

Film Literacy and Pedagogical Heresy against Cultural Oblivion



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Résumé

En termes de philosophie de l'éducation, la valeur pédagogique de l'hérésie a un caractère métaphysique et elle remonte à la caverne de Platon où la distinction entre l'illusion et la réalité n'était pas si évidente. Puis elle se dilate à travers des questions universelles quant à la nature de la condition humaine, l'essence de la beauté, la nature du mal, la primauté de la vie sur la mort, l'origine de l'univers, se montrant préoccupée par les concepts de justice, punition, équité, intelligence, endoctrinement et de l'éducation elle-même, visant des objectifs fondamentaux d'appropriations et conduisant à une véritable autonomisation intellectuelle, médiatique inclusive. Elle devient une méta-pédagogie et un élément essentiel de littéracie. Dans un contexte d'éducation aux médias et de littéracie filmique, l'approche hérétique de Luis Buñuel à cette méta-pédagogie, comme l'une des caractéristiques les plus importantes du cinéma Buñuelien, en lui donnant une place unique dans l'histoire de la création cinématographique, est une étude de cas des plus intéressantes.

Mots-clés : littéracie, pédagogie, éducation

Éducation au Cinéma et Hérésie Pédagogique contre l'Oubli Culturel

Abstract

In terms of educational philosophy the pedagogical value of heresy is of a metaphysical character and it goes back to Plato's cave where the distinction between illusion and reality was not so obvious. Then it expands through constant questions about the nature of the human condition, the essence of beauty, the nature of evil, the primacy of life over death, the first cause of the universe, showing concern about concepts of justice, punishment, equity, intelligence, indoctrination and education in itself, aiming at fundamental appropriations and leading to real intellectual empowerment, the media included. It becomes a meta-pedagogy and an essential element of literacy. Within a context of Media and Film Literacy, Luis Buñuel's heretical approach to that meta-pedagogy, as one of the most important characteristics of the Buñuelian cinema, giving him a unique place in the history of cinematographic creation, is a most interesting case study.

Keywords: literacy, pedagogy, education

If the loss of memory results in damage of tragic consequences to the individual, albeit unconscious damage, which is often impossible to recover in terms of personal and cultural identity, the possible loss of collective memory in societies amounts to a level of damage that we could not even imagine.

So, as it was already announced, the conservation of the collective memory of sounds and images as a European cultural heritage means acknowledging the various evolutionary contexts of audiovisual communication in Europe as well as their relations with the cultures of the world at large, as these processes¹ are never occur in geographical or cultural isolation. The language of film takes on a vital role in these processes of communicative and educational evolution as a vehicle of collective communication and education, that is, as a factor for an in-depth learning of the most varied domains of human knowledge. It is also important to examine the evolution of the pedagogical dimensions of audiovisual communication in general and cinematographic education in particular as the true starting point for an entire cultural repository that we cannot neglect or ignore, otherwise we risk casting into oblivion some of the most important traces of our European cultural identity which, by their nature, are often so fragile.

We are therefore obliged to delve into the media, channels, technologies and language we have developed for over a century to add clarity to the collective creativity and necessities of the artistic and documentary narration that represents us and which enables us to reflect on our own human condition. But strange though it may seem, the societies, sciences and technologies within which these *narratives develop can also suffer memory loss, just as we as individuals are forgetful or get old and are unable to regenerate the hetero-recognition mechanisms, and sometimes not even self-recognition, or because we cannot distance ourselves sufficiently from our prevailing knowledge and narratives in order to gain a more holistic, universal and reflective perspective. It is not because artists, scientists or pedagogues, like other human beings, have a "short memory", but because the arts, sciences and technologies and their languages are closed off and isolated within their own² particular spaces and sometimes separated from knowledge, application and even dissemination. This can happen in any branch of the arts or sciences, even when the fundamental principles of their languages belong to education or communication, which in itself is an enormous contradiction.*

Thus the technological and communicative supports of the records of the individual and collective production of knowledge turn inwards in their apparent self-sufficiency from the standpoint of the evolution of communication, taking into account of the technological and linguistic development of the past century, which has shown itself to be fairly redundant as well as being a reducing agent that has erroneously and inefficiently conserved the procedural knowledge of construction and communication of scientific or cultural learning.

Consequently, we are now obliged to analyze the possible risks of the loss of this collective property, which is often incredibly insubstantial and for that reason all the more valuable. To do this, we must also conserve, articulate and systematize some of the main features of the processes of cultural communication as phenomena of collective memorization and learning. As so many scientists and *researchers have stated over the years, in the exercise of their scientific irreverence and theoretical restlessness, that the scientist is hardly ever able to take a step back and view science, in space and time, in such a way that he can see it moves, "and yet, it moves"*³.

