

Media Literacy and social-aesthetic expression: intercultural communication by video.

"Students at risk" — there are various kinds of risk and a very important question is: who defines what as a "risk"? Defining things confers a kind of symbolic power. An example is the debate on the use of media by children and young people. In Germany, especially in the field of education, the main position is that children and young people watch too much TV, and play too many computer and video games. This is held to be a "risk", as TV and pictures in general are considered to be an onslaught on the written word which produces illiteracy. "Illiteracy" is defined in America, as far as I know, as not being able to read the instructions on a bottle of medicine. This is really a problem. Certainly, there are three facts that we have to admit: an over-abundance of visual stimulation, excessive TV viewing, and a loss of written expression leading to illiteracy. And it is vitally necessary to develop special, creative programs to support people in overcoming their problems with the written word.

But from my point of view it is totally unjustifiable to connect illiteracy causally with the development of visual and audio-visual communication forms, and rather dangerous to encourage a *general devaluation* of such forms in this way. I could mention several German academics, especially in the field of education, who generally regard pictorial images as inferior to the written word. In the USA, Postman represents this position. His general judgment is: television opposes abstract, structured, linear ways of expression in an aggressive way. Whereas writing is slow, hierarchical, logical, and coherent by nature, communication by televised images, Postman argues, is the opposite of this: fast, concrete, incoherent and illogical. TV, he says, demands an immediate emotional reaction from our mind, not mental processing.¹

I do not agree with this evaluation. It is true that there are differences between the quality and the semiotics of TV-literacy and the quality and semiotics of written literacy. But in my understanding it is wrong to play the two forms of literacy off against each other, constructing *hierarchies* between written, discursive symbolic representations on the one hand and forms of visual and audio-visual symbolic representations on the other. There is "good" and "bad" literature, and in the same way there are "good" and "bad" movies. Pictures themselves are not "inferior" to the spoken or written word. We devalue young people and their "natural" understanding of things if we subject visual representation to this kind of inferior assessment. It is important for us to overcome this kind of thinking, and to open our minds to a new interplay between different modes of perception and cognition. Without doubt, certainly, there are risks attached to over-use of audio and visual media and excessive television consumption. Nevertheless, we should open our awareness also to the *opportunities* children and young people are provided with

¹ See: Postman, N.: Die Bedrohung des Lesens durch die elektronischen Medien — und was die Verleger dagegen tun können. In: Franzmann, B. u.a. (Hrsg.): Auf den Schultern von Gutenberg. Berlin / München 1995: 220-228.

when they use media. Examples are: overcoming social barriers and time-borders, playing with the symbolic material of media, simulating social roles, making real interactive contact with other young people in the world.

Today we can observe a new kind of media-generated "*self-socialization*" — independent of parents' or teachers' influence. It is the task of media education to respect and further this kind of media-self-socialization, and to identify existing viewing skills. Other very important tasks are to give children the abilities to analyse, evaluate and communicate information in a variety of forms, including print and non-print. And it is necessary to relate to the existing media styles of children and young people, and to cultivate forms of critical viewing, thinking and listening.

There are, however, *different* concepts of media education. Most media literacy concepts are focussed on "official" TV-literacy, that is, learning professional film-language, analysing and "decoding" media programs and developing individual values in the appreciation of media products. Another concept is more orientated to the existing, subjective media literacy skills of children and young people. In this context I agree with the approach of Buckingham, who says: "By contrast, a social theory of television literacy would begin by acknowledging that children's use of television is an integral part of the texture of their daily lives, and their relationships with the family and the peer group (...). In this sense, different social groups may employ different 'television literacies', or different modalities of literacy, which have different social and ideological functions and consequences".²

In my view it is necessary to develop a *social-aesthetic paradigm* to understand the new situation of "media-childhood" and "media-youth". If we hold on to old paradigms, subscribing to a value hierarchy between written and audio-visual forms of expression, the world experiences, the feelings of children and young people today will not become comprehensible to us. There is no "risk" involved in accepting and integrating visual and audio-visual forms as *equal* forms of human expression! Other considerations apart, this is an important chance precisely for so-called deprived and handicapped young people to develop new ways of creative self-expression using visual and audio-visual forms and taking the step from watching and analysing media programs to producing their own fotos, videos and other media works!

In the next section I will outline this new paradigm, the social-aesthetic approach in the context of youth research. And in the third and last part I will outline a new research project that I am just starting and which is based on this approach: "Video Culture — intercultural communication by video". You are invited to participate in this project.

What follows now is the **second part**, the **social-aesthetic approach**. I have eleven theses.

First

The spoken and written word is not vanishing. It is simply losing, gradually, its dominant position.

² Buckingham, D.: Children Talking Television. London 1993.

