

VISUAL TALENT - DIAGNOSIS AND DEVELOPMENT

SYMPOSIUM AND EXHIBITION, 26.-29.8.1994, Szentendre / Ungarn

Dr. Horst Niesyto:

YOUTH RESEARCH BY VIDEO

At first I want to say thank you to the organizers of this symposium, especially Mrs KÁRPÁTI, that I can talk here about the topic "Youth research by Video".

As a youth researcher I am a - in German - "Zaungast" - at your meeting. "Zaungast" is somebody who is interested in looking over fences, that is scientific fences. Without them it would be dull, without them you can't master the challenges of an up-to-date youth research.

Why? Well, I hope, I can show this to you in my approach. I would like to start with a sequence of a commercial videoclip, which I'm sure most of you know very well.

Video: M. Jackson (sequence) ; „Black or White“

Isn't it fascinating, as at the end of the video faces of humans are morphing? Doesn't this sequence express better than thousand words the feeling: We, people of this world belong together, we can sing, we can smile and we can have fun together? We people of this world don't need any frontiers, any violence and any wars!

Yes, pictures, especially film pictures with suitable music, move us. Pictures address to our feelings. Pictures can be ambiguous, too, they can produce different feelings. They can help us to withstand ambiguous feelings. The power of pictures is great. This power especially consists of the emotional effect on our universe of emotions and our unconscious.

It's the videoclips which have changed the perception of children and young people. Today there are only rarely programmes, doing without clip aesthetics. Audiovisual "eye-catches", fleeting productions - many educationalists see there examples for the destruction of the written culture.

Surely: there is the fact of the overflow of visual stimulation, there is the fact of the prolific viewers, there is the fact of the loss of spoken and written expression forms.

But it's a onesided diagnosis, when Mr POSTMAN talks about "culture-aids". There is good and bad literature, as well as there are good and bad videoclips, good and bad films. Pictures themselves aren't "bad" or "more minor" than the spoken or the written word.

It's regrettable to play written language against symbolic language. It's regrettable to confront thinking and feeling.

It's regrettable to construct between scientific thinking and associative-intuitive thinking!

We must learn to swim in the flood of pictures! We must learn to handle pictures in a creative and playful way! We need a science which is finally open to visual and audiovisual forms and methods!

Because there isn't enough time today, unfortunately I can only make a few short remarks. You like to see especially films.

Well, I'm going to present you pictures, film sequences. But I also want to try to precise at least a few of my intentions and experiences.

Therefore my talk consists of three parts:

In the first part I'm going to say something about the question why youth research by video is important to me.

In the second part I'm going to present you two film examples taken out of a research project. It took place at the end of the eighties about the topic "Everyday life in the countryside" und was realized on behalf of the foundation "Deutsche Jugendmarke", a federal foundation for youth projects.

In the third part I'm going to outline the approach "social videography". It's about a current research project in Dresden being in its first phase. About this project I'm going to present you a film sequence, too.

Now, let's start with the first part, with the question why youth research by video is important to me.

We live in a period where our communication culture is radically changing. The perception and experience of reality is more and more transmitted by the media. The screen is the main medium. Childhood and youth today are "media-childhood" and "media-youth". Children and young people grow up with media. Media are an essential part of their everyday life.

For children symbolic language is easier to understand than words coded by signs. At the age of six months children sitting in front of TV begin to react to variations of picture- and sound material. In this context, Patricia GREENFIELD, American communication scientist, talks of a "viewing literacy" children develop in a natural way.

Those who, today in the media-age, want to know something about the perception of reality, about the feelings and moods of young people, should give young people the chance to express their feelings and moods by means of their own pictures.

Youth and social research have problems with this insight. There are anxieties. Anxieties of the loss of scientific standards, anxieties of losing analytic clearness, anxieties of integrating associative and intuitive thinking methods.

Nevertheless there are really positive scientific traditions, which we should take up. For example I think of the ethnographic film or of the beginning in visual sociology at the start of this century, especially in the United States. Unfortunately quantifying scientific thinking has submerged here a lot.

But there are approaches, to uncover these traditions again - in youth research, too. Thus there was at the end of the seventies the Philadelphia Project run by Richard CHALFEN. In this 16mm film project eight groups of young people out of different social classes could make films about topics they chose themselves.

The main interest there was the question of social and cultural influence on contents and form of the films.

Then at the beginning of the eighties the Institute Youth Film TV in Munich started a one-year pilot project. This project wanted to find out, something about the so-called "self-images" of youth groups.

At the end of the eighties, there was the Odenwald-Project in Germany, a study about everyday-life of young people in the countryside.

In this project young people from different locations and age-groups, girls and boys had the chance of presenting their life-situation by means of audio-visual slides and video productions. I'm going to show you two film examples out of this project.

As I have already remarked, there have been starts. I could mention further examples, for instance projects by Mrs KáRPÁTI and Mr HALÁSZ, who presented their interesting studies at a congress in Dortmund at the beginning of this year; or the photo studies by Phil COHEN from Great Britain, which he made within the context of an anti-racist educational work.

Such self-productions by young people, especially by means of video, are current forms of self-expression, of the symbolic presentation of experiences, feelings, attitudes. The idea is quite simple: in small groups young people produce videofilms about aspects and activities which are important to them in the context of the corresponding topic of rese-

arch. There should be visualised those aspects and activities, which cannot be expressed so well by linguistic methods, for example feelings, moods and complex movements.

This production process creates something like a "second empiricism". The results - the videofilms - and the context - the production process - can be analyzed by researchers.

