VideoCulture

Crossing Borders with Young People's Video Productions

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This article presents findings from an international research project on the use of video for interculutral youth communication, "VideoCulture." Young people from different locales of five Western countries produced and exchanged short videotapes on a range of themes, and their responses to each other's productions were recorded and analyzed. A review of the rationale and methodology for the project frames the presentation of two case studies. One study focuses specifically on how young people as media producers learn the "languages" of video production and how they conceptualize their audience. Another study examines issues of reception, in which ideas about a shared sense of "youth experience" and young people's conceptions of their counterparts in other cultures are both playing key roles. A concluding discussion reviews the multiple and interrelated findings of the entire study and the implications they hold for cross-cultural communication, youth media production, audience interpretation, and media education.

Keywords: *media production; media education; youth research; intercultural communication*

Introduction: Youth Research Using Video Production

The importance of the media in young people's life experiences is well established through research on media consumption (see Buckingham 2000; Fisherkeller 2002). By contrast, there is very little documentation and research on young people as media producers and on youths' interpretations of other youths' media products. Auditory and audiovisual media

increasingly offer young people opportunities to communicate their ideas and feelings using nonverbal and nonprint forms. The expressive, emotional, and ambiguous nature of a great deal of media material expands the norms and repertoires of representation expected by society, which are largely oriented around rationality and effectiveness. In making audiovisual media, do young people detach themselves from the constraints of their immediate social norms and cultural repertoires? In exchanging their media productions, are youths able to establish new forms of contact with youth cultures situated all over the globe?

Several analyses of films about young people exist, but very little attention has been paid to films 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, research projects are being developed in the field of media education that give young people opportunities to express personal and group-oriented experiences in self-produced video films. Such films typically represent the body and other physical forms as well as more abstract forms of symbolization. Besides analyzing the films themselves, researchers are gathering data about the contextual aspects of the production process (see Niesyto 2001). The potential for international exchange within this field is great.

Young people grow up with ever more kinds of media. They are to some extent more autonomous than adults in their uses of media. Some critics argue that we may be witnessing the emergence of a "media gap" between the generations partly because the media that are now most popular with young people are inaccessible, thematically and aesthetically, to the majority of adults. But this gap may also reflect a broader disconnect between "presentational" forms of symbolization (such as body language, images, and music) preferred by many younger generations and the "logo-centric" verbal and written modes relied on by most older generations.

The implications of this situation need to be more fully recognized by researchers. Broadly speaking, research on youth cultures aims to understand how young people assimilate symbolic resources made accessible to them in everyday life and to examine the modes of expression they appropriate in doing so. In the process, research needs to develop new methodological approaches that go beyond verbal and written methods of collecting and recording data and incorporate audiovisual methods as well. 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 provide limited access to the emotional and symbolic aspects of young people's experiences and media-related modes of expression. Verbally based methods frequently give rise to a tension between the language of the young people and that of the researcher. By contrast, the social-aesthetic paradigm that we use in this

project acknowledges the significance of audiovisual communication in people's experiences of reality and offers a new perspective for youth research. To learn about young people's views and perspectives, we should give them opportunities to express themselves through their own media productions, as well as share their creations with other youths.

Video and Global Communication

VideoCulture is a broad-based ethnographic research project that explores the potential of audiovisual media production as a means of communication between young people in different regions. The project began in 1997-98 with research groups in Germany and England and subsequently integrated colleagues in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the United States.[1]

Many media and cultural studies scholars have argued that communication and media cultures transcend national borders. Among the effects of globalization is increased access to media-making technologies by people in diverse cultures and geographical regions. As a result, transnational cultures may be emerging with their own distinctive practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions, and lifestyles (Featherstone 1995). New relationships between the local and the global may be growing, providing their own combinations of social- and media-generated patterns (Niesyto 2001).

Yet there is a gap between enormous technological expansion on one hand and our knowledge of people's actual experiences of transnational or cross-cultural media exchanges on the other. The exchange and understanding of cultural self-representations via audiovisual media forms require new strategies for teaching, learning, and research. To create and interpret "other" audiovisual expressions, perhaps we need to learn and understand some shared sets of audiovisual aesthetics and feelings—some transcultural audiovisual languages that go beyond verbal language—and use forms of visual, musical, and bodily expression. Developing common means and interpretations of expression requires specific educational interventions as well as research designs.

