

Feminisms and visual culture. The influence of the violet movement through the serial “Pepper Ann”

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ABSTRACT: Visual culture is understood as a set of images that generate an impact since such diffusion occurs in the daily lives of those who consume it. It contributes to shaping a collective imaginary that tends to represent what a majority considers normative and that should be understood as a social principle to be followed. Based on life stories as a qualitative research method, this scientific contribution focuses on the feminist analysis of the animated television serial "Pepper Ann". After analyzing these life histories, the deconstruction of normative and classical masculinities and femininities generates a wandering between dissidence and gender issues. Based on this analysis, inclusive and co-educational didactic practices are generated in a 3-year-old classroom of Early Childhood Education in a public school in a municipality near the city of Valencia.

KEYWORDS: Visual Culture, television, feminism, histories of life, Infant Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Visual culture (Hernández, 2010) is understood as a set of both still images (photographs, posters, advertising panels, etc.) and moving images (sequencing of still images that offer the sensation of running, such as television series, cinematography, short films, etc.). Therefore, the term image (Català, 2005) is immersed in the concept of visual culture, which in turn should be defined as a fictitious representation of mediate and/or immediate reality, that is to say, an iconic recreation elaborated from the positioning of the person who creates it.

Visual culture generates an influence on the community of inhabitants that consume it (Alonso-Sanz, 2015). This dominance is imposed and depends on a series of factors that favor it to a greater or lesser degree of impact, such as the evolutionary characteristics of the person (the younger the age, the greater the influence of the discourses that images transmit), the amount of

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time a person is exposed to the elements of visual culture (the greater the amount of consumption, the greater the influence of the same), the degree of reflection and generation of critical review of the cultural products provided (an active consumption of images allows a real reflection on them and translates into a conscious influence of these, while passive reception of the discourses leads to a subconscious internalization of them without the possibility of understanding them), among others.

Part of the influence that visual culture generates on the receiving citizenship resides in the daily and high frequency with which its products tend to be consumed (Miranda, 2010). The inhabitants community is exposed to (audio) visual discourses repeatedly: the advertisements shared in the means of transportation, the news that arrives unannounced to cell phone devices and smartphones, those that are disseminated with the cultural products of online platforms of great media impact such as Netflix, HBO, Disney+, etc.

Regarding visual culture, the most influential element from the middle to the end of the 20th century is television (Chacón and Morales, 2014). XX is television (Chacón and Morales, 2014), since it becomes an element that easily and quickly becomes at the service of the community of inhabitants since most households have one with which to receive the most relevant and current information daily and at repeated times of the day. As mentioned, it is increasingly frequent that this medium transitions to digital platforms. The importance of television series of the animation genre in the configuration of the identities and development of the personalities of the people (minors) who consume them is highlighted (Monleón and Carbonell-Moliner, 2023).

In the spectrum of audiovisual products, the animation generated by the Disney company (Monleón, 2022) has been rescued for this research. This is a company that emerged in the second decade of the 1920s and has managed to remain a leader in the media universe until today. In fact, despite a notable change in the socio-community paradigms, political positions, ways of understanding the current reality, ways of interacting among citizens, etc., it knows how to win a fixed and loyal following of its plots. Generation after generation, the stories narrated by Disney endure over time, continue to be consumed, and influence the development of those who belong to childhood and adolescence (Porto, 2010). Hence, it is important to generate from the different educational stages, literate spaces, and areas of reflection; a quality audiovisual literacy

that helps the consuming audience to de-code the discourses that are transmitted through the cultural product as unquestionable truth.

Specifically, for this research, attention is given to the Disney animated series *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000). This is an American cartoon television serial, created by Sue Rose and produced by Walt Disney Television Animation. The main character is Pepper Ann Pearson, a young teenager who faces recurring and common situations in the vital stage of adolescence. It first aired on September 13, 1997, and stayed on the air until November 18, 2000, with a total of 5 seasons premiering in the children's animation block of the ABC network. It is worth mentioning that this is the first Disney animated series directed by a woman, as well as the first to include a girl as the main character. These are significant data as they influence the feminist component of the television product (Aguado and Martínez, 2015). This is an aspect that is analyzed in this research.

Pepper Ann Pearson is a 12-year-old girl with a quirky and imaginative personality who lives in lower Pennsylvania with her mother and younger sister. As a High School student, she is torn between acceptance by the large group and the need to remain herself. In every episode, she is accompanied by her best friends: artist Milo and aspiring violinist Nicky.

