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Using Creative Visual Research Methods to Understand Media Audiences

This article introduces an emerging area of qualitative media ‹audience› research, in which individuals are asked to produce media or visual material themselves, as a way of exploring their relationship with particular issues or dimensions of media. The process of making a creative visual artefact – as well as the artefact itself (which may be, for example, a video, drawing, collage, or imagined magazine cover) – offers a reflective entry-point into an exploration of individuals» relationships with media culture. This article sets out some of the origins, rationale and philosophy underlying this methodological approach; briefly discusses two example studies (one in which children made videos to consider their relationship with the environment, and one in which young people drew pictures of celebrities as part of an examination of their aspirations and identifications with stars); and finally considers some emerging issues for further development of this method.

Keywords:

Audiences, methodology, visual culture, qualitative research, creativity

Introduction

Research into the impact of mass media on its audiences can be simplistically grouped into two traditional strands. One strand has used a range of methods in a bid to ‹set up› individuals so that the researchers can point to some aspect of their behaviour or response which can be represented as a media ‹effect›. The other strand has sought to avoid this crude and patronising approach, by *speaking* to individuals about their media consumption instead. Both approaches are somewhat unsatisfactory, since they rely on interpretations of instant responses rather than more reflective self-expressions, and they fail to give individuals the opportunity to express themselves creatively, or to significantly affect the research agenda.

This article discusses a new approach to qualitative audience research, based around methods in which participants are asked to create media or artistic artefacts themselves. The process of making a creative visual artefact – as well as the artefact itself (which may be, for example, a video, drawing, collage, or imagined magazine cover) – offers a *different way into* an exploration of individuals› relationships with media culture.

The Centre for Creative Media Research at Bournemouth Media School, UK, has been established to provide a hub for work in this emerging area (built in particular around the ArtLab website [www.artlab.org.uk], events such as the Symposium at Tate Britain in London which we organised in May 2004 [www.artlab.org.uk/tate.htm], and the forthcoming book *The New Creative Audience Studies*). This article aims:

– to set out some of the origins, rationale and philosophy underlying this methodological approach;
– to briefly discuss two example studies;
– and to consider some emerging elements for further development of this method.

It is commonplace in media studies to observe that (in developed, Western societies at least) we live in a world where individuals are bombarded with a large *quantity* and *range* of images and messages from television, radio, print, the internet, other forms of media, and the advertising and corporate material that surrounds us. This material, as well as being very ubiquitous, is also usually very visual, or a complex mix of audio and visual material. It is also commonplace in media studies, however, to explore the question of people's responses to this material through language alone: using

methods such as interviews or focus groups, researchers typically expect media consumers to provide more-or-less *instant* accounts, in *words*, of their feelings about these complex visual or audio-visual experiences. There is little reason to think that this would be an easy or straightforward task for most people. It is difficult to generate, on demand, a verbal account of a complex audio-visual experience[1].

Therefore, the approaches which this paper proposes offer *a different way into* these issues. By operating on the *visual plane*, these visual/creative methods mirror the visual nature of much contemporary media – so that there is ‹match› between the research process which operates (or at least begins) on the visual plane, and the research area – people's relationship with contemporary culture – which also operates (or at least begins) on the visual plane.

When participants are asked to make a creative artefact, this brings about a considerable change in the pace of statement-generation within the research process. Language-based methods are relatively time-pressured: if I ask you a question, it would seem strange if you didn't begin to provide me with an answer within a few seconds. Creative tasks, on the other hand, are understood to take longer, and lead to a more reflective process, where it seems ‹natural› to take time to think about what is to be produced, and how this can be achieved; and furthermore, during the time it takes to *make* the work, the participant will have spent further time – creative time – thinking about the research issue and their response to it, so that by the end of the process, even if we do ultimately resort to language, they will have developed a set of responses which may be quite different to what their initial ‹gut reaction› may have been. (This approach is not *necessarily* ‹better›: asking people to verbally provide their spontaneous reactions to certain research questions can be valuable in certain circumstances, but by definition such responses will not be the most reflective or carefully considered). Moreover, the *physical* process of making something – drawing, for example – involves the *body* in a physical engagement with thought which, again, may affect personal response: some artists would suggest, for instance, that the physical effort of making a creative piece means that the engagement with it begins in the mind but *comes through*

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[1] There is not space here to add to the extensive previous discussions of the limitations of the established approaches (but see, for example, Moores, 1993; Ang, 1996; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Ruddock, 2001). This article is instead an attempt to begin a consideration of alternative and complementary methods.

the body, and that this bodily engagement is a significant part of the thinking-through of the piece (see, for example, Kuh, 2000, and Palmer, 2004).