As it was said before, the role of Cinema and Film Languages as vehicles of artistic, fictional and documentary narratives, in a comprehensive, critical and creative perspective, acquires an absolutely unquestionable importance as a factor of authentic media and film literacy.

Do we need Media Literacy?

It might be argued that we can all become media literate just by being exposed to the media, without any formal media education, since some would suggest that all exposure to the media acts a sort of media pedagogy of which we are simply not aware. However, some more specific media education processes may really become important in order to achieve a higher order of media literacy, both for media readers and media makers.

It was with this in mind that a group of independent scholars and experts from different European countries and institutions¹ gathered together to join their efforts around the construction of one of the first attempts to produce some kind of a Media Literacy Manifesto - The European Charter for Media Literacy, which was a declaration of commitment to "Raise public understanding and awareness of Media Literacy, in relation to the media of communication, information and expression; Advocate the importance of Media Literacy in the development of educational, cultural, political, social and economic policy; Support the principle that every European citizen of any age should have opportunities, in both formal and informal education, to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to increase their enjoyment, understanding and exploration of the media"⁴.

And the nature of this initiative and its commitments were made even clearer by the aims of the Charter, which were agreed only after much debate, since almost every member of the initial steering group⁵ had his or her own idea of the priorities for the Charter, although the most important common principles were rather clear:

- To foster greater clarity and wider consensus in Europe on Media Literacy and Media Education;
- To raise the public profile of Media Literacy and Media Education in each

European nation, and in Europe as a whole;

- To encourage the development of a permanent and voluntary network of Media Educators in Europe, bound together by their common aims, and enabled by their institutional commitment⁶.

Although we don't see the role of media makers explicitly mentioned in the text of the Charter, it was already my view that they should be one of the most important target groups for media education initiatives, but I realized that they would also be one of the most reluctant groups to realize the importance of media literacy. Media makers, especially journalists, usually don't like to get involved with pedagogy; in fact they run like hell from it since they fear that it makes them sound as if they are «not neutral» and “subjective”, or even “propagandists”. Of course nobody is “absolutely” neutral or objective in any context, particularly those who make our media.

The Charter's view was that we would have to develop formal and informal media education strategies for school environments, for home environments and, necessarily, for professional media environments. Since we know that the media industries are usually almost completely closed to such pedagogical approaches, this meant that we would have to concentrate our efforts on the environments of academic media training, that is, universities and other media training centers.

In this perspective, besides journalism, the other fields of major importance to be concerned with media education and media literacy are film, videogames, music, advertising and, because all the media tend to converge towards it, the internet. Some of these aspects I had already raised in earlier contexts, in an attempt to develop some reflection and discussion about their nature:

“The Internet is actually the largest database for information support in the daily life of individuals and also of institutions and services. Among those we can count students and teachers, but also media and opinion makers, as well as information providers including journalists. When it is essentially used as a path for communication channels for electronic messages, the web contains much useful information, presented by individuals, institutions, governments, associations and all types of commercial and non-commercial organizations. But who are the gate-keepers of that electronic flow?

Who makes up the major elements of the global agenda? How and where are the most powerful editorial lines shaped? Beyond the boundless and instantaneous allocation of data, the Internet developed new ways for cultural, economic and social life but also new patterns of oblivion. This is related to the standing increase of new media instruments, differentiated access to the communication and information industries and consequent appropriations. It is apparent in politics, education, commerce, and in many other fields of public and private character. All these areas contribute to the

rapid change of our traditional paradigms of public sphere and space and we don't know yet if our position as individual and social actors in the above is changing as quickly and maybe we are not yet completely aware of the implications of such changes. The potential threat of widespread alienation in such new environments of media exposure should not be dismissed lightly.”⁷

Against the state of things, film is probably the most eclectic, syncretic and sometimes chaotic of all media, which means that we often need some film literacy to make coherent sense of all its elements. It has an incredible power of attraction which is replicated in all other media through the usage of film languages in any kind of media contexts: music videos to promote music; real footage to enhance videogames; film genres and film stars in marketing; film excerpts of all kinds in “YouTube”, “Facebook”, “Myspace” and millions of other websites. Film, in its many different forms, became the most common vehicle of those New Environments of Media Exposure, thus, becoming also one of the most important instruments for a Multidimensional and Multicultural Media Literacy among the many different media users, consumers, producers and “prosumers” of all ages, social and cultural levels, although different levels of media literacy, their nature or even their lack can show differences or similarities, according to the local and global contexts where they are developed and practiced “... *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 generalization 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 life-saver; 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 escapist dimensions.*”⁸

The urgency to approach film, its languages and appropriations as a main vehicle of media literacy has also to do with the enormous importance of this medium in the construction of our collective memories. The richness and diversity of the film languages, techniques and technologies of film are seen as instruments of great importance, from the primitive films of Lumière and Méliès to the most sophisticated virtual inserts in YouTube. Their role as vehicles of artistic and narratological factors of authentic film literacy, acquires an absolutely unquestionable importance in any society that calls itself knowledge and information society as constructive contributions to our collective and cultural memories. Some of the most interesting contributions in that sense along the history of film are the film works of Luis Buñuel.

