

Latin American media reception studies: notes on the meaning of gender and research methodologies¹

ABSTRACT

The author explores a comparative analysis of key methodological approaches and theoretical debates between, on the one hand, Latin American and Brazilian reception analysis, and, on the other hand, the same branch in the anglophone academy. This kind of investigation is related to the general rise of cultural studies in Latin America from the mid-1980s on. Reception studies give special attention to female audiences, especially middle-age women from lower classes. Methodologically, this empirical research, adopting qualitative methods, has sought to concentrate on the accounts of the spectator herself, commonly using in-depth interviews and sometimes including participant observation. The author sustains that, although reception research concentrates its focus on women's experience as a whole, it avoids the specificity of women's issues. The conclusion stands that, in contrast with cultural studies elsewhere, the encounter of feminism with reception analysis within Latin America, specially in Brazil, hasn't happened yet.

RESUMO

Este estudo faz uma análise comparativa de algumas características metodológicas e teóricas do estudo da recepção como tratado no Brasil e em relação ao estudo anglo-saxão de gênero.

KEY WORDS (PALAVRAS-CHAVE)

- Latin America (América Latina)
- Gender studies (Estudos de gênero)
- Methodology (Metodologia)

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THIS WORK AIMS at exploring, through a comparative view, some theoretical and methodological characteristics of reception studies carried out in Brazil in relation to the same line of research adopted and spread in the cultural studies field in the Anglo-American academic context. However, in order to approach Brazilian reception studies, which are related to cultural studies, the publication of Jesús Martín-Barbero's² *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987) is regarded as inevitable reference, for it provides the theoretical basis for the development of this kind of investigation. For this reason, the comments presented here imply a connection between the situation of reception studies in Brazil and Spanish-speaking Latin America.

When thinking of how reception research is being made, according to the line mentioned above, I highlight the way gender relations are treated. Given the extension of gender studies, the limits here respected associate the theme to the particularities referring to women. From the acceptance of this category in the qualitative empirical reception research, a singular aspect in the development of Latin American cultural studies is identified when they are compared to the tradition of cultural studies developed in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies established in Birmingham in 1964 (Escosteguy, 2001a).

One final point about the frames circumscribing this article. I use the terms audience studies or media audience research for works that have as their object of study

the experience of viewers, listeners and readers but the act of viewing, listening or reading is detached from its insertion into a social process. However, what I call reception studies or media reception analysis imply that the culture of viewers, listeners and readers is to be taken seriously. This theoretical framework consists in demonstrating the various ways of constructing the meanings. Such strand, at least in the 1980s, adopts a theoretical framework that combines textual analysis and empirical research. Anyway, these studies are associated to the development of cultural studies research tradition.

1 On media reception studies within Latin America and Brazil

Reception as a theme for debate among researchers, as well as its divulgation in the academic world in Brazil, is still poor if compared to the research effort and the presence of the subject in specialized journals and in congresses in Britain or even in the United States. However, there was a growth of the academic research in this area in Brazil along the 1990s.

If, in the beginning of 1990s, McAnany and La Pastina (1994) could compile 26 studies made in the period of 1970 to 1993 on soap opera audience in Latin America, a survey of the decade from 1990 to 1999, coordinated by Jacks (2002), involves 50 Brazilian studies on media audiences developed in graduation programs in communication and based in different theoretical-methodological perspectives. According to the first study, 17 of the 26 works are Brazilian.³

Before identifying some characteristics of Latin American reception analysis, it is essential to situate the rise of this approach in the research on communication. It was principally in the investigations of culture that media reception began, having been developed from the mid-80s in Latin America. There are different approaches to media culture in discussion within Latin

America, however, I especially refer to those studies which are influenced by the mediations theory, developed by Jesús Martín-Barbero, and usually employ the methodological model created by Guillermo Orozco Gómez⁴. In Brazil, the dissemination of this theoretical-methodological reference occurred only around the 1995s.

Reception studies configure, up to this moment, the main point of development of Latin American cultural studies, i.e., the empirical object which has contributed the most to the constitution of this field of studies in Latin America. The question of reception within a cultural studies framework is connected to a broad scope of social and cultural relations, that is, it encloses the study of different social and cultural mediations that are beyond the immediate exposition and use of the *media*.

