

Serialized fiction as a pedagogical tool: a formative proposal

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Abstract: This article presents a training proposal in audiovisual quality and media literacy aimed at teachers to be developed with young people. Based on the repository of Brazilian and Portuguese series from the Observatório da Qualidade no Audiovisual (Audiovisual Quality Observatory) and on the experience of the Clube das Séries, the didactic sequence is structured in five stages: experience, language, confrontation, appropriation, and apprehension. The proposal aims to promote the development of media literacy articulated with the notion of quality, elements that have become essential given the growing relevance of serialized fictional narratives in contemporary times.

Keywords: media literacy; audiovisual quality; serialised fictional narrative; training course; television.

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta uma proposta de formação em qualidade audiovisual e literacia midiática destinada aos professores para ser desenvolvida com jovens. Baseada no repositório de séries brasileiras e portuguesas do Observatório da Qualidade no Audiovisual e na experiência do Clube das Séries, a sequência didática está estruturada em cinco etapas: experiência, linguagem, confronto, apropriação e apreensão. A proposta visa promover o desenvolvimento da literacia midiática articulada à noção de qualidade, elementos que se tornaram essenciais diante da crescente relevância das narrativas ficcionais seriadas na contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: literacia midiática; qualidade audiovisual; narrativa ficcional seriada; ação de formação; televisão.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies have been developed since the 1980s on the quality and pedagogical potential of television in promoting both media literacy in school contexts and informal learning promoted by the medium throughout life (Freire, 2021). In the Brazilian context, works that explore the dialogue between television and education are mostly based on serialized fiction, specifically encompassing telenovelas and series (Baccega, 2003; Fischer, 2002; 2017; Lopes, 2009). According to Freire (2021, p. 109, our translation), “the fundamental question that arises for us, whatever the understanding of the phrase ‘literacy in television,’ is not to fight against television, a meaningless fight, but how to stimulate critical development and thinking.”

The research conducted by Fischer (2002) investigates the pedagogical role of media in the formation of subjectivities. Based on the analysis of various programs—primarily focusing on the representation of women on Brazilian television—the author discusses how these productions foster critical thinking and contribute to the construction of identities. Fischer (2002) points out that the media plays an important role in how individuals perceive and understand the world in which they are embedded.

According to Baccega (2003), audiovisual language contributes directly to the learning process, enabling students to actively participate in the creation of collaborative content. According to the author, among audiovisual genres, fiction stands out for its potential to address social themes and portray different cultures. Stories captivate the audience, establishing a continuous dialogue and influencing not only social dynamics but also the individual perspectives of the subject.

Carneiro (1999) proposes the integration of fictional narratives into educational strategies. In this context, the author analyzes the educational models of programs such as *Vila Sésamo* and *Castelo Rá-Tim-Bum*, and argues that these productions combine pedagogical segments with dramatic narratives, distancing themselves from didactic explanations. For the author, these shows can be conceptualized as educational entertainment, since they are aimed at specific target audiences and use innovative narrative structures.

According to Becker and Pinheiro Filho (2011), audiovisual texts can stimulate the construction of knowledge and dialogues between television and education. In their analysis of Cao Hamburger’s *On the Strange Planet of Audiovisual Beings*, the authors conclude that the plot establishes a critical dialogue with the viewer—primarily exploring the complexity of narratives and their multiple meanings—and fosters reflections on audiovisual language and genres.

Starting from the study of telenovelas as a “narrative of the nation,” Lopes (2009) states that the plots are configured as a communicative resource and become institutionalized in communication and cultural policies, thus contributing to the development of citizenship and human rights in society. By exploring themes such as health, quality of life, citizenship, environment, culture, identity,

sexuality, and emotional relationships, telenovelas stimulate discussion and reflection among the public. In this way, they incorporate political debates and issues of society into their stories, contributing to the popularization of these topics on the media agenda.

Gómez (2008) highlights the importance of developing actions and strategies in the classroom with the aim of fostering reflection on the medium and a critical understanding of programs. According to the author, the popularity of television and the new forms of production and distribution of audiovisual content in contemporary times emphasize the need to educate viewers so that they are able to question productions based on a critical analysis of the messages and structures of television.

Based on this discussion, this article aims to present a proposal for media literacy training, as well as the goal of developing skills for the critical analysis of audiovisual production and competencies for the creative production of content for social networks, based on the aesthetic experience that young people have with the consumption of fictional audiovisual narratives.