The vast majority of *Pepper Ann's* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000) episodes are self-conclusive and follow a common structure: the protagonist faces a moral dilemma, makes a wrong decision, tries to rectify the mistake, and learns a lesson. All this addresses different issues for all audiences, especially those belonging to childhood and adolescence or pre-adolescence, from a feminist approach. Each episode includes two independent 11-minute episodes, except for the specials, which last 22 minutes. A total of 65 episodes with 113 chapters have been produced.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminism (Lamas, 2007) is understood as a socio-political movement, as a community theory, and even as a philosophical perspective that pursues the achievement of equal rights between women and men, fighting for equity in gender issues and for the recognition of women as

physical persons and as subjects with rights. At the same time, it states that no person should be deprived of their welfare because of their sex.

The origins of the feminist movement can be traced back to the 18th century with the publication of Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizenship* (de Gouges, 1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft, 1792). These texts focus their analysis on the role of patriarchy in structuring unequal power relations between men and women. Therefore, the feminist movement generates a critique of the androcentric vision of the community itself, seeking to transform it into a more just and egalitarian society.

As a socio-community movement made up of organized groups, feminism develops and is collected chronologically in a succession of stages or phases which are called “waves” (Garrido-Rodríguez, 2021). In each of these, ideas and concepts, theories, etc., are developed on the conception of women about men and the rights that should be offered to them. It should be noted that this movement for the transformation of society has an influential foundation in the form of conceptualization of reality and scientific discourse.

Exposed in the introduction of the concept of visual culture and its extension to the field of animated television serials; as well as the more generic foundations of the feminist movement and terminology; a synergy is generated between both aspects and the applicability of the same to the educational field is raised. Therefore, the possibility of generating feminist discourses in the classroom through the use of resources of the visual culture of animation for purposes focused on the empowerment of women and the breaking of standards of a male chauvinist society is proposed.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a socio-critical (Loza et al., 2020) and socio-educational (Leopardi, 2009) paradigm of study. On the one hand, the socio-critical paradigm is based on the importance of offering a reflective vision of the audiovisual environment studied to acquire the ability to self-construct knowledge to transform reality. On the other hand, the socio-educational

paradigm finds its justification in the importance of approaching the analyzed reality from educational environments and spaces to generate change and social progress.

The feminist approach (Cubillos, 2015) is also latent in this research since it is based on the foundations of this theory to analyze the protagonist figures of the selected audiovisual product. The most relevant aspect of it consists of offering visibility, recognition, and empowerment to dissidence linked to gender issues and especially to the feminist model.

These theoretical positions are concretized with the development of a qualitative methodology (Martínez Miguélez, 2006) which focuses on analyzing the socio-community aspects from the element of discourses, images, words, etc. Specifically, the study method of life stories is followed (Moriña, 2017), that is, the review of the personal narratives of some identities that contribute to making visible citizen situations that are susceptible to be generalized and taken into account as referents and role models to be followed.

This research analyzes the life story of Pepper Ann in the Disney animated television serial *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000) as an example of female empowerment and as a reference for girls and (pre)adolescent women. Specifically, attention is paid to the first episode “Granucienta” of this series, first aired on September 13, 1997. This is the research study sample.

This research aims to critically review, from a feminist approach, the visual and cinematographic discourse disseminated through the main character of the animated serial *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000). All this, through her life story, is a qualitative research method.

- To analyze the masculinities, femininities, and their deconstruction of both the main character and his friends in the first chapter of the selected animation serial.
- To highlight the non-normative life stories in feminist issues of the analyzed animation figures and make them visible to generate dissident referents in the consumer audience, as well as a bank of resources available to teachers.
- To visually present the results with sequences of images as a visual essay to generate an artistic discourse with the feminist elements included in the analyzed chapter.
- To view the selected animation chapter to generate a reflection on the impact it has on the life stories of those who attend the 3-year level in a public school.

