

Folkcommunication: a Latin American Approach for the Research of the Cultural Manifestations

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Abstract

This article proposes an itinerary of the studies on folkcommunication, a theory that emerged in Brazil during the sixties, and that has been constituted as a conceptual and methodological contribution for the study of the cultural manifestations from the social communication processes, that incorporates the economic and technological challenges in which local and traditional communities are involved in Latin America. This article proposes a conceptual and historical itinerary of the different contributions that form part of this theoretical field that is increasingly growing, both in the Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries.

Keywords: Folkcommunication; Communication; Culture; Popular Culture; Communication Theory;

1. Introduction

Between the 1950s and 1960s, in Latin America, the so-called communication studies influenced by the perspectives of functionalist analysis and with emphasis on the industrial media emerged. The beginning of the "communication" studies was linked to the opening of the university careers of journalism, social communication, public relations, advertising, cinema, and television, among others of the same type. Among the dominant theoretical perspectives were the sociological functionalism of North American origin, on one hand, and the perspectives of the Frankfurt School, on the other. Some of these authors who- from a critical view- sought to unveil the mechanisms of ideological domination of the mass media, film, television and even comics, as demonstrated by the classic Mattelart and Dorfman study entitled "How to Read Donald Duck" (Dorfman and Mattelart 1991).

Brazilian authors emphasize that the beginning of industrialization which starts to develop the complex techno-scientific system of the media is carried out in a context of deep socioeconomic inequalities that not only showed a society with deep social problems and division between class levels where, together with this, the subaltern classes held a cultural heritage through which they communicated.

In this general context, as Canclini (2005) □ recalls, communication studies focused, mainly, on mass society, while anthropological and folklore studies focused on the ethnographic study of popular cultures. However, a review of the Brazilian experience shows us that communication studies in Brazil will emerge linking these two areas: studies of mass communication and cultural manifestations. In this context, Luiz Beltrao Andrade Lima emerged as a communication scholar. He, who for several years served as a journalist in the area known as northeastern Brazil, region where he approached the cultural manifestations of the large marginalized social strata for whom the developmental plans were not applied by the Brazilian government.

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With the opening of journalism and communication courses in Brazil, Beltrão entered the academic life in the Catholic University of Pernambuco where he taught Interpretive Journalism and other similar subjects.

As a Professor Beltrao was one of the initiators of the institutionalization of communication studies in Brazil. Proof of this is that he was the founder of the first Communication Scientific Journal of Brazil called "Comunicações e Problemas", a magazine that was fundamental for the firsts researches in communication in Brazil. It was precisely in that magazine that he wrote a seminal article for Folkcommunication studies. The article, "The Ex Voto⁴ as a journalistic vehicle", was published in 1965. In this article the main hypothesis of the author is that in countries such as Brazil, with a high illiteracy rate and where, therefore, not all people have access to industrial media such as the press, television and film, cultural manifestations such as festivities, ex-votos, and even popular dances, are mechanisms for communication by the subordinate sectors of society. His study of the ex-votos as popular demonstrations that shows the popular faith and also, according to him, express the feelings and social problems of the popular class.

An important aspect in the chronology of Folkcommunication studies occurred with a letter sent by renowned folklorist and Brazilian ethnographer, Camara Cascudo, who recognized in the seminal article by Beltrao master plan for a research program that would value the current dimension of cultural manifestations of the common men and women of Brazil.

Once the doctorate degree programs in Social Sciences initiated in Brazil, Beltrao enrolled himself in the first Doctoral Program in Communication of the University of Brasilia. In 1967 he presented his thesis on Folkcommunication through a commission that evaluated with maximum qualification his thesis: "Folkcomunicação: um estudo dos agentes e dos meiospopulares de informação de fatos e expressão de ideias" (Folkcommunication: a study of the agents, the popular ways of information of facts and expression of ideas) (Beltrão, 2014).□

However, he had problems to receive the doctorate degree because there were years of the military dictatorship in Brazil and his theoretical perspective analyzed that the cultural manifestations had a social critique of public policy, the reason for which he had for a long time difficult to spread his theory. In the early seventies, a book was published with the key aspects of his doctoral thesis, however, the editor truncated a central chapter because he conceived that the thoughts in it were very daring. The book was published in 1971 under the title "Communication and Folklore" (Beltrão, 1971).□

