

Childhood and culture in the context of contemporaneity

Infância e cultura no contexto da contemporaneidade

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss the relationship between childhood and culture in order to address the cultural experiences that children have had in contemporary times and how this has influenced their upbringing and the very constitution of childhood. These reflections are the result of a bibliographical study, which was guided by an analysis of the relationship between children and their cultural experiences in contemporary times. To this end, the changes taking place in children's lives, in their ways of acting, thinking and relating to the world are addressed. The main considerations point out that children are in a new relationship with culture, which provides them with new interactions and new behaviors that need to be observed and mediated by adults.

Keywords: Children; Cultural production; Experience.

INTRODUCTION

When dealing with the relationship between children and culture in contemporary times - a time that is treated in this article as the historical and cultural time of today - it is emphasized that children's culture is not an isolated culture, but is entirely related to and inserted into the wider culture in which children live and which influences their cultural experiences. Education professionals – teachers and researchers – need to be aware of these configurations.

In this context, the understanding is that there is no single childhood or way of being a child. Likewise, the idea is that childhood has a historical and cultural character and takes on different configurations and contexts (Buckingham, 2007; Narodowski, 2013). In other words, much depends on the social and cultural conditions and situations in which the child is constituted, demanding an understanding of how childhood is a social and historical construction, which is an assumption of this writing. Therefore, the proposed reflections are guided by the concept that “there are many children and many childhoods” (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 2019, p. 63).

By pointing to the contemporary context for thinking about childhood and children, this debate highlights issues related to the role that culture plays in the formation of children and in the constitution of a concept of childhood. This also includes thinking about the pedagogical practices offered to children and how the school has broadened their cultural experiences and not just reproduced existing ones, such as those that the child already has access to outside the school environment and which do not broaden their cultural repertoire. It is therefore considered that school is an important social space in children's education and is responsible for broadening their formative experiences. To this end, a number of questions guided the study and lead to the reflections in this article:

- How is the relationship between children and their cultural experiences analyzed in contemporary times?

- What concept of childhood and children is constituted by the relationship between children and their cultural experiences?

- In contemporary times, what also needs to be considered about the experience of media culture and new technologies in childhood?

These guiding questions lead to the main objectives of discussing the relationship between childhood and culture, reflecting on the cultural experiences that children have in contemporary times and analyzing how this has influenced their upbringing and the

very constitution of childhood. These are very pertinent issues that require a wide-ranging debate, which is why they are addressed without the intention of exhausting them, but rather to have them on the horizon of the reflections that are presented.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The main methodological approaches that guided the study, characterized as bibliographical (Gil, 2002), involved procedures for selecting, studying, reading and analyzing bibliographical sources that deal with the conceptual scope of children, childhood and culture in contemporary times.

Bibliographical research, being “an extremely theoretical work”, presupposes, in addition to reading and searching, “also choices and selection of information”, which underpin a critical and coherent analysis of the object of study. This means that, even if the bibliographic study is based on others that have already been carried out, there is also a process of creation involved, which is guaranteed by the methodological rigor attributed to the research (Prestes, 2012, p. 407).

Some of Bakhtin's (2003) concepts help us to look at the object of analysis in a more coherent way. Although Bakhtin did not propose a methodological proposal in his writings, some of his concepts become valuable contributions to research in the field of Human Sciences. In this way, the aesthetic-philosophical horizon of this study takes the bakhtinian concepts of exotopia and alterity as theoretical-methodological principles to help understand the other within the conceptual scope of the study carried out, which in this case is about children and their childhood.

Based on this, the concept of exotopia - of being able to place oneself in a position of detachment in relation to the *other* – makes it possible to take an investigative look at those who also place themselves as others in relation to children, childhood and the culture that permeates their formations. In this relationship, a dialog with the principles of alterity contributes to thinking about the relationship between the child and culture, not only to be able to associate the child as an *other*, but to be able to change what may be familiar and known about the *other*, in other words, some concepts or representations that one has about the child and childhood.