It is a fact that today one increasingly perceives and experiences reality 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 no longer exists, 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 behavior. 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 tolerating other lifestyles and cultures on this planet in the media age. We must learn to "swim" in different symbolic systems. We must explore both the common and the varying elements among worldwide audio-visual symbolic systems. To develop a current, social-aesthetic symbol-theory, based on the analysis of the relationship between world-wide and regional symbolic patterns and networks is a theoretical challenge.

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 often we feel helpless when we are confronted with these problems. Modern media communication often 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 frequently. To develop values like sharing, respect for nature and all living things, overcoming hate and egotism, it is necessary to open ourselves radically to the emotional dimensions within us.

Sixth

Images, especially film images accompanied by the appropriate music, move us. Images address our feelings. Images can be ambiguous, too. They can produce different feelings. But also they can help us to tolerate ambiguous feelings. The power of images is great. This power resides particularly in the emotional effect on our universe of emotions and our unconscious. 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 really necessary 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. Media are an essential part of their everyday lives. For children symbolic language is easier to understand than concepts encoded in words. Children develop a kind of "viewing literacy" in a natural way. 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 is connected with the ambivalence of disruptions and contradictions in youth culture, discontinuous developments, and the partly disjointed processes of producing symbols.

Eighth

The aesthetic opportunities provided by modern film and digital media correspond to the mode in which many young people experience the world. That is, through experiment, through exceeding limits and trying to discover new things. There is a certain structural affinity between desires of young people 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 changing 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 carefree about 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. This is the point at which the social sciences are caught in a crisis - regarding both the topics of research and the methods by which such research should proceed. A social-aesthetic paradigm that accepts the significance of audio-visual perception in the human experience of reality opens a new perspective for research.

Tenth

Precisely for young people living in deprived social circumstances, it is not sufficient to develop social and economic assistance programs alone. These programs are certainly important and they must be continued. Helping these young people to develop their self-confidence, however, is equally vital. Providing opportunities to express one's feelings and share them with others should constitute an integral part of this support.

I contend, therefore, that those who today in the media-age want to know something about perceptions of reality, about the feelings and moods of young people, should give those young people the chance to express their feelings and moods through their own images.

Eleventh

When young people make their own productions, especially in the medium of video, these are current forms of self-expression, presenting experiences, feelings, and attitudes symbolically.

The idea is quite simple: in small groups young people produce video films on aspects of life and activities which are important to them in the context of the particular topic of research. What should be visualised are those areas which cannot be expressed so well in language, such as feelings, moods and complex movements. This production process creates something like a "secondary empirical field". Its results (the films themselves) and the context (the production process) can be analysed by researchers.

So much for my eleventh thesis. Now, very briefly, some remarks about the project "**Youth Research by Video**". I've just stated that the results, the video films, and the context, can be analysed by the researchers. In this connection new scientific tasks have arisen, i.e. to develop a new kind of audio-visual interpretatory apparatus that can be applied to non-professional productions by young people. Or transforming audio-visual symbols into written language. Or to combine methods of traditional observation, interviews and group-discussion with a creative process of film-making. If there is time, I will talk about a few experiences I have had in these areas later on.

Worldwide there are only a few film-projects in the context of youth-research run along similar lines. At the end of the seventies there was the Philadelphia Project run by Richard CHALFEN. In this 16mm film project eight groups of young people from different social classes could make films about topics they chose themselves. The main point of interest was the question of social and cultural influence on contents and form of the films (Chalfen 1981). Then at the beginning of the eighties the Institute Youth Film TV in Munich started a one-year pilot project. This project was aimed at discovering 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. In this project young people of both sexes from different locations and age-groups had the chance to present their life-situation in the form of audio-visual slides and video films.

I could mention further examples, for instance photo-projects by Andrea KÁRPÁTI (Hungary), the youth research of Virginia CAPUTO (Canada) in the context of visual anthropology (Caputo 1995), the photo studies by Phil COHEN (England) in the context of an anti-racist educational scheme, or the project "Social-Videography" which I am involved in at the Technological University in Dresden (Niesyto 1997).

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.

And from a technical point of view today's video cameras are of the highest standard, providing for many creative possibilities and easy handling. Thus there are hardly any lighting problems, 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 meaningful images. Film sequences can be reviewed immediately and many institutions provide a range of opportunities for post-production activities.

I will now direct your attention to the **third part** of my talk, the "**Video Culture**"-project, which I am currently preparing. This project is based on my social-aesthetic approach. The main goal is to develop a new form of intercultural communication between groups of young people throughout the world, expressing themselves through film, music and body-language. An important goal of the project is to provide young people in deprived situations with new chances to discover their "audio-visual voice" and develop creative self-expression and communication without limits. The general aim of the project is to encourage groups of young people from different countries to produce, exchange and understand their own video productions. The main question in this respect is: Are there any forms of trans-cultural, audio-visual language in these video films?

First, the **basic assumptions**.

