

## Strategies for promoting the Barbie movie: an initial reading gesture

### Estratégias de divulgação do filme *Barbie*: um gesto inicial de leitura

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Received: March 09<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

Accepted: June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

Published: August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

#### ABSTRACT

The movie *Barbie* was the highest-grossing movie in 2023, and, as a result, it received many awards, including the Golden Globe for Cinematic and Box Office Achievement. Is all the success due solely to the quality of the movie? The aim of this paper is to analyze some strategies used to promote the movie *Barbie* on the internet, considering the concepts discussed by Walter Benjamin (1975) and Michel Pêcheux (2014). To achieve our goal, a qualitative documentary analysis was carried out by using as raw *corpus* the promotion of the movie on the internet (Google, TikTok, and Twitter). In this paper, we will apply the reflections and concepts outlined by Walter Benjamin and Michel Pêcheux to our contemporary context. The analysis based on the raw *corpus* is highlighted throughout the paper, according to Benjamin's style of organization between theory and practice. When analyzing the strategies for promoting the *Barbie* movie, we found an appreciation of the color pink and an investment in the use of social networks and humor, since the target audience concerns young people.

**Keywords:** Critical theory. Discourse Analysis. Pink.

#### RESUMO

O filme *Barbie* teve a maior bilheteria do ano de 2023 e, como consequência, recebeu alguns prêmios, dentre eles, o Globo de Ouro de Realização Cinematográfica. Todo o sucesso se deve apenas à qualidade do filme? O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar algumas estratégias de divulgação do filme *Barbie* na internet, mobilizando determinados conceitos de Walter Benjamin (1975) e de Michel Pêcheux (2014). Para isso, efetuamos uma análise documental, de cunho qualitativo, utilizando como *corpus* bruto a divulgação do filme *Barbie* realizada na internet (*Google, TikTok e Twitter*). Neste texto, tentaremos deslocar as reflexões e os conceitos apresentados por Walter Benjamin e Michel Pêcheux para o nosso momento atual. As reflexões realizadas a partir do *corpus* bruto são destacadas no decorrer do trabalho, efetuando um movimento entre a teoria e a prática durante todo o percurso, seguindo o estilo de organização de Benjamin. Ao analisar as estratégias de divulgação do filme *Barbie*, constatamos uma valorização referente à cor rosa e um investimento do uso das redes sociais e do humor, já que o público-alvo concerne aos jovens.

**Palavras-chave:** Análise do Discurso. Rosa. Teoria crítica.

#### INTRODUCTION

The *Barbie* movie premiered on July 20 and won several awards, as well as reaching the highest box office of 2023. In the present research, we carried out a qualitative documentary analysis, using as a raw *corpus* the promotion of the movie *Barbie* on the Internet (Google, TikTok and Twitter). Our goal is to analyze some strategies for promoting this film. The reflections elaborated from the raw corpus are highlighted throughout the work. Thus, we carried out a movement of theory and practice throughout the course, following Benjamin's style of organization. We will try to displace Walter Benjamin's (1975) reflections on aura and reproduction techniques, as well as Pêcheux's (2014) concepts of subject and production conditions for this work.

In view of the above, this study is justified by the absence of research that relates the two areas, as well as a gap in works on the film, as we found from a brief search carried out on the Portal of Journals of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), carried out on August 19, 2023, in which we found only two works for the word "Barbie", but without reference to the doll or the movie.

In the "Materials and Methods" section, we will present: first, the concepts of aura and art reproduction defined by Benjamin (1975); then, the concepts of subject and the conditions of production based on Michel Pêcheux (2014). In the "Results and Discussion" section, we present reflections based on three images that circulated at the time of the film's release.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Walter Benedix Schönflies Benjamin (1892-1940) was the son of Emil Benjamin, who owned an antique shop, and Paula Schönflies, who belonged to a wealthy Jewish bourgeois family.

He studied at the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium in Berlin until 1904, when he went to a boarding school in Haubinda, Thuringia, where he met the pedagogue Gustav Wynecken (Frazão, 2018).

