Audiovisual interpretative skills: between textual culture and formalized literacy

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a study on the process of acquiring interpretative skills to decode audiovisual texts among adolescents and youth. Based on the conception of such competence as the ability to understand the meanings connoted beneath the literal discourses of audiovisual texts, this study compared two variables: the acquisition of such skills from the personal and social experience in the consumption of audiovisual products (which is affected by age difference), and, on the second hand, the differences marked by the existence of formalized processes of media literacy. Based on focus groups of young students, the research assesses the existing academic debate about these processes of acquiring skills to interpret audiovisual materials.

reception; adolescence and youth; denotation and connotation; interpretative skills; media literacy; textual culture.

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Traslated: **Cruz Alberto Martinez-Arcos**

1. Introduction

For some time, the interdisciplinary research group *Hedabideak, Gizarte eta Hezkuntza* (Media, Society and Education) [1] has been undertaking fieldwork and analysis [2] about the interpretative abilities of the Basque youth and adolescence in relation to the contents of the media, music, cinema, Internet and video games, in line with the research being conducted on the perspectives of Media Literacy and *Educommunication* [3].

The research presented here examines the individual interpretation and the subsequent group discussion produced by eight groups of young students from 14 to 18 years of age in relation to the opening sequence of Walt Disney's "The Lion King" (1994), which is a benchmark example of the products of the industrialized culture.

2. Research objectives and their relationship to academic debates about the interpretative skills of media users

The overall objective of the research was to evaluate the interpretative abilities of these young people to make a critical reading of the film text, i.e. to discover the connoted meaning that underlies the story.

The sequence narrates the public presentation of a newborn lion (Simba). The soundtrack is a song about the "endless cycle of life" that starts all over again with this birth, and which already suggests that the newborn protagonist will be the future king.

In the "life cycle" the pyramidal distribution of power in society (represented by the animated characters) is a natural fact. Therefore, the setting of the sequence is the very natural world in all its glory, with a large rising and shinning sun, and a beautiful and engaging shout in a language -which known or not is Swahili- that seems to belong to a tribe living in that radiant nature. The dwelling of the lion is on top, is the best-illuminated place and this image is presented from the viewpoint of a low-angle shot. The entire society, all kinds of animals, is on the ground and is shown from a high angle point of view shot. This is a cohesive society that has come marching together in the same direction and with the same objective: to congratulate the continuity of the unquestionable power of the lion king –unquestionable because it is inscribed in the life cycle.

In order for the natural state of things to identify with this distribution of power, the animals represent a happy and equilibrated living structure, unified, without conflict, because the act executed is the recognition of the power that ensures the balanced organization of the community.

In fact, the story told by the rest of the film shows that when the benevolent power breaks down and is under the guidance of a lion who does not has the attributes of the natural power (he has black hair) and is supported by hyenas (inhabitants of the periphery of the system "where the light does not come", as Mufasa explains his son Simba), then the whole social structure crumbles and the hunger and crisis predominate. This lasts until Simba comes back as an adult and defeats the bad lion, becomes the new king, and restores the natural order, because he is the guarantee that the natural order exists, that the sun will shine again, and that the cycle of life will continue.

In this "life cycle" is also natural that something supernatural, something external and above the inhabitants of the earth -the religious power (including a heavenly shaft of light that illuminates Simba)- sanctifies the birth of a new cycle of earthly power and makes both appear unified. Society displays consent to this alliance and the continuity of power is legitimized by society itself with another act that has a heavy load of religious culture: the genuflection of all animals.

All this connotative burden is not new in Disney films and many academic studies confirm it:

> "The Disney corporate empire -Guarinos-Galán (2009) says rightly- has been highly studied and exposed in many aspects. One of them shows (...) that the image of innocence and moral defence sold by Disney hides many stereotypes that reinforce gender, racist and classist values".

Discovering these stereotypes, these connoted meanings under the denoted level of the sequence of the animated story of the birth of a lion, would demonstrate, in our view, an adequate level of critical interpretive skills.

Along with this first objective we also wanted to better assess some of the on-going discussions about academic reception research. We do not share the view of theories that give such priority to the interpretive abilities of the audience in the communicative processes that sometimes confuse interpretative skills with the ability to extract any meaning of a message or use it for a particular purpose, and disregard the content analysis when investigating the reception context. Although there are some who present it as a new perspective, this kind of academic approach has certainly a long tradition that started with the functionalist theory of the "uses and gratifications" [4].

