

# Youth research on video self-productions Reflections on a social – aesthetic approach<sup>1</sup>

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This article advances my thoughts on a social – aesthetic approach within the field of youth and social research. These reflections are not primarily grounded in traditional approaches of visual sociology and anthropology, but emerged from the context of media-educational youth research in Germany. The main assumption of this article is that qualitative youth and social research in particular, which has audio-visual self-productions as the object, should – in view of the increasing influence media has on our perception and the way how the reality is experienced – be open to concepts of subject-related self-presentations. First I make an attempt to formulate a social-aesthetic theory which focuses on the media-ethnographical exploration of symbolic milieus. Next, I introduce projects run by media-educational youth researchers in Germany, emphasizing the question of conceptions and methods when working with adolescent video self-productions. The final section reflects upon the quality, the validity and the hermeneutics of self-produced videos.

In 1987, the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli published an essay called: “The Aesthetic Paradigm. Sociology as a Form of Art”. I was interested in this essay because in the late 1980s I got involved more intensively with visual and audio-visual material as the source of a qualitative research. At the beginning of his essay Maffesoli wrote that cognition cannot be limited to the field of science, “at least not to a specific form of science”. A form of scientific understanding that also uses rather intuitive methods would be desirable. Maffesoli refers to Georg Simmel as the great sociologist who gives considerable weight to imagination and intuition. This matter is about the development of an “*aestheticising sociology*” as well as an aesthetic attitude with regard to the varied manifestations of social reality. The studies of society started with a “description of its skin”, with the combination of the surface structure and depth structure which methodologically corresponds to the “situative” perception of the reality (Maffesoli 1987: 460). This aesthetic approach favours the interaction, a groping action, as well as the sensual perception. Similar to Simmel, Maffesoli points out some kind of “microscopic sociality”, the description of “smallest communities”, their varied interactions and symbolic forms. The only way of uncovering motivations, of analysing groups and “typical aspects”, is by stressing similarities and correspondences, according to the situation (1987: 469).

By understanding the social reality as an inter-subjective world which is not constituted until there is a basis of permanent interaction and interpretation, Maffesoli and his “aesthetic paradigm” gets very close to an phenomenological-interactionistic thinking. His emphasis on an effective-emotional dimension – a dimension that had been ignored by social sciences’ theories for a long time – is important. In addition, he realises that in today’s society, pictorial forms of presentation, and electronic methods in general, did undergo a great increase in value.

Maffesoli defines his viewpoint as opposed to a pure rationalistic concept of science, but by doing this, he runs the risk of aesthetically-culturally *biasing* the social reality. In this respect he comes close to some of the post-modern studies which underestimate the shaping powers of the social situation. It is the task of a sensitive social science to investigate more carefully the interrelation between society’s symbolic material, subjective modes of experiencing reality, as well as social situations. In order to fulfil this task, it is necessary to relate the “aesthetic inter-subjectivity” to the exploration of aesthetic dimensions *and* social dimensions of real-life experiences. This perspective of research, which I would like to call a *social-aesthetic* one, integrates the symbolic-medial dimension, which today is important, while avoiding aestheticising reductionism. So this perspective involves understanding of processes of interaction and interpretation, which should be the basis for a *sensuous* comprehension of the social reality. This task implies the analysis of the *conditions* and the *modes* of constituting meaning. Today, these conditions and forms undergo social changes which can be best seen in media-aesthetic innovations.

An interesting question is how this process of constituting a meaning (the process of symbolic processing) works with individuals, how the relation between the social structures and symbolic form is imparted. This question is interesting, because the ways in which symbolic representation and symbolic comprehension functions are closely related to matters of personality development, symbolic creativity and the differentiation of taste and style. It is exactly this central aspect which Bourdieu had pointed out in his theory on the “*Habitus*” (1983). The perspective of a social-aesthetic research could make this Habitus-conception more “flexible” and detach it from its class related-deterministic couplings. This shall be attempted by the conception of “symbolic milieus”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See note at the end of this article.

