Participation and Learning Trajectories on the Rio Int'l Film Festival's Section for Children and Young People

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English abstract

This paper presents the Generation Program, a segment for children and teenagers at the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival (Mostra Geração and Festival do Rio in Portuguese) in Brazil. The authors are members of the curatorial and production team and both belong to GRUPEM (Grupo de Pesquisa em Educação e Mídia) – the Education and Media Research Team linked to the Board of Education of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. The considerations produced by the research team contributed to the analysis of this experiment.

This paper prioritizes aspects related to audiovisual production made for and by children and teenagers, but also includes some of the recent history of practices involving cinema, audiovisual material and education in Rio. It also considers some public policies that interfere with the development of audiovisual education with and for audiovisual languages.

Keywords: Film festivals, audiovisual languages, children and youth.
Introduction: Origin of the Generation Program

The Generation Program is the segment dedicated to children and teenager at the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival (Brazil) that takes place in one of the most important hubs of Brazilian audiovisual production. Up to 1998, there were two important cinematography events in the city calendar: Mostra Rio and the Rio Cine Festival. Both showed international films without any commercial distribution in Brazil and a few films of the so-called “Retomada” – the return of the Brazilian cinema. The merger of these events in 1999 gave rise to the biggest film festival in Latin America: The Rio International Film Festival. Besides expanding access to new movies reaching new audiences, meetings addressing production, finance, distribution, technical training and technology innovation were all included in the agenda. Following the trend adopted by renowned international film festivals, the new festival invited them to join the Cinema Criança Festival (Children’s Film Festival), organized by Cineduc – a philanthropic organization that focuses on promoting a “reflection on audiovisual languages along with children, teenagers and educators”. Therefore, since its first year, the Rio Int’l Film Festival has a special section that started out as Magic Window, was renamed Futura Generation up to 2003 and, in 2004, received its current name: Generation Program.

The curators in charge were Marialva Monteiro, from Cineduc, and Felicia Krumholz, who represented Oficina Cine-Escola – the educational program of the Estação Cinema Circuit, 1999–2009, and the Cinema Nosso Audiovisual School, since 2010. In a globalized world, where increasing amounts of information flow through images, curators select audiovisual works that “can mobilize the capacities to innovate and to critically analyze besides promoting creativity in the minds and hearts of the younger generations, in order to prepare them for being able to fully exercise their rights, including expressing themselves and undertaking free selection”. To facilitate this work, since 2004, Generation Program has been integrating the Ibero-American Ciniño Network of child-teenage film festivals.

Our guiding principle is that children and teenagers are more than potential adult audiences. Considering the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance” and therein sets “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”, we understand that children are important in their own right and deserve quality cinema made just for them. This is a fundamental issue in Brazil, where there are few productions for teenagers and children and the exhibition circuit is practically monopolized by Hollywood productions and/or by movies that follow that pattern or incorporate a commercial television kind of logic.

The Generation’s International Section

We endeavor to offer a list of films that while entertaining and informative, could also make the audience feel and think. Besides ethnic and cultural diversity, we favored, in the selection of films, creativity in the use of audiovisual languages and their multiple possibilities of genre, rhythm, techniques and interactions with other forms of artistic and informative expressions. The themes should appeal to the interests of children and teenagers, and it was also desirable that they touched on important questions for educators, although the thematic aspect was not so relevant. The role of the children-teenager segment in the Rio Int’l Film Festival was to value the artistic features in
cinema, drawing attention to the fact that in artistic and audiovisual expressions, form is as important as content. A single image can transfer and materialize many ideas, emotions and sensations. The relations it establishes with the images that come before and after it, the “film sense”, using a Sergei Eisenstein’s (1990) expression; the ways in which it relates to the music, the dialogue and the sounds in the films… that is where the wealth of cinematographic art lies. This is why the French theoretician Alain Bergala (2008, p.47) asserts that the great art in cinema happens when the thoughts and the emotions come up in a configuration or in a pace that could not exist except through the medium of film. In this respect we believe that our best contribution is to reflect with the audience about the specifics of cinema. 

As a result, we engage in promoting access to films that most of the time do not reach our market and, therefore, do not have copies in Portuguese. Concerned with small children who cannot yet read, we introduced live film dubbing to Brazil. Here, we have perfected this technique, combining female and male voices in two groups made up of three actors, and each one plays various roles in the same movie. With practice, this technique has evolved, increasing the synchronization and variation of tone of each member of the group. The dubbing has become a special attraction for the child audience; they often communicate with the dubbers before and after the sessions, showing curiosity. 