In that sense, we do not share the thesis of many "Cultural Studies" -and whose extreme can be the "Theory of the Resistance" (Fiske, 1989)- which proclaims the almost total "polysemy" of cultural products and also the almost absolute active character of reception [5].

Certainly there is some polysemy in "The Lion King" and it probably should be noted that this polysemy could be extended by the diversity of cognitive and emotional systems of the recipients. Although we maintain a certain distance from this consideration, Eco's (2000:76) reflection may be reasonable:

> "...One wonders whether what is discovered is what the text says through its textual coherence and original underlying signification system, or what the recipients find in the text according to their own sets of expectations".

Indeed someone might say "The Lion King" is the simple story of the "good education" that a young man receives on how to exercise his social function so that there is peace and balance in his family and environment.

For our part, and without denying the hermeneutic landscape, we particularly share the ideas proposed by other researchers like James Curran, who, from the "Cultural Studies" perspective, considers that in the texts of the cultural industries produced for mass consumption there is a structured polysemy that marks the possible limits of interpretation and that ...

> "...the denotative symbols in the texts give access, to a greater or lesser extent, to audiences' interpretations according to certain preferred forms (selected by producers/broadcasters), and that audiences do not have an endless repertoire of discourses to use to adapt the meanings" (Curran, 1998: 402-403).

However, is not so much the diversity of possible interpretations what were intend to discuss here, but the interpretive skills, namely the ability to analyze the "interpretive marks" that are displayed in a coherent manner (whether framings, cultural symbols like the shaft of light, or components of both like the united and happy march of all the animals towards the Lion King's rock or the affirmation that this is the "life cycle").

And let's not forget that even Eco (2000:34) criticized the fact that for "some contemporary theories (...) a text only seems to be a picnic in which the author puts the words and the readers the meaning" (by the way, Fiske considers this a "semiotic supermarket"). Eco also considers that "the words of the author constitute an embarrassing handful of material evidence that the reader cannot ignore in silence or noise" (2000:34).

However, our own previous research, particularly in television news and advertising interpretation, we had raised questions about the extent to which the interpretative competence required a formalized media literacy or could it be the result of individual and social experience.

We concluded that in the adolescence and youth with whom we had worked there was not an absolute incapacity of critical interpretation of media messages, at least not among the young people who maintained social critical positions on what the media frequently advocated for society. But we had also found huge deficiencies in interpretation, of which can be an example the widespread belief that "television news programmes manipulate news less because in TV one can see what happens". Therefore we agreed with Fontcuberta (2001:71) that "a student literate in the world of emotions is a student much more capable of undertaking a critical reading of the messages received from the media". But we found that, rather than solved, this was a major point of dispute between different academic studies.

Some theses of the Media Literacy approach, which we have already cited, give "formalized" media literacy a function comparable to the one that the general formalized literacy has for the reading of written texts. That is, without media literacy is not possible to even understand or produce audiovisual texts properly.

Very different from this conception is the tradition that comes from the pragmatic semiotics of Peirce [6] and his triadic conception of the sign -where the social use and interpretation of these occupy a central place- later continued by the Italian textual semiotics -Eco (1981, 2002); Grandi (1995: 93-102 and 227-292)-, which vindicates the acquisition of interpretative skills based on the experience in the practices of audiovisual consumption. The following quote from Mauro Wolf (1987: 144-45), albeit a little old, accurately summarizes this tradition:

> "It is likely that the interpretative competence of the audiences, rather than on explicitly learned and recognized codes, is mainly based and articulated on the accumulations of texts already received".

According to the researcher, the acquisition of these skills through "codes explicitly learned" would result in a "grammatical culture"; whereas achieving the abilities from the experience originated through the accumulated reception of content would generate a "textual culture".

Investigating the opposition or complementarity between the two theses of academic research on the patterns of acquisition of interpretative skills was also an objective of our work.

Our main research questions were four:

• What interpretative skills are generated by the habitual consumption (made by young people) of typical audiovisual cultural products like the one selected for this study?

• What limits are marked by the difference in age, and therefore differences in general cultural training, at the level of such interpretative skills?

• What differences in interpretative skills are produced by having or not having a formalized media literacy?

• What consequences can be obtained from the answers to the two previous questions, with regard to the previously mentioned academic debates on reception?