The conception of *symbolic milieus* starts from the assumption that there are still various structures of social milieu, but that they are much more shaped by medial influences than they used to be. Pointing at the fading cohesive powers of the traditional stratum- and class-specific milieus does not automatically mean that different social situations disintegrate in an ocean of "patchwork identities". It is true that youth scenes have evened out themselves in many ways, but this does not answer the question on milieu-specific concepts of acquiring and experiencing the reality. To that aim we should track down various forms and patterns of "how one acts in the world", considering the interplay of perception, feeling, thought and practice.

According to my thesis, adolescents mainly work on the *design of a milieu* as a process of style creation and self-finding, which is carried out in the interplay between their social and local roots and the medial world providing the possibilities of "crossing boundaries". Against this background, youth-cultural milieus constitute themselves not only through local, community-conveyed forms of everyday action, the social and local acquisition and biographical experiences, but also through symbolic patterns conveyed by media. In today's "media society", the youth chooses from mass-medial "Third Cultures" (Featherstone, 1995). However, these "Third Cultures" –being dominant global cultures – do not result in the disappearance of local culture forms. They are more likely to be used against the background of specific social, cultural and biographical constellations in ordinary situations. The influence of local, social and cultural differences does not disappear in this "world medley". Both major trends – the medial globalisation and the social and cultural differentiation –overlap. *Youth-cultural symbolic milieus* arise as new ways of combining symbolic patterns conveyed by the media (as medial settings) and social settings in which real life is lived. These symbolic milieus are based on various value-related patterns of interpretation and symbolization, social and emotional feelings about life, social and spatial orientations, as well as aesthetic-cultural preferences and concepts of expression.

The structures of subjectively experiencing the everyday world, as well as the temporal, spatial and social structuring of experiences, no longer agree with the patterns of a personal "us-experience". Comments on an increasing loss of experience by excessive media consumption overlook the fact that media offers social and cultural opportunities to experience as well. The boundaries between individual, first-hand experiences and imparted, second-hand experiences are fading. The recent digitally produced media-aesthetics intensify this process by creating fluid transitions between real and fictive-virtual images. Multi-medial and interactive concepts of medial communication lead to symbolic forms which are more complex. Adolescents learn that the statements concerning social realities are closely connected to medial constructions and scenarios. They develop their own media-related modes of language and expression. Therefore, the ways in which media influences the perception produce rather chaotic processes of experiencing the world. These processes are characterized by volatility, rapidity, ambiguity and a jarring juxtaposition of particles of experience. This mode of perception corresponds to the ambivalence of youth, to the "contrast bath" of emotions. It is basically about youth-cultural discontinuities and contradictions, about discontinuous developments and partly disjointed processes regarding the symbolic representation (Niesyto, 1997).

### **Video self-productions – research approach and methodological challenges**

If it is true that the influence media has on perception becomes more and more important, this cannot be left without consideration when developing research conceptions. Since forms of perception influence ways of expression as well, methodological questions – especially within subject-oriented approaches of research – are of equal importance. It is a fact that these approaches attach great importance to the so-called *subject-adequate* methods of data survey and self-representation. In view of media's increasing influence on everyday communication, I put forward the following *thesis*: If somebody – in nowadays media society – wants to learn something about youth's ideas, feelings and their ways of experiencing the world, he or she should give them a chance to express themselves *also* by means of their own *self-made* media products!

Up to now, many films *on* youth exist, but there are only a few productions made *by* young people which are the subject of an analysis and an interpretation. Some film and video projects within the field of visual sociology and anthropology are exceptions (esp. Worth and Adair, 1972; Chalfen, 1981; Caputo, 1995; Larson, 1999; Rich and Chalfen, 1999). In Germany, projects are being developed in the field of (media) education about "Youth research on video self-productions": e.g. a pilot study by the Institut Jugend Film Fernsehen (Theunert/Diezinger/Schorb 1985), a media-educational study on youth in rural areas (Niesyto 1989, 1991), a social-videography study (Niesyto 1996, Fritz 1997) as well as the media-ethnographical research project "VideoCulture – Video and intercultural communication" (Niesyto 1999)<sup>2</sup>.

The development of the "youth research on video self-productions" approach in Germany, originated to a large extent independently of comparable approaches in other countries. As far as I can judge, the international exchange within this field (self-made video productions in a context of

research) is still at the beginning. This article therefore focuses on the research projects run by means of video in Germany. In these projects, young people had the chance to express *personal images of experience* in self-produced video films through body- and object-related symbols and a more abstract symbolization. The self-produced videos were monitored scientifically (by examining context information on the formation process) and afterwards analyzed and interpreted.

