



Teaching Teachers to use Films in Education. Experiences of a Decade

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Abstract

Watching a film is one of the most common and widespread experiences in our time. We all know that we need to learn how to read before we can hope to understand what we read. But, surprisingly, it is often assumed that everybody can read and understand a film simply because he or she can see it. Just as reading is not the same thing as individuating each one of the letters in a word, understanding film messages is not the same as watching a screen. We need to be appropriately taught to read the audiovisual language in order to analyse and critically interpret what we see and hear while watching a film, if we want to make the most out of this experience, and to deeply appreciate the different levels of our reading. Audiovisual messages have their own grammar, their own semantics; and we all need to receive an education on this field.

Schools are expected to teach their students how to read any media, both those that we consider more "traditional" (books, photographs, cinema, radio, television...) or the "new" technologies (video games, multimedia, Internet, social networks, etc). This is so, because education aims to help students to become critical rational agents, capable of questioning and accurately evaluating what they see or hear.

Along with this, there is an increasing number of school teachers who use cinema in the classroom for multiple educational purposes: motivation, information, providing aesthetic experiences, fostering emotional and moral education, etc. But in order to use films with an educational purpose, teachers need to be educated themselves. They have to know how to read a film, rather than using it simply as a means to achieve certain pedagogical goal, or a mere tool to transmit particular ideas, with the risk of indoctrination.

Since 2003 I've been organizing courses to teach teachers how to read films, to help them to make a good use of cinema as a means for education in the classroom. More than 230 school teachers have been involved in these programs, and I would like to share with the Conference delegates some experiences about the contents, methodology, activities, and some of the most salient outcomes of the courses, among which is the publication of a book written by a group of school teachers who attended them courses.

1. New Settings, New Languages

Mass media have played a key role in the radical transformation society has undergone over the last 100 years or so. In 1541 Guttenberg's printing press marked a turning point in the way humanity gained access to knowledge. In a similar way, three major milestones have changed and enriched the way human beings communicate and interact in the 20th century: radio, cinema and ICT developments.

Reading is an invaluable instrument in our personal development and it plays a key role in our acquisition of knowledge. And in the last years, much personal effort and economic expenses have gone into promoting reading and literacy. However, there is a general concern that there is increasing illiteracy among the literate, bewildered by images and sounds or fascinated by webpages and the attractions of the mobile telephone.

Reading and writing have been encouraged, but audiovisual media education what remains repeatedly overlooked. People need to be taught how to read, in order to understand and make the most out of *all* media, be they the traditional written word or the more recent languages of ICT. If not, we will most probably end up by being able to "see" lots of things, without actually being able to "understand" them. People can be informed about different situations yet unable to know what to do with this information, or how to *transform information into knowledge*. In what follows, I will consider mainly audiovisual messages conveyed by cinema (that what we usually call "films").



In a world like ours, made up of symbolic connections produced by acoustic and visual media, to know how to read and write using all media is of great relevance, if we want to learn to live autonomously and responsibly, because cinematic messages can easily be subject to manipulation

The question is: “Do we know how to *read* the messages that films transmit? Do we *understand* what they say to us? Does education prepare the new generations for this task?

In order to teach young people how to read, understand and apply to their lives audiovisual messages, educators need some expertise, because in the same way as reading a text means not only recognising the letters and the words, but also knowing how to grasp the meaning, discover metaphors, analogies ..., to read a picture does not mean only to see the morphological features. It is necessary some knowledge about the particularities of this language –its syntax, semantics, ecc.-. If not, the spectator will remain passive in the face of the emotional impact that the film provokes, and helpless before its great power of seduction.

Reading is more than a mere decipherment of text. To read is to *understand* a message, to capture its content; this enable the reader to apply this information in other situations.

In a world like ours, made up of symbolic connections produced by acoustic and visual media, to teaching how to read and write using all media is important, if we want to learn to live autonomously and responsibly.

2. Iconic and Audiovisual Languages

Not all reading is about the decryption of written messages, since there are other means of interpretation in the world around us. Messages may be transmitted orally, by the written word, and also by means of images. Iconic and symbolic language has been the principal agent of the extension and fixation of culture in many civilizations. Iconographical media have been used in the past when the majority of the population was illiterate. For example, murals and sculptures on churches or house walls were intended to tell a story. Images were the vehicle most apt to convey a message to people who otherwise would not have understood it.