Only in 1980, he published the book "Folkcomunicação: a comunicação dos marginalizados"(Folkcommunication: the Marginalized Communication⁵) where he expresses with greater clarity and without censorship its theoretical approaches and the case studies from which his work germinated (Beltrão, 1980)□. If at first Beltrao's approaches still have a journalistic bias, as Melo (2008)□ has pointed out, the book "Folkcommunication: the Marginalized Communication" incorporates with more strength the Lazarsfeld's thesis of "Two-step flow of communication" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)□, in which the communication occurs in two stages and states that in peripheral communities there are persons who act as local opinion leaders who perform a kind of translation of the information that circulates in the mass media.

An important synthesis of the aspects that characterize folkcommunication is provided by Hohlfeldt who points out the following aspects:

1. *Folkcommunication is a process of exchange of messages;*
2. *Its agents and means are directly or indirectly linked to folklore;*
3. *Folkcommunication is a craft and horizontal process;*
4. *It is similar to interpersonal communication;*
5. *For dispersed audiences (Hohlfeldt, 2012, p. 54).*

4 An ex-voto is a votive offering to a saint or to a divinity. It is given in fulfillment of a vow (hence the Latin term, short for ex votosuscepto, "from the vow made") or in gratitude or devotion. Ex-votos are placed in a church or chapel where the worshiper seeks grace or wishes to give thanks.

5This is a free translation since some words in portuguese have a difficult of translation. Marginalized, as Beltrao says are the population of low-income living at the edge or border of society. The people that are not key players in the economic and political game.

As point of fact, it was just in 2004 and by the initiative of Hohlfeldt that the full thesis of Beltrao was finally published.

2. Two major influences: The dynamics of folklore and multi-stage flow

In the configuration of the folkcommunication, there are at least two perspectives that influenced Beltrao and the understanding of both will help to draw a theoretical-historical line of thinking. On the one hand, the perspective of folklore collected by Beltrao is influenced by the work of Edison Carneiro, a theorist of folklore who linked expressive manifestations with the dialectical process and an understanding of society as a whole. On the other hand, and due to the fact that in the 1960s there was an important predominance of functionalism in the study of communication in Latin America (Lopes, 2003) and in order to elaborate its theory, the flow of communication in several stages elaborated by the Sociologist Lazarsfeld was very revealing for Beltrao's theory.

2.1 Edison Carneiro and the dynamics of folklore

Edison Carneiro was a Brazilian intellectual who dedicated himself to the study of Afro-Brazilian manifestations and his work about the dynamics of folklore was of the most importance to Beltrao. The work of Carneiro started back in the 1930's and has great importance as a theoretical input in the Folkcommunication Theory, since its perspective assumes a dynamic view over culture and folklore.

For Carneiro, most of the time, a manifestation that is considered traditional is the synonymous of archaic as is referenced into the bourgeois society. For Carneiro, the analysis of the expressive popular manifestations must go hand in hand with an analysis of the society of which it constitutes one of its elements and in no case of an ideal bourgeois society, although the disciplinary field of the folklore has been born in the context of recording traditional knowledge from rural societies. According to Carneiro (1965), the folklore has nothing of quiet and immutable and is characterized by a dialectical and dynamic movement. If there are expressive manifestations it is because they exist within the context of a society in which they make sense. It is from this perspective that one must analyze what are the transformations that such manifestations have over the time. It is for this reason that the manifestations not only speak of the past but also of the present time and, fundamentally, of the future, since- in the case of the subaltern sectors- it can express forms of connection with the entire society and its social demands.

One of the dimensions that Carneiro pinpoints is that of cultural resistance that can occur even in situations in which social groups are accommodated to the dominant system. In this way, Carneiro locates the folkloric manifestations in the horizon of the social transformations that live in unequally organized societies like those of Brazil where he has performed his investigations and conceptual contributions, and Latin America. A manifestation exists when the context in which it is developed persists, this question is key to understand that the Folkcommunication Theory takes a critical and dynamic view of folklore and not that collected by conservatives who understand folklore as anonymous, traditional and Oral (Dupey, 2008; Luyten, 2006)

2.2 The Opinion Leaders in the functionalist perspective

As Lopes (2003) recalls, functionalism was the dominant perspective in Latin America during the process of institutionalization of communication studies. These studies are born under the techno-industrial process in which the presence of the cultural industries in Latin America have born. In the case of Brazil- as we saw with Beltrao- a configuration of a media with elitist character. But the opening of communication departments was strongly linked with the functionalism that had the first approximation with hypodermic needle theory and afterward it was the theory of the flow of communication in several stages (Beltrao, 2004).