Due the characteristics of our proposal, the children’s opinions are of prime importance, thus, we set up a jury composed of children and teenagers put forward by the Consulates of the participating countries presided over by a Brazilian. Film critics gave a lecture on the elements of the cinematographic language and a member of our production team coordinated the voting by setting up a voting chart. Besides the introduction to cinema history and techniques, the experience of this jury was a true cultural interexchange where the debate between kids, with distinct life-stories and sensitivities provided evidence on how broad interpretations are of the same film experience. Although this jury format was interesting, as it encouraged the members to practice expressing, defending and exchanging ideas, it required a high investment in order to meet the needs of the restricted number of youths. Since 2001, a popular child-teenage jury has chosen the best movie in the International selection as we needed to expand the Generation Program.
Figure 1. Ballot paper showing funny figures. Even those children who cannot yet read are able to comprehend and vote.

The second edition ran at the beginning of the dissemination of new, user-friendly, sound and imaging technologies, which lowered the production cost of quality films. Important changes in social policies made by the federal government, in the interest of reducing State intervention, have resulted in new forms of social and cultural mobilization. In 2000, Rio had a large number of NGOs working with young people, mostly from lower-income communities, using audiovisual media as an empowerment tool and for raising self-esteem. The debate on Education through Communication for citizenship reinforced our belief that by giving room to productions with different origins and approaches we encourage a fairer and more helpful society which embraces diversity. Thereby, we planned on setting up a deeper dialogue with educators. We wanted to see and show the increasing production of new generations. We would like to engage in practical video experiences with children and adolescents. Thus, we have created three more work fronts: (i) The Teachers’ Meeting, (ii) The Video Forum and (iii) The Generation Workshops.

i. The Teachers’ Meeting

We believe that educators occupy a privileged position offering youngsters new ways of and to knowledge. Therefore, we invite them to attend exclusive movie sessions followed by debates aimed at bringing them closer to audiovisual expressions and their pedagogical possibilities, because they deserve it and so they can continue the debate about our program listing with their students. Constantly, the Teachers’ Meeting theme deals with issues involving the school universe (fairy tales, bullying, teacher’s job, etc.) and we invite experts on the topics addressed by the films while our curator discusses the aesthetic treatment.
Educational thinkers and administrators consider culture to be a fundamental aspect of the curriculum and socialization that takes place in schools. Yet, with a few exceptions, Brazilian cinema and audiovisual schoolwork policies do not include teacher preparation. While regular teacher training and continuous education contribute little towards allowing teachers to build up a more intense and critical relationship with art, these organizations are even less concerned with providing teachers with the tools to do a work with cinema beyond getting them to take advantage of the thematic content of the films.

Compounding the situation in 2010, Ramos & Teixeira researched the teachers’ habits of Belo Horizonte’s Schools – one of the largest Brazilian cities – and reported data that we have also observed throughout the years that we have worked with Cinema and Education in the festivals or other projects that we have developed. In general, teachers rarely go to the cinema, giving “preference to the cultural goods that can be consumed at home” (Ramos & Teixeira, 2010, pp. 14-15). Another factor pointed out by the same study that we have also observed in Rio is the lopsided distribution of cultural services such as museums, theaters and other types of cultural centers. Knowing that the programming monopoly of cinemas extends to TV and to the home video market, Brazil has an unsatisfactory relationship between teachers and audiovisual products. We understand that the biggest cinematography event in Latin America could and should help to modify this situation, even though the more effective solutions depend much more on public policies in the Educational and Cultural areas.

Within our capabilities, we place utmost importance on the teaching profession, providing teachers with moments of aesthetic enjoyment. It is a form of professional tooling, but, mainly, a contribution to the broader process of these individual's education as human beings. The role art plays in the human dimension of teacher education is fundamental given the social function they perform. And it is in this aspect that we also wanted to raise their awareness in their work with students.

During our course of action, we noticed that even with the difficulty of access, there have always been teachers interested in cinema, a growing interest as society has demanded innovations in schools. Recently, in the State of Rio de Janeiro, there are policies that aim at introducing new technology in education in order to provide individuals with the necessary abilities for living and working in the 21st century. People expect that work with audiovisual languages will contribute to this process. However, we cannot expect effective audiovisual literacy for youngsters without considering all the aspects pointed out here concerning teachers’ habits and training.

ii. The Video Forum

In 2000, The Generation Program organized the first Brazilian exhibition of videos made by children and teenagers, now called Video Forum. The format of the sessions has barely changed: we divide the videos according to the producer group’s age; before showing the videos, the videomakers present their projects and talk a little about the creation and production process. At the end of the screening, we promote a debate between the participants themselves where they discuss language options, freedom in production and copyright/ethical issues. Here, adults can speak only if the youngsters ask them questions or if there is enough time, because our purpose is to strengthen child-teenage protagonism.