There has been a revolution in the world of iconic communication after two historic inventions: *photography* at the beginning of the 19th century (for the first time, real images could be “captured” and kept) and at the end of the same century, *cinema* made possible to record the moving image.

Cinema was, from its origins, an object for aesthetic appreciation an important industry, and an especially complex and vivid depiction of society. It plays a decisive role in the way we think, and it has shaped the collective imagination of several generations.

In its early days, cinema was considered just a scientific curiosity, a way of entertainment; and still today there are people who fail to look beyond this rather superficial view of cinema, and cannot recognise both its educational potential and its liability to manipulation. It's true that cinema is an excellent source of entertainment, but to consider films *only* from this perspective would be to miss the point and to open a door to the danger of unconscious manipulation by cinema's subtle language. This is why “cinematographic literacy” is needed.

Audiovisual language has its own literacy education system. While we all easily assume that *we need to learn how to read* before we can hope to *understand* what we read, it is often wrongly thought that anyone can *read and understand a film*, simply because he or she is able to *see and hear* it. Just as *reading a text* is not the same thing as *individuating each one of the letters of a word*, *reading a film* is not the same as *watching a screen*. We need to learn how to read both texts and films.

Audiovisual literacy begins with the *recognition* of the meaningful units of film language. Then the spectator is in a better position to understand, evaluate and enjoy cinema, becoming an *active participant* in the process rather than a *passive consumer* of movies.

When we learn to read a film, we can engage in a “dialogue”, in a sincere and fruitful discussion about the creative work with the film makers -authors, director, actors, technicians, etc.-. This dialogue leads to “different readings” of the film's text and opens up our minds to more than one “good interpretation” of the film. This is why the same film can provide a completely different experience to different people, and even to the same person in different circumstances.

3. Cinema as a means for Education

Cinema's power over human subjectivity is obvious. Unlike other media cinema affects the human psyche at sensitive, intellectual and imaginative levels simultaneously. This is why cinematographic images stick to us and are better remembered than any rational explanation.

What we see in a film is linked to a sensation, and pervades our imagination with an intensity that depends mainly on three factors: 1) the film's use of audio and visual effects (angles, shots, colours,



locations, soundtrack...); 2) the story that is told (topic, narrative structure, characters...); 3) the spectator's mood while watching the film.

Cinematographic narratives *touch* human life because they provide knowledge and arise emotions, but in order to become useful tools for educational purposes, we have to acquire audiovisual literacy. Only then the spectator will be able to distinguish between fact and fiction, and to keep a suitable distance from the film to avoid feeling personally under threat. In real life we are *participants*; when watching a film we are *spectators*; life is not like Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985).

One of the first steps of "cinematographic literacy" is being able to recognize the difference between "liking what we see" and "liking how it is presented on the screen". This helps to avoid confusing the aesthetical merit of a work of art with other types of evaluation, be they ethical, historical, religious, social...; needless to say that all these are needed in order to make an all-round judgment about a film.

Cinema is potentially a good educator, since cinematographic narratives help to discover that there are other ways of feeling, thinking and acting, thus making a positive contribution to attaining emotional maturity and freedom. But films can also have a negative effect on our emotional development. While on the one hand it can open up new ways to develop good emotions and attitudes, on the other hand there is the risk of cinema being a supplier of sentimental stereotypes: it is not unusual to find many young people turning to films in order to find out what they "should" think, feel or do; and to copy attitudes that are socially accepted. Audiovisual literacy reduces this risk, helping to understand the difference between "this is how things *could* be" and "this is the *only* acceptable way of doing something".

4. Teaching teachers to use films in education

The first condition for making a good use of cinema in education is the teacher's ability to *read* films. Teachers need to be familiar with the *elements* and *grammar* of this language, its *expressivity*, and some of its *techniques* to ensure that the film is taken for what it is, rather than being merely used as a tool to achieve a pedagogical goal. If the nature of a film -as a technical and artistic product, and a particular language- is not respected, there is a danger of misusing films for conveying certain sets of ideas or, in a worst-case scenario, to indoctrinate the students.

Success in using films as educational instrument, lies also on the teacher's ability to provoke in the students an attitude that is both *pro-active* and *critical* towards the film. Only then, students will be able to *read*, *interpret* and *evaluate* the film's message, and apply it to their own lives.

Over the last 10 years I have been running different courses to prepare teachers to use films in education. In these teachers learn to read how to read film, to understand the expressive dimension of visual and audible signs in different contexts, and to grasp the psychological effects that these elements may have on the spectator. As it is obvious, teachers don't need become as experts as cinema critics, however, they should be able of understanding in depth this language if they want to use films as instruments in education.