Therefore, being able to look at children through the principle of exotopia proposed by Bakhtin – of distancing – allows us to detach ourselves from existing

representations or preconceptions in order to gain new understandings about children. The fact is that there is a very fine line between what is familiar, or at least seems familiar to us, about children and childhood, just as it can seem strange, new and unknown to think about childhood in contemporary times, because it requires a movement to recognize the place of children in this historical and cultural time - made possible by otherness - since researchers also share the same historical time with them.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD AND CULTURE

As already mentioned, the reflections presented in this article are based on the understanding that there isn't just one childhood or one way of being a child. As Kramer (2007, p. 03) teaches us so well, “children are social and historical subjects, marked, therefore, by the contradictions of the societies in which they are inserted”. This leads us to understand that children play different roles in different contexts in which they are inserted, but are always conditioned by the social and cultural situations that constitute them, which demands an understanding of childhood that is socially and historically constructed.

With this in mind and with the aim of guiding some reflections, the questions mentioned above are revisited: how is the relationship between children and their cultural experiences analyzed in contemporary times? What concept of childhood and children is constituted by the relationship between children and their cultural experiences?

An important aspect is to consider that contemporary children are not only “produced by cultures”, but are also “producers of culture”, since they “elaborate meanings for the world and their experiences by fully sharing in a culture”. Having this precept on the horizon of the study means that children (re)elaborate their cultural experiences from a culture shared with adult culture and, therefore, children's experience is not part of a separate and isolated culture, as if there were a world of adults and a world of children (Cohn, 2005, p. 35).

When we talk about children's cultural production, we mean that their productions are not just about imitating other cultures (adult culture, for example). It is about the fact that “children creatively apprehend information from the adult world in order to produce their own unique cultures”. This also means that “children not only internalize culture, but actively contribute to cultural production and change” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 01).

There is also a capacity for “cultural transmission” among children. A good example of this are the experiences that take place at school with games and nursery rhymes that are not learned from adults, but from other children and which are sometimes even unknown to the adults who live with them (Cohn, 2005, p. 35-36). In play experiences, it is clear to see children reworking existing rules and roles or creating their own games, and all in a collective designed and regulated by them. In other words, the culture “transmitted by word of mouth”, although it often takes its elements from another culture, organized by adults, is nevertheless “re-elaborated, according to their needs, by children's groups who transform it into something of their own” (Perrotti, 1990, p. 22).

In this respect, it is clear that children's culture is not just made up of adult culture or a process of imitation, as there are cultural elements that children themselves (re)elaborate, including as part of their own cultural repertoire. By bringing them into their children's group - including elements of adult culture - they perform them according to their position as children and the social roles they develop with their children's group (Fernandes, 2004).

Certainly, being able to look at the world from the children's point of view means being able to see reality in a different way and with different interests and motivations. In this respect, the bakhtinian concept of alterity becomes a guiding principle. It is therefore important to consider that the concept of the child that guides and underpins this work is based on an understanding of the child as a social, historical and participatory subject. In other words, the child is defined in the context of a specific time and space, who is a complete and complex being subject to interference from the social and historical environment in which they live, but who also interacts with and influences the environment in which they live. For this reason, the child “is not a culturally passive being”; they also create culture (Perrotti, 1990, p. 12-23). In other words, the child is understood as a product of their social and cultural environment, in which they produce and reproduce culture at the same time.

Along with this, Walter Benjamin's thinking provides insights that are very helpful in thinking about children and childhood in contemporary times. Although Benjamin did not live through this historical and cultural period, in many of his writings on childhood, which are close to a century old, he already announced what he considered important to teach children and how they should be understood. For Benjamin, the world in which

children live needs to be presented to them and for this reason there are no forbidden themes or subjects¹ in childhood (Galindo, Souza, Mwewa, 2023).

It is plausible that, at the time Benjamin lived, cultural productions were very different from those existing today, but this does not diminish the value of Benjamin's contributions in order to take a critical look at the cultural experiences available to contemporary children.

Based on a critical theory of culture, Benjamin (2007; 2022) listed valuable teachings that help us look at and understand children, who for him are constituted by the social place they occupy. In other words, children do not form an isolated community. They are part of a group, they are social subjects, they are born into a class and a social group. Hence the responsibility of the generations that precede them to guarantee their constitution, to provide for and guarantee the rights of the child. Previous generations have the obligation and duty to create the conditions for children to participate in social life, to be protected and to have the conditions to become subjects.