In this sense we completely agreed with this reflection of Manuel Martínez-Nicolás (2009):

> "Undertaking empirical research is not to collect data and count, whether they are numbers or stories -narrations, discourses-, but to ground the exploration of reality on the corpus of available knowledge -ideas, theories- and to draw from it plausible hypotheses that must necessarily be contrasted with that reality -numbers, stories: data- that they seek to explain".

3. Methodology

Focus groups was the research methodology because our own past research and the academic community agreed that it "allows obtaining an approximate knowledge of the social reality that is investigated, through the communication produced in the group" (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998: 122).

There were four groups of Secondary School Students, hence SSS, (of 14-16 years of age), and four groups of High School Students (of 16-18 years of age), hence HSS. In order to create a favourable environment of trust to facilitate group communication, the focus groups were conducted at the schools in which each group was formed [7].

Before starting that "communication that occurs within the group" and that, as we saw, serves to open up new angles of analysis and establish new interpretive consensus, we wanted to capture and classify the interpretative capacity of each adolescent that would be a subject of our research.

We screened twice the first sequence of "The Lion King". It opens with a rising sun, while the soundtrack says in Swahili: "Nants ingoyama bagithi baba" (Here comes a lion!). Then, the images suggest the Kilimanjaro and the prairies of the Serengeti National Park where a multitude of animals are moving in unity towards the same place.

A low angle camera shot [8] shows that they are gathering under a large rock on which, under a powerful light, there is a majestic adult lion (Mufasa) towards which a red-billed hornbill (Zazu) flies up to give him a reverence, which the lion replies with a condescending gesture. Animals open a corridor through which a kind of baboon with very distinctive and special features (Rafiki) gets close to the lion's rock, gets on it and hugs Mufasa, who welcomes him with a big friendly

smile.

At the entrance of the cave that is at the bottom of the rock is Simba in the arms of his mother (Sarabi). Rafiki starts a ceremony similar to a baptism, while the the powerful volume of the soundtrack is lowered and the illumination is dimmed, creating an atmosphere of meditation; at the end of the ceremony Rafiki takes Simba in his hands, lifts him and shows him to the multitude of animals. The soundtrack comes back into first sonorous plane, the lighting gains power, and there is a combination of very low-angle shots showing Simba lifted by Rafiki, with other overhead and high-angle shots from Simba's head to the animals below.

Afterwards the clouds open up and a ray of light from the sky illuminates Simba, and at that moment the soundtrack volume increases once again. All animals genuflect and bow their heads. With Rafiki and the family of lions on the rock, and the multitude of animals under it, the sequence ends with a long shot, while the song says "we must seek to find our great legacy in the endless cycle".

The image becomes black and the film's title appears: *The Lion King*.

We gave each group member a sheet with a blank side to write and a side with four still frames of that first sequence of "The Lion King": a) Zazu flying up towards the rock where Mufasa is (low-angle shot); b) Rafiki's finger making a sign on the forehead of Simba, who is in the lap of Sarabi; c) Rafiki going to the tip of the rock to show Simba to all animals who are seen very low (overhead high angle shot); d) Rafiki, on top of the rock, lifting Simba over his arms, while a ray of light coming out from the clouds illuminates the small lion (high angle shot).

After screening the sequence, we asked participants to write in the most precise way what they saw in each still frame, what they thought each frame meant, and to try to summarize and interpret the whole sequence in the blank sheet. This way we would have an initial idea of the interpretations of each participant, and a posterior level, which would be influenced by the group discussion.

We chose the age group 14 to 18 years old to examine interpretative skills in relation to the field of fiction film because it complemented the line of our previous research projects that had had as objects of study the equipment and use of new technologies at home, the elections in the consumption of media, and the interpretative abilities and critical reading skills in relation to news and advertising.

Of the four SSS groups, half of them had specific training in visual or audio-visual studies, but the other half did not. Of the HSS groups, half were enrolled in the Arts programme, where visual or audiovisual studies were conducted, while the rest had no specific training in that area. We wanted to investigate two main variables:

• Firstly, the age difference in this period that marks the passage from Secondary School (known in Spain as Compulsory Secondary Education) to High School/Post-Compulsory Schooling (known in Spain as *Bachillerato*). In our previous studies we proved that this difference in age and type of studies marked a leap in experiences and cultural consumption (and life perspective), and so we tried to find out whether the differences also applied to interpretative skills.