VideoCulture set out to explore these issues through a series of interconnected case studies situated in very different national contexts. The project was originally conceived and developed at Ludwigsburg University in Germany and began implementation at the end of 1997. The concept was to enable groups of young people between the ages of fourteen and nineteen to produce, exchange, and interpret thematically oriented video productions. The youths were selected from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and the project was carried out in both schools and informal settings such as youth clubs and community arts centers. The finished products were then reviewed by the project facilitators. Certain selections

were assembled into sampler tapes, which were then distributed to a variety of sites for inquiry into the reception of these video films by culturally diverse youth audiences.

Following a pilot program in Germany during which eight pilot films were produced, the international project group was established in February 1998. Sixteen video films emerged from the first international field phase, and the international project group chose six of them for a sampler: *Ganxtamovie* (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 other films were produced, out of which six were selected for a second 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 backgrounds.

The project sought to address three main questions:

1. To what extent can we identify a transcultural, audiovisual, symbolic language in videotapes produced by groups of young people from different language areas and symbolic milieus?
2. Which styles of symbolic representation and interpretation are involved in the production process, in the productions themselves, and in the interpretations of these artifacts? To what extent are the symbolic styles and interpretations influenced by education, gender, ethnicity/race, and class background, as well as by the characteristics of the young people's own (available) media cultures?
3. How can transnational or cross-cultural communication via audiovisual (nonverbal, nonprint) forms best be taught?

Method

The project design imposed certain conditions and constraints on the young people's productions, in part to ensure a degree of comparability. The youth participants needed to have no prior experience of video production, and the production event had to last no more than the equivalent of five days. After being given a basic introduction to the medium and to the main elements of filming and postproduction (S-VHS cameras and digital editing), the youths were invited to produce a short video film (no more than three minutes in duration) containing no verbal language. They were given a few relatively open themes—such as "being young" and "opposites attract"—although they were also permitted to select a theme or title of their own. 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.

Several methods were used to record and analyze what took place. Participant observation of the workshops themselves focused on the production processes, communication among the young people, and 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." In other contexts, this was achieved through group discussions that were subsequently transcribed. In an additional project, Professor Renate Müller questioned 134 eighth-grade students from different types of schools in the Stuttgart, Germany, area using a multimedia questionnaire. The students saw selected video films from the project, and a computer recorded their responses using semantic differentials as well as continuous response (Müller 2003). Finally, the video films themselves were analyzed using a range of criteria developed from the young people's own interpretations and focused largely on aspects of image, sound, and montage.

As a start in analyzing our international project and its goals and objectives, we present two case studies. The first, based in London, discusses issues of production, and the second, based in New York, discusses issues of reception.

Researching Production

In the London project, we wanted to build on previous work about young people's uses of media for creative production (e.g., Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994; Buckingham, Grahame, and Sefton-Green 1995). The international dimension of the project enabled us to pay particular attention to how young people develop their senses of audience. Would it make a difference to these young video filmmakers that their work would be seen by other young people and not just by youths in their immediate communities but also in other countries?

As with creative writing, most of what students produce in media classrooms is actually made for an audience of one—namely, the teacher. In principle, enabling students to produce for a "real" (a.k.a. nonteacher) audience can encourage them to think through the choices they make in production and their possible consequences more broadly. Being confronted with audience responses can motivate the student producers to reflect more critically on the relationships between intentions and results. Yet there may be limits to the extent to which students will be able to take account of any audience, however "real." They may have other concerns and motivations that run counter to rationalistic models of "ideal communication." In the context of the school classroom, real audiences inevitably tend to be simulated, or at least very artificially constructed (Buckingham, Grahame, and Sefton-Green 1995, chap. 6). And even in the case of the

VideoCulture project, questions remain about how real the audience might be—particularly if it is an unknown audience from another country that one never expects to meet face to face.

This issue also relates directly to the central question of the VideoCulture project—that is, the question of media language. Is there (or could there ever be) a form of transcultural symbolic language that overcomes cultural and linguistic differences? This is not simply a psychological question that can be addressed through recourse to theories of perception and cognition (cf. Messaris 1995). It is also a question about the social and historical institutionalization of particular linguistic conventions and genres (see Buckingham 1993, chap. 2). At the risk of generalization, it could be argued that the globalization of the media industries has resulted in the dominance of two or three principal "media languages": the "classical" Hollywood style, with its reliance on continuity editing, realism, and invisible narration; the montage-based style of MTV (and some advertising), which draws on a history of avant-garde film aesthetics; and (perhaps) the style of the "art movie," with its more elliptical approach to narration and its self-conscious use of visual symbolism. Rather than expecting young people to spontaneously "discover" a new form of transcultural media language, we should not be surprised if they use those that are already available to them. However, we also need to situate these uses in terms of a sociology of taste cultures (see Bourdieu 1984). Irrespective of the models students are offered by teachers, different social groups may have different cultural competencies that will dispose them toward different forms of media language, as both media consumers and producers.

