

## VideoCulture – main findings

The VideoCulture project addressed the following key 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?

In this conclusion, I consider the broad findings of the project under these three headings, and seek to draw out some of the broader implications for future research and educational practice.

### Transcultural languages

The project did not begin from the assumption that there was such a thing as a canon of 'grammatical rules' in relation to audio-visual media. On the contrary, we set out in a more inductive way, to track down transcultural elements within the process of symbolic production (that is, the production of the video films) as well as the process of symbolic comprehension (the interpretation of the video films). Within the context of VideoCulture, the term 'transcultural' referred to the symbolic worlds and aesthetic modes used by young people which enabled communicative exchange. The term 'intercultural' referred to the actual communication that took place through the video films produced by young people from other countries and other social and cultural milieux.

The evaluation of the data relating to symbolic comprehension (open questionnaires, group discussions, multimedia questionnaires) generated findings on a series of issues, ranging from problems of comprehension and alternative constructions of meaning, through to similarities and differences both in terms of interpretation and in terms of the producers' original intentions. The adolescents involved in the project were very enthusiastic about interpreting and engaging with the video films produced by other groups. In doing so, they used very different styles of interpretation. While it is difficult to make generalisations here, several conclusions can be drawn:

- There were transcultural elements of symbolic comprehension which were situated on the level of 'symbolic feeling' rather than of 'symbolic consciousness'. This was a result of three main aspects of the work:
  - The VideoCulture productions did not intend to impart information: the expression of emotions, moods, experiences and fantasies was more important. From the beginning, the sensory level was much more directly engaged.
  - The orientation towards pictorial and musical representations rather than verbal language meant that many ambiguous symbols were produced.
  - The video films were beginners' productions, which were not very complex in terms of their mastery of symbolic language. In terms of comprehension, this sometimes led to frustrations and logical 'breaks'.
- Initially, we were quite uncertain as to whether the young people would be able to gain a means of access to each other's video films. This would only be possible if the young people were attracted by the video on at least one of the following levels: thematic-cognitive, cinematic-aesthetic or emotional-intuitive. Of course, these three levels cannot be separated from each other; but each of them involves a different kind of evaluation. The experience of the project suggests that the

concept of comprehension must not be restricted to thematic-cognitive processes of comprehension. This is indicated particularly by the German case-studies written by Holzwarth and Maurer (2001) and Witzke (2001), as well as from the multimedia questionnaires developed by Müller (2001).