At present there is a gap between enormous technological expansion on the one hand and a lack of inter-cultural exchange on the other. Never before in history have there been so many technological opportunities for global communication. However, our low level of media-aesthetic competence, especially in the field of audio-visual self-expression, means that we are a relatively long way from being able to exploit such opportunities. "Audio-visual competence" and "*visual-literacy*" are necessary to understand other cultures and symbolic milieus in our media age. It is necessary to decode the different symbolic systems to understand specific local-communicative meanings. For this process I use the term "inter-cultural symbolic-learning", based on the exchange and the understanding of cultural self-images and individual productions. This inter-cultural symbolic-learning has an important pre-requisite: elements and structures of a trans-cultural, audio-visual code, based on pictures, music, and body-language. To understand and to re-interpret foreign audio-visual expression, we need a set of common, audio-visual aesthetics. This is the general idea of the "Video Culture"-project: to further existing media-aesthetic skills of young people and to develop new forms of audio-visual communication.

Now I will outline the object, the points of query and the applied methods of the project. The **object** of the project is to produce and to analyse theme-orientated video films (by digital post-production). The video films are produced by groups of young people in the 11 to 13 and/or 14 to 17 age ranges from different countries and different social environments. After making the films the groups exchange them and try to interpret the symbolization of the "partner-films". It is the task of scientific research to observe and document the symbolic processing, and to analyse the various video films and interpretations.

The **points of query** for the analysis are:

To what extent is it possible to develop forms of trans-cultural, audio-visual symbolic language by producing video-films with groups of young people from different speech areas and symbolic milieus?

Which styles of symbolic processing, presentation and understanding can be analysed in the process of filming, in the video films themselves, and in the interpretations? To what extent are these styles influenced by different contextual parameters, such as the standard of education and life, gender, ethnic and media-cultural particularities?

Which forms of media-aesthetic and media-paedagogical advice are useful in realizing such kinds of intercultural communication by video? Which forms of computer-based post-production are useful in this context?

To analyse the video films, the interpretations and the context-information the project will apply different **methods**: The first important dimension is the style of the **media-aesthetic and media-pedagogical advice**. In order to produce interesting video films which are comparable it is necessary to define a set of general conditions.

Theme of the films: In the project a general theme will be defined, which is close to the juvenile cultural needs of the age-group and which can be visualized without elaborated media literacy. The goal is to express the theme through images, music, body-language, and - as far as possible - without verbal language. It is the opposite of "talking heads".

Media-aesthetic introduction: At the beginning of the video-workshops, the media-adviser will present only a small set of basic video aesthetics in a playful way. The groups do not need to have any experience in making films.

Subjective symbolic-processing: The process of filming should be open to optimal forms of subjective symbolic processing and subjective representation. A sensitive adviser is very important: to discern the intentions of the young people, to take account of their own symbolic patterns and styles. The goal is not professional filming - in the context of the research we are interested in the existing viewing literacy of young people in all its varieties and broken forms. The approach includes forms of digital post-production.

Group processes and different symbolic milieus: The video films are produced by groups from different social environments (socially deprived and "middle-class" environments). The goal is to create "group orientated" video self-reports. These self-reports are only parts of the totality of experiences and feelings. This is precisely where the good adviser comes in: it is his job to highlight some important aspects and to express the core of "group-feeling".

Further conditions: In every group there are 5 to 6 young people. All groups are supplied with the same technical equipment: S-VHS-camera, sound-recording and digital image-mixing apparatus. All video-workshops run for two weekends. Their locations should be close to the everyday environment of the young people. None of the video films should exceed three minutes.

The second important dimension in the field of methods is the kind of **documentation, analysis and interpretation** of the video films and the context of production. The methods are:

Participating observation: The different phases of production are observed according to certain criteria and are noted down. The important phase of post-production will be documented by video.

Group discussions: In some situations, especially in the context of media-aesthetic advice, there will be group discussions - for example at the beginning of the post-production phase (discussion about the selection of images and music).

Evaluation with colleagues: Interviews with colleagues involved in the video-workshops on their observations and interpretations.

Questionnaire for film-interpretations: All groups will write interpretations of the "partner films". For this reason everyone involved will have to fill out a short questionnaire. The questions refer in particular to the symbolization in different sequences of the film. The interpretations are evaluated in the groups: where do common interpretations arise and where are interpretations divergent? At the end, all groups become acquainted with the self-interpretation of the other production groups. If there is enough money we will invite interpretations by other groups of young people without any contextual information about the film-processing (by "Multimedia-Questionnaire").

Interpretation by external experts: To optimize the methods three experts from every country will be involved in this project in order to provide scientific advice. It will be their task to write reports about all four video films without any contextual information.

Summary analysis, interpretation and judgement: Based on all project materials the scientific advisers will write a concluding report and evaluation of the results of the project. If there is enough financial support from foundations, the project will be documented on CD-ROM. It is also a project goal to publish a report giving media-paedagogical, -aesthetic and — technical advice for video film productions of this kind.

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