These are complex issues that are unlikely to be resolved through a small-scale study of this kind. Nevertheless, our experiences in the VideoCulture project do suggest some ways in which the debate can be taken further. In the light of these arguments, we will now discuss two contrasting video films, *Opposites Attract* and *Equilibrium*, made by young people in London as part of the international phase of the project.

Opposites Attract

Opposites Attract (a video film using the theme of the London program as its title) is, in many respects, a typical first exercise in video. The video film tells the story of a black boy and a white girl who meet at a video production course. Initially reluctant to communicate with each other, they eventually start to play around with the camera and finally leave arm in arm as friends. In this video film, there are clear sequences of establishing shots and close-ups, shot–reverse shot patterns, and point-of-view shots. The images are accompanied by a fast drum-and-bass reggae-style soundtrack.

The video film was produced by three young people: Sinead (seventeen, white), Richard (fourteen, black), and Siobhan (fifteen, black). All come from working-class backgrounds. Following a day of basic instruction provided by the tutor, this group spent some time casting around for ideas, using the given theme of "opposites attract." They expressed frustration with the restriction on not using language or dialogue, as they felt this would be needed to convey "a story"; initially, they never considered the possibility of interpreting the assigned theme in a nonnarrative form. Broadly speaking, however, they were pleased with the results ("we've made a *film*!"); the course tutor felt that the group had developed an effective grasp of the "film language" she had set out to teach.

Equilibrium

Equilibrium is a very different kind of video film, constructed in the montage-based style of a music video. The video film focuses on two characters, both white and in their teens: a girl dressed in a white sheet or a feather boa and a boy dressed in a black cape with black mask-like shapes painted around his eyes. Rapidly cut sequences of images feature the couple kissing, close-ups of the girl's eye, the boy's face appearing through a black cloth, a rat licking a stud in the boy's tongue, and the girl's hand being drawn across her face, smearing the eye makeup down her cheek. Several images are reflected in mirrors (sometimes in negative), and the girl frequently looks directly into the camera. In some shots, the boy and the girl are seen lying down, arranged to form a yin-yang symbol. The video film is accompanied by a techno soundtrack, which starts slowly and then speeds up, and the pace of the editing reflects this change of rhythm.

Bea (Beatrice), the producer of this video film, was a middle-class, sixteen-year-old, white female. Like the others, she had not had any previous experience of video production, but she did have other experiences as a performer that were not shared by the other young people. For instance, she had attended extracurricular drama classes since the age of nine and had recently acted in a commercial music video. Because Bea began the course a day late, she missed the tutor's introduction, and she was allowed to work individually. She reported later that when she had heard the theme "opposites attract," she had immediately decided to construct a montage-based music video about the dynamics of a close personal relationship. At an early stage, she produced a storyboard of a series of symbolic images, which remained close to her final edited version. Bea's evaluation of the course was very positive. She commented on enjoying the "freedom" to create her own video film, and in a later interview, she said that her next project would be a twenty-minute "art film," which she planned to produce in the coming summer vacation.

Different Languages?

In terms of "film language," there are several striking differences between these two video films. The group that made *Opposites Attract* set out to produce a narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In this respect, they achieved their goal. The characters have coherent motivations, and one event leads logically to the next. Their production employs the most obvious "rules" or conventions of continuity editing, and there is never any doubt about where the viewer is positioned in time or space. By contrast, Bea set out to produce a nonnarrative, montage-style video film in *Equilibrium*. Several recurrent images are intertwined, although there is no obvious logic about how they are juxtaposed or arranged. While there are "characters" here, we are left to infer a good deal about what motivates them. The pace of the editing relates to the pace of the musical soundtrack, but there is no obvious use of continuity editing or any clear sequence of cause and effect.

Both video films relate fairly explicitly to our given theme of opposites attract. Yet whereas the opposites in the group production are primarily individual personalities, the oppositions in *Equilibrium* are much more abstract and self-consciously symbolic. Interestingly, the group video film was interpreted by other young people who saw it as promoting a "moral" or message—particularly in relation to racial harmony—although in fact the group did not claim this as their overt intention. By contrast, *Equilibrium* specifically aims for an aesthetic response, rather than a singular "meaning." It requires a more intensive form of interpretative "work" on the part of the reader, and it consciously promotes a degree of uncertainty.

