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Youth research by video

1. Media cultures and experience of reality

I will outline my general thinking about this topic in nine points.

First

The spoken and written word are not vanishing. They are simply gradually losing their dominant position. It is a fact that today reality is perceived and experienced increasingly through audio-visual media. Universal visualization is aestheticizing the social world. Audio-visual signs and symbols are the basis of a global communication culture. There are trends toward standardization as well as fragmentation of media symbols.

Second

This global media aestheticization does not mean that social realities in their concrete forms are disappearing. Even though the traditional division into social classes is no longer valid, social, regional, gender and especially ethnic differences - to name just a few

- remain. Media are not replacing social interaction. Different social realities, social milieus and life-styles continue to exist.

Third

In this situation, new social-aesthetic entities are emerging. I refer to these entities as "symbolic milieus". Symbolic milieus are the result of interaction between media symbols and social settings. These symbolic milieus differ from the old and traditional social milieus in that media communication now occupies a predominant position in human thinking, feeling and behaviour. Symbolic milieus are current patterns of interpretation and orientation at the interface between everyday social action and media-communication as a form of para-social interaction. The symbolic milieus are not static. They are based on different styles of perception, appropriation and experience of social reality and media symbols. These styles are influenced by different social and educational biographies and by changes in cultural and media-aesthetic environments.

Fourth

The social-aesthetic theory of "symbolic milieus" accepts the great significance of perception and symbolic processing. Media literacy and audio-visual symbolic processing will become the basis for understanding and toleration of other lifestyles and cultures on this planet in the media age. We must learn to "swim" in different symbolic systems. The challenge is to develop a current, socio-aesthetic symbol-theory, based on the analysis of the relationship between world-wide and regional symbolic patterns and networks.

Fifth

Today we are living in a postmodern world which in many ways seems very ambiguous, chaotic and confusing. There are many social and political challenges and we often feel helpless when confronted with them. Modern media communication frequently exacerbates this situation. In our media age it is impossible to distinguish clearly between right and wrong, between the real and the fictitious, between appearance and reality. Ambiguous feelings and situations occur again and again. If we are to develop values like sharing, respect for the environment and all living things, and thereby overcome hate and egotism, then we must open ourselves radically to the emotional dimensions within us.

Sixth

Images, especially film images accompanied by the appropriate music, move us; they address our feelings. Images can be ambiguous, too. They can engender contradictory feelings, but they can also help us to tolerate ambiguous feelings. The power of images is great and lies particularly in their ability to affect the entire spectrum of our emotions and every layer of our subconscious. To understand the world and our life, we need better interaction between associative-intuitive and analytic-logical forms of cognition. Social sciences acquire greater knowledge about social life and social reality if there is an opening for feelings and moods, an opening for audio-visual methods of cognition.

Seventh

This opening is needed, now more than ever, because our communication culture is radically changing. Childhood and adolescence today are "media-childhood" and "media-adolescence". Children and young people grow up with media: they are an essential part of their everyday lives. For children, symbolic language is easier to understand than concepts encoded in words. Young people learn that statements about social reality are very closely connected with media-constructions and media-productions. Today, media-influenced forms of perception are connected with chaotic processes of world-experience. These forms are characterized by rapidness, ambiguity and a crass juxtaposition of experience-particles. This mode of experience goes hand in hand with the ambivalence, disruptions and contradictions in youth culture; discontinuous developments with the disjointed processes of producing symbols.

Eighth

The aesthetic opportunities provided by modern film and digital media correspond to the way in which many young people learn about the world: namely, through experimentation, by exceeding limits and by trying to discover new things. There is a certain structural affinity between young people's desires and creative digital opportunities, for example:

- the desire to use imagination can be realized by mixing reality and fictional recordings;
- the desire for the immediate experience of the here-and-now can be realized through digital network contacts;
- the desire for different identities can be realized by the unlimited simulation possibilities of digital media.

Ninth

Generally, young people are more playful and open to experimentation than adults. They grow up in closer contact with media and are more at ease with new media. A kind of media gap exists between generations. Science also exhibits this phenomenon. The majority of social sciences, even hermeneutically-oriented research, is having difficulty accepting the current transformation of reality perception by media. This is the case with both empirical investigations of the transformation itself and social science methods. The social sciences are in the midst of a crisis with regard to both the topics of research and the methods by which such research should be carried out. A socio-aesthetic paradigm that accepts the significance of audio-visual perception in the human experience of reality opens up a new perspective for research.

2. Youth research by video - approach and methodological challenges

The urgent necessity of using more methods that are not based on language results from changes in the subject area of research itself. It does not arise out of the methodology debate. If it is true that perception is taking on an increasingly media-like form - and many studies in the field of children, adolescents and their media indicate that this is so - then this must be taken into consideration when developing research designs. Media reception among adolescents has shown that cultural perception is not a static quantity, but that it changes according to context, such as social situation, individual disposition and the different kinds of aesthetic media available.

