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VideoCulture: an Introduction

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VideoCulture was an international research project, which set out to explore the potential of audio-visual media production as a means of intercultural communication. The project investigated the ways in which young people from different countries produce, exchange and interpret video productions. The research aimed to discover whether there are any forms of transcultural audio-visual language in these productions, and how young people's competencies in media production might be developed and enhanced.

VideoCulture was an intercultural project in so far as the youth groups involved – which came from different countries, language areas and social and cultural backgrounds – exchanged video films with young people from other countries and other social and cultural milieu. Their interpretations of these films represented an 'encounter with others' and showed in different ways the need for communication on an *aesthetic* level as well as on the level of *meaning*. By focusing on visual and symbolic forms of expression, we hoped to open up new possibilities for young people to express their emotions, moods, experiences and fantasies through images and music.

The project, sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the Arts, Baden Württemberg, and co-ordinated by Professor Horst Niesyto, began in 1997 with groups in Germany (Horst Niesyto and colleagues), England (David Buckingham et al.), Hungary (Andrea Karpati et al.) and the Czech Republic (Jana Hnilicova et al.). In the second phase of the project (1999–2000), colleagues in the United States (JoEllen FisherKeller, New York, and Gina Lamb, Los Angeles) were also involved. In this introduction, we provide a brief outline of the project, together with a sense of the broader theoretical and methodological issues it raises.

Globalisation and communication

It has become commonplace to refer to the globalisation of communication and media cultures. Beyond national borders, new transnational cultures are seen to be emerging, with their own distinctive practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions and lifestyles. These transnational cultures are based on symbolic systems and conceptions of the world which overlay local and national cultures. They are rapidly becoming dominant world cultures, although this does not necessarily mean that local and national cultures are

disappearing: on the contrary, new sets of relationships between the local and the global are beginning to emerge (Featherstone, 1995; Morley and Robins, 1995). The 'gravity' of local and national traditions, and of ethnic and social differences, continues to exist, alongside moves towards media globalisation. Yet in the interplay between 'localism' and 'globalism', new kinds of symbolic communities are growing up. These symbolic communities use global media forms and images, but they re-work and re-shape them in the light of local social experiences. This particularly evident in the case of contemporary youth cultures, where particular styles of music and visual imagery (graphic design, fashion, video) combine to form new aesthetic 'languages' which express and define new social identities.

The extension of interactive media technologies potentially accelerates this process. Yet there is still a significant gap between this enormous technological extension on the one hand and the lack of intercultural exchange on the other. Never before in history we have had so many technological possibilities for global communication; although we have yet to develop ways of using these possibilities, particularly as means of audio-visual self-expression. This new potential raises several significant questions. To what extent can we talk about a transnational or global media language, or languages? How are 'local' media forms and conventions recontextualised in this new global context? And to what extent can new media technologies facilitate the development of new transnational forms of culture and communication?

Media literacy across cultures

In this age of electronic media, 'audio-visual competence' and 'media literacy' are increasingly necessary in order to understand other cultures and symbolic milieux. It is necessary to decode different symbolic systems in order to understand specific 'local' communications. The exchange and understanding of cultural messages and self-representations requires new forms of intercultural, symbolic learning. It may be that in order to understand and to interpret 'foreign' audio-visual expressions, we need a shared set of audio-visual aesthetics. This transcultural audio-visual language may need to go beyond verbal language, and to use other forms of visual, musical and bodily expression. And, of course, developing such a language requires specific kinds of educational interventions.

These issues relate particularly to young people. Many studies suggest that childhood and youth today are 'media-childhood' and 'media-youth' (Buckingham, 2000). Children and young people grow up with media: they are an essential part of their everyday life. For children, audio-

visual language is easier to understand than verbal signs. They can develop abilities and skills in 'media literacy' in a natural way; and they are also more playful and open to experiment with media. Media education seeks to capitalise upon, and to extend, these skills and competencies. Yet there are still many unanswered questions about how young people learn the language of audio-visual media. How do young people 'read' media productions from other cultures? How do they draw on their experience as consumers in their attempts to become producers? And how does the relationship with an audience change how they work?

Youth research using video production

Most research on young people's relationships with media has focused on media consumption. By contrast, there has been very little research on media production by young people. Yet auditory and audio-visual media are increasingly offering young people opportunities for giving free rein to their ideas and emotions. The expressive character, the emotionality and the ambiguity of a great deal of media material exceed the norms and repertoires of behaviour expected by society, which are predominantly orientated towards rationality and effectiveness. Indeed, some critics have argued that we may be witnessing the emergence of a 'media gap' between the generations (Ohmae, 1995). This gap arises partly because the media that are now most popular with young people are inaccessible (at least thematically and aesthetically) to the majority of adults; but it may also reflect a broader disconnection between the 'presentative' forms of symbolisation (such as body language, images and music) favoured by young people and the reliance on 'logocentric' verbal and written modes among older generations.