### **Pilot study of the Institut Jugend Film Fernsehen (1984/85)**

The Institut Jugend Film Fernsehen (Institute for Youth Film Television, JFF / Munich) emphasised – in a research report (Theunert et al. 1985), as well as in later publications – particularly the *methodological* advantages in getting access to group-specific self-portrayals of youth by means of active video work. Among other things, the authors refer to the increasing significance of visual media for youth's perception of the reality, the large variety of modes of expression (especially non-verbal modes), as well as those processes of analysing and elaborating which are connected to the making of video self-productions. These processes enable to indicate young people's self-assessment. By taking the *process* – and not the product – as the focal point, chances for an intensified reflection on the self-made experiences, for a higher degree of authenticity and for new orientations concerning action are provided (Theunert/Diezinger/Schorb 1985: 126).

The approach by the JFF was right in pointing out the advantages of *pictorial* ways of expression. However, the relatively strong reference to *cognitive* working methods, when circumscribing the topic and the plot of the film, is questionable and seems to constitute a contradiction. Especially the exclusive orientation towards the "construction of a script" before the shooting is problematic: "Here, the medial production is structured as a reflexive process: The medial production itself is actually preceded by a group discussion, in which the young people intensively examine the chosen topic with regard to the relevant aspects. It is also preceded by a discussion on the film topic, the development of a plot and the construction of a script" (Theunert et al. 1985: 128). This orientation owes to the idea that group-specific self-portrayals already exist in the young people's minds and that video production is mainly about "adequately portraying the complex structure of interpretations of the reality which is represented by these self-portrayals" (Theunert and Schorb, 1989). In my opinion, the approach by Theunert and Schorb does not mention sufficiently that the self-portrayals can only develop from the process of finding a concept (during the phases of recording, the selection of material and the post-editing).

In their report, the Munich research team introduced the film example "Freizeit – tote Zeit? (Leisure time – lost time?)" (Theunert et al. 1985: 142 ff.). In order to get the production process going and create a thematically affective setting, the research team used a selection of television reports as material for inspiration. This material produced reactions among the youth which were then structured by the way of a group discussion. The researchers captured these group discussions on paper and let the whole production process be accompanied by a participatory observer who mainly grasped the context of the situation and the atmosphere.

In order to analyse and interpret the aspects of self-portrayal in the video films, the Munich research team has developed a sophisticated method which involves three successive stages: the interpretation of the product, the product context and the portion of self-portrayals.

"The *interpretation of the product* refers exclusively to the video film itself. The production context is not considered [...]. As additional material, the transcription of the production, in which each sequence is described concerning the content and the transfer and in which all the dialogs are written down, is available. This transcription of the product was carried out by a colleague who did not attend the group process in which the film was made. This is supposed to prevent the descriptions from mixing with any knowledge of the context" (ibid.).

In a second stage, the interpretation of the *product context*, which evaluates the transcriptions of the group discussions and the participatory observer, and relates them to the product interpretation, was carried out. "Only those interpretations of the product, for which the context shows clear evidence, are considered as valuable" (ibid.). In the third and final stage, the results of the second stage were further analyzed regarding thematic criteria (the system of indicators) in order to get an impression of the aspects of self-portrayal. All in all, three collaborators participated in the entire process of analysing and interpreting. One of them was part of the product's developing phase.

On the basis of this method, the Munich research team was able to work out the following aspects from the chosen film example "Freizeit – tote Zeit?": On the level of desires, the longing for emotional-communicative relationships is reflected in entire series of images, but the adolescents were rather restrained in commenting on this, during the group discussions.

"Some observations indicate that the matter of emotionality in relationships is largely tabooed within the group. It was noticeable, for example, that the young people showed a

relatively distant behavior towards each other [...]. The fact that they had difficulties in arranging the relevant sequences in the script (i.e. in a written form) could also be an indication for this [...]. From an audio-visual perspective, these barriers can obviously be torn down. The adolescents use the possibility of expressing themselves by means of gestures, facial expressions and behavior in order to investigate their emotional desires directly, i.e. without an interposed verbalization" (Theunert et al. 1985: 150 f.).