From Benjamin's perspective on children, the author sought to make it clear in his writings that the child is to be seen as a social, participatory subject who sees the world with a sensitive and different eye from the adult and that, for this reason, they are not a “linear child”, but a “disorderly child”, as Benjamin so aptly presents in one of his essays:

Every stone she finds, every flower she picks and every butterfly she catches is already the start of a collection for her, and everything she owns constitutes a single collection for her. As a child, her passion reveals its true face, the stern Indian gaze that still burns in antique dealers, researchers and bibliophiles, but with a clouded, maniacal look. As soon as she enters his life, he's already a hunter. He hunts the spirits whose traces he sniffs out in things; between spirits and things, years pass, during which his field of vision remains free of human beings. It happens to her like a dream: she knows nothing permanent; everything happens to her, she thinks about it, it comes to her, it happens to her. Her years as a nomad are hours spent in the forest of dreams. From there she drags her prey home, to clean it, consolidate it, disenchant it. Her drawers need to be transformed into an arsenal and a zoo, a police museum and a crypt. “Putting it in order” would mean annihilating a work full of thorny chestnuts, which are the medieval clubs, tin papers, a silver mine, blocks of wood, coffins, cacti, totem trees and copper coins, which are the shields. The child has already gathered it for a long time in his mother's closet, in his father's library, while in his own

¹ In a radio program for children, through radio narratives, Benjamin presented various themes to children, such as: class struggle, prejudice, marginalization, madness, the relationship between scientific knowledge and magical knowledge. This work can be found in Benjamin's work (2015) entitled “The Children's Hour”.

territory he remains the most unstable and warlike guest (Benjamin, 2007, p. 107).

What Benjamin wants to do is present us with a view of children. Even though it comes from a different time in history, this view is still relevant and makes a lot of sense. For him, the “disorderly child” is a configuration of the child, because it is about the way in which they relate to objects in the world and attribute meaning to them, because they are collectors, full of inventions, creative, participative and attentive to details that may go unnoticed by adults, but which have a lot of meaning for them. Thus, for Benjamin, wanting to insert the child into an order and linearity would be to deny the specificities of being a child and their ways of living their childhood.

As has already been pointed out, in order to be able to look and see things through the eyes and perceptions of children, you need to adopt a stance of alterity. This means that you have to put yourself at a cultural distance from the children and at the same time empathize with them in order to establish a relationship with their perception. This means that “the child must be considered as another person”, who has a culture, and not just as a reduced model of the adult (François, 2009, p. 22).

Benjamin states that it is necessary to consider the uniqueness of the child, and what characterizes them as a subject is the social place they occupy and the main activity they carry out, which also differentiates them from adults. In this respect, play plays a central role in the child's formative processes. Through repetition, the desire to do things again and again in order to relive the same pleasures as the first time, which is very particular to play and games, children (re)elaborate their experiences (Benjamin, 2007).

From Benjamin's perspective, it is very clear that the child's experience is unique in relation to the adult's experience. In other words, when thinking about children's experience, “one must conceive of the child as a sensitive body, which learns the world around it through sensitive experiences, that is, through the whole body” (Santos, 2015, p. 236). Considering this is also significant for assessing the quality of the cultural experiences that are being produced and made available to children in the school environment. As well as being able to analyze whether there is an enrichment or impoverishment of children's experiences in this space.

For this reason, it is important to recognize the specificity of childhood. In other words, “their power of imagination, fantasy, creation, play understood as an experience of culture” and recognizing that children “produce culture and are produced in it”

(Kramer, 2007, p. 03). Thus, a different way of looking at children enables adults to also see the world from their point of view. In other words, with a stance of otherness, we place ourselves alongside them and try to understand how they also see and (re)signify their experiences.

It should be emphasized that there is no intention of exhausting all the most important aspects of the discussions on the relationship between children, childhood and culture in this article, precisely because it is a complex discussion that deserves a broader debate. Even so, it is important to include some reflections from researchers who have sought to investigate and understand this relationship.

CHILDREN, NEW ARTEFACTS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Bringing up the subject of childhood in contemporary times, especially the relationship between children and culture, is relevant to understanding that children's culture is not an isolated culture, but one that is entirely related to and embedded in other cultures. On this basis, the cultural experiences lived and produced by and for the children are dealt with and mediated through the cultural products made available to them. This includes thinking about the production of toys for children, which also provide a 'contemporary play culture' that is influenced by elements and content from the cultural environment in which children live (Brougère, 1998, p. 05).

