MAIA (movie analysis in action). A new teaching method in media literacy education

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Abstract

MAIA (movie analysis in action) is a simple method in Media Literacy Education. It consists of a few simple operative steps, thanks to which you can design interesting learning situations to approach audiovisual text analysis with students. The method has been tested several times in last three years, in groups of young (16-18 years old) and adult students (23 years old and over). The main purpose of this teaching model is both to make the moment of "graphic transcription" of the audiovisual text more interesting, and to actually easily introduce the whole analysis process.

Keywords: Media literacy; visual text analysis; teaching methods; media education, semiotics.

1. Movie analysis in education

MAIA (movie analysis in action) is a simple method in Media Literacy process. It consists of a few simple operative steps, thanks to which you can design interesting learning situations to approach audiovisual text analysis with students. The method has been tested several times in last three years, in groups of young (16-18 years old) and adult students (23 years old and over). Nevertheless, the method proposes very easy and pleasant activities, so it can be extended also to the younger students.

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1.1. Audiovisual text description and graphic transcription

Knowledge and skills, related to the media text reading, are certainly considered a sort of preambula of media literacy. The primary goal of any media education process is to know how to “read” media messages and especially their linguistic elements. The first step in media literacy is learning the basic elements of communication. So, the knowledge of the signs and codes of audio-visual language appears as a pre-condition to develop any other consideration on the media (Casetti, Di Chio 1990).

Among teaching strategies that media educators have developed, text analysis could be considered one of the best-know aspects of Media Education (Buckingham 2003).

Briefly, the process of analysis of the audiovisual text is traditionally structured on three levels:

a) description - the text is broken down into its constituent parts in order to deeply understand the writing techniques;

b) meaning - the analyst "reconstructs" the text, linking the linguistic components to the narrative and thematic "content", giving a first interpretation;

c) judgment – that is the deep process of interpretation, which proposes a general critical overview.

The first level (description) allows to “closely look” at the structure of the video and to focus on its smaller parts (frames or shots), in order to recognize the linguistic elements in them. In teaching/learning situation, we can propose two operational steps (Rivoltella 1998):

1. breaking up the text into its meaningful units, i.e. the sequences and shots (frame by frame), and
2. accurately identifying, in every single frame, all the linguistic components.

How to make this analytical task? We can use the classic model of graphics transcription and produce a sort of “a posteriori script”. It allows to highlight all the audio-video components. This “written object” is the starting point to work on the reading skills development, to move from a "naïve look" (linked to the immediate vision, full of emotion, participation and psychic dynamics) to a "competent look" (which leads to the critical evaluation of the text language and communication - without, however, preclude the viewing pleasure).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO</th>
<th>AUDIO</th>
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| 1. 2" I.N. MF of Sam (left) and of Werner using a knife | Werner: “Vedi Sam, è Natale. Guarda. Che ne dici? Me lo ha regalato Mylene”  
Background music |
| 2. 1” I.N. P.P. of Mylene smiling while pouring from a jug | Background music |
| 3. 2” I.N. P.P. of Sam watching the knife | Sam: “Non sono venuto per questo.”  
Background music |
| 4. 2” I.N. P.P. of Werner | Sam: “Io voglio la tua confessione...”  
Background music |
| 5. 2” I.N. P.P. of Sam | Sam: “...e i soldi.”  
Background music |
| 6. 2” I.N. P.P. of Mylene | Sam: “Altrimenti, chiamo la polizia.”  
Background music |
Therefore, the descriptive moment is crucial and adopting an appropriate methodology is equally decisive. Graphical transcription could be a useful methodological tool because it transposes the visual language in written verbal language, and it promotes critical distance from the video and analysis process.

But today graphical transcription could be replaced by an equally valid and functional methodology: MAIA.

1.2. MAIA Method

The importance of a “translation” of the visual text is undoubted. It can “fix” the text and make it available for analytical crossing. Today digital technology (digital cameras, video editing software) offers new tools to improve this descriptive step of media analysis: MAIA perfectly does it!

The main steps of the MAIA method are the following:

1. the careful viewing of the whole audiovisual text – it allows you to have an overview and to make some first "naïve" reflections about its style, language and narrative content;

2. the selection of shots - it is necessary to stop the audiovisual flow, following the sequence of shots, in order to turn them into pictures. This activity does not involve any particularly difficult technological tool, because now all the most common freeware video players (e.g. VLC) are equipped with useful functions for this task: “stop playback”, play “frame by frame” and “frame snapshot” (extract frames). The selected images are collected in a specific folder on your PC. They will be the starting point for the next reproduction activity of the shots;

3. the re-production of the shots – The students now work in groups. They are asked to produce a picture that is as similar as possible to the original (the picture previously extracted from the sequence), by using a digital (video)camera. During this step, the students are invited to re-write the scenes. So, they perform a series of actions that are very significant for learning process and the starting point of audiovisual language analysis:
   a. they prepare a movie set, with the main environmental elements;
   b. they put the objects on the scene;
   c. they choose the "actors", and provide them with some distinctive features, similar to the original model;
   d. they try to light up the scene;
   e. they place the camera in a specific position, in order to copy the point of view of the original;
   f. the “actors” take on the position of the video characters, with the help of all the students;
   g. finally, they take some picture of the scene.

4. the selection of the pictures – at the end of the shooting, the students can download all the pictures in a specific folder in the PC. By using a picture viewing software, they can now select the best pictures, the most similar to the originals.

Werner: “Vedi Sam, è Natale. Guarda. Che ne dici? Me lo ha regalato Mylene”

Background music
2. Final remarks

MAIA helps teachers to introduce students to the audiovisual analysis by using a simple, intuitive and active method. The technical tools, which are used in the process, are accessible to anyone and they don’t require specific technical skills. The success of the educational action is certain, just activate a few simple warnings.

First, while the group works in the “video rewriting” (as it happens in the “verbal graphics transcription”), the media
The educator has the task to indicate, from time to time, the dense meanings of “rewriting”: it is the “on the field” discovery of picture language. The steps are very basic, but the in-action meta-reflection is very important. The teacher must continuously ask to reflect on the various phases of group work, and he has to highlight the how-and-why of the different actions and choices.

Secondly, MAIA method doesn’t involve audio analysis, but it’s possible to think about another activity that is focused on audio elements (by using, again, easy audio editing software). In addition, I note that MAIA is very flexible. It can be centered, from time to time, on different aspects of the audiovisual language. For example, the media educator can focus on proxemics, on the use of light, on the point of view, etc. In short, he can implement all learning strategies that he has traditionally used in the video analysis.

For all these reasons, MAIA is a simple and practical method available to all media educators.

References