### **The Odenwald Study on Youth in Rural Areas (1986-1988)**

The second project of youth research, in which the video (besides other media) had been predominantly used, is the Odenwald study on youth in rural areas (Niesyto 1991, 1992). The motto was: "We will create our own pictures!". Between 1986 and 1988, about thirty self-made videos had been produced. These videos dealt with the themes of leisure time activities in villages, clubs and societies, the media reality of youth and the regional youth culture (age: ca. 15 to 25). The project started from the assumption that adolescents and young adults living in the countryside move in an area of conflict between adapting (to more traditional images of role and life) and being different (often influenced by the youth culture styles of big cities). The project focused on the question how adolescents and young adults can be supported in getting an idea of the everyday life in the village and the region by creating self-made media productions. Most of the young people were dealing with the medium video for the first time. The forms of presentation involved documentaries, clip- and collage-like productions, as well as short movies. Collaborators were trained in several seminars to advice and support the group productions,. The basic elements of the media-educational set up were: a) Production of experiences by video as a form of symbolic acquisition of the environment; b) The encouragement of youth-cultural stylistic and symbolic representations (starting from the subjective abilities and needs of expression); c) Production of experiences by video for stimulating social communication within groups; d) Publishing the self-made productions (using existing public as well as creating new "audiences").

Concerning the methods, this model project, run on behalf of the foundation "Deutsche Jugendmarke e.V. (Bonn)", adopted the approach of the Munich research team (by using similar methods of documenting the production processes and contexts), but modified one significant aspect: The Odenwald study assumed that youth's self-productions and the researcher's interest represent *two* dimensions which are connected, but still, each of them has its own *independent* meaning. Through this distinction, a thematic orientation towards a rigid purpose and the instrumentalization of the media work – by overloading cognitive-oriented, scientific methods – should be prevented (see my criticism of the approach of the Munich research team). The orientation towards the *subjective* forms of stylistic and symbolic representation was an essential element of the media-educational conception, in order to provide exactly those young people, who have, as experience shows, difficulties with the verbal or written tasks, with adequate possibilities of expression. Most of the media productions did not emerge from short-period, educational seminars (such as the ones of the pilot study from Munich), but were mainly produced within the context of a place and group related youth work.

The evaluation of the project confirmed the appropriateness of the chosen media-educational approach. The acquired experiences indicate that:

- Forms of expression which are closely related to the subject emerged especially when vivid, associative-intuitive methods were used, as well as in situations in which the youth had enough time to look for adequate forms of representation. Here, by moving between associative-intuitive and aim-oriented proceedings, they were able to try out various camera angles, to film people and objects and to collect image and sound material according to a creative idea. The examination of a thematic *leitmotiv* facilitated a certain form of expression which initially showed individual experiences and fantasies – including their ambiguity – and did not aim towards consistent statements. This form of expression corresponded to a vivid perception of the everyday life and the reality.
- Especially the use of *medial "images made by others"* furthered collage-like forms of selection and representation in some productions. Recorded TV-images and personal images were put together into a new production. "Material made by others" helped to make speech intentions clearer by combining them with personal images, and in this way, placing them in a new context of meaning.
- During the phase of giving advice, the collaborator's focus on imparting the most essential possibilities of operating and designing – instead of pointing out certain forms of representation – proved to be right.
- Besides the context information and the additional interpretations, given by external experts during the stage of analysis and interpretation of the self-made productions, the involvement of the *youth*

as *producers* – e.g. by commenting on certain sequences and symbols – proved to make sense (communicative evaluation).

The Odenwald study has produced numerous results related to the aspects of “medial self-portrayals”, “acquiring the medial forms of representation”, “producing experiences in groups by means of media”, as well as “creating new audiences by self-productions”. For example, the analysis of the video films, the context material and the adolescent’s verbal statements showed, that there are *various* youth-cultural milieus in rural areas. The self-made productions make it clear that there is no such thing as a “cultural gap” in the countryside. There seems to be a variety of youth milieus instead. This variety is nevertheless restricted by the influence of the local, traditional cultural forms and must therefore develop and assert itself – more than in other areas, like in towns for example – in the struggle with traditional structures. This, however, does not lead to the several milieus getting closer. There are common grounds: e.g. nature as the important resource, the desire for social vicinity and the wish to stay in the area. But against the background of various milieus of origin, as well as various attitudes and preferences towards mass media material, there are more differences in youth-cultural milieus to be seen (Niesyto 1991: 137 ff.).