Complementarily, it is taken into account that the critical (Mateos-Pérez, 2021) and cinematographic (Pérez-Rufi, 2016) review of the discourse is present in the proposed study, since the selected sample consists of a product of visual culture. In turn, the treatment of the hybridization of methods in research (Alonso-Sanz, 2013) is raised, especially the presentation of synergies between qualitative and artistic methods. Reference is made to IBI or Image-Based Research (Monleón and Carbonell-Moliner, 2023) precisely because the life stories studied are drawn from an audiovisual resource. Artistic Research (Vilar, 2017) and Arts-Based Research (Hernández, 2008) are also present, especially in the exposition of the results, since part of these are presented as sequences of images that exalt some of the feminist principles and positionings by way of a visual essay (Marquina Vega et al., 2018).

As a final part of the research process, the chapter is envisioned with a group of children under 3 years of age in a public school to generate a feminist discourse with this group of infants; and contribute to the development of their personal life stories from a much more inclusive and respectful paradigm with non-normative and non-prototypical identities. The selection of a single group of students to implement the didactic proposal leads to the monitoring of a case study (Durán, 2012).

RESULTS

The first episode of *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000) is entitled “Granucienta”, and has a duration of 22 min. and was first aired on September 13, 1997. It serves to introduce the protagonist whose name is the same as the name of the television serial, i.e. Pepper Ann.

This is an adolescent girl in high school who does not fit into the normative parameters that society imposes concerning gender issues and roles. Likewise, this chapter presents the first problem of those who go through the vital period of adolescence. At her high school, it is time to take pictures for the yearbook, and Pepper Ann is obsessed with having, for the first time in her life, a valid personal photograph to be proud of, as well as to respond to the normative demands that society tends to impose on her.

In the process of preparation, Pepper Ann must face another situation typical of adolescence, acne. A pimple starts to appear on her forehead and, for fear of not being accepted by the large group, she sets out to buy a face cream at a discount store to combat it before the photograph is taken.

The first chapter analyzed visually presents the yearbook photographs of young Pepper Ann throughout the different school years. All of these products show a non-normative appearance and go against the concept of feminine aesthetics that is socially attributed to women. All these photographs are shown visually in Figure 1. It is necessary to make visible identities that break with the aesthetic canon of Western beauty and show others that are more diverse and, above all, closer to reality and everyday life (Wolf and Reynoso, 1992).

Figure 1

Non-normative aesthetic elements in the adolescent female figure: acne



Note: Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

One of the social problems in the imagination of those who belong to adolescence is the appearance of acne on facial skin, especially in women, since society imposes on them to present themselves in public with an aesthetic and normative perfection concerning the classic parameters of the concept. Therefore, imperfection on the surface of their faces is not conceived as possible in these community parameters. Feminism values and tries to normalize real situations in the reality of women (Dietz and Vericat, 1990). Therefore, the audiovisual resource selected and analyzed is shown as a valid example to generate and present a feminist reference through the life story of Pepper Ann in the serial *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000), especially for the group of girls and young adolescents.

However, all her efforts are insufficient, since finally one of her teachers sets her as an example in the classroom for having shopped at a discount store where it is possible to learn mathematics experientially through the calculation of percentages and discounts. Also, when she discovers that it will be her mother who will take the individual photograph for the yearbook, she is surprised and ends up with a photo that does not favor her and with which she will be criticized for another year.

Having commented on the summary of the episode to land on the plot of the chapter, we proceed to the analysis of the visual elements that favor the creation of visual and audiovisual discourses in favor of female empowerment and the feminist movement.

Figure 2

The color violet as a feminist symbol



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

The feminist movement is labeled and characterized by purple and violet (Franco et al., 2022). This is the most identifying tonality of this socio-communitarian example. It is common to find cases in the visual imaginary in which this tonality generates a direct relationship with feminism. This is how it is presented in Pepper Ann's clothing. The protagonist wears a purple T-shirt, has purple two-piece pajamas and the skates with which she is presented in the introduction are also of this color. This chromatic range is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3

Feminist examples and non-normative behaviors in women



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

It is significant to comment on the moment at the beginning of the serial in which Pepper Ann is portrayed as a super-heroine since this visual component generates a discourse of empowerment towards women in terms of their worth to face their life stories. Although it is true, the immediate change generated by this discourse is more significant when she is turned into a mere adolescent. Through this positioning, the importance of women in the emergence and development of the feminist movement itself is valued. It requires ordinary people who develop ordinary lives, but who through their actions generate a socio-community impact and fight towards the modification of gender standards and stereotypes.