The implications of this situation need to be more fully recognised by researchers. Broadly speaking, research on youth cultures aims to understand how today's young people assimilate the symbolic resources which are made accessible to them in everyday life, and seeks to examine the modes of expression that they employ in doing so (Willis, 1990). But in the process, it needs to develop new methodological approaches that go beyond verbal and written methods of collecting and recording data. The method of research should, in this sense, follow the object of research. Within qualitative youth and communication research, verbally-based methods such as narrative interviews, group discussions or written field-notes are still predominant. Yet these methods only provide a limited access to the emotional and symbolic aspects of young people's experience, and to media-related modes of expression. Using such methods frequently gives rise to a tension between the language of the young people and that of the researcher. By contrast, the social-aesthetic paradigm that we have used in the VideoCulture research accepts the significance of audio-visual

perception in people's experience of reality, and thereby offers a new perspective for youth research. If we wish to learn about young people's views and perspectives, we should be giving them a chance to express themselves through their own media productions.

To be sure, there have been several analyses of films about young people, but very little attention has been paid to those made by young people themselves. However, research of this kind is now beginning to emerge in the fields of visual sociology and anthropology. In Germany, for example, research projects are being developed in the field of (media) education which give young people the opportunity to express personal and group-oriented images of experience in self-produced video films. Such films typically use bodily and other physical symbols as well as more abstract forms of symbolisation; and in addition to analysing the films themselves, researchers are gathering data about the contextual aspects of the production process (see Niesyto, 2001a). It was this approach that we sought to develop via the VideoCulture project.

Aims and methods

The fieldwork for the project was carried out both in schools and in 'informal' settings such as youth clubs and community arts centres. Groups of young people, aged between fourteen and nineteen, were enabled to produce, exchange and interpret thematically-oriented video productions. The videos were produced by groups from different social backgrounds (both socially disadvantaged and 'middle class' milieux). The international project team compiled selected video films on sampler tapes, which were then sent to the production groups in all countries; and the young people then attempted to interpret the video films of the 'partner' groups.

In devising the project, we decided to impose certain conditions and constraints on the young people's productions, not least in order to ensure a degree of comparability. The young people involved were to have no prior experience of video production. They were brought together in workshops lasting no more than the equivalent of five days, and given a basic introduction to the medium, and to the main elements of filming and post-production (S-VHS cameras and digital editing were used). They were then invited to produce a short video film, of no more than three minutes in duration. They were given a few relatively open set themes – such as 'Being Young' and 'Opposites Attract' – although they were also permitted to select a theme or title of their own. The goal was to express the theme through images, music, body-language, and – as far as possible – without verbal language. Beyond this, the tutors or facilitators were asked to let the work be guided by the young people's own needs for self-expression, and to provide support and help

as required. The goal was not professional filming: we were interested in identifying the existing media literacy of young people in all its varieties and limitations – which in our view should precede the attempt to define the competencies that might be developed through media education.

Several methods were used to record and analyse what took place. Participant observation of the workshops themselves focused on the production processes, on the communication among the young people and on conversations between them and the tutors or facilitators. In some contexts, an open questionnaire was used to gather individual impressions and interpretations of the finished 'partner-films'; while in other contexts, this was achieved through group discussions, which were subsequently transcribed and exchanged. Some other groups of young people were also asked for their responses, without being provided with contextual information; and in some instances, outside experts were asked to write reports about the videos, also without any contextual information. In an additional project, Professor Renate Müller questioned 134 8th-grade students from different types of schools in the Stuttgart area using a multimedia questionnaire: the students saw selected video films from the project, and the computer recorded their responses using semantic differentials as well as continuous response (Müller 2000, 2001). Finally, the video films themselves were analysed, using a range of criteria developed from the young people's own interpretations, and focusing largely on aspects of image, sound and montage.

Ludwigsburg University developed the concept and began the project at the end of 1997 with eight pilot films in Germany; and the international project group was established in February 1998. Sixteen video films emerged from the first international field phase. The international project group chose six of them for a sampler: Ganxtermovie (Budapest), The Contradiction (Prague), Freedom (Reinheim, Germany), Fresh Memories (Ludwigshafen, Germany), Overdose (Budapest) and Equilibrium (London). Between the end of 1998 and spring 1999, eleven further video films were produced of which again six were selected for a sampler: Love (Ludwigsburg, Germany), Angel and Devil (Prague), Our Life (Freiburg, Germany), Push to Pull (London), Self Destruct (Los Angeles) and Joy and Grief (Karlsbad, Germany). Both samplers represented a mixture of topics, film-styles, and social and gender backgrounds.

Research Questions

To sum up, the project addressed the following three questions:

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

A full report of the project, with an accompanying CD-Rom featuring the video productions themselves and some of the accompanying data, will shortly be published in German (Niesyto, 2001b) and disseminated via the internet. In this special issue of the Journal of Educational Media, we present three small-scale case studies that address different aspects of our key questions. We accept that case study research of this nature is contextually specific, and that it is difficult to use it to establish proven generalisations. Nevertheless, each of the case studies involves systematic contrasts and comparisons, which enable us to generate broader insights. David Buckingham and Issy Harvey focus primarily on production, examining two contrasting video films made during the pilot phase of the project and the broader educational issues they raise. JoEllen Fisherkeller and her colleagues focus on reception, looking at how groups of youth in New York City responded to a range of VideoCulture productions, and the implications of this in terms of intercultural communication. Peter Holzwarth and Björn Maurer address the issue of 'symbolic creativity', through their analysis of the aesthetic dimensions of one of the German productions, entitled Love (Die Liebe). Finally, Horst Niesyto offers an overview of the theoretical and emthodological issues raised by the project, and a summary of key findings.

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