Cultural Heresy as a Critical and Creative Element of Media Literacy - Buñuel's works as elements of Film Literacy - a case study

The aim of this study is to analyze the subversive pedagogical value of the film works directed by Luis Buñuel, which have been highlighted in different contexts as some of the most important examples of heretical cinema, giving him a unique place and value in the history of cinematographic creation. Such a value has not only a paradigmatic dimension (which is comparable with those of Griffith, Eisenstein, John Ford, Hitchcock, Bergman and Godard), but, in fact, it implies another most important pedagogical dimension as a source of subversion of the reading and appropriation mechanisms that the spectators have been acquiring along with their film and cinematographic cultures - which means, in fact, their film literacy.

The “heretical cinema of Luis Buñuel”, or the “heretic Buñuel” are expressions that have been used before in different contexts⁹ that, in one way or another, relate the concept of heresy with the cinematographic activity of Luis Buñuel. Nevertheless, the existing heresies in Buñuel's work have, besides the generally recognizable theological meaning in reference to the catholic iconography, a much deeper range of significations, namely turning his films into authentic manuals of subversive (heretical) pedagogy, acting upon the subconsciousness of the spectators in the same way that many other fairy tales, fables, parables, metaphors, aphorisms and allegories do: as exercises of observation and catharsis.

All the films of Luis Buñuel are major contributions to the development of the genre, or paradigm, that can be called «poem-film», but their value should not be limited to that paradigmatic dimension. In fact, they have another important dimension as sources of subversion of the reading mechanisms that the spectators have been acquiring along with their cinematographic culture. The films of Buñuel are prose-poems that put the public systematically into the dilemma of choosing among several criteria of language usage, rendering different conditions for the development of new criteria of reading and consequently new possibilities of appropriation, which means, in the end, acquired literacy. It is this dimension that we identify as the pedagogical value of Buñuel's work. Such a dimension has also been developed by filmmakers like Welles, Losey, Fellini, Pasolini or Godard among others, but never as consistently as Buñuel did it. That pedagogical dimension is certainly present in all his films gaining different shapes and implications, but in *Los olvidados* (like in *Las Hurdes* and in *Viridiana* for several different reasons) it gains also a strong character of mixed social morality with socio-cultural heresy, with a new surreal approach comprehending systematic observations of the human instincts as they are reflected in the heresies and moralities of the film narrative but also in interaction with the pedagogical effect of their predominant social and cultural equivalents. To conclude this introduction we would like to reproduce

Buñuel's opinion about "le pédantisme et le jargon" which could be a shot right between the eyes of this attempt:

Je déteste le pédantisme et le jargon. Il m'est arrivé de rire aux larmes en lisant certains articles des Cahiers du Cinéma. A Mexico, nommé président honoraire du Centro de Capacitacion cinematografica, haute école du cinéma, je suis invité un jour à visiter les lieux. On me présente quatre ou cinq professeurs. Parmi eux, un jeune homme correctement vêtu et rougissant de timidité. Je lui demande ce qu'il enseigne. Il me répond: « La sémiologie de l'image clonique. » Je l'aurais assassiné.¹⁰

Consequently, we take Buñuel's opinion as heresy and not as dogma, trying to turn the master's gun away from the face of the present text.

The pedagogical character of heresy

In terms of educational philosophy the pedagogical value of heresy is of a metaphysical character and it goes back to Plato's cave where the distinction between illusion and reality was not so obvious. Then it expands through constant questions about the nature of the human condition, the essence of beauty, the nature of evil, the primacy of life over death, the first cause of the universe, showing concern about concepts of justice, punishment, equity, intelligence, indoctrination and education itself. It becomes a meta-pedagogy. Buñuel could then be called, (one more label?), a metaphysical pedagogue, who, as a prisoner of the Platonic cave-republic and as an inquisitor of the Aristotelian/Christian universal order, shows us the dogmas, in their peculiar reality, as if he accepted them, but simultaneously, with reptilian subtlety, changing or suppressing a detail, thus subverting the entire result, liberating the instincts and the doubts of all kinds. But he is also a rational illusionist (human-entomologist?), who makes us surrender to that liberation by means of illusory no causality.