• Secondly, the difference in audiovisual training, in order to establish the extent to what those interpretative skills depended on formalized literacy.

Our initial hypotheses about the responses that participants would give to the two main variables were three:

• That the experience in the consumption of audiovisual products and the presence in the film sequence chosen of many cultural references not expressly reducible to audiovisual language (humanization of animated animals, the representation of religious symbols...) should allow margins for interpretation in all groups.

• That the age difference (in that age and school level) would mark important differences in the critical decoding ability.

• That in each age level, media literacy would add interpretative skills that would be crucial for a critical reading of the opening sequence of "The Lion King" and that this would put in a second level (without annulling them) the capabilities generated by both the "textual culture" and the age difference.

Therefore, the hypotheses were open to a greater weight of that textual culture, that Wolf (and some of our own interpretations) vindicated as interpretative reference, but also preventive about the limits that that textual experience could have to develop interpretative skills of powerful cultural texts like "The Lion King" on the youth sample we were would analyse.

4. Interpretative skills and critical interpretations

All the groups had clear from the outset that it was a fiction film and a not a documentary about animals. But only one group related the fictitious character of the story with the fact that that it was told with cartoons. In general, the references about the lions were given in the same sense as if they were talking about images of real lions.

When we see pictures of lions in a documentary we know they represent real lions. But in order for the written word

"lion" to generate in us a mental image that also represents a real lion, we need the formalized literacy. The completely arbitrary nature of written expression "lion", marks the distance between the concept of "literacy" with regards to the reading-writing aspect and audiovisual expression. There is no zero interpretive competence to decode an audiovisual text as a consequence of not having received formalized media literacy.

But we knew that already. Now it should be added that the cultural/communicative use of cartoons as a substitute for the filmed image has been established to such extent that it replaces that image with absolute normality. And this is again a result of the "accumulation of texts received" but without the formalized literacy resulting conditioning at all.
But we had to analyse the interpretative competence of our teenagers beyond this basic level of recognition.

• Firstly, whether they noticed that underneath the story starred by cartoon animals [9] there was a representation of a story about human society.

• But we were also trying to verify the extent to what the groups' interpretation of the denotative level of the sequence had been able to understand its hidden connotations about the hierarchical organization of power.

4.1. Individual responses

As already indicated, before moving on to the group discussion, each member had to make a brief written explanation of the whole sequence and the four individual still frames. In both cases they were asked to tell what they saw and what they thought it meant [10].

The combined result of the responses of the four types of groups in describing the sequence and explaining its significance is presented in the three following tables.

Interpretation	SSS with media literacy	SSS without media literacy	HSS with media literacy	HSS without media literacy
Just as a story of animals	25%	62'5%	12'5%	18'75%
As a story of humans	56'25%	18`75%	75%	56'25%
Ambiguity about whether it is a story about animals or humans	18'75%	18'75%	12'5%	25%

As can be seen, there were important differences among the members of each group with respect to interpreting the sequence as a representation of or a reference to the human society, although it is formally narrated with animals.

If we compare the data of SSS and HSS without media literacy to those with media literacy, it is clear that formalized literacy influences interpretive capabilities. It can also be noted that there are different interpretive capabilities between SSS and HSS without audiovisual training and between both levels with audiovisual training studies. By contrast, the results of SSS with media studies and HSS without media literacy are almost the same, as if, at least at the elemental level of expression of interpretative skills, both variables are in balance.

Interpretation	SSS with media literacy	SSS without media literacy	HSS with media literacy	HSS without media literacy
It represents a hierarchical and pyramidal organization	75%	50%	87'75%	75%
There is a representation of religion to legitimize power	62'5%	12'5%	81'25%	75%

As already explained, two of the main connotative messages of the sequence are, on the one hand, the legitimacy of a pyramidal and hierarchy power structure as natural and, on the other hand, the double legitimacy given to this structure by its supernatural or religious consecration.

The table shows the positive perceptions about the two connotative meanings; the missing percentage of the 100% did not express anything about it. It should be noted that in the perception of these two elements, the first one, referring to the hierarchical and pyramidal character of power as natural, only allude to those who have interpreted the film as representing the structure of human society; for the rest, it will be the hierarchy of animals where, as we know, the lion is called king of the jungle. For this same reason, the difference about the perception of the supernatural or religious validation is remarkable.