### **Dresden social-videographical study (1994/95)**

The third research project in Germany which took place in the context of a video-educational research was the Dresden Social Videography Study (Niesyto 1996, 1997, Fritz 1997). This study was part of the scientific evaluation related to the “program for action against aggression and violence”, launched at the beginning of the 1990s by the federal government (Bonn) against the background of an increasing social and youth-political conflict situation in Eastern Germany<sup>3</sup>. The project “Social Videography” is cognitively focused on exploring youth-cultural symbolic milieus. In contrast to other projects which were scientifically evaluated (by social-statistical interviews, participant observation of a “right-winged” youth club, biographical interviews with young people), the project “Social Videography” aimed at getting access to an aesthetic-symbolic dimension of youth-cultural milieus. In a way similar to the media-educational study on youth in rural areas, it was about developing a further mode of representation in order to analyse and interpret issues, emotions, attitudes by means of video productions. For this, two forms of videographical exploration were planned: documentary video portraits and collage-like video films.

#### *Documentary video portraits*

During the work on the video portraits, the videographical observation and documentation of activities, physical forms of expression and movement, styles of communication, cultural attributes, symbols and the practices of young people were foregrounded. The framework of an examining video work was about interviewing adolescents at their familiar meeting-places, so that they can show the world in which they live in, how they spend their leisure time, which activities keep their group together, and what they do at these locations. Interested adolescents should get involved in the production process of the video portraits. Youth research on video self-productions is interested in working in a dialogue form, right from the beginning. Especially when working with a group which keeps a strong distance to the outer world and is suspicious of others, it is essential to earn *trust* and to gain respect and acceptance amongst the youth. The basis for producing video portraits should therefore always be the *personal encounter*, as well as the interest in youth and their lives. The medial documentary is related to that; e.g. each has access to the camcorder, there is a right of veto (approval or disapproval of certain shots), and the film can only be accessed by project collaborators and people the adolescents want to show it to.

#### *Collage-like video films made by adolescents*

In contrast and in addition to the video portraits, which mainly documented practical activities, the collage-like video productions were supposed to allow access to the youth’s *inner worlds* of ideas and pictures. It was assumed that collage-like forms would be suitable to express the feelings and fantasies about an emotional topic. If, for example, young people have difficulties in bearing ambivalent emotions and complex circumstances in everyday life, and if they are looking for clear solutions against this background, the video films could facilitate – according to the researchers – a “symbolic rehearsal action” of allowing and expressing ambivalent feelings within the medial sphere.

In the context of the project run in Dresden, video productions were made with several youth groups. The access to youth groups was mainly possible by existing contacts stemming from other projects within the “program for action”, as well as by the institute’s practical contexts. The training of the collaborators was carried out in several workshops which involved: introduction of the approach

“Youth research on video self-productions”, introduction of the practical video work emphasizing video portraits and collage-like video films, development of central practical questions for the participating observers as well as criteria for keeping a written record. All in all, nine video productions were created. The valuable experiences of the social videography study are listed below:

