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**Panel:**

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**Dr. Horst Niesyto**

Technological University of Dresden, Institute for Social Education

**The Social Aesthetic Paradigm**

- Youth Research by Video -

Half a year ago, I visited California for the first time. Here, at UCSB I had interesting conversations and encounters. I want to thank Victoria Vesna very much for the invitation to this convention. I am an educational social-worker and am presently working in the fields of youth education, media education, and youth research. As you can imagine I did not travel across the Atlantic just to introduce a few ideas. Fax, e-mail, Videoconferences and the World Wide Web fulfill these purposes nowadays. So why am I present?

Well, I could tell you that I am using the invitation to this conference as an opportunity for making more contacts and for preparing a comparative intercultural research project. That would offer an easy and plausible answer. There is, however, a deeper dimension. (You know,) I feel torn. *On the one hand*, I believe truly, that through digital media we possess novel opportunities for communication which overcome nearly all barriers, creating new connections and networks and, therefore, paving the way for a new and needed democratic impulse in society. *On the other hand*, I feel that neither multimedia nor interactive media can replace personal interaction among humans. To be quite frank, I hope that multimedia can never do so! I hold no sympathy for the horror images of a Mr. Moravec, who wishes to scan the "non-biological human being". Preserving the quality and magical charm of direct personal encounters, the direct experience of individuals with each other, and the expression of their intentions and emotions, represent my genuine desire.

My presentation consists of two parts. In the first section, I want to outline the basic ideas of the social-aesthetic approach. Describing these ideas for the field of youth culture and research in more detail makes up the second part of my lecture.

Referring to the first segment of my presentation, concerning the importance of a socially aesthetic mode of thinking: Despite a so-called globalization process, there are still different oral and written languages. For the foreseeable future, it will remain the case that people like me who want to communicate at such conferences must learn English. Nonetheless, we are observing how visual and audio-visual media are gaining in importance. It is a fact today that, more and more, one perceives and experiences reality through visual media. Although the spoken and written word is not vanishing, it is gradually losing its dominant position. Especially, young people are experiencing that statements about reality are closely linked to the audio-visual media of their everyday media environment. Media construct statements about social realities. To some extent, media even create realities. We can define this phenomenon as an *aestheticization of reality* by media.

This aestheticization does not mean that social realities in their concrete forms are disappearing. Even though the traditional division into social strata and classes no longer exists, social, educational, regional, gender, and ethnic differences, to name just a few, remain. These differences often lead to conflicts and are partially linked to major social and political problems. In many cases, placing reality into an aesthetic and visual form distracts from the conflicts and problems, palliates them, or does not provide the necessary factual background information. Furthermore, economic concentration are resulting in an enormous standardization of media symbols.

Contradicting trends in the media area also persist, trends toward program and channel differentiation and fragmentation. Further, different people and groups are making use of media in different fashions. As a result of different social, cultural, and biographical experiences people use and comprehend media in a variety of ways.

Bluntly: *Media does not replace social interaction.* Different social milieus, social bonds, and cultural orientations continue to exist. We can observe this by looking at how modern media are used. A new sort of *two-class society* has developed between those persons who take advantage of the new technologies relatively independently and selectively, applying it in many areas, and the great number of others who, more or less in excess, only use these technologies for entertainment. And there is a variety of different styles of comprehending what is entertainment.

To sum up: Modern media communication aestheticizes the world. There are trends toward standardization as well as fragmentation of media symbols. And there are, subjectively, different, primarily socially-determined styles of processing symbols.

And with this statement we have reached the essence of my *social-aesthetic approach*: New social-aesthetic groups, which I call *symbolic milieus*, form where media symbols and social milieus converge. These symbol milieus differ from the old and traditional social milieus in the predominant position of media communication for the thought process and behavior of humans. Questions on the development of perception and the style of symbolic processing reach a status of great significance. Media literacy and audio-visual symbol development will become the basis of understanding and tolerance of other lifestyles on this planet in the media era.

I will now skip ahead to the second part of my lecture, the meaning of this social-aesthetic thinking for the field of youth culture and youth research. 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. The structure of individual experience, the temporal, spatial and the social structuring of experiences doesn't follow any longer the model of personal "we-experience". Personal, "primary" experience and mediated, "secondary" experience are mixing more and more. The digital generated media-aesthetics reinforce this process by flowing transitions between real and fictitious-virtual representations. Interactive forms of media communication are generating complex patterns of symbols.

Young people are learning: statements about the social reality are very closed connected with media-constructions and media-productions. Young people develop themselves different forms of media-literacy. Today media influenced forms of perception are connected with chaotic processes of world-experience. These forms are characterized by rapidness, quickness, ambiguity and a shrill juxtaposition of experience-particles. This modus of experience is connected with the ambivalence of youth-cultural breaks and contradictions, the discontinuous developments, the partly disjointed processes of producing symbols.

Now, *my approach* is: If, in the media era, we wish discover something about the perception of reality of, for instance, young people, we should provide them with the opportunity to express their emotions and moods through media, especially, audio-visual media! 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 ethnografic film or the visual anthropology and sociology. 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, based on a sociovidistic perspective, analyzing different visual symbolic forms in a process of 16-mm filmmaking. Then at the beginning of the eighties the Institute Youth Film Television 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 the everyday life of young people in the countryside. I could mention further examples, for instance projects by Andrea Kárpáti in Budapest (Hungary), or the photo studies by Phil Cohen (Great Britain) in the context of an anti-racist educational work.

