only in a specific context of education for peace, civic literacy, environmental awareness, cultural dignity or any other media literacy connected subjects, but even as the necessary educational guide lines towards the new nature of the increasing social and technological challenges of this new century. The media literacy novelty here is to assume that the role that Grierson played, namely that of an educator, was, in fact, the role of a film educator. Not anymore the cinematographer that can play some important educational role, but the cinematographer that is just and only an educator. And if there were any doubts about this assumption, Grierson specified it further: "The entire basis of comprehension and therefore of educational method may change: in fact it is now changing."... "No one, I hope, imagines that the new society with its wide horizons and complex perspectives can be taught in the old ways, and in fact we are discovering that the only methods which will convey the nature of the new society are dramatic methods. That is why the documentary film has achieved unique importance in the new world of education. It does not teach the new world by analysing it. Uniquely and for the first time it *communicates* the new world

by showing it in its corporate and living nature."¹³

It is rather interesting to notice Grierson's emphasising of the word 'communicates' to characterize the functions of documentary film in the 'new world' while he states that the 'new society' needs, for its education 'dramatic methods'. We will see that this conjunction of functions and methods still are, today, some of the most effective pedagogical strategies that characterize the modern multimedia materials and their correspondent multimedia literacy, but also their request of multicultural contextualization in this «brave new world» that we are living in, and its «corporate and living nature», are, in fact, nothing else than the different cultural heritages that we try to mingle, many times through powerful media, but so many times also with rather little success.

4 The case of new multimedia, global media literacy and multiculturalism

Travelling in time and technology, we could now turn our attention to other modern industrialists, or technology traders, and notice their beliefs, this time not only in cinema as a powerful pedagogical medium, but in multimedia, as a global phenomenon, in which cinema is taking a growing part.

John Sculley, one of the former chiefs of Apple Computer Inc, wrote in his foreword to *Interactive Multimedia*: "Imagine a classroom with a window on all the world's

¹³ Ibid., p. 129.

knowledge. Imagine a teacher with the capability to bring to life any image, any sound, any event. Imagine a student with the power to visit any place on earth at any time in history. Imagine a screen that can display in vivid color the inner workings of a cell, the births and deaths of stars, the clashes of armies and the triumphs of art."... "I believe that all this will happen not simply because people have the capability to make it happen, but also because people have a compelling need to make it happen."¹⁴

Once again, is very interesting to notice that the differences between the different cultural and historical beliefs in the pedagogical power of the media are almost not existing. However, that shows much more of how intensive and constant the industry's expectations to penetrate the educational market have been during all these years, than it reflects some really tested perspectives for the media, or its media literacy reflection within a pedagogical context. Nevertheless, we have to admit that these perspectives are much more realistic now, all over the world, than ever before because of the new technological media context in which they are drawn and which, in turn, makes that we cannot dismiss them anymore as a bunch of new/old prophecies based on the industry's best wishes. In fact, some of them are already happening every day and imply different effects upon our social and cultural structures. Thus, we must deal with them, trying to find what are the new facts that characterize these new media, their materials and their real implications, mainly pedagogical in fact, upon the communication pro-

¹⁴ In the forward to Ambron & Hooper, 1990, p. vii.

cesses that can be developed towards an audience, even if it consists of one only receiver, in a formal educational context, or any other context of implicit literacy usage of many multicultural faces and aspects.

The increasing development of daily life multimedia materials as new supporting vehicles of filmic languages, for example, and their educational use, have raised up some new questions and problems within cinema, communication and new contexts of usage and appropriation like satellite and digital television and its pedagogical implications. This fact, in turn, has lead many research works dealing with these problems into some new ways of approaching those very same mediatic vehicles, that is, the cinema, the films, the materials and the filmic languages in general, in their own mediatic context, trying to achieve a more accurate knowledge about the complex and multiple phenomena that characterize the different mediation processes within those contexts.

