

# VideoCulture in Los Angeles

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I see the video medium as a flux that connects me and the youth that I work with to each other and to our community. The process of video production takes us out of the schools/institutions and onto the streets to interact directly and immediately with people in our community. Social documentation is an opportunity to have an exchange of ideas around specific, directed topics that concern community. In the large, sometimes alienating, city of Los Angeles these kind of dialogues don't happen unless you create them. Video making takes us to places we have never been in our own city and creates connections with peoples and cultures that are forever new (i.e. some of the youth that I work with have lived in Los Angeles all of their lives and have never been to see the ocean).

When I first heard about the VideoCulture Project I was very excited, because here was an opportunity to extend our video dialogue and community across an ocean with youth from many other countries. I wasn't sure though, if the youth would share my same enthusiasm. I was pleased to find out that, not only were they interested, once I showed them the first short video from the VideoCulture reel, their interest and excitement grew. There are several factors about the premise of the VideoCulture project that immediately grab young people's attention.

## **Youth Culture – the “look“ of the videos Strangely familiar while commonly different**

The VideoCulture tapes are by youth, so even though there are cultural differences, a youth audience immediately take notice of commonalities in international youth culture - music, clothing, graffiti, etc. (the youth in the US particularly notice American pop culture exports). At first this realisation of common interest surprises them (youth in the US have very few images of youth in Europe, so this is often their first experience of knowing that youth in other places like the same music and clothing that they do). The second part of their reaction is noticing things about the youth and environment in the videos that are different from their own experience. So there is a high level of intrigue in discovering cultural mores that are totally unfamiliar mixed with elements that are very familiar.

## **Youth Culture - the “content“ of the videos**

Once the audience “gets over“ the initial reaction of clothing, music etc., the youth are very open to the content of the videos. Since all of the projects are “youth driven”, for and by youth, about youth issues such as friends, relationships, loneliness, drugs, violence, and freedom, most of the youth audience can either personally relate directly to the issue or at least understand the subject of the videos. This relevancy results in a healthy discussion, because youth are comfortable talking about these issues.

## **Youth Culture - the length of the videos**

VideoCulture limits the length of the videos to under three minutes which is very conducive to the teen attention span, especially when experiencing something new. It is perfect timing to present an idea and then allow the youth audience time to comment on each video. When they are done discussing, they are anxious to go on to the next video as they know already it will be short and to the point.

## **Visual Literacy - VideoCulture and how to watch video “differently“**

The VideoCulture project is interesting to me as a way to expand on young people's ability to decode and decipher the use of visual symbol and metaphor in video. As an artist and independent producer I am often trying to get youth to think outside the “box“ of commercial television and the restrictive forms of linear narrative storytelling (in movies). In each youth production workshop, I first like to show youth examples of artists' works and independent videos that challenge the way that youth think about the video medium as a creative form. In doing so I have to choose artists' works carefully so as not to intimidate or “turn off“ a young audience to alternative video making.

What I like about the VideoCulture project is that the video reel comes with a built-in premise that each video is from youth that don't speak the language of the audience - so it's a given that the audience may not understand the video at first. This is okay because the premise or the challenge of the project is to figure out what each video says to each youth that is watching. This group process of “figuring out“ each video takes the pressure off the youth feeling that they are already supposed to know what the video means. Suddenly, they are all talking about what this element symbolises or how the music adds to this mood, etc.; and no one is worried about “getting it“ because we all came into the project at the same level. By taking the pressure off, youth are more able to relax with the visual symbols and metaphors in these works through the process of discussion: after all, they are critiquing works made by other youth their own age, as opposed to those of an adult artist that they are afraid to criticise, or whose subject they can't relate to.

So I find that the VideoCulture project can be a good way to introduce visual literacy. Since some of the VC videos are unsophisticated in their approach and some are more complex in their conceptualisation and use of visual juxtaposition, you can begin the analysis with the more simply constructed videos to build confidence and open up the dialogue at the start.

