Chapter 1
Film Literacy, Visual Culture, and Film Language

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, in the age when we experience the supremacy of the visual dominance, sustains the assumption that political power has infiltrated the lives of the individual as a subject in visual representations, and that films, which can be a medium where the individual may oppose the domination against the struggle for power, produce both hegemonic discourses and counter rhetoric. Based on this assumption, it aims to explain the content required for film literacy in general terms. For this purpose, the concept of media literacy covering the mass media and the historical development process are summarized, followed by a brief overview of the history of film and the scope of film literacy. Then cinematographic image and film analysis methods are explained, and finally, the results of the content in the context of film literacy are evaluated and suggestions are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Able to distinguish figures long before they learned how to read, individuals can watch films, but they can perceive them only when they possess the aptitude to understand iconographic and symbolic images appearing in their cultural environment. Therefore, as in the creation stage of the film, the subjective accumulation of the individual is important in the reception stage as well. In this context, studies on cinema try to explain the film within the framework of various approaches. For example, “Eisenstein describes the film as the collision of concepts; Bazin, as the photochemical record of reality; Auteur theorists, as a work of art created by the director. In the sixties, Christian Metz however, while discussing how the texts/films convey meaning through the medium of codes, described the film as a group syntactic relationship that can be characterized as grammar” (Ildırar, 2008, pp. 21-22).

A product of the subjective selection, the film can use visual, auditory and written narration techniques to depict the world as a dark, threatening or as a radiant, and tranquil place. The choices made during the
creation of the film are evident and read through different meaning layers. Hence, films, each a cultural object, create a text that encapsulates many meanings. “Films can teach a lesson to the viewers on how psychological identities, characters’ relations with each other or with objects, their dynamics such as crises and conflicts, and the ways of solution are shaped, enabling viewers to self-criticize” (Parsa and Olgundeniz, 2017, p. 24-27). On the other hand, the film audience is in various positions in face of these messages. Accordingly, while the viewer is “the subject of the “gaze”, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, in Althusserian Marxism however, is guided by the ideology” (Ildırar, 2008, p. 22). Cinema reflects the changes in the social convention like any other art, but as it contains everything and because of its popular nature, more so than other art forms” (Monaco, 2000, p. 504). From painting to music, covering a wide area where all art forms and different disciplines exist, cinema although regarded to be in the field of dramatic arts, is a field which has a strong narrative are used that includes visual elements as well as sound and music. In movies, just as in the language, there are representations of the struggle between the ruling and ruled, which reflects the truth in an infinite number.

Films, with their unique narrative features such as visual effects, music, colors, signs, and symbols within the social, political, historical, philosophical, artistic context, in addition to being educational and guiding, can be transformed into a realm where the ruling power carries out its propaganda activities as well. That is why film literacy is important because it enables to see what is not shown in the meaning produced. Being able to recognize the visual, auditory, and discursive structures of films requires critical reading. Images encoded and created by visual, audio, and written codes (meaning systems) through the unique language of cinema, in other words the camera angle, lighting, scales and other technical characteristics of the film language, generate the meaning. Through the space and story created beyond time and space, the film takes the spectator to a place where that person can never be present at. Lives depicted in the storylines of films can be experienced as if real. Film analysis is necessary with respect to seeing the meanings behind the world of imagery created. Therefore, film literacy education should be organized in a context that includes the methods of analysis in mention. Concordantly, the analysis method of film readings is often the semiotic analysis.

In this context, motion pictures, unlike the language, regardless of being based on the truth or on fictional elements, bear the traces of the culture lived in, including the meaning created and significations made by the viewers. Therefore, considering that different cultures have different forms of reading, cultural elements on which the storyline is based on should be read with different ways of seeing when engaged in intercultural communication.

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE HISTORICAL PROCESS

In the 1930s, which were the beginning years of media literacy practices, there came the notion of “anti-media education against the manipulative nature of the media” (İnceoğlu, 2006, p. 4) into question. Media education was launched in the United States, one of the first countries to implement media literacy in 1932, at the initiative of the New York Times. Various newspapers were sent to 17 thousand schools, 48 thousand teachers took part in the implementation of this program and 350 media outlets supported the program. Moreover, in Switzerland, “the cantons passed decisions to take part in media education programs, media education implemented in Lausanne since 1967 was included in the Pestalozzi program in Zurich and in the Media Entry program in Fribourg” (Topuz, 2006, pp. 2-3). While issues such as monopoly, violence and consumer culture became the main topic of conversation in the 1980s,
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