Without being unduly schematic, these differences might be understood in terms of the dominant types of film language identified above. Essentially, the group film uses Hollywood film language, while *Equilibrium* uses the montage-based style of MTV—albeit, perhaps, with elements of the self-conscious visual symbolism of the art movie. These differences might be traced to the social and cultural differences between their producers. Bea clearly possesses a form of cultural capital that is unavailable to the other young people here. This is partly a matter of her middle-class background and partly to do with her "subcultural" experiences and identifications. The fact that she had been involved in production as a performer on two previous occasions was also significant, of course. In our interviews with her, Bea presented herself as an artist making a personal statement, although this was also made possible because she was able to work alone. By contrast, the fact that the *Opposites Attract* group had to negotiate their way to an agreed approach effectively militated against a more "personal" style—even if this had been something they had wished to achieve in the first place.

Imagining the Audience

Although the introduction to the project included a brief explanation of the VideoCulture network, there was no explicit discussion among the group about how other young people from different cultures might view their films. It was only on subsequent reflection that the question of audience really became a concern—and this emerged in particular when the group had the opportunity to watch and discuss some of the films produced by other young people involved in the project.

At least initially, Richard and Sinead of *Opposites Attract* were reluctant to accept the suggestion—represented strongly in some of the German students' feedback—that their video film was conveying a "message" about overcoming differences, whether of race or gender. Richard maintained that this social message had not been intentional on their part and that the decision to use a black boy and a white girl was simply a consequence of who was available. As such, audience responses helped them to become aware of a gap between their intentions and the final results; thus, real audiences can play a role in young people's learning about their own media productions.

By contrast, Bea had consciously seen the preparation and production stages of *Equilibrium* as personal and therapeutic—an attempt to express something she felt on an emotional level. As she put it, "I don't really care that much if the audience totally misunderstands it or misinterprets it for themselves, 'cause I don't care—'cause I did it for myself." However, she also said that she had changed to a more distanced stance at the editing stage and made her selections on the basis of which shots might have a visual impact on the audience: "By the time we were editing, I'd done all my film therapy. I was over that (*laughs*) and I just wanted to put across something that would stick in people's minds."

Both in her presentation of her own work and in her reflections on the other young people's tapes, Bea was able to access a quasi-academic discourse of aesthetic appreciation that was not articulated by the other students. For example, she judged the other productions in terms of existing cultural movements ("surreal"), she searched for "symbolism" and philosophical themes ("reality and perception"), she used a somewhat "technical" terminology ("that violin harmony"), and she was able to assume a rational distance both from the productions themselves and from her own responses to them (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, in relation to her own work, she was keen to present herself as an artist with "vision" and "imagination," claiming her video film to be a "personal" statement that was "clear and focused" from the very beginning. In fact, there are some grounds for questioning these claims, since at least some of what she produced came down to accidents in the editing.

Nevertheless, for all the young people here, the experience of watching the other video film productions definitely influenced how they thought about their own—or at least what they were prepared to say about this. There was a kind of "decentering" here: thinking about their own interpretations of other people's productions encouraged them to think about how other people would think about theirs. In particular, it led them to consider the relationship between intentions and results, to recognize that some of their intentions were not clear or had changed as the work progressed, and that some of the outcomes did not correspond to their initial intentions and may even have led to them being misinterpreted. 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 more thoughtful and critical way.

Pedagogic Implications

Equilibrium was received with considerable enthusiasm by our fellow researchers. When we came to select productions for the sampler that was subsequently used with all the groups, there was no hesitation in including it. As we shall see below, the responses of the young people who saw it were fairly diverse, but the adults, in general, rated it very highly. Bea's video film was also chosen as the focus for an online chat session between a group of German undergraduate students and Bea herself, and Bea subsequently received what can only be described as fan mail from this group. Interestingly, much of this subsequent discussion focused on the "symbolism" of the video film, to an extent that even Bea herself found rather pretentious and amusing.

We would like to suggest a couple of notes of caution about this. First, it should be emphasized that unlike many of the other young people in our study, Bea is middle class and a high achiever in terms of formal education. Both her production and her subsequent contributions to the interpretation discussion reflect the fact that she has a quasi-academic orientation toward "art." This is not in any way to suggest that this orientation is invalid—or to dismiss it as "just middle class" or "just high achieving." It is, however, to suggest that it is partial and that it is a form of knowledge that not all young people will possess, or indeed want (or feel they need) to possess. We would caution against the temptation merely to validate Bea's knowledge, or indeed to celebrate it. On the contrary, we need to find ways of valuing the full range of competencies, tastes, and motivations that young people bring to media production, rather than privileging those that are closest to our own.