2. QUALITY IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA AND MEDIA LITERACY

According to Machado (2014), the concept of “quality television” was first mentioned in the 1980s in the British publication *MTM: Quality. Television*, from the British Film Institute. The book analyzed the aesthetic, dramaturgical, and critically acclaimed value of the *Hill Street Blues series* and other shows. As we will detail later, the definition of the concept is complex and variable, guided by various points of interest. According to Sewell (2010), this epistemological plurality is related to the very context in which the term is adopted. The author states that quality cannot be concretely defined, otherwise it would lose its mystique as a special form of knowledge and its usefulness as a tool for distinction. In general, quality television can be conceptualized from theoretical-methodological axes referring to “[...] the technical resources of the medium, the aesthetic question, the reception and the content of the programs” (Lopes; Mungioli, 2013, p. 5, our translation). In this sense, the term encompasses criteria such as “[...] taking advantage of audience demands, proposals of social value, pedagogical character or use of technical and linguistic resources in an innovative way” (Lopes; Mungioli, 2013, p. 3, our translation). As Machado (2014) points out, quality TV breaks discursive and thematic rules, hybridizing genres and expanding narrative perspectives.

In the context of serialized fictional narrative, quality is discussed based on the specificities of the format. For Buonanno (2004), when reflecting on quality television, it is important to consider the idiosyncrasies between quality fiction and the quality of fiction. According to the author, quality fiction is elaborated based on a generic consensus linked to opinion, interest, and the imposition of power. The quality of fiction is guided by the productive environment—that

is, the training of professionals—encompassing issues related to administration, management, organization, and creative, productive, performative, and technical practices. Another point highlighted by Buonanno (2004) is Indigenization, in which fiction plays the role of portraying nature, prosody, customs, lifestyles, among other elements related to the local sphere. According to Lopes and Mungioli (2013), the axes of the productive environment and Indigenization were incorporated into the national context from studies of telenovelas, mainly with regard to the “Globo Quality Standard¹” and the term “narrative of the nation.”

According to Thompson (2007), the narrative and aesthetic parameters present in quality narratives were anticipated by some series shown in the 1980s and early 1990s, such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987, NBC), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991/2018, ABC/ Showtime). In this sense, for the author, quality is associated with aspects such as, for example, the hybridization of classic formats, production and writing elements, among others. Cardwell’s (2007) approach also starts from a set of characteristics geared towards a sense of stylistic integrity, in which theme and style are significantly intertwined, permeating all episodes of the plot. Thus, for the author, despite being distinct, quality programs can be grouped into the same genre, as they present resources such as:

[...] high production values, naturalistic acting style, renowned and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created by careful, even innovative, camera movement and editing, and a sound style created through the judicious use of an appropriate and often original soundtrack (Cardwell, 2007, p. 19-34, our translation).

Another recurring point, according to Cardwell (2007, p. 19-34, our translation), is the themes addressed in the series.

[...] programs tend to explore ‘serious’ themes, rather than depicting the superficial events of life; they tend to suggest that the viewer will be rewarded for seeking greater symbolic or emotional resonance within the details of the plot. Quality American television also tends to focus on the present, offering reflections on contemporary society and crystallizing these reflections in smaller examples and instances.

However, the author emphasizes that adopting resources and themes related to quality fiction does not necessarily imply a value judgment of that content. In other words, the quality of the series encompasses a set of textual and extratextual elements, not being restricted to the implicit subjectification of something “good” or “bad.”

Cardwell (2007) points out that quality plots encourage viewers to engage and attentively understand the stories. That is, by being composed of elements such as complex structure, contradictory and ambiguous themes, fast pace, and the adoption — even if sporadic and of erudite, technical, and poetic language — series demand greater cognitive effort from the viewer.

The discussion proposed by Cardwell (2007) presents a clear dialogue with media literacy. By stimulating viewers’ critical understanding—whether by

1 A set of explicit and implicit rules that have guided the operations and productions of *Rede Globo de Televisão* (Rede Globo Television Network), Brazil’s largest and most influential television broadcaster, since the 1960s.

directing attention to plot details or interpreting the nuances and abstractions of the narrative—the plots contribute to promoting the audience’s critical and analytical capacity. According to Borges *et al.* (2021, p. 56, our translation), quality “[...] is a fundamental concept for discussing the development of media and digital skills of different audiences in contemporary times.” If between the 1980s and 1990s there was some resistance to understanding the capacity of television to produce quality content, currently the concept often occupies a central place in both creative and marketing strategies, especially with regard to US channels.