## **Specifics of Video Culture Analysis with Los Angeles Teens**

I showed the VideoCulture videos to two very different demographic groups in Los Angeles; one at a very wealthy, exclusive private high school and one at a public high school in a low income neighbourhood. I found the basic elemental responses and interest in the project to be very similar. In both groups the strongest initial reactions were to pop youth cultural similarities. Second came reactions to content. Certain issues seemed to affect the youth overall more deeply: videos dealing with emotional issues, freedom, loneliness, relationships, yin/yang, good and evil, etc. Other videos became strange or funny - drug videos, or chase scenes, for example.

Girls tended to respond more openly and were more interested in the videos produced by other girls.

By far the strongest reaction overall was to a video from Germany that was a rap-music homage to the late LA rapper Tupac Shakur. Youth in East Los Angeles felt a sense of ownership of this rapper's music because he was from *their city* and of *their* culture - they were a little threatened that youth in Europe also felt such a strong connection to this music and so they were very critical of this video. They wondered out loud, "How can teens in Germany understand our ghetto life?". This created a very passionate, lengthy and interesting conversation about US exporting pop culture; ghetto as exotic, racism, poetry and what Tupac's music is really about; and questioning our own motives for criticism.

### **Video Culture Production with Los Angeles Teens**

The Video Culture production workshop in Los Angeles was with upper-middle-class youth at a private high school. We watched and analysed the Video Culture tapes before the students began their own projects. They worked in production groups of two or three. First, they brainstormed their ideas and then presented them to the group. I worked with each group individually to help them with the technical and creative logistics of their projects, but left their ideas intact. They borrowed cameras and shot on their own for the most part. Each group edited their own video on computers with Premiere software.

This group of youth definitely created videos in response to the Video Culture tapes that we screened. Three girls made a video about freedom and restrictions in their lives; being at the brink of adulthood, but still living under the rules of their parents; school, etc. They had liked one of the videos about freedom, made by three girls in Europe, and wanted to expand on this idea from their perspective. A mixed group of two boys and a girl, who were very interested in the whole youth culture exchange possibilities of the project, wanted to create a video that would emblemize their own youth culture - visually demonstrate the essence of who they are, particularly, as teenagers in Los Angeles. One other group of two boys created the video about violence, wanting to show one of the deep seated concerns that youth in the US are facing (this video became more poignant with the many school shootings we have had since its production). The school shooting it is meant to speak of violence begetting self-destruction, and, sadly so, America is killing its youth.

To begin a production project with a built-in, specific audience, creates a specific response. It pushes the use of video into becoming a direct medium for visual dialogue, rather than a means of obeying the strong conventional impulse to tell a linear story to a general audience. Most of the youth that I worked with responded directly to the VC videos/discussions by making issue-driven videos because they now had a desire to "talk back" to the youth in Europe who had sent the videos. VideoCulture is ideal as a first-video project in a production workshop because it sets up an interesting set of parameters within which youth can become very creative whilst utilising video as a direct communication tool.

### **The Future of Video Culture?**

I see Video Culture as a great project to continue. These first two years can be

viewed as just the beginning and somewhat technically clumsy (mailing videos, different formats, etc.). As technologies progress, the internet becomes an obvious choice as a main medium for this project. All of the youth in Los Angeles who were introduced to this project wanted to have direct contact with the youth in other places via email or snail mail. Should this project continue, it would make most sense if the videos were streamed on the internet with message boards for each video where the youth can post their comments. This can take place initially in the workshop setting and later youth can participate on their own, thereby establishing an international community of young media-makers. I feel that the youth lose some of their involvement in the project if there is too much adult intervention. Also, extending the dialogue to non-western cultures will really test the idea of global visual language as the cultural shift is far greater between eastern, western and African countries. Opening up the 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 acting only as receivers of entertainment. Starting with the premise of no spoken or written language really forces youth to explore their creativity and understanding of visual and audio elements in a technological age in which this is increasingly important.

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