Influenced by the context of social mobilization through the NGOs, Video Forum was created with the participation of popular communication organizations, which, at that moment, were already...
forming a collaborative network that would be vital for promoting our discussions and sessions. Out of the 27 videos shown in the first year, 10 were made under NGO projects. Six private schools were responsible for seven selected titles and the others were productions by research institutions’ special projects, educational TV stations and the isolated experiences of some government cultural and health institutes. Only one state school has participated. Most of the people enrolled were from Rio or neighboring cities, with only one project from the north-eastern region of the country and one from the mid-west.

Today, Video Forum receives on average 150 entries a year from all parts of Brazil and other countries. 181 institutions have already shown their videos here. The NGOs constitute the majority (30%), although state schools are already overtaking this number (29%). Despite the pioneer initiatives, there are still very few Brazilian private schools with audiovisual projects; they represent only 11% of the submitted works. The set is completed by educational projects produced by cinema and video production or exhibition companies; audiovisual classes; educational and community TV channels; social projects by private companies and community cultural centers. After three editions we became well known among audiovisual educators and young people. In 2004, we spread our call for submissions on the Internet where children and teenagers could find us without school intervention. Then we received our first entries from youngsters who had made their own independent videos. Out of a total of 510 projects exhibited, 30 are independent productions.

An indication of the profile change is the reduction of videos about violence in the slums and an increase in themes that are frequent in the school universe such as bullying, cultural diversity, teenage pregnancy, the environment and commemorative dates. The independent producers are teenagers and constantly address themes such as loneliness and depression, even when exploring the genre of comedy.

This evolution in the profile of the participants can be attributed to two reasons: 1) As a new initiative, at first we experimented with broader participation, then later we reduced the age from 23 to 18, excluding university students. As NGOs’ work usually mixes people with different ages, this option of the curator’s office directed our entries to schools; 2) NGOs produce a lot, but are more unstable organizations, finding it difficult to maintain their projects; while educational reforms in Brazil have equipped state schools, which end up motivating their audiovisual production.

Sometimes it is hard to identify videos where youngsters are their real creators and makers. Many teachers work with the young people, but do not allow them to use the equipment, fearing that they might break it. It could also be that the teacher does the entire project and enlists the students as “actors”. The thematic treatment is usually a clue to the greater or lesser participation of students in a movie. According to Regina Bortolini, Video Forum curator in 2000 and 2001, “adolescents are always in a crisis and usually think of more tragic denouement for the problems”. For Bete Bullara, the current Cineduc representative in the general curatorship of the Generation Program, “the teachers’ point of view about ‘teenage pregnancy’ highlights structural and financial difficulties, while the first thing the teen thinks is ‘my mother is going to kill me’”. In the small children’s videos, it is harder to confirm their participation. Many times we get it wrong, but the debates always reveal the making of the video and over time, we kept perfecting our eyes to identify these issues.

The exchange of experiences is more important than the video’s quality. The videomakers can enter up to five projects each, and obeying the criteria mentioned above, the curator chooses at least one
video to guarantee everybody's inclusion. Due to the educational characteristics, Video Forum is not a competitive event. There are no parameters to compare videos made in such distinctive contexts, different objectives and with such diverse resources. The idea is to help the youngsters get to know each other: to see each other’s reality, context, processes, and results. That is why we insist that everybody attends the screenings. Besides, we distribute annual collections to the participants containing all the projects selected. With the collections, institutions and especially the groups that could not attend the Festival can watch all Video Forum programming along with their own communities. According to reports from participating educators, this material enables a comparison that has encouraged video improvement in subsequent years.

iii. The Generation Workshops

With Generation Workshops, we try to join the seeing to the doing. It is here that we come across the hardest challenges. The biggest one is time: the Festival is only two weeks long and the target audience does not usually have time to participate in an activity that is more than three hours long. The budget for practical experience with video is another problem: there are difficulties in mobilizing financial resources for the attendance of small groups and the number of participants has to be defined with care. In general, the more profound experiments are only helpful to groups with up to 15 people. The technical and technological aspects limit the possibilities for action in most cases, requiring a larger team for dealing with children/adolescents and equipment.