As the perception mode also affects the mode of expression, questions about method have to be considered - especially when research is principally subject-orientated. Work based on this principal lays great store by so-called subject-adapted methods of gathering data and of self-representation. This means above all that research should be conducted using everyday language and means of communication. In view of the 'mediaization' of everyday communication my thesis is simply this: If one wishes to learn something in today's media society about adolescents' ideas, about their general feeling and the way

they experience the world, then they must be given the opportunity to express themselves through their own media-productions, created by themselves.

Up to now numerous films have been made about young people, but only very few by young people. Films they themselves produce could provide a kind of second empirical source for analysis and interpretation. Among the exceptions are the "Philadelphia Project" which was conducted on the basis of 16 mm films created by adolescents from different social milieus (Chalfen 1981), the media-pedagogic case studies by Buckingham, Grahame and Sefton-Green (1995) and the ethnographic field work with video by Caputo (1995). In Germany, in particular, the beginnings of "youth research by video" have sprung out of educational youth research; for example the one-year DFG study by Theunert/Schorb (1989), the media educational "rural youth" project (Niesyto 1989, 1991) and the socio-videografic project in Dresden (Niesyto 1996, Fritz 1997).

In the three projects named last, adolescents had the opportunity to produce videos which expressed the way they experience the world using body- and object-related images and more abstract symbolization of their own choosing. The creating of these self-made videos was scientifically observed (contextual information about the origins and development was gathered) and subsequently analysed and interpreted.

Research interests are one side of the coin. The interests of the young people are the other. Young people can expect to profit greatly from this kind of film-making. They make films on their own, they have fun producing films within the group, they can acquire aesthetic knowledge and, finally, they can present the films in their social contexts and get feedback.

From a technical point of view, today's video cameras are of the highest standard; not only are they easy to handle, they also provide many creative possibilities. There are hardly any lighting problems, moreover, and the cameras are small and easy to transport. Experience shows here that most young people have a relatively high level of knowledge about handling video. In most cases they require only a little technical and aesthetic advice to produce an initial set of images. Film sequences can be reviewed immediately and many institutions provide a range of opportunities for post-production activities.

The concept "youth research by video" does not claim, of course, that it will constitute a comprehensive record of the world of adolescent life, nor does it overlook critical points that are connected with audiovisual productions made by the young people themselves. Youth research by video takes a new approach to research and it is still very much in the developing stages. I should like to make some points on this subject, based on first-hand experience of the Dresden project "socio-videography" (Niesyto 1996).

The question of quality and validity of self-produced videos as a source of scientific knowledge. Analysing "self-produced" videos is essentially about exploring self-images in relation to the group: self-assessment and interpretations of reality, which are to be found in the symbolic modes of expression in the video films. These modes of expression contain statements in the form of image and sound montage on relevant themes, i.e. on cultural and social experiences and events which relate to the real life of the group or clique. The term "theme" also implies unconscious, suppressed, emotionally charged themes, that are not always articulated (verbally), but whose subjective relevance becomes evident in aesthetic practice. There is no denying that self-produced videos are always only excerpts from the world of adolescent life-experience. But video films provide an opportunity - as do artistic products in general - to condense certain aspects. When young people sense that it is not about 'some subject or other' but about themselves; when they discover new sides to their own character during the making of the film - then the motivation to create something together, to actively co-operate and to produce a living film, can develop.

The main task in the "youth research by video" idea - and the art - lies in developing ways of working and modes of expression that make it possible to create experiences and symbols that relate directly to the group. Project workers must be able to empathise, they must be skilful teachers and well-versed in film aesthetics,

- in order to discover the themes within the group that lead to action;
- in order to initiate ways of learning video techniques and film-making which are adapted to the young people's capability to express themselves;
- in order to ensure at each phase in the production the highest possible level of co-operation.

"Youth research by video" is interested in the subjective modes of expression that are already present - in their variety, but also in their disjointedness. A research project that used professional film-making standards as the basis of its work would be taking the wrong road. Experience has shown that it is quite sufficient to pass on some basic filming techniques and the rudiments of creative design and structure in a playful and orientating way. It is also necessary to give advice on which concepts of expression can be visualised effectively and which modes of expression require more filming experience and would involve more work. Giving support and pointing out other possibilities when trying to find a "basic design" for the montage or the post-production (on the level of dramatisation) form part of this advisory function. Films that use the idea of collage, which is based on associative-intuitive work processes, usually provide good opportunities for the group to use "borrowed material" - e.g. from television - and through new combinations and montage to realize their own ideas in visual form (Niesyto 1991, 166).

Despite this support, there are again and again differences between what the young people want and mean to express, and the extent to which they are capable of doing so. It is important to monitor the production processes continually in order to be able to take these differences into account when the film material is later analysed. Observation and self-assessment with regard to the way in which media-teachers and researchers conduct themselves (stimulation, transference etc) should be included as well.

The question of hermeneutics in self-made video productions.

We know from previous studies that it is important to observe and describe the context of conceptualisation in order to understand symbolizations in the video work produced: observation through participation, documentation and analysis of group discussions, in depth one-to-one talks with the young people involved (as far as possible). Statements regarding the influence of the individual members of the group on the video film and statements concerning the influence of the project leader (researcher) form a part of the contextual information.