Second, we should emphasize that *Equilibrium* is an individual production. While it does largely conform to the VideoCulture assignment (the theme of opposites attract, the lack of verbal language), in this respect it does not: the fact that she did not have to negotiate with others allowed Bea a considerable freedom. To state the obvious, this is a fairly unusual situation, given the limited resources that are generally available in youth work, and we would argue that there are several problems in taking this individualistic, privatized approach as a model for cultural production by young people. For political and pedagogical reasons, we would wish to insist on the importance of collective production and to challenge the mystique that typically surrounds the notion of the individual "artist"—a mystique that, as we have indicated, is one in which Bea was keen to locate herself. Ultimately, Bea conforms to a particular fantasy of what creative young people should be like: she is an artist, an auteur, in the making. For all its attraction, this is a fantasy that may have damaging educational consequences, particularly for young people who do not share Bea's economic and social advantages.

In this latter respect, we need to raise the question of how young people learn to communicate in this medium. In the view of the course tutor, it was the *Opposites Attract* group that has in fact learned most—at least in terms of what the tutor claimed she had been attempting to teach. Sinead, Richard, and Siobhan had developed an ability to use the conventions of continuity editing to tell a simple story, which had been one of the aims of the exercise, and while Bea had not set out to do this, it is certainly debatable whether she learned anything that she did not already know. Here again, we need to avoid the temptation to merely celebrate youthful "creativity" and pay closer attention to the kinds of learning that it might entail.

Researching Reception

In the summer of 1999, twelve New York City adolescents were brought together in a community access television studio to view the two samplers of youth video productions selected by the VideoCulture research team for exchange and interpretation. Four New York University–based researchers asked these fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds to describe the content or topic of each of the video films, to identify and justify what they liked and disliked about each production, to suggest what they might do differently as producers themselves, and to specify what they would say to the youth producers in the participating countries. The titles of the video films were not revealed until after the screening and discussion.

Generally, and understandably, the New York City youths had varied responses to the video films. While mostly black and Latino and living in households with lower incomes, they had diverse backgrounds and life

circumstances, and each of them had a unique point of view and style of interacting. Thus, they did not always agree on what these video films were about, whether they liked them, or why. In addition, group dynamics played a role in how comfortable and competent participants felt about discussing different aspects of these films (Buckingham 1993, 1996), so some voices prevailed while others were less dominant. It is difficult to represent the complexity of these interpretations in the space of a short article (for other reports on these youths' interpretations of VideoCulture productions, see Fisherkeller, Butler, and Zaslow 2000; Zaslow and Butler 2002). Here, we focus specifically on the young people's responses to the youth-oriented themes of the videos and their debatable sense of "otherness."

Making Connections

Overall, these young people identified common aspects in the video films that they associated with teen life as they knew it. *The Contradiction*, *Freedom*, *Our Life*, *Love*, *Push to Pull*, and *Joy and Grief* were all seen to convey something about the fun and difficulties of social interactions in different contexts. Admittedly, issues of relationships and the dynamics of socializing are not exclusive to teen experience, but these youths made particular connections with situations reminiscent of their own lives. For example, New York City youths found the school in *The Contradiction* to be familiar because of how it depicted peers grouping together and because it looked "boring" like their own schools. Likewise, they assumed the young people in *Freedom* were enjoying themselves because they trusted each other as friends and could therefore take certain risks, like walking on train tracks and "bothering" horses. In the case of *Being Young*, these youths thought that the boy seen on the train was either dreaming about or remembering good times with friends at a party or shopping. These youths understood the melancholy of love and yearning that *Die Liebe* represented. The video film *Push to Pull* seemed most familiar to these youths in the way the narrative, though problematic, represented the anxieties of meeting another person in what seemed like a "date" situation.

Communicating "youth experience" was stressed as a general goal for the youth producers to accomplish, and the New York City youths were told that they would be viewing media products created by other young people expressing something about their lives—which may have "cued" the New York City youths to focus on precisely these elements in their discussion. However, these youths' connections with the youth producers' experiences also prompted them to suggest potential changes in the video films that would conform to their particular emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. For example, *Push to Pull* conveyed a linear chronology of events about two people meeting (which seemed prearranged), a situation they

associated with their own. Yet the New York City teens questioned the patience of the young woman waiting to meet someone, and they wondered why the young man traveling to the young woman threw away the flowers but then continued to locate the young woman. Some females in the New York City group were especially vocal on these matters of narrative and would have had the young woman in the video film get mad or leave before the young man arrived.