- On the scene of action, the project group did not fully succeed in putting the conception into practice and developing it further. This was primarily due to the difficult *prevailing circumstances*: The collaborators did not have enough experience in working with video and scientific methods; the time they had available was limited due to their participation in other projects running at the same time. The study was supposed to contribute to the “pioneering work” within the context of radical changes in Eastern Germany at the time (shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall) and combine training work and research work within a special field. However, from today’s point of view, this goal was set too high, because the new approach “Social Videography” should have been tested by an experienced team.
- Altogether, the examination of specific symbolic milieus proved to be difficult. The structural conditions were not the only problems which occurred in the course of the project. For example there was one group fighting against the closing of its youth center (“wagon group”). This group used the opportunity of creating a video portrait to take as many shots of positive aspects of the youth center as possible. The project collaborator on the scene wrote in his report that the young people “did not primarily make a film ‘for themselves’, but rather a film for adults about themselves” (Fritz, 1997:22). Here, in some respect, the interest of research and the practical application clashed. The young people tried to adopt the “official” media language and produce a “video commercial” in order to reach their target group (the adults).
- Different experiences occurred in another video portray project. *Grammar school students* from Dresden met in an “alternative, left-winged” youth club. They did not treat the camera as if it were the listener or the viewer, but as some kind of “weapon”. These young people were not interested in “reflecting their everyday life in the project or impart any message to the adults” (Fritz 1997: 23). Instead, they tried out a *new production* of the everyday reality in front of the camera by means of excessive camera work (e.g. sudden pans, extreme close-ups), as well as the method of provocatively confronting people passing by with the microphone and the camera. The film was directly edited in the camera, there was almost no post-production. The film resembled “Chaos-TV” productions and was shaped by spontaneous-sporadic decisions.
- A few adolescents were interested in the idea of *collage-like* video films. For them, video was an “intimate possibility of expressing individual states” (Fritz 1997: 24). The first attempts of filming led to a collage-video which pictured people, actions and objects in the context of a sense of life which is expressed by music and a more experimental camera-work: “The use of the camera is much more ‘unbridled’ and open to experimentation. Often, the perspective is oblique. The finished film gets its dynamic from excessive camera movements rather than from a tremendously fast succession of sequences.” (Fritz 1997: 25).
- In some groups, the offer to produce a *video-collage* was taken mostly by young people that were in a rather *marginal* position within their group. Those were both adolescents with a high formal education, as well as youth who had difficulties with ordinary means of communication, such as language and writing. For them, collage-videos proved to be a possibility to express the world of inner images and to process the recorded image and sound material further in the phase of post-production. These young people rather intended to create (rather private) audio-visual “diary records” instead of presenting these to a local audience.

### **VideoCulture – aims and methods of a current, international project (1997-2000)**

This project is a media-ethnographical research project which is in the phase of analysis and evaluation at the time. VideoCulture is an international project exploring the potential of audio-visual media productions 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 was started by research groups in Germany and England and integrated colleagues from Hungary, the Czech Republic and the United States (Los Angeles, New York)<sup>4</sup>. The project is sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the Arts, Baden-Württemberg.

The fieldwork for the project is carried out in schools and within “informal” settings of youth work. Young people aged between fourteen and nineteen, from a range of social backgrounds, are enabled

to produce, exchange and analyse thematically-oriented video productions. After having finished their videotapes, the groups exchange them and try to interpret those produced in the partner countries; these responses are gathered by means of interviews, written reports and multimedia questionnaires. Digital technology is used during the phase of post-production. The following describes the concept on which the international project group agreed at the beginning:

#### *Structural Conditions*

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 videotapes themselves should not exceed three minutes in length. The young people work on common topics which are closely related to the cultural needs of the age-group, and which can be visualised without a high standard of technical expertise ("being young" and "opposites attract"). The aim is to express these topics by means of image, music, body language and – as far as possible – without spoken language. At the beginning of the video workshops, the instructor presents only a small set of basic video aesthetics in a playful way. The group members do not have to have any prior experiences in video production. The emphasis is put on maximising the potential for an open and creative work which reflects the intentions of the young people in all its varieties and limitations. The videos are produced by groups from different social backgrounds (both socially disadvantaged and "middle class" milieus); and the students are encouraged to produce a collective "group statement".

#### *The research assignment*

It is the task of the researchers to observe and to document the forms of symbolic processing involved and to analyze 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 between the various research sites. The important phase of post-production is partly recorded on video. Once the productions have been exchanged, each group writes or records its interpretations of the "partner films" by using a short questionnaire. 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 asked for their responses as well, without being provided with contextual information. All of this material will be analyzed, particularly focusing on the following questions:

1. To what extent is it possible to investigate forms of a trans-cultural, audio-visual symbolic language by producing videotapes with groups of young people from different language areas and symbolic milieus?
2. Which styles of a symbolic representation and understanding are involved in the filming process, in the production 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?

The University of Education in 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 35 video films have been produced since then. The analysis of the material (comparative case studies) will be finished by the end of the year 2000 and the report will be published the year after<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Reflections**

The conception of "Youth research on video self-productions" does not claim to constitute a comprehensive record of adolescent's lives, nor does it overlook critical aspects which are connected to young people's audio-visual self-productions. Youth research on video self-productions takes a new approach to research and it is still in the phase of development. I would like to mention some aspects of this matter based on previous experiences.