When considering the question of "validity", it is not sufficient to look only at the media statements and modes of expression which are unambiguously confirmed by the group constellation and the references to the young people's living environment. Aesthetic experience and production relies upon association and intuition, its essential qualities are

the event and the here-and-now. Comprehension and interpretation of adolescent productions can be improved, not only by achieving denser image descriptions, but also by taking these aesthetic production aspects into greater account and employing associative methods. A combination of associative-imaginative/intuitive and logical, analytic thinking; a synthesis of different modes of cognition needs to be used here - without the rationality of analytic thinking we cannot have a communicative discussion about symbolic pictorial representations. One should begin, however, by describing sensual perceptions and lead on from there.

The "Youth Research by Video" approach has so far mainly used communication-through-dialogue methods. For instance, various members of the research team (with and without contextual information) are involved in interpreting the video productions. A further possibility would be to involve the young people themselves: they make their remarks on particular sequences and symbolisations (a certain time after the workshop), recalling, as they do so, production processes and decisions within the group. Such reconstructions are important; they open up possibilities for plausible interpretations, encourage both similar and contrasting receptive interpretations. They are nevertheless insufficient. Methods should be developed further by experimenting with representative-symbolic and discursive sign-systems and by collecting interpretations on various levels of symbolic processing: verbal and written language, improvised scenes, visual and audio-visual interpretations. The aim should certainly not be to construct a canon of rules on "image-grammar", nor to formulate the only valid interpretation, but to discover the modes of expression and symbolic patterns of adolescent culture in the video films.

3. VideoCulture - aims and methods of a current, media-ethnographic project

Finally, I should like to briefly describe the central questions and the methods that have been formulated for a current research project, and to show two video films as examples. VideoCulture is an international project exploring the potential of audio-visual media-production as a means of intercultural communication. The project investigates the ways

in which young people from different countries produce, exchange and interpret video productions. The two central aims of the research project are to discover whether there are any forms of trans-cultural audio-visual language in these productions; and how young people's competencies in media production might be developed and enhanced. The project started with research groups in Germany and England and integrated colleagues in Hungary, the Czech Republic and the United States (Los Angeles, New York).

Aims and methods:

The fieldwork for the project takes place in schools and in 'informal' youth work settings. Young people aged between 14-19, from a range of social backgrounds, are enabled to produce, exchange and analyse thematically-orientated video productions. After making their videotapes, the groups exchange them and try to interpret those produced in the partner countries; these responses are gathered using interviews, written reports and multimedia questionnaires. Digital technology is employed in post-production, and in dissemination of the productions via the internet. The arrangements for these productions are designed to provide sufficient basis for comparison between the fieldwork sites. Each production group is supplied with the same technical equipment: S-VHS-camera, sound-recording and digital image-mixing. All video-workshops take the equivalent of four days. The video-tapes themselves should not exceed three minutes in length. The young people work to common themes which are close to the cultural needs of the age-group, and which can be visualised without a high level of technical expertise ("being young" and "opposites attract"). The goal is to express the themes through images, music, body-language and - as far as possible - without verbal language. At the beginning of the video workshops, the workshop leader presents only a small set of basic video aesthetics in a playful way. The groups do not need to have any prior experience in video production. The emphasis is on maximising the potential for open, creative work which reflects the intentions of the young people in all its variety and limitations. The video-tapes are produced by groups from different social background (both socially disadvantaged and 'middle-class' milieus); and the students are encouraged to produce a collective 'group statement'.

It is the task of the researchers to observe and to document the forms of symbolic processing involved and to analyse the different video productions and their

interpretations. The researchers use participant observation methods, as well as interviews and focus group discussions. Observation and interview schedules are shared across the various research sites. The important phase of post-production is partly documented on video. Once the productions have been exchanged, all groups write or record their interpretations of the 'partner films', using a short questionnaire, and these responses are subsequently exchanged. Particular attention is paid here to similarities and differences among interpretations and to the symbolic language used in the productions. Other groups of young people are also asked for their responses, without being provided with contextual information. All this material will be analysed, focusing particularly on the following questions:

1. To what extent is it possible to investigate forms of trans-cultural, audio-visual symbolic language by producing video-tapes with groups of young people from different language areas and symbolic milieus?
2. Which styles of symbolic processing, presentation and understanding are involved in the process of filming, in the productions themselves and in the interpretations? To what extent are these styles influenced by factors such as education, gender, ethnic and class background, as well as by the characteristics of the young people's media cultures?
3. Which teaching strategies are most useful in attempting to encourage this kind of intercultural communication by video? Which forms of digital post-production are most useful in this context?

Based on the project materials, the researchers will produce a report for publication. As well as evaluating the work, the report will seek to provide advice for teachers in the field, both on teaching strategies and on aesthetic and technical issues. If possible, the findings of the project and the young people's work itself will be documented on CD-ROM and disseminated via the internet. The University of Education at Ludwigsburg developed the concept and started the project at the end of 1997 with pilot films in Germany. The international project group was established in February 1998. About 30 video-films have been produced since 1998. The analysis of the material (comparative case studies) will be carried out from mid -1999 to the middle of 2000.

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