When I mention Latin American cultural studies, I specifically refer to a variety of works and reflections that so far are grouped under the name of *communication and culture studies*. Many Latin American authors may be already associated with a Latin American cultural tradition in cultural studies, even if one argues that such authors do not know much, are unaware of and, above all, criticize the British and the North-American versions of cultural studies. Despite the diversity of approaches and the unequal theoretical-methodological development, all of these authors configure a politico-social thought which tries to comprehend the place that media-related activities occupy in the understanding of the present-day cultural field. Several reasons were collected by me (2001a, 2001b) to justify the identification of contributions made by, for example, Jesús Martín-Barbero and Néstor García Canclini with the tradition of cultural studies.

However, differently from what happened in the Anglo-Saxon context, Latin American reception studies have not evolved from analyses strictly based on texts to a more contextual approach. In Latin America, the research on communication in

the 1970s and part of the 1980s propagated a reproductive conception of culture. The adoption of a certain concept of ideology and domination, which prevailed at the time, did not provide an environment where a less Manichaean vision on the contents of cultural industries would flourish.

In the Brazilian context at that time the embryo of the approach that later would lead to reception was constituted by studies theoretically and methodologically different, many of them carried out outside the academic communication field.⁵ From the 1980s on, there is an increase on the production of audience research, and works as the ones written by Leal (1986) and Lins da Silva (1985) express the connection between media audiences and the broader scope of culture. Such works signal a search for improved theoretical alternatives, revealing points of contact with cultural studies, even though such contact is not formalized. However, in Brazil, up to the second half of the 1980s, the presence of Martín-Barbero's reflection for the fecundation of reception studies was almost unknown due to the difficulty of circulation of these texts.⁶

It was basically through the publication and dissemination of Martín-Barbero's ideas in *De los medios a las mediaciones*⁷ (1987) that Latin American reception studies developed an approach where different social and cultural mediations that link reception to social life are involved. In this way, the subject of reception is linked to the relation with the *media* but is not defined by it, building a much more contextualized position. Influenced, above all, by Martín-Barbero's (1987) seminal work, reception studies, carried out from the end of the 1980s on in the Spanish-speaking part of Latin America, found out and celebrated a subject-viewer that would give new meaning to media messages, identifying its negotiations with and resistance to the logic of the media.

However, it is only in the 1990s that important changes on this theme will occur in Brazil. The consolidation of some graduate programs⁸ in communication that

agglutinate researchers who are interested in spreading the Latin American communicational thought provided the circulation of the texts and ideas of some authors – for example, Jesús Martín-Barbero and Néstor García Canclini – who later would be identified as a driving force in Latin American cultural studies.

It is, then, only in the 1990s that it is possible to observe the recognition, by the Brazilian academic community, of the contribution made by the mediation perspective, making it possible, in turn, to debate the contribution of cultural studies as a whole. From a recent national survey on the academic production on media audiences in the 1990s (Jacks, 2002), one can observe that 36 (72 percent) out of 50 dissertations and theses identified with this concern are associated with the perspective of studying reception in the scope of culture, but only three of them mention their connections with cultural studies. In this group, 19 (52,7 percent) studies are associated with Martín-Barbero's theory, and nine of them propose an articulation between the theoretical approach of the same author and the methodological model constructed by Guillermo Orozco Gómez.⁹ This theoretical and methodological articulation will be later commented on.

With regard to Brazilian and Latin American reception studies, I would like to note that these investigations focus on qualitative empirical research, and principally on television reception. The work by McAnany and La Pastina (1994), which is a collection of 26 studies made in the period of 1970 to 1993 on soap opera audience in Latin America, helps us to understand that 14 of these studies stress the interaction process between audiences and media texts, offering, on the one hand, insights into interpretative processes and every day contexts of media use and, on the other, revealing a diversity of meanings constructed by the audiences. In relation to methodology, ten studies employ qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis. The other stu-

dies still emphasize the qualitative aspect, although some quantitative strategies are also used.

In the other group of Brazilian reception studies made in the period of 1990 to 1999, 28 (77,8 percent) out of 36 reception studies can be associated with exclusively qualitative methodologies usually adopted by cultural studies (in-depth interviews, life stories, ethnography, among others), and eight (22,2 percent) articulate qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

2 A foreign view of the Anglo-American reception studies

My view of the development of Anglo-American reception analysis is built on the basis of both the reading of some reception studies published in English, inserted – obviously – in the cultural studies framework, and state-of-the-art compilations on the area, also published in English. The reception studies I have read and discuss here are my own choice. I do not claim to be representative in my coverage of this subject.