These youths responded similarly to the video film *Joy and Grief*, a tale of grieving about a friend's death. Here, a boy who appears to be distraught over a good friend's death due to illness acts out a suicide by slicing his wrists. Some New York City youths were critical of the closing credits scene in which the "suicide" boy smiles at the camera while he eats what must be fruit jam from his wrist, jam that was meant to represent blood in the context of the video film story. This epilogue, which explicitly referenced the "made-up" component of the video film, detracted from the expression of grief the New York City viewers thought the video film needed to maintain, even through the credits. The idea of death and dying is not strange to these New York City youths. Indeed, some of these youths at the time were involved in constructing a video film about their own experiences with death, whether a violence-related death or the untimely death of a family member or friend due to terminal illness (see *R.I.P.: Teens coping with death* 1999). Since death had been deemed a subject worthy of producing a serious documentary that featured their experiences, perhaps the New York City youths did not like the "mood-lightening" aspect of the boy smiling and eating jam from his wrist in *Joy and Grief*.

The New York City viewers also associated death with other topics they saw as extrinsically connected to teen life and that they viewed as serious matters. Most of these youths assumed that issues of "drugs, sex, and violence" were common for urban, lower income teens. Viewing *Equilibrium*, *Ganxtamovie*, *Overdose*, *The Angel and the Devil*, and *Self-Destruct*, they argued that the teens in these video films contended with drugs, sex, and violence and that dealing with these matters is difficult. As one suggested, all teens have "a hard life." Thus, it appears that these youths see the teens in the video film confronting a complex of responsibilities and living with a good deal of stress and strain, like themselves. Along these lines, the video film *Freedom* was viewed as an escape from the stresses and strains that most young people experience. *Freedom* showed how youths could relax and enjoy themselves if they were away from the city and just having fun with friends. Most did not think that young people actually lived the life portrayed in *Freedom*: they assumed that young people, like themselves, must need to travel to these idylls and therefore would need money to do so. Perhaps these New York City youths, whose lives are circumscribed economically, assume that many other young people's lives are similarly

constrained, and so any youth-produced video films will reflect this. Indeed, in the United States, urban teens' opportunities for engaging in audiovisual communications occur almost exclusively in community access contexts serving lower income neighborhoods. Rarely are adolescents from different socioeconomic classes brought together in these endeavors.

Thus, despite some of their critiques of the video films, most of the New York City teens might have been intent to find resonance with the video film producers, whom they presumed were beleaguered like themselves. These are similarities they might not seek in commercial or even adult-sanctioned educational media productions in the United States, even if they feature teens, since these young viewers assume such products have been produced by adults about youths, rather than by youths. Indeed, an argument was made by New York participants that these VideoCulture productions, especially those about drugs, would be more influential and meaningful in educational contexts since they were made by adolescents, not adults. (A similar argument is found in Tally and Kornblum 1997.) Some suggested that adults cannot communicate with teens as effectively as youths themselves because, as one female participant explained, things are different for adolescents now, compared to when current adults were young. She argued that adults cannot really understand what is going on for youths today, even though adults, such as her own mother, claim understanding when they invoke their own younger experiences. What is pertinent about this explanation is the logic it presents: these U.S. youths are arguing that youths who live in other regions and speak different languages are more effective at communicating with them, compared to the adults in their own country, and even their own homes.

Yet their connections with the youth producers as youths might also be explained by their experiences in a city of multiple cultures and regional histories. New York City teens are far from homogeneous: they come from a range of different family and cultural backgrounds—a situation characteristic of large urban areas. Indeed, most of these young people, or their parents or grandparents, had emigrated from other countries in recent years. Given these contexts, perhaps these youths found points of connection in video film products created by "others": they appeared to recognize a "we" even while they acknowledged that the films came "from another place" (whether that place was perceived as geographical, social, or emotional).

Looking for Differences

Many of these New York City adolescents also looked to find elements in the video films that were "different" from their experiences, and sometimes if they did not find these different elements, they suggested they

should be there. On one hand, they noticed the different kinds of cars, buses, tramways, and other technologies that are different from the United States in general or New York City in particular. Thus, they thought the car and the motor scooter in *Ganxtamovie* looked like they were from "the Third World." They acknowledged that this might be a matter of access for the youth producers (none of these youths owned a car and would find it difficult to access one if needed for their own production purposes). Nonetheless, they judged that drug dealers with the amount of money and drugs depicted in the story should have had a more upscale car, referencing their sense of the reality in the United States—or perhaps reality according to Hollywood films or music videos. Also, New York City viewers noted that the guns used in this video film looked very different from those that would be found in any American representation of drug trafficking: semiautomatic weapons would have to appear in such a scenario to be taken seriously by these youths.