3. THE PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION OF CONTEMPORARY SERIAL FICTION

According to Scolari (2011), contemporary narratives are guided by a new mode of consumption, encompassing practices that go beyond television, such as Transmedia Strategies and the impact of plots on social networks. According to the author, “people say, for example, ‘I watch *Lost*’ or ‘I watch *Big Brother*,’ but this ‘watching’ is, in many cases, radically different from the old television ‘watching’” (Scolari, 2011, p. 127-136, our translation). Digital culture provides modes of creation, participation, collaboration, and distribution that help sustain the complexity of the fictional universes of narratives. As Johnson (2012, p. 92, our translation) points out, “just as programs have become more complex, so too have the resources for understanding this complexity multiplied.” Discussed by Jenkins (2008, p. 138, our translation), Transmedia Storytelling “[...] unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text contributing in a distinct and valuable way to the whole.” In this way, fictional universes are composed of reference content—the primary media—and from it, Transmedia Strategies and actions are conceived.

Collaborative platforms and the environment of participatory culture are also fundamental points in sustaining contemporary series. In this sense, if the viewer does not understand issues such as the ambiguity of the characters or the unfolding of the program’s narrative arcs, they can find guidance in discussion forums, virtual encyclopedias, specialized websites, and, above all, social networks. According to Jenkins (2008), the informational architecture of Facebook and X—formerly Twitter—allows viewers to instantly share and confirm their analyses of fictional universes. In this sense, even with the increasing complexity of the plots, the platforms broaden the repercussions of the series, transforming reception in terms of depth.

When unfolded across multiple platforms, Transmedia Storytelling stimulates the ability to comprehensively interpret discourses from different media and languages. Jenkins *et al.* (2014) state that the phenomenon encompasses not only multilateralism but also audience participation. Interactive viewers

collaboratively analyze actions on networks and produce new content based on the expansion of fictional universes.

According to Mar (2004) and Andrews *et al.* (2009), fictional narratives activate various areas of the human brain, allowing the subject to experience the plot based on their own ideas and experiences. This process stimulates, among other things, the production of dopamine—the hormone responsible for pleasure and emotional connection—and establishes *Neural Coupling*. That is, when consuming the plot, the brain activates areas as if the subject were actually witnessing that event. Andrews *et al.* (2009) state that this connection between subject and story becomes clear when we are moved by the suffering of a character, for example. According to Mar (2004), when presented in narrative form, information tends to hold the subject's attention more effectively, and the probability of memorization is 20 times greater than when presented in isolation.

According to Orozco (2018), the increasing ubiquity of audiences demands the discussion of an educational agenda to strengthen the culture of participation in relation to screens. Authors such as Scolari (2011) also point out that narratives are no longer restricted to a single platform and explore diverse media and languages, configuring what they call “world-building.” According to the author, the hypothetical construction of possible worlds has ceased to be individual and has become a collective process that unfolds on social networks. In this sense, we have the creation of an expanded fictional world that stimulates the participation of interacting viewers who, in turn, create other possible worlds, which can be interstitial micronarratives, parallel stories, peripheral stories, and content generated from online conversations.

4. PROPOSAL FOR TRAINING IN AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION AND MEDIA LITERACY

Before delving into the proposed training in audiovisual media literacy, it is important to detail the teaching methodology that will be used in its application. According to Bender (2014) and Cote (2007), Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one of the main teaching models of contemporary times. In addition to its effectiveness and encompassing various levels of application, PBL is based on the collaborative construction of teaching-learning processes. According to Bender (2014), despite having different names such as Problem-Based Learning, Inquiry-Based Learning, and Authentic Learning, the general teaching approach of PBL remains the same; that is, “[...] students identify and seek to solve real-world problems that they consider important” (Bender, 2014, p. 16, our translation).

According to Bender (2014), the anchors adopted in PBL are fundamental elements of this teaching methodology and contribute directly to student motivation during the pedagogical action. In this context, the audiovisual and media literacy training proposal of the *Audiovisual Quality Observatory* focuses primarily

on audiovisual media, mainly encompassing Brazilian and Portuguese children's and youth television series. Bender (2014) also emphasizes that a PBL project should be guided by collaboration; that is, the tasks and artifacts that make up the action should always consider the cooperative work of the students. As we will explore further below, the artifacts of the workshop proposed in this article are organized based on pedagogical sequences that prioritize collaboration, encompassing different types of results and levels of complexity. The action also includes tools that involve self-evaluation of the project at the end of the workshop—a fundamental guideline in PBL (Project-Based Learning).

Within this context of the production, circulation, and consumption of contemporary serialized fictional narratives, and based on studies developed by the *Audiovisual Quality Observatory*—which operates as a space for research, reflection, and training on contemporary audiovisual production, especially Brazilian and Portuguese—we present a proposal for training in audiovisual quality and media literacy.