The multi-stage communication flow is an intermediate point between the start and ending points of the communication process. This theory was developed with an emphasis on the book by Lazarfeld and Katz (1955) in a study that focused on the behavior of consumers of fashion and leisure in the selection of films. Mattelart and Mattelart (1997) recall the importance of this theory in the Latin American context as it was useful in the process of acquisition of innovations "either the adoption of a machine or a fertilizer by the farmers"(p. 34). In the same text, it is argued that "Lazarsfeld exerted considerable influence abroad. He considered his relations with the international community as a *scientific multinational*" (Mattelart&Mattelart, 1997, p. 34).

In the system of Folkcommunication, local actors emerge as opinion leaders from the peripheral sectors. They carry out a process of mediation and can also carry out communication processes towards the hegemonic segments of society.

Until then, communication studies had made the subjects invisible as agents and had focused on the power of the media both from functionalism and communication studies linked to the Frankfurt School. That is why taking the elements of the flow of communication also regained interest in the subjects of the marginalized sectors as agents of communication.

3. Folkcommunication and the folklore of the industrial man

José Marques de Melo is one of the most important communication researchers in Latin America and has made the most widespread use of Beltrao's theory on Folkcommunication at an international level (Melo, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2014, 2016). This author analyzes that in the field of communication research. Regarding the processes of modernization in developing countries that there are initial links between folklore and communication in their research.

Melo (2008) says that the communication of lower-class groups is an object of study, mainly, in the countries of late industrialization, despite the universality of the subject. He adds that one exception to this situation was that of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan with the publication of his work "The Mechanical bride: the folklore of industrial man" (McLuhan, 2011) in the middle of the 20th century. For Melo (2008), the outline of the theory of Folkcommunication "unquestionably corresponds to the Brazilian sequence of a historical episode that was emblematically played by Marshall McLuhan (1951)" (Melo, 2008 p.41).

In this book McLuhan establishes a new facet of folklore, saying that the folklore of the industrial man is made by the mass media. McLuhan's thesis in the mid-twentieth century is that there is an appropriation of popular culture by the so-called "mass culture". The latter have the ability to process images and symbols originating in national cultures and transform them into goods for multiple audiences. Here lies what McLuhan conceives as media folklore that "confused itself as an amalgam of signs from different national or regional geographies, seeking to procreate secular or emerging cultures in the new world map" (Melo, 2008 p.41). Hence the author notes that mediated folklore has two faces, one is the ability to appropriate symbols and the other is to export them and change them into media products.

His work seeks to account for the so-called mass culture. His research was based on commercials and entertainment products such as film, television, and comics that were published in newspapers and magazines. "Implicit was the idea that the 'industrial man', living in the peripheries of the megalopolises, was inserted in a culture of mass rooted in popular traditions" (Melo, 2008 p.43). There was the secret of the success of the media industry in the United States because it fed a symbolic universe that had its origin in rural areas built by contingents of former colonizers and migrants that formed a powerful popular culture that was strengthened by the state and Reproduced by social media agencies that operate throughout the national territory. For Melo (2008) here was the basis of what would later be his theory of the Global Village.

Melo (2008) recalls that in the same historical context Luiz Beltrao observed an inverse situation in Brazil. At that time, his country was characterized by an elitist media system that relied on scholarly elements. In this context, the process of mediation between these media and the popular sectors of the Brazilian population becomes relevant. In his doctoral thesis, Beltrão understands Folkcommunication as the study of "popular means of information of facts and expression of ideas" (Beltrão, 2014) to make intelligible these contents coming from an elitist media system. It is thus configured as an alternative, Folkcommunication system, in which it becomes relevant to understand how cultural expressions influenced by cultural industries become media for collective communication (Hohlfeldt, 2012). Over the years, a movement has also developed that is dedicated to the study of the processes of appropriation by the media of popular expressions, a situation that will be analyzed from a folkmediatic perspective that will be reviewed later according to the perspective of Luyten (2006).