The topics of reception and density of media consumption have its starting point in Stuart Hall's "Encoding and decoding in the television discourse", published for the first time in 1973. However, in that article there are not strong references on the viewer, understood as someone whose existence is concrete and living in a certain context. It is with David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980) that the flesh-and-bone viewer appears on the scene. From this moment on there has been a shift in the current view, which used to be centered on media texts, toward media audiences.

Thus, in the scope of British cultural studies, especially those concerned with media, a strand that defends the idea that meaning is not an attribute of the media text, but something formed in the interaction between viewers and texts, has been configured. Such a perspective will

try to capture, empirically, the viewpoint viewers themselves hold. This theoretical framework combines textual analysis and empirical research.

Between Hall's model and the stronger development of ethnographic audience studies, as they are today known, investigations that still tried to connect a given media text and its reception to a given social group were conducted. However, it was a series of qualitative studies on reception, carried out more often in the 1990s, that indicated the formation of the matrix known as ethnographic audience studies, although such matrix had already been rehearsed in some works in the 1980s.

Ethnographic audience studies have decreased the interest in media content itself, focusing more on the role of media in the everyday life of a group, but not on the impact or significance everyday life has on the reception of a given media text.

However, other investigations that questioned some ethnographic assumptions appeared in the 1990s, instituting criticism and reflexivity in the area. These studies continued to claim for the decentralization of the media text in favor of an understanding of specific routines of everyday life where the use of mass media is a fundamental feature (see, for example, Hermes, 1995).

Demarcating the contact between feminism and reception studies in the Anglo-American context is something of great importance. Taking account of their mutual influences and contributions as a background, it is possible to identify specific aspects of the reorientation caused by the powerful influence of the feminist perspective, mainly in media reception research.

The feminist view challenged media studies, which at the time valued only news programs and of a political character, by including analyses of soap operas and some other genres regarded as more "feminine". The family was then considered an important space for the appropriation of cultural products, opening tracks for innovative

investigations on the connection between private and public life.

This perspective has questioned the centrality of the social class category in the interpretation of domination processes, introducing the gender issue. In terms of method, the concern about saving women's experiences from oblivion and giving women a voice caused feminists to make more and more use of methodologies that would invoke experience – biographies, reports, life stories, in-depth interviews, etc.

It is also possible to say that the contact between media studies and the feminist approach allowed new inquiries on identity issues to happen, for such contact has highlighted new variables, and identity building processes were no longer considered through class culture and its generational transmission. This way, audience members started to be defined by differences based on class, gender, race, ethnic group, age, and subcultural relations.

Although reception studies incorporated new elements – many of them as a consequence of the debate presented by feminism –, audience, from the first empirical research influenced by Hall (Morley, 1980), remained active, since media texts were regarded as something that opened space for the resistance and reaction of the audience. This view is an element that continues to exist today in reception studies developed within a cultural studies framework.

3 The meaning of gender

In this section, I think of the way the notion of gender is and has been incorporated by reception analysis carried out in Brazil. However, it is first of all necessary to say that the word *gender*, as it was employed by feminist studies, started to be used in Brazil only by the end of the 1980s. Besides, the meaning this word has that would be of interest for this text is not even registered in *Dicionário Aurélio*, one of the reference works for Brazilian Portuguese.

This fact does not, however, discredit observation of the way reception studies has been adopting and mentioning the gender category, for empirical research is many times based exclusively on the reports made by women. Five out of fourteen Latin American soap-opera audience studies (McAnany and La Pastina, 1994) have only women as its sample, but other five studies are focused on the family. In such cases, the woman is still a fundamental source of information, given the centrality of her role in the administration of domestic responsibilities. There are, therefore, ten studies in which the woman is the central source of information. Female and male young people and adults constitute the sample of the other four studies.

In the other survey which compiled research done in the 90's (Jacks et al, 2002), one can observe that out of 28 reception studies which the primary source were people, six of them (21.4 percent) worked with an exclusive feminine sample, and seven (25 percent), although it had combined men and women, presented a predominance of the female sex. Only three studies (10.7 percent) were founded on an exclusive male sample and one (3.6 percent) worked with mixed sampling but with male predominance. Finally, out of 28 studies, seven (25 percent) had a mixed sample and the other four (14.3 percent) had not specified it in the report.