Developed since 2016, the project “Quality in Brazilian television fiction: debates, proposals and analysis” He organized a repository containing 440 Brazilian fictional serial narratives broadcast on free-to-air and pay television, and on streaming services between 2000 and 2022. Of these productions, 34 are aimed at children and young people, and 20 have themes related to adolescence. From Portugal, 69 series have already been collected for the period 2010 to 2022, and among them, 6 are for children.

It is important to understand how young people have been represented in serialized fiction, as it is noticeable that teen dramas have begun to include narratives and characters relevant to the social, cultural, and political context of contemporary society. According to Marghita (2021) and Pyles (2023), series that address youth subcultures portray themes such as maturation, first love, sexuality, and conflicts with authority figures. The narrative arcs generally address the transition from childhood to adulthood, exploring issues related to identity, love, and self-discovery. Pyles (2023) points out that teen series play a fundamental role in the formation of young people. Therefore, it is important that the audience consumes quality dramas that can foster critical thinking about the media and act as catalysts for relevant conversations among viewers. By presenting characters and situations that generate some kind of identification with the audience, narrative arcs allow viewers to discuss and reflect on complex themes such as race, gender, and social justice.

Based on data collected on contemporary series and audiovisual criticism analyses available on the *Observatory's website*—which discuss aspects of quality related to this content—this training proposal is aimed at teachers to develop activities with young people aged 15 to 17. It is based on the experience of the Series Club—which operated between 2018 and 2020 at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil—and developed a methodology that includes—in addition to audiovisual analysis and criticism related to stylistic and content characteristics—the study of the actions of dissemination, broadcasting, and propagation of

audiovisual production and the analysis of fan practices. Therefore, its objective is to provide elements so that teachers can develop media literacy skills with their students related to the ability to access, analyze, and create audiovisual and media content in a critical and interventionist way.

The training program is structured in five phases—which have already been tested in training programs developed in the documentary filmmaking field and Transmedia Storytelling. These studies are organized based on a theoretical and methodological proposal that discusses the relationship between audiovisual quality and media literacy in contemporary serial fiction. Its main objective is to update studies on audiovisual quality, integrating the discussion of circulation and aesthetic experience into the analysis of fictional series—from the perspective of discussions on media competence—based on the new configurations present in digital culture.

The five stages of the proposed training action are as follows: experience, language, confrontation, appropriation, and apprehension.

Etapas da Ação de Formação em Ficção Seriada



Figure 1: Stages of the Training Action in Serialized Fiction

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

In the first stage, activities are aimed at introducing participants and the group they belong to, with prompts that seek to understand which fictional universes they consume and discuss in their daily lives. Furthermore, it is also in this phase that perceptions of the plots are evaluated before the training activity takes place.

Next, the characteristics of the language that will be discussed throughout the process are presented, such as the main elements that make up serialized fiction. The aspects considered in this stage encompass the Plane of Expression, which considers how the product is created through its technical-expressive resources—audio, video, editing, and graphics—and the Plane of Content—characters and narrative. The production of meaning will thus be analyzed based on

the setting, photography, editing, and soundtrack, through visual codes (shots and framing, lighting, scenery); sound codes (dialogues and soundtracks); syntactic codes (editing and rhythm of the program); and graphic codes (vignettes and graphics), the elements of character construction, and narrative development.

We can use as an example the results of the analysis of the series *Everything Solid Can Melt* (*Tudo o Que É Sólido Pode Derreter*, TV Cultura, 2009). The thirteen-episode series follows the story of Thereza (Mayara Constantino), a fourteen-year-old high school freshman. The young woman has just lost her uncle Augusto (Luciano Chirolli), a writer and actor in theatrical plays. Also passionate about literature, the character seeks to delve deeper into the books her teachers recommend at school. This relationship causes everything in Thereza's life to become a modern reinterpretation of works that are generally required reading for Brazilian university entrance exams, such as *Os Lusíadas* by Luís Vaz de Camões, *Senhora* by José de Alencar, and *Auto da Barca do Inferno* by Gil Vicente.

Thus, in the language stage, after the series has aired, we will discuss the elements that make up the Plane of Expression and the Plane of Content—such as, for example, the importance of the setting of *Everything Solid Can Melt*—for the development of the series' narrative arcs. It is from the conflicts at school and at home that Thereza establishes—even if often unconsciously—the correlation with literary works. Another guiding point of the fictional universe is the soundtrack of the plot's scenes, which seeks to engage with the target audience through styles such as alternative rock and indie pop. The soundtrack is used extensively in the series to build atmosphere and rhythm in scenes and transitions.