In 1919, he defended his thesis entitled "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism". He met Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer in 1923. In 1925, he presented an essay at the University of Frankfurt, but was unable to gain access to the faculty of the university's Aesthetics department. He began collaborating with newspapers and magazines, including the journal of the Institute for Social Research, which would later be known as the "Frankfurt School" (Frazão, 2018).

Among all of Benjamin's production, we highlight, for this moment, the reflections made on aura and reproduction techniques. According to Benjamin (1975), there has always been the possibility of reproduction. The Greeks already used casting and minting as technical processes, but it was the process of lithography that allowed serial reproduction. From that moment on, reproduction happens at an accelerated pace.

For Benjamin (1975), even in the most perfect reproduction, the *hic et nunc* is missing, that is, "the unity of its presence where it is, since "What characterizes the authenticity of a thing is everything it contains and is originally transmissible, from its material duration to its power of historical testimony" (Benjamin, 1975, p. 14).

With the development of new reproduction techniques, the aura of the work of art has been affected. For this author, "it is to historical objects that we would most widely apply this notion of aura, but for better elucidation it would be necessary to consider the aura of a natural object" (Benjamin, 1975, p. 15). From Benjamin's reflections, we realize that the aura is related to



our contemplative state.

The decline of the aura happened firstly because things became human and spatially closer; secondly, because of reproduction, we no longer value what is given only once (Benjamin, 1975). Previously, when observing a work of art or a monument in a city, the only way to “revisit” it would be through memory or if the individual returned to that place; but now we have the possibility of filming, photographing and accessing satellite images. We can “revisit” the monument or work of art at any time, so we don’t contemplate it in the same way as before.

Furthermore, for Benjamin (1975), authenticity declines with the development of new reproduction techniques, “[...] since the criterion of authenticity is no longer applicable to artistic production, the whole function of art is subverted. Instead of being based on ritual, it is now based on another form of praxis: politics” (Benjamin, 1975, p. 17).

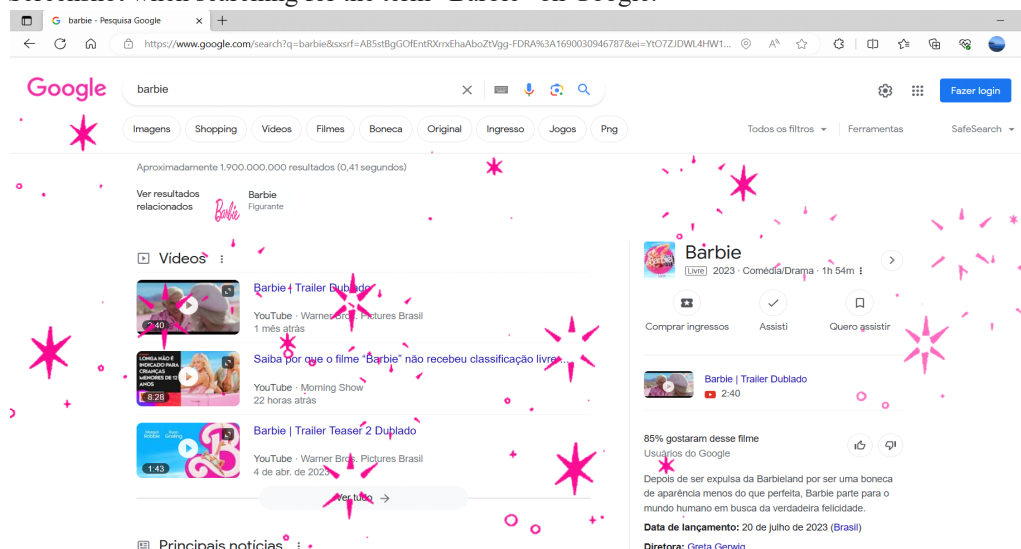
As for the movie *Barbie*, for example, even those who did not go to see it at the cinema will be able to watch it at home via streaming or via “clandestine” websites, which post movies

recorded by people who went to the cinema.

In the cinema, the viewer would have access to a larger image (for which the producers planned the shot), a louder sound and a suitable dark place for the person to concentrate on the film. At home, the screen would probably be a computer, with inferior sound and image. Not to mention the noises and external interventions that disturb the contemplation of the film. If, before, the spectator could only see the film at that moment if he went to the cinema, now, people can watch in their homes the films that are still in the cinema. With large-scale reproduction, there was the decay of the aura.