Still, in the past 13 years, we have offered 25 different workshops, thanks to partnerships with educational TV channels and audiovisual classes. During these years we have attracted a large audience. However, the challenge in managing so many different options forced us to reduce to one type of workshop per year during the last seven years.

We have noticed that workshops on screenwriting, documentaries, acting for cinema, photography or camera operation, videography, advertising and “making-of films” need more time in order to draw the audience to the basics of creative processes involving images. For this reason we do not intend to repeat them in this three hour time span.

Nevertheless, during this same time span, non-computerized animation workshops are a very thorough exercise concerning the audience’s contact with the process and history of moving images. Even if masterpieces are not completed as final products, any animation workshop deal at least with the act of narrating an action, the characters and/or objects, the composition of the visual field and the discovery that movement in the cinema is an illusion divided in frames/second.

Optic devices workshops – production of dark camera, zoetropes and thaumatropes – are a good activity for children up to 12 years old. They are animated meetings and work with groups of up to 30 kids. Although, to handle it in three hours, is necessary to bring in semi ready devices.
During the 2006 Festival, we formed three groups of five adolescents that had to reedit movies that were not included in the Video Forum selection. In six afternoons, in an intensive form, the groups had editing classes operating professional software and discussing script issues. It was exciting to work with youngsters during the process involving the reading of the original audiovisual material, theories and editing techniques, narration, message controlling, possible interpretations, choices, points of view, collective creation and, even more, reflecting with the kids about the final products. The resulting videos of the workshops were presented at the end of Video Forum, with the presence of the original video production teams and other youngsters that had participated in this Generation’s section. The Reediting Ideas Workshop was the experience we consider the most productive. The debate was intense, but due to the infrastructure issues already mentioned, we were not able to repeat this experiment.

In 2007, we had access to the first cell phones with cameras, a cheaper way to capture images and sounds, lighter and more compact, easier for a child operate than a regular camcorder. Because of that, we decided to lend some cell phones to kids from the age of 12 up to 18 so they could film with them. On the Internet, we found a few shorts from foreign festivals. However nobody had yet executed this experiment here. We therefore invited two teachers who had experience with video and asked them to research this new technology with a group of young monitors (aged 16 to 21 years old), selected from popular audiovisual courses. Two months before the beginning of the Festival we started to research images and information about this type of production, experimenting with the language aspects and the equipment tools.

At this stage, the videos captured by the tiny lenses and then passed on to the cell phones’ small screens have reminded us of those silent films from the early cinematography decades. Even capturing audio and images separately, the quality was not sufficient to understand the dialogues. The low resolution printed bad images with an aspect common to the black and white images of the “First Cinema” (Costa, 1995) already bypassed after one century. Moreover, we noticed that to keep the interest of the spectator, the movies had to be very short, about a minute each. Nonetheless, silent movies had less camera mobility and little field variation. While the light weight and size of the cell phone made it possible to position them in unthinkable places, the image quality was also not favorable to wide angles and too much movement. We gradually discovered the potential of this emerging language.
The technical difficulties were many. The phones were easy to handle, but each brand produced a different video format and not all were compatible with the software we used for video and image editing on computers given to us by our partners. A vast amount of research was conducted to unify phones, codecs and software so we would not waste time on technical issues during the Generation Workshops open to the Festival’s audience.

During preparation, the monitoring group went to six schools (state and private) to practice the activity that would be offered during the Festival, carrying toys, costumes and props to provide the students with material for the films they were going to produce. When the Festival began, the workshops took place in a cultural center with a beautiful architectural structure, where participants, organized into five groups of three, could record the exhibitions and have plenty of encouragement for being creative. We posted the videos on our YouTube channel, and we distributed them via Bluetooth to people’s cell phones in the Festival’s theaters.

In 2008 and 2009 we returned to using cell phones for making moving images, perfecting our method. At the beginning of the workshop, we inserted a 30-minute module for exhibiting movies from the “First Cinema” and short films made with cell phones that were creative and very different in nature. In the latter year, each group created just one part of the video - beginning, middle or end - and watched it later on YouTube with the remaining story completed by other groups.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we focused on actions that could be of more interest to those who are seeking information about digital and audiovisual literacy. Many other activities have happened in the Generation Program, like the dialogue we promote with cine club members, or like the time we brought the Principal from Orson The Kid School to present and debate the first feature film entirely produced by youngsters, with commercial distribution in Spain. Another important learning trajectory in the Festival is the volunteer program, which recruits college freshmen. It was as a volunteer that Beatriz M. de A. Porto Gonçalves entered the Generation Program, becoming a coordinator in 2008 and a collaborator since 2009. For further information, please visit our blog.