Evidence collected up to this moment show that the gender category is being used only to indicate a sex distinction between feminine and masculine. In some cases, the same category may be even associated with social roles - for example, mother and housewife - , but such specific performance do not contribute for the explanation, at least partially, of certain social aspects and objective results.

In using the gender category as a mere biological differentiation, reception studies run the risk of adhering to a discourse regarded as essential on gender. Thus, if gender is equivalent to sex and if the latter refers to anatomical differences between male

and female, there is no reason to reflect on this category.

One of the causes of such kind of incorporation is associated with the methodological model used to make reception studies possible in the contexts of Latin America and Brazil. As it had already been said, it is the perspective of Martín-Barbero's mediations that will renew and stimulate reception research developed within the scope of cultural studies.

In Brazil, Martín-Barbero's theory is very often articulated with the contributions of Orozco which are centered in the empirical investigation of reception. Its main formulation deals with a methodological map to approach the mediations at stake in the reception process.

It is necessary to point out that in Orozco's proposal attention was centered on the role of school, family, and television, its wider intention being to design alternatives aiming at an education to television reception. The articulation between education for the media and reception studies takes place when the subject studied is capable to know and also propose an intervention to viewers.

The basic presuppositions that inspire Orozco's proposal are reiterated in several texts, but can be summarized as follows: the relation between viewers and media is necessarily mediated; reception is a process, not a moment; the meaning of the television message is negotiated by the viewers; TV, regarded as a social institution, is not the only one to signify reality; the specificity of television as a medium influences the way viewers understand its meanings and, finally, the interaction TV-viewers is not individual, but collective.

The multiple mediation model, formulated by Orozco, indicates a series of mediation sources used to understand the relation between audience and mass media. According to Orozco, the mediations¹⁰ can be identified as: video-technological mediation (derived from the characteristics of the medium, in this case, television); cogni-

tive mediation (composed of mental maps formed along the life of the individual by means of social interaction); the situational mediation that refers to the "watching TV" scene; the institutional mediation concerning different institutions integrated by audience; reference mediation, composed of a series of [referents] belonging to the viewer – gender, ethnic group, age, social and geographic origin, etc.

Briefly summarized, one can say there are two types of criteria for analyzing the activity of the audience in Orozco's proposal: the general criterion, through which audience is seen as a set of historical subjects in a social and economical context, i.e., a criterion that deals with structure conditions; the communicational criterion, which takes account of the particularities present in audience members' communicational interactions, therefore, assuming cultural and situational elements of the reception process itself.

It is in the incorporation of reference mediations that the identification of social class, gender, and generation, among other viewers' features, is juxtaposed. At this moment, Orozco's model indicates that such mediations do not act in different levels, being, therefore, interchangeable. Thus, the gender category is mentioned among the general criteria, but it does not add anything specific, that is, its incorporation has not helped to understand the different processes through which people catch hold of and negotiate media texts.

Moreover, given the fact that reference mediations implies a series of variables, seen as integrators of the subject-viewer, and that distinct levels of repercussion do not exist, the reception research guided by such model describes a totally rational viewer who seems to act, then, as an unified, coherent, and non-fractured subject occupying different positions, something that could lead him/her to assume contradictory standpoints.

In my judgement, such development of reception studies does not seem to be

connected to the investigation tendency which refers to the several forms through which our own identities are constituted by media consumption. The approach that debates the constitution of today's cultural identities has as its central figure a decentralized subject, configured by different standpoints, especially class, gender, generation and, more recently, race and ethnicity.

Finally, the articulation of Orozco's model and the mediation perspective has contributed to the development of reception research in Latin America. However, the incorporation of the gender category offered by the model has not resulted in a change in analysis, as a feminist approach would probably expect, i.e., thinking of it mainly as a social and historical construction produced over biological characteristics.

4 Final remarks

If in the early 1980s it was possible to observe a shift toward audience in Latin America, today there is an accumulation of studies on audiences composed, in many cases, by women. Privileging the soap opera as a theme, and having the domestic space and the family as an investigation environment were factors that contributed to this approach.

This set of studies is signaling the necessity of a better understanding of the meaning of *women* and *gender* categories, for it is possible to notice that there is no problematization of gender relations in Latin American cultural studies, particularly when reception studies are focused.

On the other hand, recognizing that these same investigations allowed us to know women's cultural universe is something compulsory, revealing the context in which they receive media texts and which use they make of these narratives in their daily life.