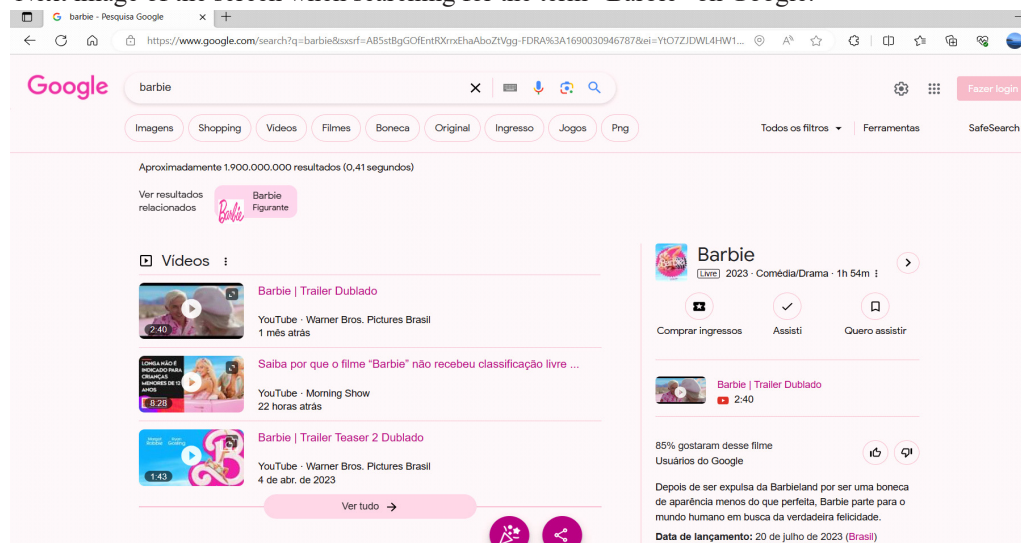
When we searched for the word “Barbie” on *Google*, on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023, we found the following page (Figure 1), in which pink stars and several links appear that lead the internet user to videos and other informative sites. A few seconds later, new stars stop appearing and the page turns pink (Figure 2). Would this be a strategy to restore some authenticity to the work? Could we consider the color pink an “originally transmissible” object that reminds us of the Barbie movie?

**Figure 1**  
Screenshot when searching for the term “Barbie” on Google.



Source: Internet/Google search.

**Figure 2**  
Next image of the screen when searching for the term “Barbie” on Google.



Source: Internet/Google search.

According to Elsesser (2023), the main actress in the film wore pink at events to promote the film and some brands created

personalized products in this color. We can no longer consider the concept of “authenticity” in the same way as Benjamin (1975),

because there are techniques of reproduction now that did not exist in his time, however, we can signal the proximity of the color pink as an “originally transmissible” object due to the use of color on a large scale.

In Benjamin’s point of view (1975), the cult value (secrecy) attributed to works of art takes a back seat when they begin to be reproduced on a large scale. According to Paiva (2023), the Barbie movie grossed R\$ 22.7 million in its debut in Brazilian cinemas, making it the biggest box office debut since 2019 (Avengers). This means that thousands of people watched the movie at the same time.

The various reproduction techniques have reinforced this aspect to such an extent that, through a phenomenon analogous to that produced in the origins, the quantitative shift between the two forms of value typical of the work of art has been transformed into a qualitative change, which affects its own nature. (Benjamin, 1975, p. 18)

In other words, there is a tension between the quantity and quality of works. If we try to analyze the current instruments of reproduction based on Benjamin’s (1975) reflections, we realize that with the arrival of smartphones and streaming platforms, the value of worship has almost been abandoned, because now we can watch/access whatever we want, whenever we want.

Within the cult of remembrance dedicated to loved ones who have moved away or disappeared, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fugitive expression of a man’s face, old photos replace the *aura*. This is what gives them their melancholy beauty, incomparable to any other. (Benjamin, 1975, p. 18, emphasis added)

In order to turn his attention to film production, Benjamin (1975) differentiates the film actor from the theater actor. The film actor’s performance is “subjected to a series of optical tests”, in other words, how the audience sees his performance will depend on how the other people (director, editor) “conceive the scene”.