But if we compare the differences in relation to the variables of age, and media literacy, the conclusions drawn in the

previous table can be repeated (with a small "favourable" difference in the variable of age). Here it is important to note that in this case we are facing a much more significant level of interpretative skills capacity to deduce the connoted meanings of the material elements of the sequence.

Finally, the following table presents the results regarding the description and interpretation of the four still frames. The term "communicative functions" indicates that the participant answered without mentioning the formal name of the frames (high-angle shot, low-angle shot, etc.), for example, "the fact that the lion is seen from below and above the rock represents he is the boss".

Interpretation	SSS with media literacy	SSS without media literacy	HSS with media literacy	HSS without media literacy
No interpretation. Only describes denotative elements	12'5%	81'25%	86'25%	43'75%
Interprets communicative functions of frames	87'5%	18'75%	93'75%	56´25%
Cites the formal name of the frames	37'5%	0%	75%	0%

Is clear that in this case media literacy marks borders, not only on the knowledge about the terms of the audiovisual grammar, but also on the interpretation of the communicative functions of the frames. It is likely that these interpretations did not wake up or surface in the participants' minds because we were dealing with still frames. But it is also true that participants' accumulation of audiovisual texts was high enough to produce interpretations of such frames. In any case, it must be highlighted the fact that more than half of the HSS without media studies did not have problems in interpreting these communicative functions.

Of course, the data do not negate that the accumulation of cultural texts in life is a spring for the generation of interpretive capabilities. Without this accumulation it could not be understood that in order to tell a story (and understand it) images of animals can be replaced by animated drawings of animals that are given the ability to speak. Without accumulated cultural (and extra-cinematic) references it would not be possible to understand that the genuflections before the lion indicated a hierarchical relationship and that the role of shaman or the shaft of light from the sky falling on Simba's head were interpreted as a religious rituals of legitimation of power. Even in groups where there was no one able to cite a cinematic "grammatical" norm (framing, lighting) there were teens able to identify that the lion was up high and the other animals down just like the pyramid of power distribution. Even participants ignoring the concept, have seen many and enough high and low angles to understand that they represent certain relationships.

This same data obtained, however, also require us to correct the very secondary role attributed by Wolf (and the Italian textual semiotics) to the training in audiovisual "grammar". In each of the two age levels the difference in interpretative skills showed not only a certain distance, but also a great difference.

It also follows that older age (and major education in general) stops making a difference when there formalized studies, even among younger people.

4.2. Group discussion (1): Differences in the perception of connoted meanings

However, it is necessary to compare the previous data and conclusions with theo data and conclusions that can be drawn from the group discussion, where, as it develops, perspectives previously unnoticed, individually, are recognized, as they are integrated naturally into the cognitive world. And, as we will see, the group discussions produce variations on the conception of the interpretative skills, which was based on the individual written responses.

Undoubtedly, it should be noted that the group discussion is affected by leadership phenomena and even the effect generated by the perception of the dominant views, in the most classic sense that such phenomena has been investigated in social communication: for example, the traditional "social approval" (Hovland, Irving and Kelley: 1953) or the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann: 1995).

But it is also true that, as it has been said, the communication that occurs in groups is a good instrument for understanding the social reality under analysis (in this case teenagers). Moreover, the scenario posed to those who lack media literacy by the cold individual still frames may hinder the same interpretive capacity. This was evident, for example, in two HSS groups belonging to institutes with good educative and cultural level.

Thus, for example, almost immediately after starting the debate and one member made the point, almost all participants agreed that the story was a representation of society, which, in many cases, revealed a significant departure from positions previously expressed individually.

The exception was the youngest age group that, as already indicated, expressed a lower level of participation in the debate. This group tended to stay more in the pure denotative level of a fictional text about animals. In the middle of the debate, the moderator questioned the participants whether it was a film about animals or people represented by

animals. Although the question induced an affirmative answer, the responses were rather hesitant, "Yes, maybe yes" or "I saw it long time ago and did not think about that".

On the way to a critical interpretation of the significance of the sequence, the four HSS groups established a similar reasoning: The social hierarchy, the legitimization of power by religious rites and the divine unction that will make continuity of such power unquestionable, and the popular acceptance of that hierarchy. Sometimes the social power represented by the film was identified with the monarchy or absolute powers (by divine intervention). But when a member of a group without media studies was explaining in what sense he saw it as a symbol, he described it as a more recent representation of the auto-reproduction of power:

> "In the film there are different races and species. It could be that the king represented the United States and the other animals represented the rest of the world's nations. And as indicated, every four years a president is elected and everyone must accept it".