On the other hand, many of these young viewers identified features of the video films that they felt should have been "different" from their expectations. While most of them recognized popular songs and understood the tone of most of the music used in the video films, some youths did not appreciate the inclusion of familiar pop melodies (as in *Joy and Grief*) or music television formats (as in *Our Life*). One participant suggested that the producers should have included music in the video films from their own cultures, so that the viewers would know that "they [the producers] are just as important as us." This statement points implicitly to an awareness of the dominance of American music in the global marketplace. It also references discourses about how cultures should maintain their unique forms of expression in the face of globalization. For example, some New York City youths appreciated how *Our Life* showed young people making their own music but also felt that the lyrics and format were too much like music television in the United States.

Thus, while these youths wanted to make connections with the video film producers as youths, some wanted the youth producers to express aspects particular to their cultures as well. Indeed, what was valued highly in the video films were expressions and features of teens "being themselves" or "doing whatever they wanted." This is one reason that *Equilibrium* was selected by the majority of youths as one they liked in particular. Even though they did not completely understand this video film, they found it creative and attention grabbing due to the costumes, the makeup, the camera work, and editing and because it was sexually suggestive. But, especially, the youths admired how the *Equilibrium* producers seemed to be saying "this is who we are" strongly and clearly, and "who they are" was seen as self-expressively different and bold. Indeed, this aspect of the video film prompted one participant to suggest that *Equilibrium* be presented to

adults as an exemplary statement about the nature of youths, so that adults could better understand adolescent experiences.

Culturally Situated Interpretations

Perhaps the New York City adolescents' interest in having "difference" and self-expression represented in the video films can be partially explained by commercial exhortations that surround them in the United States and by the discourse they often encounter on the nature of adolescence. There is an interesting coincidence here between the emphasis on "individuality" in commercial culture and that which characterizes traditional arguments about artistic expression. In the United States, advertising campaigns, especially those geared toward young people, are laden with images and messages promoting individuality and personal freedom, albeit in paradoxical ways. As features of advertising, these sensibilities are to be fulfilled by the consumption of commercial goods, whether those goods take the form of consumable products or media material. Perhaps these young New Yorkers—who live in a city that is saturated with ads and is an advertising industry headquarters—are responding to the ideology of consumer capitalism, a system that relies on consumers believing in the free expression afforded by the marketplace. Meanwhile, youths and adolescents in the United States are also often spoken about as intensely invested in self-expression. The discourse on this amorphous group suggests that if they are true to themselves, then they are each different and unique in a particular way. Popular literature and counseling advice for youths, if not about substance abuse or sexual misbehavior, might be summarized by a slogan such as "be yourself." Maybe these young people's interest in and desire to see (what they consider to be) unique expressions of self are part of this general discourse.

Whether participating in prevailing consumer or youth discourses about individuality and self-expression, the New York City youths are also contributing, perhaps unknowingly, to debates about the worth and nature of creative endeavors. All works of art are subjected to a level of scrutiny that ponders in what way a creative product or endeavor uniquely challenges or elaborates on established standards of craft while illuminating some aspect of the human situation. Even though it may be unconscious and utterly intuitive, these youths are critiquing the video films in terms of their artistic authenticity and thus indicating that they would want to imbue their own creations with a unique sensibility. However, these young people's discussions about VideoCulture creations only hint at such notions. Without their producing their own audiovisual texts, our understanding of the themes and aesthetics these New York City adolescents would want to convey to "others" is limited. In addition, without gathering

"other" responses to New York City youths' audiovisual creations, we cannot know how their expressions would elicit recognition, critique, and learning from "others."

Implications and Directions for the Future

Production

All in all, thirty-six video self-productions emerged from this project between 1997 and 1999, involving different topics and modes of narrative and stylistic expression. The quality and style of these films are partly a reflection of the particular contexts in which they were produced and of the individuals or groups involved. The style of symbolic processing young people employed developed from their existing knowledge and previous experiences of media genres, although it also reflects broader social and cultural differences. In view of the fact that most young people involved in the project had no previous experience of video production, there were bound to be significant differences between their initial intentions and the final results. On the basis of our data, it would be hard to generalize about this. However, the style of production and the dramatic theme or concept the young people selected are clearly connected with the subjective relevance of media models and genres, as well as the respective style of the media tutor or facilitator.