Film actors, on the other hand, need the mediation of a set of devices that transmit the artist’s performance under the direction of someone else who will define what and how it should be shown. Another factor is that he does not have the possibility to change his performance, depending on the reaction of the spectator, because, at the time of recording, he does not know what the reaction of the audience will be.

It is worth noting that the scenes are not recorded in order and are generally short, which makes it difficult for the actor to create a deep identification with the character. Thus, in the cinema, the individual must act with his whole personality alive, however deprived of *aura*, because his *aura* depends on his *hic et nunc*. This does not suffer any reproduction (Benjamin, 1975).

Insofar as it restricts the role of the *aura*, cinema artificially constructs, outside the studio, the ‘personality of the actor’; the cult of the star, which favors the capitalism of the producers and whose magic is guaranteed by the personality that has long since been reduced to the corrupted charm of its commodity value. While capitalism runs the game, the only service that should be expected from cinema in favor of the revolution is the fact that it enables a revolutionary critique of the old conceptions of art. (Benjamin, 1975, p. 22, emphasis added)

In the cinema, devices can use different angles, shots and montages to show reality in depth. Cinema, however, is more than representations through devices. It’s the way in which individuals represent themselves to the world. With the development of the means of reproduction, the social significance of an art has diminished and, with it, the critical spirit. According to Benjamin (1975, p. 26), “one enjoys what is conventional without criticizing it [...]. In the cinema, the public does not separate criticism from enjoyment”.

In the movie Barbie, for example, many people expected a quiet romantic comedy just to pass the time. By addressing issues such as patriarchy and provoking reflection on capitalism, the movie became the target of criticism by some groups.

Benjamin (1975) reflects on the relationship between art as a commodity and art as an object of contemplation. He goes back to André Breton, who pointed out that art only has value when it agitates the reflections of the future. Painting invites contemplation, while in the cinema everything is very fast, “as soon as the eye captures one image, it already gives way to another and the eye can never fix itself [...], the film can only be apprehended through a greater effort of attention” (Benjamin, 1975, p. 31).

The speed with which we are exposed to information is not just in the movies. If we look at our society today, everything is very fast and ephemeral, for example: when we watch a newspaper, we are bombarded with news and we do not have time to reflect on how that event might impact our lives.

According to Benjamin (1975), those who concentrate are able to dive into the work of art and contemplate its essence. In the field of music, we can also distinguish between music for fun and music for concentration. There are songs that you can listen to while cleaning the house (these are the songs of fun), but there are songs that you have to stop and listen to/appreciate (these are the songs of concentration). Also, according to the aforementioned author, “[...] the masses seek entertainment, but art requires concentration” (Benjamin, 1975, p. 32).

Furthermore, “the audience in the dark rooms is very much an examiner, but an examiner who is distracted” (Benjamin, 1975, p. 33). In times of TikTok, an individual’s attention and concentration are worth gold. In general, people have lost the patience to watch long videos or read books, because everything has to be very quick and ephemeral. As a result, the means of dissemination have also had to change.

Before, the bigger the advertising on open TV, the better it would be for commercial purposes. Now, advertisements tend to be short and circulate on social networks, especially when they are aimed at younger people. According to Siqueira (2022), traditional advertising no longer works for Generation Z, as this generation interacts through TikTok, the largest social network focused on visual content.

In order to analyze the context in which the film Barbie was promoted, we resorted to the concepts of production conditions and subject developed by Pêcheux, disseminated in Brazil by Orlandi (2004, 2015).

Pêcheux developed the concept of discourse production conditions, “which refers to the notion of conjuncture and which, in this way, opens up space for the notions of discursive event and equivocation to appear [...]” (Amaral & Fontana, 2015, p. 37). Orlandi (2015), in turn, classifies the conditions of production into two groups, namely: 1<sup>st</sup>) the conditions of production linked to the immediate context, which refer to the circumstances of enunciation (Who is speaking? To whom? How are they speaking? When are they speaking? Where is the utterance circulating?); 2<sup>nd</sup>) the broad conditions of production, which include the socio-

historical and ideological context.