Cultural maturity appears, again, as a determinant element of interpretative skills.

But these interpretations were given at a similar level of critical reading in the SSS group with higher levels of media studies, which re-emphasizes that formalized learning is directly involved in the acquisition of such skills. The first intervention that occurred in this group is of great richness and mixes cultural and cinematic elements:

> "It can be seen that the people is at the bottom and the lions are on top, as if there were social classes and they ask God's approval and when they get this divine approval all the animals kneel and express respect to the king's son".

In the other SSS groups the situation was diverse. Thus, for example, in the group in which we had already seen difficulties to overcome a purely denotative reading (story of animals), the hierarchy is seen mainly as a result of the agreement of all animals, of the natural superiority of the lion or the need to avoid conflicts:

> "The Lion King manages to bring together all species that are very different, and he demonstrates his superiority to others (...). If everyone does the same thing, there is no problem. But if people disperse, if there are different ways, then, there is a problem".

But even in the other SSS group that was taking media studies (although, as already explained, only a short time had passed since they started these studies), produced a reading far from the critical interpretation that could drawn from the sequence's elements:

> "[The animals are seen] respecting each other [...] in friendly attitude and all that [...], although they are very different they get along very well together".

> "The reflection that is intended behind the story told is how the author would like the world to be, that we all were united in society, and that harmony and peace reigned among all (...); animals are used to teach us that the world should be this way and not full of conflicts".

4.3. Group discussion (2): Analysis of the influence of Disney films on children's image of the world

Almost all groups knew that telling a story through animated drawings of animals is a communication strategy aimed to reach more easily children's knowledge, and even suggested that this activates emotions. For example, a member of a SSS group without visual experience said:

> "The animals are used to reach children easier"; (or:) "seeing animals is more interesting to children"; (and, also:) "besides, the use of animals is more exciting, especially when you see the little one, that really is an exciting moment".

As can be seen, in such interventions it is known that there is a Disney strategy aimed at generating emotional enjoyment that will lead the young public to identify with Simba. This is something that university research has defended many times. Soto *et al.* (2009) explain it this way:

> "Most of the empirical studies are based on the premise that the most important variable in predicting the enjoyment of the audiovisual narrative (cinema or television) is the relation of the audiences with the protagonists of the stories, and in particular, the attitude of the receptors to events that happen to the characters they identify or sympathise with".

However, only one HSS group with visual studies considered that this strategy is part of the Disney brand, and that it has profound persuasive effects in children, and even established an ethical critique about it. Here are some of these interventions:

> "This is what Disney usually does, giving animals human behaviour".

> "Yes it is a typical Disney movie and as it is produced for children, it must respond to their understanding ability, it must meet certain criteria to achieve this, and when children see it they internalize it, although us

[adults] do not realise it".

"Well they use animals because it is a film for children and if it was told with people it would be very weird to narrate these things with people, with animals is easier to engage children".

"In my opinion it is wrong they to try to put these ideas in your head as a child (...) and this is easier to do it with children because they are learning".

These findings are the opposite of the theory of "uses and gratifications". In what ca be considered the reference document of this approach, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1986:137), citing Schramm, Lyle & Parker, state:

"In a sense, the term "effect" is misleading, because it suggests that television "does something" to children (...). Nothing could be so far from reality. Children are the most active in that relationship. They are who use television and not television which uses them".

This clear example of interpretive competence, that means having an assessment of the communication strategy of Disney, is a result of the better audiovisual training of the group. For the rest, Disney is something "that parents can trust".

In addition, all groups associated Disney with quality, attractiveness, well-made stories, beautiful music, and colourful elements. It is also perceived as a brand image: "It's like in a store with designer clothing you already know; with Disney is the same" (SSS). The groups also knew that there is a lot of merchandising around Disney and its different products. They even identify its narrative structure and how the solution of the crisis ends in a happy ending, and they are able to quote "Pocahontas" and "Bambi", among others, to prove it. Almost everyone has been part of Disney's public and almost everyone remembers Disney's "Lion King" quite consistently. For almost everyone, too, they are films in which children are accompanied by older people, who talk about the films to extract a moral. But what everyone remembers is that the family moral tried to strengthen, in the connoted sense, the value of respecting the social hierarchy because it is natural, instead of promoting a critical reading from the world of emotions, which would be, briefly speaking, to develop emotional intelligence.