The backstage of an international film festival shows the extent of the productive chain of moving images, involving many individuals in different situations. A lot of attention is dedicated to the production front. However, despite the rise in amateur productions, we all are everyday spectators of a rapidly increasing number of moving images surrounding us. Generation Program focuses on the audience, even when it encourages practical experience. Audiovisual technologies allow youngsters to exercise their right of expression and to participate in society. But how can you create new meanings by using the camera instead of merely reproducing the hegemonic pattern of the great media?

How can sound and editing help develop a discourse? While preparing our 14th edition, in the so-called “post-cinema” times (Mattos, 2011), we have many answers to these questions, all pointing to the fact that as students gain more exposure to different types of films, their productions become more critical and creative.

The experience of cinema only materializes when each spectator relates the movie to his/hers particular sense. The different interpretations of the viewers are related to what Martin-Barbero
(1987) called “mediations”, i.e. the particular circumstances, such as time and place and the people with whom one shares their experience of the movies, all the environments in which the films are appreciated, all the spectators’ information backgrounds, as well as their own life stories and personal sensibilities affect the way films are understood. We believe that the exposition of a single production model to young audiences would not only limit their knowledge, but could bridle their imagination. So, we hoped that the Rio Int’l Film Festival’s children/teenager segment would become an opportunity for reflection based on the diversity of films.

We believe that we are providing the new generations with cinematic and aesthetic knowledge through quality and diversity in film and thereby encouraging them to communicate, express and create through the use of audiovisual and other Information and Communication Technologies that are also based on audio and image features.

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In 1990, the federal government closed down the department responsible for the production of Brazilian cinematography, Empresa Brasileira de Filmes S/A (EMBRAFILME). Film production was almost reduced to zero by 1995, when new cultural policies were implemented, allowing the return of national productions.

It was a biannual festival and took place between 1989 and 1997.

The following festivals are some examples of Ciniño Network members: Festival de Cine de Pamplona (Spain); Festival Internacional de Cine para Niños (...y no tan Niños) (Mexico); Red UNIAL Casa del Festival del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (Cuba); DIVERCINE (Uruguay) and Festival Internacional de Cine Nueva Mirada para Niños y Jóvenes (Argentina). In the research for unreleased titles, another association was crucial: the Centre International du Film Pour L'Enfance et La Jeunesse – CIFEJ (International Center of Films for Children and Young People).

These criteria helped the curator of the 94 feature films in the International part of Generation Program in the past 13 years. Some countries have a strong tradition of audiovisual production for our viewers: Germany has participated more than any other country with 14 titles, followed by Denmark (11); Sweden (9); India and Norway (7); Brazil and Finland (6). Spain and Canada (5); Iran, Japan, the United Kingdom and France (4) have also constantly sent productions. However, it is extremely important to always make room for countries that export fewer films such as Argentina, Chile, Greece, Croatia, Bosnia, Israel and China.

The films for 12-year-olds or older have computer-generated subtitles projected on a small rectangular screen placed under the big screen where the film is played.

Generally in the other festivals, a single person does the dubbing by performing a simple reading.

The Cultural area, as Hall (1997) observed, has been the subject of competition as culture stands out as a social dimension that permeates economy, work, religion, politics, etc.

Our translation.

We agree with Ramos & Teixeira when they state that “more than the possible financial difficulties [the price of the ticket is expensive in relation to the average salary of a Brazilian teacher] we believe the little time they have for rest and leisure partly explains why they choose to stay at home” (Op. Cit.).

Most of them teach literature/ Portuguese, history and geography, and some of them teach art.

We have already received two shorts in film, but most of the works are in video format.

Approximate percentages.

Even though we favor practical experiences, there have also been lectures by filmmakers, writers, photographers and actors. Theoretical meetings work well with the time we have with our audience and have allowed a good number of people to meet
personalities like Cacá Diegues, one of the most important Brazilian filmmakers and Yawanawa Indigenous People, both in 2004, always emphasizing the filmmaking craft.

17 Remontando Ideias was the name in Portuguese.
18 About 2.0 megapixels.
19 Our translation.
20 Examples: 3gp; mp4; mov
21 mostrageracao.blogspot.com, content in Portuguese.