

WHEN YOUTHS HAVE A VOICE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MEDIA AND YOUTH CULTURES IN PORTUGAL¹

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Statistics show that the increase in violence in countries like Brazil and Portugal involves children and young people. This creates a stigma that in most cases involves situations of risk and abandonment, shifting the position of victims to social villains. The main motivation for this research was based on this perception.

We use cinema as a means of reflection over violence, citizenship and youth. Contemporary cinema has repeatedly shown a part of society that in most cases is unknown. Films such as the Brazilian *City of God*, the Portuguese *Zone J*, the South African *Wooden Camera* and the Venezuelan *Huelepega, ley de la Calle* present, through fiction, the reality of children and young people who live in situations of similar risks, exclusion, violence and abandonment. Is this a coincidence (which we do not believe to be the case), or a reality as a result of this modern, globalized and industrial society we live in?

Research Outline

Our intention was to try to understand, through these films, the movement occurring in cinema whereby fiction portrays poverty-stricken, excluded young people and children as the reality and brings these images to our screens. By retrieving information and opinions in regard to these films and their accuracy in the portrayal of youth culture, we used cinema as a means by which they feel stimulated to exteriorize what they think, feel and see.

¹ Pacheco, Raquel (2008). *When Youths Have a Voice: An Ethnographic Study of Media and Youth Cultures in Portugal*. In The International Clearinghouse. Children, Youth and Media, Special Themes, Suécia, março de 2008.

In order to understand the young viewer, we developed an ethnographic study over six months, choosing for our investigation a secondary-level school situated in the urban zone of Lisbon. The goal of this investigation was to understand how the young people see themselves and how they think they are viewed by society (which includes the cinema, media, etc.) they belong to. A board diary was used as a tool for recording research, in order to portray everyday life at the school.

It was deeply moving to see the process through which the students learned about each other and themselves. They were very aware of discrimination issues, not only based on cultural and racial issues, but also on their age.

The Educational Process

The philosophy of this work is based on the dialectal pedagogic of Paulo Freire. It is processed through problem-oriented dialogue, developed mainly after the exhibition of the films, in the classroom and in meetings. The final product of this project was a documentary in which the students were the protagonists, enabling them to accomplish complex tasks from pre-production to finalization through the education for, with and about the media, using concepts of communication, education, participation and working thematic related to the daily life of these young people. The work of media education with the students and its “entities” of representation constituted an educational process.

Below are the two main concepts:

A) The first concept is the understanding that the education is destined to “transmit” (or “spread”) knowledge, values and patterns of behaviour of past generations (or sources of knowledge, of the knowing or of the power) to the current generations, so that they are adapted to society. In this concept, the pedagogical theory of education guiding the methods and techniques is that of stimulation/reply/reward (behaviourism).

B) The second concept considers a person to be the “subject” of his/her own actions, which exercise the person’s intelligence, reasoning and creativity. Through brainstorming and decision-making, one is capable of modifying or transforming one’s physical and social world, a goal for human development and consequently economic, social, cultural, technological and political development. This concept does not tolerate the educational notion of relationships such as the educator who “knows everything” and the student who “ignores reality”. The relationship between educator and educating is centred on the dialogue between “citizens” and not in the monologue of the professor (subject, active and agent) in front of the student (object, container, liabilities and listener).

The ethnographic research presented here was based on the concept of education mentioned in Example B, above. As time passed, the meetings and the methodology process helped the students’ maturity grow and gave them the capability to be better prepared to discuss and develop ideas related to themselves and the youth they are part of.

The researcher and those being investigated were now in an analytical phase, in which all the processes developed up to that point (dialogues, problems and questions) took form and the ideas started to come together as desired. The students were now prepared to produce the audiovisual document.

Feelings of Empowerment in the Production Process

It was evident that when we divided the group into teams for filming that the young people realized they were going to participate in a real video. It was then that they finally felt the sensation of empowerment, meaning they now felt that they were in possession of the project – free to choose the characters they wanted to play, the importance of each character, each choice...and later the choice of topics for the script. Also, deciding what to do with the video gave them a sense of belonging to a special team.

With the guidance of the coordinator and suggestions from the investigator, the students decided, how the video would unravel – what it would be about, how it would be made and the reasons for making it – resulting in their increased confidence in their capacities to fulfil their goal and meet their objectives.

During the whole process the students had acquired skills and knowledge, and the accomplishment of the video made it possible for them to go public and express this knowledge, allowing them freedom of execution and creativity.

The Result

The final product was a 13-minute documentary called “We Have a Voice”, in which several youngsters made statements and talked about themes such as school, media, neighbourhood, relationships, pregnancy, abortion, discrimination, racism, violence, drugs, police, consumption, leisure, sport and music.

Although we did not have the illusion that the final result would be the same as that of a professional movie, we had the hope that the result would be positive, reaching each of these youngsters. We hope that the seed of freedom, the possibility of “making it happen”, has been planted and believe that the self-esteem of these youngsters will contribute to their becoming present citizens and directors of their own lives’ videos.

Conclusion

Through dialogue as the “main instrument” of this “communication”, we began with the specific and moved toward the general, the individual toward the collective, the known toward the unknown , the simple toward the complex – allowing the approach of the specific, individual, immediate situations, perceived in a more ample social, economic and political context.

We observe the necessity that young people have to leave the places marked by the media with the sensationalist approach on the condition of youth. A middle-class

youth is treated as a “good student”, “good boy” or an “example” as opposed to the poor young boy who is treated as “lesser”, “delinquent”, “offender”, “violent”. We also observe that young people in general (rich and poor) need auto affirmation to respond to the expectations placed on them (socially), to feel that they are part of the system, to follow fashion trends dictated by the market of consumption, and “well being”.

When social acceptance is not obtained in “the socially acceptable” ways, young people will find other ways to obtain it. To feel the sensation of being accepted, being “somebody”, through practices far from approved of by society such as violence, the use of drugs and hedonism, they are marginalized to a life “on the edge”. Therefore, the existence and role of public politics, schools, organizations and institutions are of extreme importance and should be prepared and conscientious when receiving these youths who yearn to feel that they are visible participants and above all citizens with a voice.

We have come to understand the existence of different **youthful cultures**. When we appraise the culture in this phase of life that we call youth in this manner, when we discard the idea of the existence of only one youthful culture, we realize that plurality also becomes possible for the reality of the young people. The concept of youthful cultures diminishes stereotypes and, consequently, preconceptions. We become conscious of the diversities between the different cultures.

The films we worked on and the many media-related discussions we had led us to believe that when youthful cultures are observed, considered and shown in a singular concept, this causes serious problems, mistakes and constraints, mainly for the young people themselves. The media are largely responsible for an overwhelming number of worldwide mistakes. Evolved in positivism and only publishing facts and in a useless attempt at keeping exempt these facts, believing this goal can be reached.

Note:

This project was carried out in the school “Escola Secundária Marquês de Pombal”, with a group of 17 students aged between 17 and 22 years old, and consists of an ethnographic

study carried out over a period of five months, from October 2006 to March 2007. The project was the final product in my Masters Dissertation, which also includes a video produced, directed and starred in by the students.

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