This kind of attempts generally requires an interdisciplinary approach that covers the different fields in question and considers their historical, theoretical, technological, æsthetical, ethical and cultural characteristics as conditioning factors of the problems in scope, per se, or in mutual interaction. This means that most times it is rather difficult to delimit the fields of knowledge that have to be present in those analytical efforts towards a global understanding of the questions in study. To minimize this problem, it is absolutely necessary to define, as sharp as possible, the object of study and its specific fields of knowledge and that is not an easy task to undertake within any of the multicultural multimedia literacy contexts that we have to deal with.

This is, of course, a pretty old and very well known problem for researchers of all subjects and matters, but, nevertheless, it develops some rather complex ramifications inside media studies as the research widens its perspective to comprehend a more global approach, like the multicultural perspective, and even when it sharpens its focus. Thus, it becomes more necessary to define with stringency the multimediatic and multicultural fields in study, than to try to exclude a priori, peripheral fields of knowledge that may seem irrelevant for the approach in sight at a first glimpse.

When I started this essay approaching example that could illustrate a partial, but very problematic, vision of the fields in study, with some help from the more concrete intersection between cinema and education, I wanted to show, rather early, that any approach to the problem would need a wide perspective of analysis because of the global pedagogical aspects of the communication processes in which the media literacy and the multicultural problems are really inserted.

The fields in question, here, are those that comprehend and shape the recent, but generally accepted designations – multimedia and multiculturalism, and although it possible to try to provide some more consistent and stringent definitions of the terms, it is necessary to introduce into the discussion their mediatic and cultural limits rather early, in order to open the discussion and the consequent global understanding of the problems within that discussion.

Multimedia and its multicultural equivalent may designate different information and communication processes that combine different mediatic and cultural limits and con-

texts and problems. One of the most important problems that have been often enunciated is, exactly, the one that questions the extent of the mediatic limits of the different vehicles supporting the original documents and works. For example, until which point are we still in the presence of a given film work, or of a given news sequence, when they are shown, no longer on the large screen of a movie theater, projected from a celluloid reel – the original presentation form for which it was conceived – or on a relative small television screen, but beamed into a micro mobile screen, controlled through sequences of alpha-numerical commands and, probably, shown to some very specific audiences, such as a class, a small working group, or a single, very special individual - the multimedia multicultural single receiver.

Another facet of the former problem is the one that questions how the language of the original work, generally assuming some literary shape and correspondent literacy understanding, may transmute its contents and forms into a new language system and eventually into a new work of different cultural implications.

These multiple aspects of the problem embody the main question of nowadays media literacy, which is, in brief, to approach those problematic facets as they appear within a given film, tv or digital work, based on a literary or realistic original and assuming the shape of manipulative multimedia materials, requiring in general a global understanding of a much wider 'Pedagogy of Communication' – a designation that was coined by Raymond Ball in 1971 to describe the necessity of a new communicative educational approach at all cultural levels, at school, in the family, within the massmedia and towards

society, in order to gain new communication and literacy skills that were more adequate to our new global media societies.¹⁵

It is true that all these items and approach angles are not completely new. Some of them are already known from other contexts of media studies or media literacy and we can recognize some of their shapes and domains from former discussions about the differences between literature and theater, handmade pictures and photographs, theater and cinema, cinema and television, or, more recently, between cinema, video and computer generated images and sounds. But the main question remains generally the same: different artistic and communicative languages upon different mediatic devices require different analytical approaches to state different contextual and cultural implications. Nevertheless, there are some new aspects within the main questions that may confer a more pluridimensional character to the problem and those are the given by the necessary introduction of raising issues about global and local tolerance, global and local peace agreements and last but not least, global and local multiethnic understanding of the different mediatic and cultural heritages that surround us. All these are crucial aspects for any efficient media literacy and multicultural approach, so let us try not forget them in our attempts to develop dialogue and communication through our multimediatic and multicultural barriers.

¹⁵ Ball, 1971.

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