As Gushiken (2011) points out, the perspective of Folkcommunication lies in a historical analysis that considers how the subjects influence and are influenced by dominant media systems. This is how this theory allows us to study how practices are refunctionalized in the modernizing process of Brazil. In the book "Folkcommunication: the communication of the marginalized" (Beltrão, 1980), Beltrao takes a step to the journalistic emphasis of his first texts and makes a characterization that accounts for different marginalized public, a notion inspired by the Chicago School in Early 20th century in the United States, this characterization is as follows:

- 1) The marginalized rural groups due to their geographic isolation, their economic hardships and low intellectual level;
- 2) Marginalized urban groups, composed of individuals in the lower echelons of society and who constitute the underprivileged, underserved and least accessed classes;
- 3) Culturally marginalized, urban, or rural groups that represent Contingents of response to the principles, morals or social structure in force. (Beltrão, 1980)

In this way, Melo (2008) makes the connection between Beltrão's work in Brazil and that of McLuhan. In this context, it was impossible to separate the study of popular culture without considering the influence of the media. In Latin America, folklore had predominated, which for start conceived folkloric as synonymous with anonymous, collective and traditional (Dupey, 2008; Luyten, 2006). These positions "became more and more difficult for students of communication given the interpenetration of various levels of culture and communication" (LUYTEN, 2006, p. 40).

4. Further development of a field of study

From the beginning, there were several researchers associated with Beltrão's studies, such as Roberto Benjamin and Joseph Luyten for instance. They all made important conceptual contributions to this field of study. In the same way, it is remarkable the figure of the Jose Marques de Melo, who cultivated and helped to internationalize and spread the studies of Folkcommunication.

Benjamin (2004) was a direct disciple of Beltrão. He served at the Federal Rural University of Pernambuco and was President of the National Folklore Commission of Brazil. His work focused on the Folkcommunication analysis based on the theory of Opinion Leaders in various stages from the American functionalism, fundamentally Lazarsfeld (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). His descriptive studies focused on northeastern "Cordel" poets as opinion leaders of marginalized communities in the processes of industrialization and modernization that Brazil began to live after the 1950s.

The most important of Benjamin's contribution are the five communication processes, that in his opinion, are relevant to understand the importance of the field of Folkcommunication studies: 1) Mediation of folk channels for reception of mass messages; 2) The appropriation of mass communication technologies (and others) and the use of mass channels by holders of folk culture; 3) Cultures of mass culture absorbed by folk culture; 4) Appropriation of elements of folk culture by the mass culture and erudite culture; 5) Reception in the folk culture of elements of their own culture reprocessed by mass culture.

5. Joseph Luyten and the Folkmedia

Although Joseph Luyten was the most enthusiast researcher in the field of Folk Media, he was not its founder. The first time the word was written in portuguese was by Roberto Benjamin in his Book "Folkcomunicação no Contexto de Massa" (Benjamim, 2000).

In this book Benjamim dedicated some chapters about the Folkmedia concept, that came first from UNESCO effort at the beginning of the 1970s to discuss and use of Folkmedia in programs to communicate with lower-class and illiteracy communities throughout the mixture of their folkloric tradition and health, education and social issues to their better development (Institute, 1975).

The UNESCO efforts are still producing results in Asia, Africa, and some other underdeveloped countries throughout the world. A great number of communicators are using the Folkmedia concept to work with popular communities to teach them to make familiar planning, language teaching, and health care. Since this concept was presented in Brazil by Benjamim (2000) it has spread among a lot of Brazilians Folkcommunication researchers. One of them was Joseph Luyten (2006). His main work was with the oral literature, called "Cordel". Was his vision that this kind of communication device was a Folkmedia instrument.

⁶Cordel = string – it is a popular form of folk literature that is exposed in these thin ropes in fairs and market places in Brazil Northeast cities. The artists, most of them poets and painters, sell their textbooks about a variety of subjects, most of them about the inner lands life and folkloric tales of the rural inhabitants.