At a time when there is a huge variety of toy production, it is possible to observe children's relationship with these new cultural products and clearly see how they provide them with new experiences and also trigger new behaviours. Some games, such as video games or games on mobile phones, tablets and computers, create new playful experiences for children, but they can also provide them with solitary experiences and changes in their social interactions, body movements and thinking (Brougère, 1998; Meira, 2003). And not only electronic games, but also dolls offer children 'models of playful activities', examples being miniature dolls and the 'Barbie' doll (Brougère, 1998, p. 07) and their variables, which are also present in the films and series that children watch.

When he analysed the cultural history of toys in the context of the industrial revolution and modernity, Benjamin (2007) announced a change in the production of toys for children, which, in his view, were no longer unique but were part of mass production

and included new materials, especially the replacement of handmade toys with industrialised ones. It is curious to think what Benjamin's writings would be like if he could observe, in this current historical and cultural moment, the different toys that are produced for children, which cause an excess of stimuli and put them at a fast pace, so involved in a relationship with time marked by speed and instantaneity, aiming at a new configuration of childhood (Narodowski, 2013).

Discussing questions about toys means saying that they 'are objects that reveal in their configuration the traces of the culture in which they are inscribed', and 'contemporary childhood presents traits that lead us to think about what is erased in play' (Meira, 2003, p. 75). It also shows what toys, as an object of cultural production, have changed in children's relationships, in their formative processes and in their experiences of play and games.

Notably, the concept of the child and childhood that guides these reflections allows us to conceive that the changes brought about by toys in children do not limit them to being able to create constructive interactions with these artefacts. Children are also capable of creating and reinventing their games, transforming their toys into different objects according to their imaginative capacity and their need to play. In one of his essays, Benjamin writes about a 'construction site' to express his thoughts on children:

The fact is that children are especially inclined to seek out any workplace where work is done visibly. They are irresistibly attracted to the rubbish that comes from building, from working in the garden or in the house, from the tailor's or joiner's work. In these waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns towards them, and them alone. In them, they are less engaged in reproducing the works of adults than in establishing a new and incoherent relationship between the most different materials, through what they create in their play. In this way, children form their own world within the big one (Benjamin, 2007, p. 103-104).

The 'construction site' and everything that can be represented on it signifies the child as someone who chooses their toys on their own and who often chooses objects that may be totally insignificant to adults, but not to them. It's also a way of showing that children are capable of attaching meaning to different objects and making them their own.

It has already been mentioned that in children's relationship with contemporary culture, new stimuli are made available and new relationships and interactions are also defined. In this regard, I would like to highlight children's relationship with the

dimensions of time, characterised by the acceleration and immediacy of things. In other words, children seem to be increasingly restless, as if they no longer know how to wait or deal with boredom or idleness very well.

The new cultural experiences that children have bring them into new relationships with the world and with people. And adults, who are also affected by today's temporality, often end up speeding up the pace of children's lives out of a concern to occupy them. Activities are expanded quantitatively for them to carry out, or they are rushed to fulfil commitments created by the needs of adults. In this new experience with time, children also don't seem to know how to cope or how to occupy themselves when they do have some time left and often tend to feel bored. There is often an impression that they solve their boredom with their new experiences of solitary play and almost no bodily movement. They then come to 'distract or occupy' themselves with electronic games, films and series available on television and 'playing on their mobile phones'.

Following in the footsteps of Benjaminian principles, these reflections are in line with Larrosa's thinking (2002, p. 23), when the author criticises what he calls the 'subject of the stimulus'. Larrosa takes as a reference Benjamin's own indications that, in his own historical moment and in his own way, he criticises the new technologies of his time (particularly the printing press), whose rise would correspond to the decline of narrative and the art of storytelling and which, for Benjamin (1994, 2007), would indicate the end of the exchange of experiences. Larrosa's notes on the 'subject of the stimulus' take up many of Benjamin's principles, albeit at a different time in history, which makes them – authors and principles – relevant and current for these reflections.

From this, it is important to reflect on the cultural experiences that are being offered to children and what they have caused in their formation. That is, what "child-subject of stimulus" is being constituted in this new relationship with culture and childhood itself?

When comparing the contemporary child with the "subject of stimulation" that Larrosa (2002, p. 23) presents – that everything "crosses him, everything excites him, everything agitates him, everything shocks him, but nothing happens to him" because he is a subject of "punctual experience" and immediacy – it is urgent to rethink the mediations that adults build with children for their experiences, especially with new cultural products, media culture and new technologies. These are essential questions that require attention to also think about what the place of experience has been in children's lives.