- On the thematic-cognitive level, the subjective making of meaning seems to be particularly related to the possibility of recognising personal experiences and forms of knowledge within the text. Video films such as Love, Fresh Memories, Joy and Pain and Equilibrium focus on themes which are very relevant for young people in all countries: shared experiences with friends, relationships, friendship, being in love, lovesickness, pain. Other films such as Ganxtamovie, Gangsta-Power, Self-Destruct, The Angel and the Devil, Our Life and Overdose deal with conflict, violence, social exclusion and drugs. Because of their youth-cultural relevance, these themes provided a kind of 'anchorage' for the young people's own meaning-making, despite the fact that the films were also biographically, socially and situationally specific.
- On a cinematic-aesthetic level, we observed that there were several video films which offered thematic 'anchorages' to the young people, but also provoked frustrations and problems of comprehension at the level of cinematic representation. These were mostly productions which exhibited logical 'breaks', to do with the omission of particular details and/or problems with dramatic form (for example, in terms of representing time). Among these 'breaks' there were also symbols whose semantic content depended upon a knowledge of the specific cultural context from which they came. In contrast, the use of universal symbols which convey similar meanings irrespective of the cultural context had a beneficial effect in terms of comprehension (see the analysis by Holzwarth and Maurer 2001).
- On the emotional-intuitive level, in several case-studies there was a clear relationship between enjoying the film and understanding the film. In particular, the use of familiar musical pieces served to express certain feelings and moods. However, within the interpretations there were different judgments regarding the use of 'found' music: some criticised this for lacking 'originality' and for imitating pop-cultural genres. In this area in particular, connections between individual preferences and broader youth-cultural orientations were clearly recognisable.
- In several cases, it was clear that the young people had a mixture of different expectations and attitudes with regard to interpreting these 'other' video films. On the one hand, they wanted to rediscover the familiar; but on the other, they wanted to discover unfamiliar things, in the interests of authenticity and originality. As Holzwarth and Maurer suggest, films such as Love which offer a 'structured openness' seem to offer a greater degree of access to interpretation within the context of trans-cultural communication. Likewise, Buckingham and Harvey (2001) established in their initial case-study that, in general, young people preferred 'open' texts to 'closed' texts. They preferred films that allowed a 'play with meaning' to those which sought to impose moral messages or warnings by means of the wagging finger.
- At the same time, it was apparent in several instances that both producers and audiences felt the need for more 'clarity' and 'closure' in terms of the message. Thus Hnilicova (2001) indicated that most of the young people in Prague preferred films with a 'clear ending' and an unambiguous message; and that more open-ended films made them feel uncertain. Hnilicova explained this attitude in relation to these young people's socialisation: because of their previous education, they were used to rather straightforward methods and had not learnt to deal with ambiguities. Among the youth in New York, Fisherkeller and her colleagues (2001) also found that there was an interest in clear messages. Besides influences at school, she refers to commercial TV genres (sitcoms, soaps, advertisements) which in many cases convey a definite moral or message. In this context, it would seem important for media education to promote young people's willingness to deal with such ambiguities in meaning; although it is also important to recognise the value of the different kinds of cultural capital the young people have at their disposal.
- Finally, it is important to consider the connection between the producers' intention, their chosen genre and their conception of their audience. As Buckingham and Harvey (2001) point out: '... the mere fact that there was a real audience out there somewhere – and indeed that they themselves were a real audience for somebody else's productions – seems to have helped them evaluate their own work in a much more thoughtful and critical way.' As their case studies suggest, the

young people were looking for generic links within other video films in their attempts to discover the producers' intentions.

### **Interpreting differences**

As we have indicated, the video films produced during the project involved several different modes of expression: montage/MTV-style films, narratives, and various combinations of the two. The stylistic differences are partly a reflection of the particular contexts in which they were produced, and of the individuals or groups involved; and they are also influenced by the young people's existing knowledge and previous experience of media genres, as well as factors such as education, social background, age, gender and cultural specificities. These will now be considered in turn.

### ***Media-cultural influences***

Several of the productions use styles of symbolisation which clearly refer to global media cultures, indicating the relatively close connection between media and youth-cultural orientations. This mainly applies to the use of popular music, as well as the imitation of genre-patterns known from Hollywood movies and video clips. Within the constraints of the situation, the young people tried to make use of these 'third cultures' in order to express their individual concerns and their feelings about life. Here, the styles ranged from experimental videos (Equilibrium) to close imitations of international music and film productions (e.g. the Hip Hop video Our Life or the crime narrative Ganxtamovie).

### ***Education and social background***

The first London case-study (Buckingham and Harvey 2001) suggests that there is a relation between the types of cultural capital available to young people and their modes of aesthetic production. Young people from working-class backgrounds may be inclined to favour narrative modes of representation, combined with movie-like scenes; while those from middle-class backgrounds may favour a more 'aesthetic', montage-based approach. However, the film Equilibrium is somewhat untypical of the videos in the project as a whole. The case-study of Love presented by Holzwarth and Maurer shows how two girls from a secondary modern school, without any previous experience of video production, created a meaningful film that combines concrete-representational and abstract symbolisation in a poetic-lyrical form.

However, there are also several indications within the field of film interpretation which suggest that young people with higher education have fewer difficulties in discussing authorial intentions and their creative realisation, without being influenced by their own individual taste (Witzke 2001). Hnilicova (2001) observed that with the young people from Prague, there was a connection between their own symbolic modes of expression and a sympathy for corresponding features in other productions. Holzwarth and Maurer suggest that the social-cultural similarities between the producers of the film Die Liebe and adolescents from Los Angeles who were very attracted to the film may account for the fact that their interpretations were particularly close to the producers' intentions. These similarities in symbolic milieu - that is, similarities in social-emotional and social-aesthetic orientations – point to the fact that there are close relations between youth-cultural symbolic styles and social-educational conditions.