In Figure 3 we attend to the non-normative life story of the selected female character. The introductory song of the animated serial *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000) presents a recreation of the protagonist as a warrior and/or super-heroine; as well as an adolescent woman who tends to like activities more socially linked to the group of boys of the same age, such as recreational games and reading comics. It is essential to rescue life stories such as the one presented in this example of visual culture, since through it, the presence of other identities that are not very normative, but real and susceptible to be taken into consideration, being valued and respected, is valued and made visible (Illanes, 2012).

Figure 4

Disorganized behavior in the protagonist of the television series



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

Continuing with the life stories of non-normative female characters, Pepper Ann's disorganization stands out as a characteristic of her personality. In one of the first scenes of the plot, the young teenager is shown stacking her belongings in the high school locker without any order or logic in the task performed. In this way, she breaks with the stereotype of women as being delicate, careful, tidy, etc. (Esquerra Muelle, 2015). Thus, it is collected visually in Figure 4. This stereotype is changed with the visual information shared in the figure 5, about non-normative photos of Pepper Ann.

Figure 5

Non-normative aesthetics in the protagonist figure of the television serial are exemplified through the photographs in the yearbook.



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

Figure 6

Social oppression against female nonnormativity



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

Feminism is a social movement that throughout its different waves and contextual moments tends to be oppressed by the most conservative sectors of society. Those who attack women's community progress tend to ridicule the efforts of the movement (Kaufman, 1995). Similarly, there is a remarkable resemblance to Pepper Ann's life story. She is continually reprimanded for engaging in behaviors that are socially unacceptable for a young adolescent girl by her peer group and others with whom she interacts. Precisely these actions should be critically reviewed by the public and countered by the violet movement itself. Some visual examples of life history are shown in Figure 6.

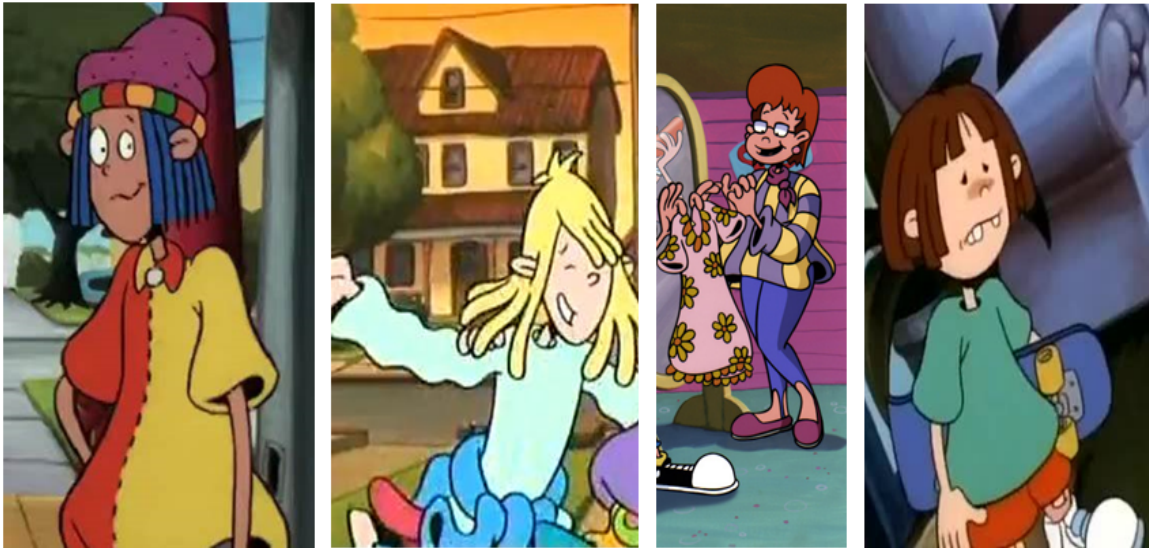
Continuing with the review of the cultural product analyzed, the presentation of a deconstruction of normative and hegemonic masculinities stands out (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2015). This is presented through the life story of Pepper Ann's friend, Milo Kamalani. This is a young teenager and artist who can conceive reality from a different sensibility, mannerism, and aesthetic gaze than that of their respective male defenders of patriarchal positions.

Other examples to generate visibility of the feminist movement are also presented through the life stories of Nicky Little, a young teenage friend of Pepper Ann, who is preparing to become a professional violinist; and Lydia Pearson, Pepper Ann's divorced mother who works in a clothing store. There are also non-normative behaviors in the figure of "Moose" Pearson, Pepper Ann's sister. The latter has a penchant for skateboarding and tends to be mistaken for a male due to her style of dress and her deep tone of voice. In this way, non-hetero-normative identities,

personalities, and life stories are highlighted. Figure 7 shows visual examples of such animated personalities.