Moreover, the HSS groups with visual studies who previously considered the low cognitive development of children, also believed that, as it happened with them, this low cognitive development would be supplemented with age, new knowledge and ideas that can change and generate an autonomous critical thinking:

"I saw the movie as a child and I did not realize these things, but now you go to see it with your little sister and say "fuck man" (...) They want to put ideas in your mind, but then, when you start to think independently, you can modify it, and that's what usually happens, right?"

However, none from any of the groups saw himself/herself playing with his/her little sister to do, why not, a fun critical reading of the film. Today, many parents express a deep concern about their children's access to the Internet, largely because as many investigations show, "parents' computer literacy levels are quite low" (Livingstone *et al.*, 2009: 110 [11].

However, very few people seem to realize that media literacy levels of parents and the education system are also very low.

Furthermore, this is something that the participants in the "Discussion Groups" appeared to give little importance. And although several groups recognized ("because we have looked carefully") having found in this screening of the film meanings that that they had not found before, they did no questioned these practices in children films. In one HSE group with no media literacy but with very critical interpretation, it was said that if they were to re-tell this film to an adult, they would include their critical interpretations, but (almost everybody agreed with similar words) "if they were to tell the story to a of 7 or 8 years old child, they would narrate it as a story of animals, there is need to ruin them film for them".

5. Conclusions

The answer to our first research question inquiring whether the ability of a continued consumption of audiovisual products could generate interpretative skills is definitively affirmative.

Certainly it is not only a consequence of such consumption, but is also linked to the socialization process (with family, peer groups, etc.) produced by that consumption, and to the entire cultural and social context in which it is inserted. This also leads us to make relative an excessive over-valuation about the direct (and alienating) ideological effects of media consumption -although the study of such effects is not subject of this investigation-, that does not take into account, besides the level of media consumption, their subsequent process of socialization and their relationship to the ideological and cultural contents received from other social, cultural, and educational practices.

However, there was an evident difficulty to go beyond a denotative reading of the sequence, beyond of what Stuart Hall (1998:103) would call "preferred reading", among the two younger groups and groups without media literacy at all, and in particular, among the group that displayed a lower level of involvement in the experience.

The group discussion made easier for the members and with the greatest and most dynamic critical capacity to provide

bridges of critical interpretation to the rest; but if some of these members accepted what the leaders said, this cannot be judged as mere "submission" (an attitude not noticed at all in the relationship) because this was something they could relate to their own experience. However, in this age range of adolescents and young people, there were those who never went beyond reading the denoted meanings in the text and simply endorsed its "preferred reading".

As we have noted and valued on the individual responses as well as the group discussions developed in this research, it is beyond doubt that the differences in age, personal cultural background and social experience existing among SSS and HSS groups, also show clear differences in favour of the latter in terms of interpretative skills, although they have not experienced formalized media literacy (our second research question).

Without a doubt this was influenced by the fact that the sequence analyzed had, using once again Eco's term, many "interpretative marks" of Western culture, and was not at all a cryptic text that constantly needed references to the specific visual grammar to make sense. But in the so-called mass culture that is not exclusive of the "The Lion King", but occurs, with more or less saturation, in many of its products.

It is possible that some of the perspectives held by those, like us, working at the Media Literacy seem to be little aware that in mass culture, particularly the predominantly audiovisual, the is a cultural pragmatism and a social use of the image capable of creating important interpretative sediments.

The conclusions we just quoted -largely predicted in our first two hypotheses- demand us to question this perspective even more than we had already done in our research group *Hedabideak, Gizarte eta Hezkuntza* (Media, Society and Education) in previous analysis. Anyways, let's not forget the difficulties expressed by a minority of the younger group of people with no media literacy to minimally perceive meanings beyond the denoted level in the sequence.

In any case, our findings endorse the first two hypotheses that we raised at the beginning of the study about the importance of that "textual culture" as a component of the interpretative abilities of the youth analyzed.

Our third research question inquired about the differences that media literacy could produce over those differences that the difference in age and general cultural education could generate. Our hypothesis was that at every age level media literacy would add interpretative skills, which would be crucial for a critical reading of this sequence of "The Lion King" and that this would out in a second level the skills produced by the age difference.