In the production conditions of the Barbie movie, we highlight the script by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, who created the story inspired by the Barbie doll, released in 1959. The film was directed by Greta Gerwig and starred Margot Robbie. The release was held in July 2023, being a box office success. It would be impossible to produce the same film at another time, because, before, we did not have the digital technologies used. Then, probably, the questions raised by the film would not make sense.

In consonance with Magalhães and Mariani (2010), it is in the imbrication between the unconscious and ideology in the materiality of language that the terrain of discourse theory for Pêcheux is constituted. The discursive subject works through the unconscious and ideology. For example, in Figures 1 and 2 (presented above), the color pink is used to refer to the Barbie movie. The relationship between pink and Barbie is a socio-historical and ideological “construction”. Why did not they choose blue or yellow to represent the movie?

Because it is a film about a doll and it is related to the socio-historical context of the female universe, this color was used. It is the ideology that sustains the notion of literalness, making people conceive it as natural to relate the color pink to the feminine. For Pêcheux (2007), discursive memory is the pre-constructed necessary to make the discourse legible, “[...] it is a mobile space of divisions, disjunctions, displacements and resumptions, conflicts of regularization... A space of developments, replicas, polemics and counter-discourses” (Pêcheux, 2007, p. 56). In order for the color pink to be related to women, it is necessary that there are other sayings that make this connection.

According to Pereira (2020), for a long time, pink was linked to red, which would bring more masculinity to boys, while blue was associated with the Virgin Mary and the delicacy of women. With the industrialization of the United States, blue began to be marketed to men. Thus, for Elsesser (2023), it was with the emergence of the medical examination during prenatal care, making it possible to find out the baby’s sex in the 1980s, that families began to have more time to decorate the nursery and to prepare the trousseau, in order to give strength to the division of colors in children’s clothes.

The subject of language is a historical subject, in which power relations are politically symbolized. They are not enunciative places, they are subject-positions related to history, the symbolic and the ideological, affiliated to discursive formations in which the power of language plays a role [...]. (Orlandi, 2004, p. 59)

Because they belong to different discursive backgrounds, a part of the film’s audience did not like some themes presented in the narrative, such as: patriarchy and capitalism. According to Gallo (1995), every human individual, that is, social, can only be an agent of a practice if he or she takes the form of a subject. The “subject-form”, in fact, is the way of historical existence of any individual, agent of social practices.

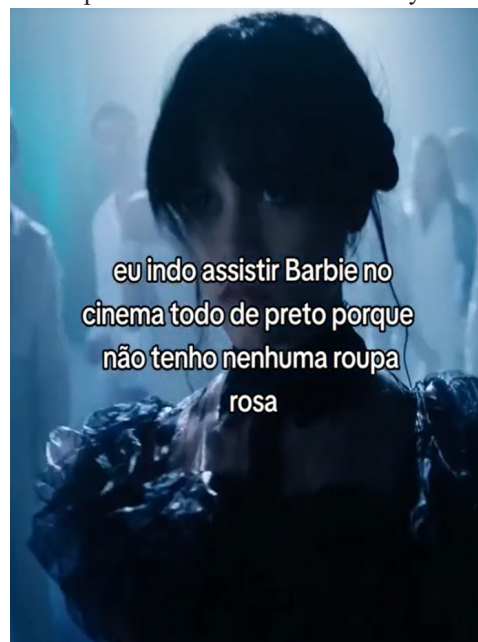
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For this moment, we selected three posts made on social networks (TikTok and Twitter) related to the statement “*I don’t have pink clothes to watch the Barbie movie*”. Figure 3 shows, in non-verbal language, a frame from the series “Wednesday” (2022). The character Wednesday, played by Jenna Marie Ortega, is known for wearing black clothes and not being very sociable. Figure 3 is from a scene featuring Wednesday dancing.

The choreography became famous and “went viral” on social networks.

**Figure 3**

Meme produced from the “Wednesday” series.



Source: Não... (2023).

In verbal language, we have: “*I’m going to watch Barbie at the cinema all in black because I don’t have any pink clothes*”. This is the subject enunciating his resistance to wearing pink, using this meme as a publicity strategy for the movie.