The courses are designed as an introduction to the specific elements of film language and its application to educational practice. I will briefly outline the main features of these courses:

A. Objectives

- a) To outline the basic film techniques, stressing their expressive features
- b) To show some anthropological issues raised by the cinema
- c) To present a wide range of activities where films are used as means for education

B. Program contents

1. Cinema: language, technology and art.
2. The audiovisual elements: narrative, sight and sound.
3. The narrative structure of human existence.
4. Narratives: expanding the boundaries of experience.
5. The presentation of the image: shots, sequences, scenes, transition elements, light and color, photography.
6. The soundtrack: dialogues (script) and other sounds (music, noises and silences).
7. Archetypes of human existence: a cinematic approach
8. Educational possibilities of films
9. Using films in the classroom



C. Methodology

Distance Education (on-line courses). A Study Guide is provided for the course, with specific indications for the activities. Students may contact the teaching staff by telephone, e-mail, and the UNED web campus.

D. Recommended Bibliography

- AMILBURU, M. G. y LANDEROS, B., *Teoría y práctica del "análisis pedagógico del cine"*, UNED, Madrid, 2011. (Teaching "educational film analysis". Theory and practice)

The first parts of the book has four theoretical chapters; the second presents a learning experience developed in the School of Communication, where an "educational film analysis" technique was implemented. It also provides models of worksheets to plan other activities.

- DE SANTIAGO, P. y ORTE, J., *El cine en 7 películas. Guía básica de lenguaje cinematográfico*, Cie Dossat, Madrid, 2002. (Cinema in seven films. A Basic Guide of film language)

The book describes the elements of film language, with examples taken from classic movies (Casablanca, Psycho, West Side Story, Blade Runner...). The book provides a good selection of frames from these movies, and explains the psychological effect of different film techniques.

- GONZALEZ, J. F., *Aprender a ver cine La educación de los sentimientos a través del cine*, Scepter, Madrid, 2002. (Learning to see movies. The education of the feelings in the cinema)

This work deals with the educational dimension of films. The chapters analyze the major film genres (Epic, War, Drama, Thriller, Western, Sci-fi, Screwball Comedies. It includes some anthropological studies (with particular interest to the feelings of the characters) and questionnaires that can be used to organize educational activities.

- CAPARRÓS LERA, J. M., *Guía del espectador de cine*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2007. (Moviegoer's Guide)

A basic guide for beginners, presents cinema both in its technical and expressive aspects. Some of the sections of this book may serve as examples for further activities

E. Activities and Evaluation

Each student must present two essays:

- *An educational activity project*, using a film. This work should include the following sections:

1. Technical details of the film and synopsis.
2. Group of students for which the activity is planned.
3. Subject area to which refers.
4. Objectives (cognitive, procedural and attitudinal)
5. Development of the activity: number of sessions and content
6. Evaluation
7. Bibliography

- *Selection of films*

The second task consists in making a selection of 10 films on the same topic (i.e., a historical period, race conflicts, ethical dilemmas in the profession, politics, journalism, adaptations of literary works to the screen, etc.), that could be used for educational purposes, justifying the choices

F. Outcomes

More than 230 teachers have attended the courses, and all of them have expressed their satisfaction. I have edited a book including 10 of the best projects planned by the students. This book aims to help other teachers to use cinema as a pedagogical instrument: AMILBURU, M.G. (Ed.), *Mil mundos dentro del aula. Cine y Educación*, UNED, Madrid, 2009. (A thousand worlds in the classroom. Cinema and Education). The book provides a detailed analysis of 10 films -within a wide range of themes and film genres- and it offers suggestions to develop educational.

References

- [1] AMILBURU, M. G. y LANDEROS, B., *Teoría y práctica del "análisis pedagógico del cine"*, UNED, Madrid, 2011.
- [2] AMILBURU, M.G. (Ed.), *Mil mundos dentro del aula. Cine y Educación*, UNED, Madrid, 2009.
- [3] CAPARRÓS LERA, J. M., *Guía del espectador de cine*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2007.
- [4] DE SANTIAGO, P. y ORTE, J., *El cine en 7 películas. Guía básica de lenguaje cinematográfico*, Cie Dossat, Madrid, 2002.
- [5] GONZALEZ, J. F., *Aprender a ver cine La educación de los sentimientos a través del cine*, Scepter, Madrid, 2002.