Nevertheless, these reception studies seize on women as a gender-variable, that

is, only one indicator among many, such as social, economic and generational. In general terms, the condition of women does not have a structural position in the analysis of society; it is not given a social and concrete meaning in most studies. The assumption seems to be that this subject does not deserve to be studied in depth at the theoretical level. Generally, in the case of reception studies, the concern around women avoids the specificity of women's issues. Therefore, it is necessary to say that there is no connection between feminist and reception studies carried out in Latin America and, specially, in Brazil.

Concerning the academic production of reception analysis, it can be observed that since 1995 there is a substantial growth of researches on this subject. However, this amount of investigations has not produced a wide debate about communication in the Brazilian field, when compared to the trajectory of the Anglo-American reception studies.

On the whole, in the 90's, under a strong influence specially of Jesús Martín-Barbero and Guillermo Orozco, the Brazilian reception studies reveal that, although the authors' formulations can be seen as associated to "one political project of social transformation, typical of reception analysis which comes from cultural studies" (Gomes, 2003: 35), this relation is not established in an incisive form, constituting a singular characteristic of the Brazilian reception studies.

In conclusion, I would say that reception analysis constitutes a strategic link to think about media, the statements of audiences and their social contexts or, in other words, media, audiences and their connection to society. It is for this reason that a deeper discussion about the implications of studying reception in the communication field should happen. On the contrary, it has been given relatively little attention, at least in Brazil.

Notes

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1 Different parts of this article were presented at Inaugural International Media Conference, London/UK, 2001, and Crossroads in Cultural Studies - Fourth International Conference, Tampere/Finland, 2002.

2 Jesús Martín-Barbero, born in Las Navas del Marqués (Spain), lived and worked in Colombia between 1963-1968 and 1972-2000. Between 2000 to 2002 he worked in Mexico. His background is in philosophy, but he turned his attention to communication studies in the early 1970s. *Communication, Culture and Hegemony - From the Media to the Mediations*, first published in 1987 and translated to English in 1993, is a seminal text that has influenced almost all-subsequent Latin American communication studies. The research program developed by Martín-Barbero supports the idea that communication can be approached from a cultural standpoint. It is necessary to assume that observation is not centered around the media themselves and that analysis is open to *mediation*. Generally speaking, this means moving the communicative processes to the dense and ambiguous space occupied by subjective experience placed in certain socio-historical contexts. In sum, the development of a *mediation* theory implied that we moved away from media-centered communication conceptions. Such contribution has already been given importance and is recognized in Latin America.

3 Besides the 17 Brazilian studies, there is a work on Brazilian soap operas and female audience carried out by a Danish researcher. See Tufte, Thomas (1993) "Everyday life, women and telenovela" Fadul, Anamaria (ed.) *Serial fiction in TV: The Latin American telenovelas*, São Paulo/ECA-USP.

4 Orozco is a Mexican researcher who graduated from Harvard. The perspective developed by him is known as *full*

focus on audience. Its starting point is a criticism of the tradition of effects research in communication studies. Orozco's approach stresses the role of school, family and television within the reception process but the main point is that the author integrates reception analysis into the general enterprise of education for the mass media.

5 In the 1970s Brazilian audience studies developed, for example, in Sociology and Social Psychology academic research programs.

6 I believe that the precarious net of specialized journals, as well as the difficulty to keep them, somehow contributed to retard the dialogue between the Brazilian production and the Latin American reflection written in Spanish.

7 This book was published in Brazil only in 1997.

8 Among them, I highlight the graduation programs offered by Escola de Comunicações e Artes at the Universidade de São Paulo and Universidade Metodista de São Paulo.

9 Summarizing: eight (22,2 percent) out of 36 studies articulate Martín-Barbero and Orozco, seven (19,4 percent) are exclusively associated to Martín-Barbero's proposals, three (8,3 percent) are exclusively associated to Orozco's model, three (8,3 percent) articulate Martín-Barbero and Canclini, one (2,8 percent) articulates Martín-Barbero and Orozco's model along with Canclini, one (2,8 percent) articulates Orozco and Canclini, and the remainder (36,1 percent) present theoretical-method-ological principles developed by different authors (for example, Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, Paulo Freire, etc). These results are part of my research "Cultural studies and reception analysis in Latin America" (2001/2003) funded by CNPq and FAPERGS.

10 Given that the multiple mediation model is under construction, the author has been changing the mediation terminology. Thus, for example, reference mediations have already corresponded to structural or individual mediations. However, we will not take part in this debate.

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