The subject is affected by the unconscious and interpellated by ideology. Althusser (1980, p. 97) considers that we are always interpellated by ideology, “we are always already subjects and, as such, we uninterruptedly practice the rituals of ideological recognition [...]”.

Subjects fulfill functions not by their own decision, but by class or group injunctions and by being affected by a certain ideology, which determines what they can and should say. “In other words, the subject is not free to say what he wants, but he is taken, without being aware of it [...]” (Mussalim, 2001, p. 110). Many people may not have watched the “Wednesday” series, but they know the character from other memes and videos circulating in the media.

In Figure 4, we have, in non-verbal language, Spider-Man all in black. This scene is from the movie “Spider-Man 3” (2007), in which Spider-Man is under the influence of an extraterrestrial symbiote that interferes with his behavior and decision-making, which is why he turns this color. In the scene presented, he is looked at his hand in a moment of recognition that his uniform is black.

In verbal language, we have: “*I realize I don’t have pink clothes to go see Barbie*”. The verbal language “*I realize*” refers to the character’s moment of recognition in the film. For a statement to make sense, it must already make sense. Therefore, for the reader to understand the relationship between recognition (of Spider-Man with the new color) and recognition/constatement (that the person doesn’t have pink clothes), it is essential that the Spider-Man scene is part of his interdiscourse.

In Discourse Analysis (hereinafter, DA), language is conceived as the materialization of interdiscourse. This is everything that has ever been said. “Interdiscourse is the whole set of formulations made and already forgotten that determine what we say. For my words to make sense, they must already make

sense” (Orlandi, 2015, p. 31). For example, the word Barbie, used in verbal language, only produces meaning (we know what it is), because it has been used before in our repertoire, that is, it is part of our interdiscourse.

**Figure 4**

Meme based on the movie “Spider-Man 3”.



Source: Nopuede... (2023).

Language is not merely an instrument to be controlled or used to inform content, but it is an event in the subject, and meaning is ideologically attributed. “Starting from the idea that the specific materiality of ideology is discourse and the specific materiality of discourse is language, it works on the language-discourse-ideology relationship” (Orlandi, 2015, p. 17).

DA does not understand ideology as the concealment of reality or worldview, because, according to Orlandi, there is no reality without ideology. Thus, the author describes ideology as “[...] fixation of a content, by the impression of literal meaning, by the erasure of the materiality of language and history, by the ideological structuring of subjectivity” (Orlandi, 2004, p. 22). Therefore, we use the expression “produces the effect of meaning” with some frequency, since we are aware that our “reading” is one among many possible.

The meaning we attribute to what is said depends on the discursive formation in which we find ourselves. “In this way, the senses are always ideologically determined [...]. The study of discourse makes explicit the way in which language and ideology are articulated, affect each other in their reciprocal relationship” (Orlandi, 2015, p. 43). Consequently, ideology unconsciously determines the actions and thoughts of the individual, standardizing the thinking of social classes.

The same discourse can cause different interpretations for the same reader, if the conditions of production are different. For Pêcheux (2014), a word does not have its own/literal meaning, since meaning is constituted in the relationships they maintain with each other in the same discursive formation. “We shall then call discursive formation that which, in a given ideological formation, that is, from a given position in a given conjuncture determined by the state of the class struggle, determines what can and must be said [...]” (Pêcheux, 2014, p. 147).

This means that some sayings may appear in one discursive formation, but not in another. As an example, the statement “girls wear pink” was recently taken up by Damares Alves, when she took office as “Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights”, in January 2019. The utterance is associated with a subject who inscribes his or her saying in a discursive formation

considered sexist-conservative.

In Figure 5, it is necessary for the reader to recognize the character Darth Vader, who is the antagonist of the “Star Wars” franchise, a character known for being part of the “dark side of the force”, in order to understand non-verbal language. He is not wearing black only at a certain moment (as was the case with Spider-Man), because black/dark is intrinsic to the character. It is seen that the character is sitting with his head down, producing the effect of feeling that he is sad or tired. In verbal language, we have: “*I don’t have pink clothes to go see the Barbie movie*”. It should be noted that the word Barbie is in pink, so we have the mention of the color pink in both verbal and non-verbal language.