Given the participants' prior experiences and new knowledge presented in the characterization of the audiovisual product, we sought to foster the exchange of ideas, presenting thought-provoking productions that encourage critical reflection through the following quality parameters: opportunity, broadening the audience's horizons, diversity, and stereotype (Borges, 2014). These parameters aim to reflect the extent to which audiovisual creation promotes or hinders attentive reading and stimulates critical reflection on the part of the audience.

Table 1: Quality parameters in audiovisual messaging

Parâmetro	Descrição
Oportunidade	Relevância dos temas em uma dada conjuntura histórica, dialogando com a agenda midiática em suas escolhas e enquadramentos.
Ampliação do horizonte do público	Expansão do repertório cultural do público, apresentando novas problemáticas e pontos de vista e fomentando debates.

Parâmetro	Descrição
Diversidade	Geográfica, temática, de pontos de vista, e grupos sociais representados, entre outros.
Estereótipo	Identificação de representações e discursos com afirmação/desconstrução de estereótipos.
Originalidade/Criatividade	Presença de um formato diferenciado que experimenta com a linguagem audiovisual em temas de apresentação e abordagem de temas.

Source: Adapted from Borges *et al.* (2022).

The fictional universe of *Everything Solid Can Melt* manages to connect the often complex themes of classic works of Luso-Brazilian literature with the daily lives of young people. In this sense, conflicts such as parental authority, platonic love, and friendships become points of intersection with the discussions proposed by the authors. By watching the series, viewers create—even if indirectly—a familiarity with the subjects and the themes of the works. We can affirm that the TV Cultura series stimulates reading and brings young people closer to classics of Luso-Brazilian literature. It is important to emphasize that the discussions proposed by the screenwriters do not present dense and complex information, but they serve as a starting point to awaken the viewers' interest. The broadening of the audience's horizons and the encouragement of reflection on relevant themes are present in the program and fulfill their function effectively.

During the appropriation phase, participants are invited to bring together all the discussions held so far in the creative conception of a media product. At this stage, we also discuss the circulation of the narrative, considering an understanding of Transmedia Strategies, used by media companies for the dissemination of audiovisual creation and the conversation generated from the comments on these publications on social networks. In this sense, it is necessary to articulate the two spheres of media competence—critical analysis and creative production—, as theorized by Ferrés and Piscitelli (2015), insofar as reflections on language, formats and different discourses will be applied in creative practice.

TV Cultura encouraged active audience participation through its official website, which featured full episodes, music from the series, a photo gallery, behind-the-scenes information, digital books of the classics that inspired the narrative available for free download, and a blog written by the protagonist Thereza. The posts aimed to offer reflections on the events of the series and music suggestions, such as the post “I transform myself into others”; the blog also included an option for viewer comments. In the post “A (very) long post” from May 27, 2009, some comments were selected to be answered. Therefore, in the appropriation phase, we will propose the creation of fictional profiles of the series' characters on social media. Students will have to create posts indicating

books that are part of the episodes, exploring the informational architecture of digital platforms and the production of multimodal content. The practice of creating fictional profiles is very common in contemporary fan culture, with telenovela fans frequently updating their profiles with each new telenovela.

The final apprehension phase is dedicated to discussing all the workshop processes, exhibiting and discussing the products created by the students, in order to evaluate which activities were most effective and to what extent the students grasped the relationship between audiovisual quality and media literacy, developing critical analysis and critical expression skills, as well as debating new perspectives and developments that emerged within the group.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on discussions focused on the inclusion of television in the context of education and the construction of a pedagogy of fiction present in the Brazilian context since the 1980s, and on the research, reflection, and training experiences developed by the *Audiovisual Quality Observatory* since 2013, this article presents a proposal for training in audiovisual quality and media literacy, aimed at providing teachers with tools to work with their students based on young people's media consumption and the aesthetic experience provided by contemporary serialized fiction.

We aim to provide this pedagogical path based on PBL—that is, taking into account students' media consumption and collaborative production on social networks—in order to develop teachers' skills in critical reflection and the expansion of their audiovisual repertoire so that they can develop strategies for teaching audiovisual analysis and production, which can be linked to other areas of knowledge such as literature. Therefore, and in accordance with PBL, teachers can act as facilitators in the process of developing their students' media literacy.

Our objective thus focused on the theoretical and methodological presentation of the proposed training action, which should, in future publications, present results on its application. With this, we aim to promote the development of media literacy in its intrinsic relationship with the discussion about the quality of content, elements that have become essential in contemporary society due to the relevance that fictional narratives have gained in interactions on social networks.

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