### ***Differences in relation to age and gender***

The young people from Prague were the youngest VideoCulture group (age 13 – 15). Their reactions revealed the relevance of differences in relation to age. For example, they found it hard to engage with the symbolic style of Equilibrium because the content as well as the expressive and complex modes of presentation were too far away from their own experiences and preferences.

However, differences in age played a subordinate role, especially in comparison with gender-related factors. Out of 17 films included on both international samplers, eight were produced by mixed groups, three by female-only groups, one by one female working alone, and five by all-male groups. The productions themselves as well as the interpretations revealed gender-specific differences. Thus, a specific evaluation of the German films showed that the female groups tended to work in an integrated way. They represented their chosen topics joyfully, emotionally and playfully. In contrast, the male

participants tended to work seriously, with a 'cool', technical approach. Witzke and Müller (2001) point out that girls expressed more emotions, and also more weaknesses and fears, within their films, while boys were more interested in external representations and appearances.

Likewise, when it came to the interpretation of the video films produced in other countries, the German team noticed some gender-specific differences. Thus, boys showed less willingness to get too deeply involved in videos dealing with emotional topics and modes of representation (Witzke and Müller 2001). A comparative evaluation of two film interpretations (*Equilibrium*, *Ganxtamovie*) showed that girls were more likely to develop an emotional response, whereas boys put more emphasis on formal aspects (Pilz 2000). First results of interviews using the multimedia questionnaire also indicate that gender-related differences had greater impact on preferences for certain videos and modes of symbolisation than differences of education, age and culture. Müller (2001) showed that viewers' attraction to certain audio-visual symbols seems to vary according to a typology of 'viewing styles' – so that boys, for example, were much more inclined to favour action- and violence-related material.

### ***Culture-specific and ethnic differences***

Several of the video films contained symbolic or pictorial representations which can only be understood in terms of the cultural contexts from which they derive. This sometimes led to greater frustration concerning the comprehension of a film, or made the film difficult to engage with. Ethnic and culture-specific differences could also be observed in connection with assumptions about 'cultural ownership'. Thus, young people from Los Angeles and London criticised the Hip Hop video made by one German group (*Our Life*) and argued that this was a 'dull' and 'implausible' imitation of an American model. Young people from New York and Prague came to a more differentiated judgement: the adolescents from Prague mainly noticed the lack of 'self-composed music' within the film. In fact, there were connections between the film and the real-life situation of its producers (Witzke 2001), but for many young people the symbolic representation in this film was not convincing or 'authentic' enough.

Altogether, ethnic features played a subordinate role during the examination of the video films. Irrespective of national and ethnic identities, most of the young people were interested in learning about the 'authentic' features of young people from other countries. The clichés of global 'third cultures' were only accepted if a subjective 'tone' was still perceivable and combined with personal meanings.

### **Pedagogy**

Symbolic production and symbolic comprehension cannot be understood regardless of the pedagogic style of the tutor or facilitator. His or her preferred modes of expression usually have a clear influence on the aesthetics of students' videos. Although the project aimed to achieve an 'empathetic' style, and to foster a 'student-centred' development of styles and symbols among the young people, this orientation could not be successfully realised in several workshops. The interaction between the adolescents and project collaborators was documented and analysed, but the project did not have enough resources to sufficiently sensitise and train all the collaborators in the participating countries in the intended approach.

Even so, the experiences of the production workshops clearly show that it is possible for young people – with the help of a qualified tutor – to produce meaningful montage- or collage-like video films within a few days. For example, Holzwarth and Maurer (2001) describe how they attempted to support aesthetic creativity in a playful manner. They argue in favour of an associative, exploratory approach which encourages non-linear forms of symbolisation, rather than narrative. However, this depends upon tutors or facilitators who can give appropriate advice, who provide aesthetic input on different levels and in different situations and who make sure that there is a constructive working atmosphere.