In fact, if we were to search for another name to connect with the pedagogical value of the Buñuelian work, we would be obliged to jump in time and ideas in order to find the name of Paulo Freire, who conceived education as having a critical and therefore liberating function. Although Buñuel confessed himself not interested in the didactic cinema, the truth is that his films as heretical (inquiring and liberating) metaphors assume a didactic function in the totality of their epistemological environment: the metaphysical, the individual and the sociohistorical. And, as Martin Drouzy showed in his book *Kætteren*, what Buñuel really achieved was to become a heretic within all those fields, not only as a surrealist, nor as a marxist, nor as an atheist heretic per se, but mainly and above all, as a total heretic within his history, culture and craft¹¹.

To find some wider clarification of the term total heresy, we should also search, as we did for morality, for its meaning in the Middle Ages, since the medieval period was a great time for religion and therefore for heresy too.

Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans tell us in the introduction to the collected Heresies of the High Middle Ages that “Heresy was treason to God, the worst of offenses against Christian society, a challenge to every duly constituted authority. It was a deadly contamination, making necessary constant vigilance against infection,...” and offering a theological definition: “Theologically, heresy was defined in the Middle Ages as doctrinal error held stubbornly in defiance of authority.”¹²

A great part of these judgments are applicable to the works of Buñuel. Theologically, they are “the worst offenses against Christian society”, i.e., against that cluster of dogmas that have marked him so much in his childhood-adolescence and which mark, perhaps more than anything else, all our western values. And from a social point of view, his films are really “a challenge to every duly constituted authority”, following that anarchistic heritage that so marked the Spain of his younger years, in a constant crusade, from *L'âge d'or/Le journal d'une femme de chambre* versus Chiappe/fascism, through *Viridiana* versus Franco and to *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* versus French militarism, international terrorism and universal bourgeois hypocrisy. But mostly, as it has been shown, with *Los olvidados* and its character of subtle subversion of social and cultural values. From a strict cinematographic point of view, the films could also be seen as “errors” (of a more dadaistic than surrealistic character) “held stubbornly in defiance of authority”, “deadly contamination, making necessary constant vigilance” against the infected cinematographic dogmas - the master artisan controlling the powerful secrets of his art craft, punching holes in the sub consciousness of the art, perverting the genres, the types and the fabulas with their own dogmas. It is the dogma as transvestite heresy - or, total heresy.

The multifaceted nature of the cinema requires multifaceted forms of heresy, especially if the aim is to teach the spectator about the poetics of liberation. This is what Buñuel has been doing since 1929 with his morality acts of heresy - the films.

Conclusion

From a pedagogical point of view we could then say there are three main types of cinematographic paradigms: the affirmative film (Hollywood paradigm) which confirms and coincides with the dominant narrative structures; the interrogative film (so called avant-garde paradigm) which steps out completely from the dominant narrative structures; and the heretical film (poem paradigm) which remains within the dominant

narrative structures subverting them from the inside. The films of Luis Buñuel belong to this last category in a very high degree. The pedagogical value of heresy in this poem film is based upon different degrees of subversion of content and form which, in confrontation with the dominant expectations, leads the spectator, through a process of voyeurism and catharsis, to ask questions within the openness of the film, which means that, in the Buñuelian case, the pedagogical value of heresy is directly connected to the filmmaker's ideological moralism expressed in the thematic and semantic cohesion of his work.

This means that Buñuel's films are an intrinsic part of our western film culture and encompass in their openness an incredibly large number of significant aspects of that cultural environment. But their richness of signification still requires other studies, for the benefit of our knowledge and for Buñuel's possible ire or fun in heaven, hell, or wherever he is ... including the ubiquitous mediatic spheres... and all that is, in fact, a constructive basis for film and media literacy.

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Notes

1. Reia-Baptista, 2010
2. Op.cit.
3. Reia-Baptista, 1912
4. In: European Charter for Media Literacy, 2005.
5. This group was formed by: Cary Bazalgette - British Film Institute, U.K.; Patrick Verniers - Conseil de l'Education aux Médias, Belgium; Evelyne Bevort - Centre de Liaison de l'Enseignement et les Médias d'Information, France ; Vítor Reia-Baptista - University of Algarve, Portugal; Susanne Krucsay - Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Austria; Ben Bachmair - University of Kassel, Germany; Klas Viklund - Swedish Film Institute, Sweden.
6. In: European Charter for Media Literacy, 2005, *ibid.*
7. Reia-Baptista, 2008, 2012.
8. Reia-Baptista, 2006, 2012.
9. Reia-Baptista, 1987.
10. Buñuel, 1982: 274.
11. Drouzy, 1970.
12. Wakefield & Evans, 1969: 2.