⁷The Folk-communication in the Mass Context (free translation from Portuguese)

He dedicated all his work to collect and bring to the academic scenario the value of such popular literature, which was considered by some intellectuals as a minor art form. Nowadays the Folkcommunication researchers have developed new lines of study in the Folkmedia field, such as Hip Hop culture, Movies, Internet Facebook communities, popular feasts, Television programs, video-games, and other mass media products. The Folkmedia concept is evolving among communication researchers through the years and now it can be understood as the studies of how the popular culture interpreters translate the mass media information to the popular classes, and how the mass media companies use in their products the popular traditions to get a closer understanding with the popular classes.

5. Osvaldo Trigueiro and the media activists

Professor Osvaldo Meira Trigueiro is a noted communication researcher and Brazilian folklorist who is also an acknowledged Folkcommunication researcher and in the last years has introduced his notion of media activist as a concept that seeks to distinguish between the character of agents that always have been the actors of the popular segments and the one who assumes an active role in specific social situations.

At first, Trigueiro (2008) proposes to distinguish between active and activist subjects. For the author, an activist is the one that "exercises an action, participates actively, which is always in motion" (Trigueiro, 2016, p. 68), while an activist is a militant who organizes and plans "the participation of others in the Movements, which stands for or against a given situation, dominates different knowledge, gives primacy to actions" (Trigueiro, 2016, p.68).

The media activists are part of the audience that leaves the anonymity and acquires visibility both, among its peers and by the public and private institutions that shape society. He is an activist who operates in his reference groups and as one who chains cultural transformations. According to Trigueiro (2008) is someone who is always in a process of building social practices and for it uses local cultural elements as media that operate in everyday life. That is why "it transits between traditional and modern practices, appropriates new communication technologies to circulate popular narratives in global networks" (Trigueiro, 2016, p. 68). In other words,

When you use your own media, occupies a space conquered and recognized by its social group, but when uses the Media (Midia), a space that is granted in the course of a social time, almost always is without the recognition of its owners. The media activist of the Folkcommunication system acts as a cultural animator of his street, his neighborhood, his city, making visible the movement between the reality of his living world and the staging of television fiction. The cultural production of spontaneous popular groups in institutions such as schools, libraries, novenas, processions, church fairs, and countless civic, military and religious activities carried out in the vicinity of their territories of social dominion" (Trigueiro, 2016, p. 68-69)

Trigueiro adds that a media activist can operate in both informal and formal institutions. He participates in processes of construction of the social fabric between diverse actors, moving from the zone of activity to the zone of activism always outside the limits of the State comprehension of its institutional role. Hence, starting from the studies of Folkcommunication, Trigueiro approaches with more emphasis on the political dimension of the local actors who carry out communication processes rooted on the manifestations of popular culture.

6. Folk Marketing a new research field

*Folk = people, gathered the word marketing [...] results in folkmarketing expression, according to a generic view, means the appropriations set of popular cultures with communicational goals, to visualize products and services of an organization to its public - target*⁸ (Lucena Filho, 2007, p. 85).

The Folkmarketing concept was first developed by Lucena (2007) in his Doctoring thesis. He had studied the popular festivity of June in the city of Campina Grande, in Paraíba State. He saw that a great number of companies trying to bond with the participants of this festivity used some marketing strategies to blend their trademarks with some traditional elements of the celebration.

⁸Folk = povo, ajuntado à palavra marketing [...], resulta na expressão folkmarketing que, segundo uma visão genérica, significa o conjunto de apropriações das culturas populares com objetivos comunicacionais, para visibilizar produtos e serviços de uma organização para os seus públicos-alvo

To him, the actions of the folkmarketing, "have well-defined objectives, besides the elaboration of strategies appropriate to the local situation, but in tune with the transformations of the industrial society" (Lucena Filho, 2007, p.85). That means that the companies have a very careful action to use symbols of the festivity to add some value to their products or services.

It is, therefore, necessary to understand the relation between the "traditional" of popular culture and the changes it undergoes in the process of globalization, and the way in which the media appropriates these elements with the objective of reaching a certain public through strategies of marketing organizations.

Is this theme the folkmarketing concept is actual and in the "avantgarde" of the Folkcommunication theory because of its modern ideas that bring some market interests and the traditional culture together. The combination of those two elements is in the mind of a lot of advertising professionals to reach the more selective audience in the globalized world.