**Figure 5**

Meme made with the Darth Vader character.



Source: Igor (2023).

We noticed that black was used in all three images as opposed to pink. Wednesday, Spider-Man and Darth Vader are in black. They produce the meaning effect that black is a “standard” color; for this reason, they all have the reader’s identification with the post. The fact that we have these characters linked to the statement “*I don’t have any pink to watch the Barbie movie*” produces the meaning effect that everyone is going to see the movie. An attempt is made to seduce the reader into also going to the movies. It is worth highlighting the paraphrase and polysemy movements present in Figures 3, 4 and 5:

Paraphrastic processes are those by which there is always something that remains in every utterance, that is, that can be said in memory. [...]. In polysemy, on the other hand, we have displacement, a rupture in the processes of signification. It plays with equivocation. (Orlandi, 2015, p. 34)

We verified a movement of paraphrase in the use of characters stabilized in memory (Wednesday, Spider-Man, Darth Vader) and polysemy in the relation/displacement of these characters with the pink color used by people to go watch the Barbie movie. In the meantime, Benjamin (1975) presents a reflection on the possibility of authenticity, while for DA, everything that is said has already been said at some point in order to make sense.

Benjamin (1975) elucidates what is originally transmissible as a characteristic of authenticity. When analyzing

the figures selected in this work, we noticed the use of the color pink in all of them. At Google, pink was present in nonverbal language through the stars that appeared. Then, these stars were in the color of the information displayed on the page. In Figures 3 and 4, color was present in verbal language. In Figure 5, it was present in both verbal and non-verbal language.

The effect of meaning produced by the use of the color pink can be different, depending on the socio-historical and ideological context in which it is presented. In the case of the figures presented in this research, the color pink was used to refer to the Barbie movie. Wearing the pink outfit or taking a picture inside the Barbie box can also produce a different effect before and after the subject watches the movie.

When we type the word “Barbie” into Google at the moment, we no longer have the pink page as an answer (Figures 1 and 2). That image was only there during the premiere of the movie. Thus, that experience could not be reproduced later. We can have copies of that page, but it is not interactive, like the “original”.

The technical reproduction may be perfect, but it will not produce the same sensations in the spectator subject, because the conditions of production will be different. We can't watch our favorite movie as if it were the first time. The sensations can be good, however, there will be no surprises, discoveries, or curiosity.

## CONCLUSION

When analyzing the strategies for promoting the Barbie movie, carried out on the internet (Google, TikTok and Twitter), we noticed the recurrence of the use of the color pink as a tactic to advertise the film. In Figures 3, 4 and 5, in addition to resuming the pink color, humor was used as a resource for the dissemination of the film. The game of paraphrase and polysemy using characters dressed in black with the statement “*I don't have pink clothes*” was an efficient way of dissemination, as it manages to reach different audiences quickly and humorously.

The disclosure on social networks resulted in many people going to the movies in pink clothes, taking pictures inside the doll's box and posting on their social networks. With this, the spectator himself contributed to the dissemination of the film in a media context.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors declare that they have no financial interests.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

*Conceptualization:* C. B., L. C. F. D. R., A. G. L. *Formal analysis:* C. B., L. C. F. D. R. *Investigation:* C. B. *Methodology:* C. B., L. C. F. D. R., A. G. L. *Project administration:* L. C. F. D. R. *Supervision:* L. C. F. D. R. *Visualization:* A. G. L. *Writing the initial draft:* C. B. *Revision and editing of writing:* C. B., L. C. F. D. R.

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Não tenho #Barbie #barbiegirl #wandinha #wandinhaaddams #roupapreta #cinema #meme #fy #foryou #fyp #fyooooooooooooooooo #vaiprofyfycaramba. (2023). *@felipeflop05*. Retrieved from <https://www.tiktok.com/@felipeflop05/video/7254286927736704262>

Nopuede ser #barbie #barbiecinema #rosado #meme #humorsv #humortiktok #paratii #fypp #simplehumor #sigueme. (2023). *@jordisonsv*. Retrieved from <https://www.tiktok.com/@jordisonsv/video/7256317300326894853>

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