It is essential that adult mediation helps children to “linger” more on the details, in the same way as the Benjaminian child is represented – “disorderly” and attentive to details. But, to pay attention to the details, it is essential to learn about the slowness of things in the world. It is necessary to guide children so that boredom is experienced as important. As Benjamin (1994, p. 204) said, “boredom is the dream bird that hatches the eggs of experience”, the experience that needs silence, calm, patient waiting and, above all, attentive listening to the experiences of the world. other. In other words, it means that:

Experience, the possibility that something happens to us or touches us, requires a gesture of interruption, a gesture that is almost impossible these days: it requires stopping to think, stopping to look, stopping to listen, thinking more slowly, looking more slowly, and listen more slowly, stop to feel, feel more slowly, linger on details, suspend opinion, suspend judgment, suspend will, suspend the automatism of action, cultivate attention and delicacy, open your eyes and our ears, talk about what happens to us, learn to be slow, listen to others, cultivate the art of encounter, keep quiet, be patient and give ourselves time and space. (Larrosa, 2002, p. 24-25)

All of this needs to be built with children, both in family and institutionalized spaces, such as school. Faced with a scenario permeated by a broad and rapid access of information and potential knowledge, it is necessary to teach children how to “stop” and give meaning to their daily experiences, without just going through them. In view of this, another question and reflection already mentioned in this writing can be revisited: in contemporary times, what also needs to be considered about the experience of media culture and new technologies in childhood?

A starting point is to consider that the culture of electronic media is among those that have most influenced children's cultural production. For education professionals, attention to these new configurations that occur in children's culture is justified because they are issues associated with a new understanding of what occurs in and about childhood itself, as well as different experiences for the child.

In other words, the assumption is that a new understanding of childhood, both in terms of dominant concepts of childhood and children's own experiences, is strongly marked by the presence of electronic media in their lives. In children's relationships with different cultural practices, it is extremely relevant to consider their relationship with this form of media culture, which provides them with a “common global culture” that transcends borders and cultures (Buckingham, 2007, p. 09).

Such questions do not mean conceiving that these media are solely responsible for the “subjective formation” of children or even for their “identity formations”. However, accepting this idea means recognizing that the culture of electronic media assumes an increasingly important role in the child's formation process, as it “permeates other situations – family, school and social – through which the child moves” (Girardello, 2005, p. 04-05).

It is increasingly possible to see the presence of electronic media in children's daily lives. As an example, it is possible to mention the time they spend daily exposed to screens, more precisely cell phones or televisions. In these media, they are involved with offers from the entertainment industry or social networks, which interfere with their subjectivity and even offer them new emotional and sensorial experiences. That is, new ways of touching, seeing and feeling. The touch of the cell phone screen is already a new sensory experience that children experience and which is combined with a new disposition of movement and body posture and a new way of looking at things in the world, with much more speed and possibilities of access to different forms of information.

In this sense, the reflections that were presented are to reaffirm the importance of discussing the cultural experiences that are being offered to children and, above all, analyzing what other experiences are causing in their lives. Furthermore, being able to join other research that is also attentive to new changes and cultural productions for childhood.

CONSIDERATIONS

The reflections presented show that, faced with a new historical and cultural scenario, new productions and cultural experiences, it is necessary to direct attention to what it has been like for children to relate to all of this and what changes are happening in their subjectivity, in their behavior and their ways of thinking and acting. Without a doubt, it is a contemporary cultural experience and children are born into it. Therefore, it is the adult's role to also educate children to interact, in a safe and formative way, with new toys and digital devices, as representatives of the new cultural productions available. In the relationship with adults, it includes thinking about the important role that school plays in the formation and expansion of children's cultural repertoire.

Although this is a theoretical study regarding children and childhood, the principles of alterity helped to analyze the relationships between children and their experiences in contemporary times. In other words, it was a reflective activity of putting oneself in the children's shoes to be able to imagine how they (re)signify their cultural experiences in contemporary times and what meanings they attribute to what they experience.

Thus, this text ends by paraphrasing Larrosa. It is necessary to educate children to relate to the new dimension of temporality. In other words, educate them on how to stop to think, to look, to listen and to feel, so that children also learn to put themselves in a posture of otherness with others and learn, above all, about how to give more meaning to their experiences.

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