#### **Quality and validity of self-produced videos as the source of scientific knowledge**

Analyzing “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*, e.g. 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 on video self-productions” 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 empathize, they must be skilful teachers and well-versed in film aesthetic, in order to

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

“Youth research on video self-productions” is interested in the *subjective* modes of expression that are already present – in their variety, but also in their disjointedness. A research project that would use professional filmmaking 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 visualized 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.

Many experiences acquired in other projects of video-educational youth research show that an aesthetic and educational *training* is essential for the success of the project. The furthering of subject-oriented concepts of expression goes beyond letting young people to just take the camera and start filming. Dependent on the concrete film genre and the concrete formulation of a question, specific suggestions and help is required, and it should not be imparted in a directive, but rather in a sensitive way. In order to, for example, be able to express pictorial imaginations in a symbolic way, it is important to have a knowledge of an audio-visual language and of the meaning of subtexts. In Germany, it is especially Röll who has pointed out this important dimension and presented practical conceptions in his approach of a perception- and symbol-oriented media education (Röll 1998). The project “VideoCulture” concerned itself with this dimension and in several workshops developed new concepts of furthering symbolic creativity.

Despite the support that was being provided, 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 behave (stimulation, transference etc) should be included as well.

### **Hermeneutics in video self-productions**

We know from previous studies that it is important to observe and describe the *context of conceptualisation* in order to understand symbolisations 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. By reflecting on experiences made in the Munich pilot study, Schorb emphasised vigorously that “the phase of evaluation and its processes of interaction [...] was of decisive importance for the process of research” (Schorb 1995: 227). 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 more into account and by employing associative methods. A combination of associative-imaginative, intuitive and logical, analytical 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 take it further from there.

So far, the "Youth research on video self-productions" approach has mainly used *communication-through-dialog* methods. For instance, various members of the research team (with and without contextual information) are involved in interpreting the video productions. A further possibility is to involve the young people themselves: they make their remarks on particular sequences and symbolizations (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 of adolescent culture in the video films<sup>6</sup>.

### **Modes of "self-productions by video"**

The development of the methodical approach also depends on the differentiation of those concepts in which video is used within the context of adolescent self-productions. Against the background of previous projects, I shall distinguish among the following modes:

#### *Group oriented video-documentaries*

This mode corresponds to the "documentary video portraits" approach, designed in the Dresden study. Within this approach young people create "notepad films" ("camera stylo") on ordinary activities in their living environments. They just have the camera running in typical situations and produce group related self-portrayals about their situation, their imaginations and desires. They get a chance to speak for themselves, they comment on situations and run interviews. The video films can also be produced together with the researchers (dialogic method – the film as a joint "third thing"). Often, the youth's imagined practical application of these films is to verbally express their own themes and needs to the local public (youth political dimension) and to create their own adolescent audiences. By this, research can yield unique insights into youth cultural milieus, as well as forms of communication and interaction. These productions involve verbally and physically expressed symbolizations, as well as signs of the surrounding which offer a large variety of word and image material. "Group oriented video-documentaries" are an important methodical concept for the practical youth- and media-ethnographical research.

#### *Video-diaries*

In contrast to group or clique related video-documentaries, video-diaries are produced by *individual* adolescents. Several sub-modes are possible:

- The initial ideas might be *written diary entries* which young people make into a film. These films can contain fictitious as well as documentary dimensions. Personal thoughts and emotions are the basis (biographical approach). The audio-visual narration of these thoughts and emotions involves writing, speaking, image and sound. Additional role-plays are also possible (re-enacting experiences), as well as productions which pick up the day-to-day experience and assimilate it in an audio-visual way. Regarding the comments of individual adolescents, they should be encouraged to give free rein to their associations. There are additional possibilities of processing the image material in the post-production.
- Documentary videos are another way of recording *ongoing, every day processes*, as well as integrating interviews with friends and relatives and self-made camera statements ("*visual narratives*"). In one project report, Rich and Chalfen very impressively show how the method of "visual narratives" helped research to a better understanding of children who suffer from asthma. All participants were trained in the basic fundamentals of operating video camcorder, similar to the method developed by Worth and Adair (1972) and Chalfen (1981): "Camcorder training was designed to give the participants competence in the technical aspects of shooting video without