Figure 7

Feminist examples and deconstruction of hetero-patriarchal and hegemonic identities in secondary figures of the serial analyzed.



Note. Taken from *Pepper Ann* (Rose and Khan, 1997-2000).

After analyzing the feminist discourses and positionings that emanate from the selected audiovisual, a didactic use of the same is generated with a group of children under 3 years of age from a public school in a municipality near the city of Valencia. This dynamic is aimed at generating a personal experience that leads to the configuration of a life history more inclusive and respectful of diversity in gender issues with those who consume it, i.e., this group of infants.

The selected school is CEIP Benjamín Benlloch in Manises (Valencia). This is a school of Infant and Primary Education with a specific Communication and Language classroom; therefore, among the pillars that support it at the educational project level, the center is committed to a real inclusion of the diversities of those who inhabit its space, especially those of a functional nature. Likewise, this school is characterized as being a school that attends to a large number of students in a situation of inequality compensation. Especially students who recently arrived from other

territories with no knowledge of the official languages (Spanish and Valencian) of the host area, students of gypsy ethnicity, and the population at risk of social exclusion.

Specifically, the group of 3-year-olds in which the reflection and critical consumption of the audiovisual product is implemented is composed of a total of 13 children, among whom we highlight: 2 children from other territories (Colombia and Armenia) who start school after returning from Christmas vacations (January-February 2024), 3 children from other territories (Saudi Arabia and Russia) who start school at the beginning of the school year, 1 child with a broken family unit (gender violence and situations of neglect and lack of care) and 1 child of gypsy ethnicity with a tendency to intermittent absenteeism. The class group is divided between 7 girls and 6 boys who, although they play together and interact with peers, tend to prefer social relationships between members of the same sex. Furthermore, despite their young age, the whole group has internalized a series of gender stereotypes, which are simply the result of a social construct.

The second week of February we proceeded to the viewing of the chapter of the animated serial with the whole group class. Although it is an introductory episode, it does contribute to the development of life stories with this group of minors, since it favors the opening of ideas that are more up-to-date with today's society and female empowerment. On the one hand, Pepper Ann is presented as a young girl who breaks with the established norm. Based on this situation, each minor shares her tastes, hobbies, etc. Among others, the most significant examples that contribute to break with the constructed norm are: "I liked to wear a pink tutu for the Carnival party" (I.), "S. likes to cook" (S.), "Boys don't paint their lips, but V. painted them. It's okay" (L.), etc. In fact, through Pepper Ann and the simulation of the figure in a super-heroine, a discourse is generated through which the life stories of other fictional figures such as Vaiana, Merida, Captain America, etc. are put in value.

In addition to the figure of Pepper Ann, Nicky and Pepper Ann's little sister, who contribute to the development of two children in the classroom, are also highlighted. Both sisters have personal tastes that break with what is expected by the group class with whom they cohabit. One of them receives a boost from Pepper Ann's sister since she is attracted to everything related to riding scooters, as happens to this minor during recess (V.). Another gets it from Nicky, who

helps her to openly share her passion for music with the other children: “I go to music like this girl, too” (Z.).

To close the session and so that each child can freely express their identity, we proceed to take pictures of the group individually and in small groups; taking as a reference the sequence of images through which the past and failed story of photographs for Pepper Ann's yearbook is shared. Likewise, by way of closing the proposal, from the simile between Pepper Ann and the volcano, we proceed to the reading of the story *Tengo un Volcán* (Tirado, 2018), through which emotions such as anger and rage are normalized and made visible in the women's collective.

CONCLUSIONS

This scientific contribution concludes by commenting on the importance of research on the life stories of non-normative identities that are shown as examples in favor of the feminist movement. Especially if these realities are presented through visual or audiovisual culture products since they are shown as examples of great media reach and influence for the consuming citizenship.

All in all, this scientific contribution highlights the value of the discourse of a group of 3-year-old students towards the change of look (and approach) towards the feminist movement from the active consumption and critical literacy of the audiovisual resource in the classroom. The didactic proposal implemented is considered significant since the first stimulations generated during the Infant Education stage have a great impact on the later development of the personalities of the group of children.

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