The comparison between the differences between the media literate and the media illiterate sectors in each age group clearly shows the differences in interpretative abilities to decode the sequence analysed. Even the ability of critical interpretation, due to the difference in age and general cultural training, is diminished almost to the limit, when the SSS enjoy a formalized media literacy and when HSS lack of it.

Therefore, the consequence is not to deny the ability to acquire audiovisual skills from textual practices, but to affirm that formalized media literacy grants its beneficiaries superior competence levels, and that literacy allows jumping much faster in the acquisition of those interpretative skills.

Therefore, this research does not question, but highlights the importance of "educommunication". Moreover, the study demonstrates that a good way to carry out a process of media literacy is to do it with communicative texts known and experienced by young people; i.e. to address the acquisition of skills precisely in texts on which the student had previously practiced individual and collective interpretive uses. The group discussions have proved to be, in this sense, a motor where there was not only a lack of formalized media studies, but also a motor where media literacy existed.

Logically, the same conclusion is projected on the fourth research question of this research about the academic debates about reception, which were identified at the outset. In the course of our investigation we have found a text that summarizes well what seems to us the best academic position in this regard. This is a text written some time ago. Kathlee Tyner (1996: 39-40), a member of "Strategies for Media Literacy" of San Francisco, has two ideas that summarize our current conclusion. And we should not forget that these ideas are expressed, too, from the perspective of the Media Literacy:

"Audiences are not passive entities. We may seem passive when we are immobile reading a book or watching TV, but our minds are working to make sense of that information. This is especially true when it comes to modern fast-paced audiovisual documents. We learn to find the codes and conventions of the media and to "read" the message somehow, or give it a meaning. We do it as individuals, and in predictable ways, as groups. Our tastes about the content and forms of the audiovisual documents change as we age".

"People enjoy a lot using the media and media literacy skills can increase this pleasure. We can appreciate the artistic ability of the documents, the technical expertise, and the creative vision. We can also understand that the form and content are closely linked in audiovisual documents and that each medium has its own code, conventions, advantages and limitations that influence its content".

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7. Notes

[1] The *Hedabideak, Gizarte eta Hezkuntza* group is formed by those who signed this article, and also by Josi Basterretxea and Txema Ramírez de la Piscina (both professors at the Department of Journalism at the UPV/EHU).

[2] Basterretxea *et al.* (2007); Ramírez de la Piscina *et al.* (2007); Zarandona *et al.* (2008).

[3] The literature about these perspectives is very broad. Important works in Spanish are, among others: Aparici (coordinator) (1996); Kaplun (1998), Ferrés (2000); Garcia Matilla *et al.* (Ed.) (2004); Buckingham (2005); and the work of *Comunicar* magazine.

[4] For a reference text see Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1986).

[5] For an aSSSssment of these debates, see Nightingale (1999); Curran, Morley and Wakerdine (Eds.) (1998); Mattelart and Neveu (2004: 79-105).

[6] The bibliography of Charles Sanders Peirce and the books written about his work are very large. One of the most renowned contemporary studies of his work is James Brent (1998).

[7] The secondary students groups were formed in the following institutes: Manteo Zubiri of Donostia-San Sebastián; Instituto of Sopela (Bizkaia); Koldo Mitxelena of Vitoria-Gasteiz; and Txurdinaga Behekoa of Bilbao. On the other hand, High school students were formed in the public institutes: Zuloaga of Eibar (Gipuzkoa); Mendizabala of Vitoria-Gasteiz; Gabriel Aresti of Bilbao; and the Ikastola San Fermin of Iruña-Pamplona. To all of them our deepest gratitude.

[8] Since this is an animated film, the references made to angles, shots and camera movements suggest that the sensation produced is similar to that which would be produce by such operations.

[9] To facilitate reading, from now on we shall say animals or lions instead of "cartoon animals or lions", as it has been already established that they refer to cartoon icons representing the real lions or animals.

[10] Although there is not need for clarification in each case, it should be noted that of the two secondary students groups with visual studies, one had developed those studies somewhat more extensively in time and in content than the other, and this was noticed in the responses. Between the two secondary students groups without visual studies, the members of one group got more involved than the other both in the production of individual responses, and in the participation in group discussions, and also in this case the differences were noticeable.

[11] This subject has also been studied by the same research group in "EU Kids Online" by Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon (Eds.) (2009); and also by Garmendia *et al.* (2010).

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