The experience of the production workshops clearly shows that it is possible for young people—with the help of a qualified media educational advisor—to produce meaningful montage or collage-like video films within a few days. While planning one workshop—in which two 16-year-old girls produced the video *Love*—Holzwarth and Maurer (2003) developed a method of fostering aesthetic creativity in a playful way:

> The procedure of first taking everyday images as a starting-point, instead of striving for an immediate orientation towards a constructed plot (e.g. using a storyboard or script), enables the producers to see everyday life in a new light by trying out unusual angles and different distances. Youths come to know film as a means of art which does not have a firm meaning or content in advance. (P. 164)

Holzwarth and Maurer argued in favor of an associative, exploratory approach, which encourages nonlinear forms of symbolization rather than narrative. However, this depends on tutors or facilitators who can give sensitive and competent advice, who provide the young people with aesthetic input on different levels and in different situations, and who make sure that there is a constructive working atmosphere.

The support of tutors should not only be concerned with the visual dimension. A subtly differentiated handling of music and sound should be imparted as well. 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 (2003) wrote in an expert report on the use of music in VideoCulture productions,

> 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 in this field: here, we 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." (P. 341)

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 to use music, in conjunction with the visual level, as an independent form of symbolization.

Reception

When interpreting the partner films, the production groups involved used very different styles of interpretation. Here again, it is difficult to generalize about this. At least in terms of the German interpretation groups, several conclusions can be made, however. Broadly speaking, a subjective ascription of meaning seems to be connected particularly with the capability (or the possibility) of recognizing personal experiences and forms of knowledge within the text. Here, understanding a video film is not reduced to the cognitive understanding of the content and the (suspected) intention. There are also emotional-intuitive processes that come into play as soon as symbolic forms are perceived that evoke associations with personal, real-life experiences:

> It seems as if the viewers were only able to assign a subjective meaning to a video—whether on a cognitive or an emotional level—if they were able to relate to it in a personal way. In this process of getting emotional access, which involves attraction as well as disapproval, the music used in the video seems to be of great importance for many viewers. (Witzke 2003, 191)

When asked, some of the young people preferred "open" productions to "closed" ones. That is, if the "message" was too unambiguous (bold and simple) and did not leave enough space for self-made ascriptions of meaning, these young people often expressed disapproval. Here again, however,

there seem to be individual differences in young people's preferences that cannot simply be related to broader social and cultural factors. On the basis of their case study as well as other productions, Holzwarth and Maurer (2003) argued,

> The experience of our case study production *Our Life* indicates that it is possible to impart emotions and experiences without words across national boundaries. The ratio of openness to closure in this film seems to be particularly suitable in terms of inviting other young people to relate to it. It also seems that the subject of "love"—as a cross-culturally relevant area of experience—as well as the use of common symbols would have enabled transcultural processes of acquisition and connection. (P. 166)

A comparative evaluation of three film interpretations showed that girls are more likely to develop an emotional access to video films, whereas boys put more emphasis on formal aspects. The first results of the multimedia questionnaire also indicate that gender-related differences have more influence on preferences for certain videos and forms of symbolization than differences of education, age, and culture. Nevertheless, this questionnaire also indicated that "the adolescents showed common reactions to audio-visual symbols used in young people's video productions. This might be interpreted as a confirmation of the assumption that young people make use of an interculturally understandable, audio-visual symbolic language" (Müller 2003, 314). And finally, ascriptions concerning the attractiveness of certain audiovisual symbols seem to vary according to what type of "video viewer" one is. Thus, one significant (and almost exclusively male) type of video viewer is characterized by a fondness for action- and violence-related material in videos (Müller 2003).

While for most young people the VideoCulture project was a welcome opportunity to produce their first videos, the selection and the exchange of the productions proved to be a prolonged process. Future projects should find ways of publishing these productions immediately via the internet and of facilitating dialogues about these productions that are critical as well as appreciative. 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 definitely be in the young people's interest. As Gina Lamb (2003), 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 receivers of entertainment. (P. 265)

At the same time, media educators and youth workers need to support and encourage youth media production activity that nurtures and nudges youths to learn about themselves, others, and differential modes of communication. In a globalized, media-saturated, and deeply complex world, helping all youths express themselves and to understand others, using all available technologies and strategies, is a goal that is not only desirable but necessary.

Note

1. The German project team (researchers) included Prof. Dr. Horst Niesyto (project concept and coordinator), Prof. Dr. Renate Müller, Peter Holzwarth, Björn Maurer, and Margrit Witzke (Ludwigsburg University of Education). The international partners were Prof. Dr. David Buckingham and Issy Harvey (Institute of Education, London University), Dr. JoEllen Fisherkeller (New York University), Gina Lamb (video artist, Los Angeles), Jana Hnilicova (Prague), and Dr. Andrea Karpati (University of Budapest). JoEllen Fisherkeller would also like to acknowledge Allison Butler, Marshall Weber, and Emilie Zaslow for their assistance on this project. The project was sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the Arts, Baden-Württemberg.

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