However, even an empathetic tutor reaches certain limits. When they produce a video film for the first time, there are bound to be constraints on what young people can achieve: they may possess 'passive' media knowledge, but they are only able to transform this into 'active' knowledge to a limited extent. For this, fairly long-term learning opportunities are needed, which give sufficient time to

experiment and practise. 'Creativity' is not innate: symbolic expression with media has to be learned and developed in the same way as cultural modes of expression within other contexts. The VideoCulture project was able to show that young people have the potential to 'activate' their media knowledge, to use existing media genres and to combine them with personal topics and modes of expression, fairly spontaneously. However, well-directed aesthetic inputs are also necessary in order to help young people to communicate more successfully.

One more specific issue that the project raised here was to do with the role of music. It became clear that the advice of tutors should not merely be concerned with the visual dimension, but also with sound. Our analysis suggests that media teachers need a far better knowledge of this area if they are to provide young people with creative alternatives. Thus, Münch and Bommersheim (2001) wrote in an expert report on the use of music in VideoCulture productions that the adolescents know about and use a large number of techniques relating to music and sound. At the same time, however, it became clear that these techniques are still quite limited in relation to the potential possibilities within this field. Münch and Bommersheim particularly noticed the stereotypical use of musical genres and the extensive renunciation of an audio language that would stand out against the visual level in order to 'speak for itself'. Young people's knowledge as 'consumers' of popular music does not automatically result in an active and productive use of music in their own work. Accurate input, exercises and suggestions are needed in order to use music, in conjunction with the visual level, as an independent form of symbolisation.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the potential contribution of the audience. In many instances, it was important for the young people's motivation to present the productions to friends at the immediate location as well as in the context of the international 'video-exchange'. For some groups the project became a 'window to the world' (Witzke 2001) – a means of representing themselves and gaining an insight into the world of other young people. This was mainly observed among young people from Prague, as well as in one German group of disabled young people. The fact that the audience was anonymous and unknown did not represent a problem for any of the young people, who were mainly concerned with aesthetic feedback (see Buckingham and Harvey 2001). The examination of the 'partner-films' often prompted a more self-critical view of their own productions and – as a result – a greater respect for other productions.

While for most young people the VideoCulture project was a welcome opportunity to produce their first video, the selection and exchange of the productions proved to be a prolonged process. Future projects should find ways of publishing these productions immediately via the internet. In this way, they would not be exposed to a selection process of any kind; and this could enhance the communicative dimension of the project's approach, which would be definitely in the young people's interest. As Gina Lamb, a video-artist from Los Angeles, concluded: 'If this project continues, it would make the most sense if the videos were streamed on the internet with message boards for each video where the youth can post their comments... Opening up access through the internet will allow the project to grow more rapidly and entice youth to use technology as a creative tool for dialogue rather than being receivers of entertainment' (Lamb 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The VideoCulture project developed and tested a new approach to media education research on an international level. Unlike other projects in this field, the primary aim was not to facilitate intercultural 'face to face' meetings or the exchange of 'video-letters' (for example, in combination with foreign language learning). On the contrary, our main concern was to identify the potential for 'presentative' or 'symbolic' means of expression and communication by means of image and music. Our case-studies show that intercultural communication with video is possible, even if the 'comprehension' of video films is not reduced to a matter of cognitive processing and unambiguous modes of comprehension. 'Transculturality' should be regarded positively, as a way of encouraging subjective meaning-making and the perception of differences and ambiguities.

VideoCulture was a pilot project which broke new ground. Thanks to the support of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs as well as other institutions in the other countries involved, it was possible to run numerous workshops and document each of them. However, international projects of this kind need substantial resources if they are to ensure a genuine sharing of

different approaches and research traditions; and in this case, this was not always possible, since the project was primarily conceived as a practical enterprise, and had only modest means for more intensive research. Nevertheless, our experiences and results do provide some interesting reflections on our research questions, and some hints on how to organise future projects within this field.

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**Note:** At various points in the text reference is made to a book publication on the VideoCulture project, which was not published in 2001 but in 2003: Niesyto, Horst (2003) (Hrsg.): VideoCulture – Video und interkulturelle Kommunikation. Grundlagen, Methoden und Ergebnisse eines internationalen Forschungsprojekts. München: kopaed. ISBN: 978-3-935-686-18-1 (376 pages + + CD-ROM).