7. Contemporary dialogues between communication and culture in Latin America

As Mexican researcher Jorge González recalls, even in the 1970s in Latin America, social communication studies focused on the Mass Media.

On the one hand, a positivist orientation generated in the Anglo-Saxon world that was oriented to the description of its effects on the population, and on the other, a critical perspective from the conflicting political interests between the dominant classes possessing the mass media and the classes exploited and idiocy by the contents of such instruments of the bourgeoisie (González, 2017, p.496).

Within Brazil, the Folkcommunication had problems to open its way due to the military context that prevailed in the period in which Beltrao presented his doctoral thesis. Also the language barrier that the Portuguese writings of Beltrao have encountered stopped his theory to gain a greater reverberation in Spanish Latin America, and English America.

Precisely in a historical conjuncture marked by the influence of the Cultural Studies, the sociocultural approaches will systematically permeate the studies of communication. Saintout and Larrañaga (2003) □ argue that it is systematically in this period that are a movement from the study of the instruments (the media) to the study of the culture or, as González (2017) will say, plural cultures. This is how in the 1980s it became explicit in the field of communication that its study necessarily involved asking about the different ways of social construction meanings.

Among the works that had wide circulation in Spanish Latin American was the text *Hybrid Cultures* (Canclini, 2005) □ that sought to think about the sociology-cultural transformations that occur in the various social groups in contemporary society. Another reference work was undoubtedly Martin-Barbero's book "From Media to Mediation" (Martin-Barbero, 2010) □ which raised communication as an area that requires working in an interdisciplinary way. Until then, Latin American communication studies in the Spanish and Portuguese languages had understood orality as synonymous with illiteracy by the influence of the diffusionist currents. Without belittling the importance of orality as did the old-school folklorists. Barbero's perspective pluralized a vision about orality that allows us to account for different ways of understanding the world and processes in how subjects appropriate the contents driven by cultural industries.

Another important revitalizing perspective is the one that González (2017) carried out with his theory on the Cultural Fronts. His ethnographic research sought to understand the popular as a condition that is not "defined by its contents or its origin, but because the subaltern and instrumental classes of society use it in opposition to the culture of the dominant classes" (Gonzalez, 2017, p. 498). The same author recalls that in his first investigations:

[...]popular forms of communication were documented within a peasant community in Mexico, especially local dances and festivals, as opposed to external forms of communication (radio, television, cinema, industry Record label, etc.), which, in their own way, weighed in with the peasant cultural forms (González, 2017, p. 498).

It is relevant that Melo's (2008) approach pinpoints out that Beltrao and his Folkcommunication theory addressed several aspects, that since the 1980s, spread in Latin America with the work of Martin-Barbero. This reveals that the Folkcommunication is a theory that, although it has its origin in the studies of "communication", integrated the relations between the communication and the culture in Brazil before the Eighties that was when these relations were first studied in the continent.

8. Conclusions

This Latin American theory, which is Folkcommunication, is still young, despite its promising approaches, by associating the communication of manifestations of popular culture. Beltrão, as well as his followers, faced much opposition to the thesis that Folkcommunication was a new theory and a new field of knowledge. But the tenacity of the researchers proved that there are many objects of research that can be explained by Folkcommunication, as well as it has a clear and efficient methodological approach to show its assumptions and to understand different communicational phenomena that occur at the center of cultural manifestations. At first, some folklorists repudiated Folkcommunication research because they thought that new folklorists would emerge without the support of the folklore sciences, but then, with due explanation and presentation of different results, they realized that, in fact, Folkcommunication is not Folklore, but rather communication within folklore. However, researchers in this field must know and respect the manifestations of popular culture so that they can understand what levels of communication are present in the manifestations that are the object of their research. In an era of fast technological and political change, researching Folkcommunication is still a challenge as it merges two worlds: The new digital world, connected and globalized with the traditional, disconnected, and localized.

Perhaps this is its greatest contribution to the field of research in social sciences since the researcher is required both the knowledge of new and emerging technologies and the respect and knowledge of the traditional cultures, that unite and identify the peoples of America. Dominique Wolton (2009) called for a new globalization based on different paradigms, the Folkcommunication may be a new paradigm, because it invites us to find the universal in the local and also invites to proceed a new globalization through the recognition of the multiple cultures that make us diverse and similar as clearly recalls Canclini (2005).

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