At the same time young people can expect to profit greatly from this filmmaking: they make films on their own, they have fun while producing within the group, they can learn aesthetic knowledge and finally they can present the films in their social contexts and get a feedback.

From a technical point of view today's video cameras have such a high standard. This standard enables many creative possibilities and an easy handling. Thus there are hardly any illumination problems, the cameras are small und easy to transport and to handle. Experiences show: Most young people have a relatively commanding knowledge of handling video. Mostly they need only few technical and aesthetic advice to produce initial and meaningful pictures.

You can see the sequences immediately and repeatedly and for the postproduction there are, in the meantime, a lot of good possibilities in a series of institutions.

Well, now I've talked enough. Let's start with the film sequences.

In the above-mentioned Odenwald-Project about thirty self-productions were produced, most of them by video, predominantly productions by beginners. I've chosen the two examples according to the different working methods and forms of filmmaking.

The first film example is produced by young people who had started their vocational training. At a five-day film-workshop they produced the film with the title "Must or Luxury?" The video was produced in a traditional way: at first the young people thought about the film story, then they made a detailed storyboard down to the individual takes and then they produced the film scene by scene.

As for the contents, there is the question: Do young people in the countryside need a car? Is it a "must" or a "luxury"?

Two young men try to answer this question in form of a parallel montage - one of them takes the bus, the other goes by car.

Now have a look at the initial part of the film!

Videofilm: "Must or Luxury?" 3 min

Well, the total film would be too long. The message of the film is: Mobility in the countryside is very important. Especially young people are permanently on the way in the region. They want to leave their village. It's frustrating sitting at home and seeing others on the way. Since there are only rarely buses you are much more mobile going by car.

But I would like to attract your attention to the expression form and the form of filmmaking.

In contrast to this more traditional method we could experience a more associative process in numerous productions. This was especially important for those young people who wanted to collect and to cut the film material in a situative and collage-like form.

The talent of many young people can be developed better when they handle pictures in a playful way, for example when they integrate existing TV-pictures as "raw-material" into self-productions.

I would like to call this form of filmmaking "associative-illustrative" - in contrast to a more planning-anticipating form, as we have just seen in the film "Must or Luxury?"

Now I'm going to offer you a second videofilm which is cut more in the form of a collage. The film is a beginner production as well. From an aesthetic point of view possibly the film is not so good.

So the rhythm of cutting between picture and music is not always successful in some parts. But it's quite an authentic production.

That's very important for the research context: Primarily not to take nice pictures and cuts but to have an as original style of filmmaking as possible.

Only a few words about the film:

The topic of the film-workshop was the media everyday-life of young people. The young people chose the song by Nina HAGEN "I watch TV!", listened to it several times, collected visual ideas, then worked out various takes. At the same time the young people ambled around the village with the camera, spontaneously they recorded scenes from the group and workshop-life. Visual ideas were collected intuitively.

In this way many ideas and recordings came about that would never had been achieved in script-sketch-outline. The clip and collage depiction form left enough opportunity for associations and symbolic allusions. The film shows the young people, their feeling, their attitude towards the media everyday-life in an illustrative way.

Please excuse the technical quality: the film is the third generation VHS. The young people of the region kept the master tape.

Videofilm: "I watch TV!" 3:55 min
--

As you have seen, at this workshop there was a lot of action. Being young means: to move, to make new experiences, to pass frontiers. And we know: Film is movement!

You find "movement" also in the East-German youth! As you know, the unification of Germany led to a fundamental change for the people especially in the eastern part. Thus the old structures of youth work don't exist any more. New structures are in the process of development. Many young people are disappointed of politics.

Some of them tend to violent actions.

In this difficult situation the Federal Ministry for Women and Youth developed an "action programme against aggression and violence".

Today about 140 practical projects are supported by this programme. The Institute of Social Education at the University of Dresden is in charge of the scientific study of this action programme. Within this study there are interviews, partly standardized as well as different qualitative studies. One of this qualitative studies is the media exploration of youth cultural scenes by video.

And so I'm going to start the last part of my talk. There is little time left to talk about this new study. In short perhaps the following remarks:

In the methodical area the Dresden study will develop further the approach "youth research by video". By means of the principle of reduction, which is an artistic principle, too, we want to get meaningful partial results.

"Reduction" means delimitation of the topic, rules for the form of expression and the length of the videofilms, equal standards of the technical and aesthetic advice. As for the contents we want to explore the social and cultural milieu of young people. We call this approach "social-videography".

Two forms of social-videography are planned in our research context:

- at first documentary video portraits about young people,
- secondly videofilms in collage form by young people themselves.

Currently the project is in the beginning period. The first film productions are planned for the following winter semester.

I would like to illustrate you which kind of film language we want to prefer in the methodical-aesthetic area. For this I want to present you a videofilm taken out of another project.

The film with the title "violence" was produced in a two-day video-workshop of the "Landesfilmdienst Hessen" in Frankfurt/Main. Young people from a so called "social focus", a district with greater social problems, had the chance of making a videofilm about this topic without having any filmmaking experience.

At the beginning, my friend Pit SCHULZ gave them only a few aesthetic ideas. But he wasn't present at the recordings. Pit always takes a "music-case" with many songs. Out of this music-case young people can choose the music they like best for the visual ideas. Pit asked the young people to present the topic "violence" in a different way than only to record scraps and street fights.

In my opinion, the symbolic allusions you are going to see offer very interesting impressions of the feeling and the symbolic thinking of these suburban kids.

Videofilm: "Violence" 4:15 min
--

I don't want to interpret this film. This is up to you! Thanks for your attention!