Such audio-visual self-productions from young people are current forms of self-expression, of the symbolic representation of experiences, feelings, attitudes. In the remarked Odenwald-project I developed the approach "youth research by video". The idea was quite simple: Small groups of young people produced videofilms about aspects and activities which were important to them in the context of the corresponding topic of research. Those aspects could be visualized, which couldn't be expressed so well by linguistic methods, for example feelings, moods and complex movements. This production process created something like a "second empirics". The results, the videofilms, and the context, the production process, could be analyzed by researchers in different steps. At the same time young people could profit greatly from this filmmaking: They made films on their own, they had fun while producing within the group, they learned aesthetic knowledge and, finally, they could present the films in their 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 and easy to transport. Experiences show: Most young people have a relatively commanding knowledge of handling video. Mostly they need only a few technical and aesthetic advice to produce initial and meaningful pictures.

In the past few years, I have further developed the method of "*youth research by video*". Because of time restraints, I cannot elaborate this method any further here and refer you to my books. In my theoretical and practical work, my major interest is the question of how one can recognize the varied methods of symbol processing applied by teenagers in their videofilms. Now, to illustrate my idea, I would like to show you three sequences from such teenager-produced videos.

### **Film Sequences**

The last film sequence, particularly, demonstrated the ability of teenagers to express their feelings through pictures and music in a video. Through utilizing the opportunities digital videoproduction offers and the use of appropriate equipment, one can further promote this creativity. The production of videofilms and computer animation turns into a game, to a *Bricolage* with one's own and others' sound and film material. One can remove pictures and meanings out of their original context and thereby transform them into totally different symbols. In the past, experimental filmmakers could only dream of these opportunities. Now it is becoming possible - and not only for artists!

I even claim that the aesthetics of digital media correspond with how teenagers experience the world - that is, to experiment, to exceed limits and to discover and try new things. As it were, a certain *structural affinity* exists between desires of young people and digital creative opportunities, for example:

- between the desire for imagination and the creation of an almost arbitrary composition of reality and fictional recordings;
- between the desire for the experience of the here-and-now and the digital network contacts in realtime;
- between the quest for changing identities and the unlimited simulation possibilities of digital media.

Generally, young people are more playful and open to experimentation than adults. They grow up in closer contact with and are more carefree about the new media. A kind of *media gap* exists between generations. Science, also exhibits this phenomenon.

The majority of social sciences made the jump a while ago from carrying out purely quantitative surveys to a variety of forms of qualitative, hermeneutically-oriented research. Symbolic interactionism, especially, puts great weight on the understanding of meanings that are communicated between humans. However, even hermeneutically-oriented research is having trouble accepting the current transformation of reality perception. This is the case for both empirical investigations of the transformation itself as well as social science methods. Ethnographic films and visual sociology exist, yet in this instance the movies present mostly photo or film documentations *about* different social groups. World wide only very few attempts have been made, - for example in the area of youth research - to produce something like a "second empirics" through the analysis and interpretation of teenagers' self-made audio-visual productions. This is the point at which the social sciences are caught in a crisis - as to what theme should be researched as well as the method for research. A social-aesthetic paradigm that accepts the significance of audio-visual perception and experience of reality to humans, opens up new realms for research.

As a person who has studied educational social work and possesses many years of practical experience in youth- and community work with disadvantaged teenagers, I am aware of what significance the expression through pictures, especially for these teenagers, has. The written language and its "elaborated code" often trouble them. They act more emotional, personal and more body-focused and they can better illustrate their feelings towards life through images and music. Organizing social and economic assistance programs is not sufficient for young people who live in disadvantaged

environments. These programs are certainly important and they must be continued. Helping these teenagers develop their *self-confidence*, however, is equally as important. Providing opportunities to express one's feelings and share them with others makes up part of this support. I am convinced: If one offers teenagers suitable access to media and advises them professionally, they will develop an immense desire to produce.

The German artist *Joseph Beuys* once said: "*Everybody can be an artist!*" With this statement he meant that every human possesses the ability to express himself or herself through his or her creative potential. One must only discover and encourage these capabilities. Producing professional movies is not the goal; the goal is to develop forms for finding one's own authentic style and to take advantage of the supply of symbols. The English researcher on juveniles, Paul Willis, defines this as "*symbolic creativity*". And his colleague in London, Gunther Kress legitimately emphasized that children and adolescents take on actively the reserve of symbols that correspond to their interests. They do not simply passively adapt a pre-supplied set.

Artists who work professionally with video- and computer technology can assist children and teenagers in creating their own media productions. This spring, when I visited California, I happened to read the "*Los Angeles Times*", in which a lengthy article appeared about "*Busting the Barriers to Cyberspace*". One of the key sentences read: "We do have a problem with access...but we can't rely entirely on government policy... We need to develop a critical mass of people to go into the community and teach people to use this technology." (LA-Times, March 29, 1995).

I can only strongly reinforce this sentence. *Enter the neighbourhoods of your city, take up contact with community projects and offer your knowledge and skills!* You will notice how much the teenagers enjoy learning new things and expressing themselves - and you will experience their everyday concerns troubles and but also their hopes and dreams.

We need a new synthesis between art and social science that is in tune with the times! What we need is a link between associative, intuitive, and analytical-logical forms of perception and comprehension! What we need is cooperation among social scientists and artists in order to analyze the fundamental transformation of our communication culture and to encourage as well as support people to express themselves through the new digital media!