teaching visual style or composition, video-making techniques, or otherwise influencing the way that they saw and portrayed their lives" (Rich and Chalfen 1999: 51). I selected this aspect from the interesting and extensive report, because it points out one fundamental difference to most projects run in Germany: the renunciation of *creative* support during the designing of self-productions. Rich and Chalfen try to guarantee consequently subject-oriented concepts of audio-visual self-representation. However, I doubt that it is possible to strictly separate techniques and aesthetics. It may be that, when using a documentary-narrative style, research can more considerably keep aesthetic suggestions to itself, as if it was working on collage-like productions. In my opinion, a communication process in the form of an open dialog is crucial to reflect the young people's intentions and symbolic dimensions on the basis of their own material.

### *Collage-like video films*

This concept of self-production is particularly suitable for expressing emotions, moods and fantasies. In an associative-intuitive method, ideas can be developed (brainstorming), sounds and images can be collected and fit together to a sound-image-collage in a non-linear way. This is not about 'simple' concepts of representing the realities of day-to-day life, but rather about experiences of aesthetic breaks and complexities. It is the collaborator's task to not only impart technical, but mainly aesthetic fundamentals as well, so that the adolescents are able to gain aesthetic-symbolic skills. One example from the VideoCulture project: "The young people receive a list of abstract terms which are not 'filmable' as such (e.g. emotions such as love, hate, joy, grief etc). They are supposed to look for images that go well with these terms. The young people are encouraged to reflect on how a certain topic can be presented in an 'indirect' way. They have to find objects and situations which are related to the topic. By doing this, they have both, the possibilities of using conventional relations (e.g. heart stands for love) as well as solving the task intuitively or in an abstract way." (Maurer, 1999: 73) Collage-like video films intend to be audio-visual self-representations by using *artistic* concepts of expression, and they move within metaphorical fields. They are not aimed at unambiguity and open up beneficial modes of expression for youth cultural search movements. In order to motivate and enable young people in the context of research projects to create such productions, collaborators are needed who impart aesthetic fundamentals on the basis of a life-related symbolic comprehension. A rigid orientation towards specific genres and iconographical systems obstructs the media-ethnographical access to youth's symbolic worlds. Therefore, the precise documentation of the situations of communication and interaction between youth and collaborators is particularly important<sup>7</sup>.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The term "symbolic milieu" comes from the art-sociological works of Segerstedt (1947) and Paulsson (1955) who intensively examined the interrelation of the sense of belonging together, symbolic forms and social structures. By doing so, they stressed the social influences on visual and sensual forms of reception. My reflections on social-aesthetics were also inspired by Chalfen's sociovidistic approach (Chalfen, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Comp. within the field of education: the article by Su Braden (1999) about video films produced by social minorities in the UK. These films were supposed to encourage local initiatives from the viewpoint of these rather poor people.

<sup>3</sup> "Social Videography" was one of the projects which were scientifically evaluated in context of the "program for action". This evaluation was organized by the Institute for Social Education and Social Work at the Technical University of Dresden. My task was to develop the conception of "Social Videography" (advice). The field work on the scene, as well as the evaluation of the project, was carried out by collaborators and students of the University Dresden.

<sup>4</sup> German project-team (researchers): Prof. Dr. Horst Niesyto (project-concept and co-ordinator), Prof. Dr. Renate Müller, Peter Holzwarth, Björn Maurer and Margrit Witzke (University of Ludwigsburg). International partners (main contacts): Prof. Dr. David Buckingham (University of London), Dr. Andrea Karpati (University of Budapest), Jana Hnilicova (Prague), Dr. JoEllen Fisherkeller (University of New York), Gina Lamb (Video artist, Los Angeles).

<sup>5</sup> Previous publications on the project: Buckingham/Harvey 1998, Niesyto 1999, Müller 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Within this context, also compare the reflections on the cultural-sociological hermeneutics of images by Müller-Doohm (1993).

<sup>7</sup> An additional concept are *short feature films*. Adolescents like to fall back on this genre – known from cinema and TV – in order to "fill" it with their own meanings. In particular within these films, there is often a gap between the intentions and the design of the self-production. Young people also like to produce a *mix* of clip- and movie-like films which involve dramatic (role-) play.

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