This approach recognizes the creativity of audiences. It is obviously quite different to those studies (which, indeed, it was developed in opposition to – see Gauntlett, 1995, 1997, 2001) which offer participants a limited range of possible ways to express their response. Such response-limited studies include, for example, surveys where respondents have to concur with one of a pre-set range of views, or ‹effects› studies where the ‹subjects› have their behaviour categorised, within a pre-set range, by observers. By contrast, participants in visual/creative studies can offer a wide range of responses, and ideally should be able to significantly change the researchers' agenda or frames of reference. (Of course, as with any kind of research, such studies can be done badly, or unimaginatively, or used in a way which ultimately categorises participants in limited ways; but that should not be the intention).

Furthermore, it is contended that setting a task which invites participants to engage in a visual creative activity (making a media or artistic artefact) – as opposed to a language activity (the traditional spoken or written response) – leads to the brain being used in a different way. A full understanding of neuroscience is not necessary for this point to be made. Recent introductions to the latest scientific findings regarding the human brain and how it works, such as Winston (2003) and Greenfield (2000), reflect that even specialist scientists themselves do not have a clear understanding of how the brain works. However it is clear that earlier ‹modular› models (which suggested one corner of the brain dealt exclusively with language, for example, and another dealt wholly with movement) were not quite right, as different areas of the brain appear to work together. Nevertheless, different brain patterns, and different area networks, are associated with different types of activity, and so visual/creative studies will use some parts of the brain, and some kinds of brain activity, which are different to studies which ask participants to generate language/speech. Combined with the more reflective process, this could – possibly, at least – lead to a different quality of data.

Finally, this kind of approach tends not to treat people as ‹audience› of particular things. A standard approach in media studies is to see people as the ‹audience› of a particular individual media product – a particular soap opera, or a particular magazine, for example. This kind of approach, by

contrast, prefers to recognise that most individuals are typically surrounded by a very broad range of media which they engage with on various levels, and involving different dimensions of pleasure, intellectual connection, distaste, voyeurism, apathy, enthusiasm, desire, and other feelings. It seems best, then, not to single out specific branded ‹bits› of the media for examination, but rather to look at the impact of different broader elements, spheres, or styles.

Making visual things

We know that humans have been engaged in artistic expression for a very long time. The drawings in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc cave in southern France, for example, have been found to be at least 31,000 years old (Lewis-Williams, 2002; Clottes & Féruglio, 2004). To get back to this period in a hypothetical time machine, you would have to travel back to the fall of the Roman Empire, and then travel a further *twenty times* as far back into history. It is worth pausing to consider this long-standing human interest in the creation of imagery.

Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that human beings, since ancient times, have felt the need to make marks to represent their lives and experiences not simply as a reflection of private dreams, or to communicate instrumental facts about survival, but as a kind of necessary celebration of existence: an «impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life» ([1872] 1967: 43). We can see that this principle could apply to any number of creative works from any period – linking, say, a Chauvet cave sketch of running horses, with a Vermeer painting of a woman reading a letter, with a Hollywood romantic comedy.

For many centuries the purpose of art was generally seen as being the attempt to reflect the beauty of nature – stemming back to Aristotle's notion (c. 384–322 BC) that the purpose of art should be the imitation of nature (*mimesis*). This was meant in a broad sense – art simply had to offer, as Richard Eldridge puts it, the «presentation of a subject matter as a focus for thought, fused to perceptual experience of the work» (2003: 29). Art did not have to be a simple ‹copy› of what we see in the world, then; music, for example, fitted very well into this definition of imitation. Furthermore, in *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that art arises because «representation is natural to human beings from childhood», and because «everyone delights in representations» and we like to learn from them (2004: 4). He also stated that the function of art is «not to relate things that have happened, but things that may happen, i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity» (p. 12), thereby suggesting that art is about possibilities, and perhaps a thinking-through of ideas about ways of living.

These ideas about art, then, were often complex and sophisticated, but did not place special emphasis on the psychology of the artist themselves. The Romantic era, from the second half of the 18th century, embraced the idea that art was primarily the self-expression of the artist (feelings, emotion and experience). The groundwork had been laid by George Berkeley, who in *An Essay Towards A New Theory of Vision* (1709) established the idea that we can only have mental representations of things, and not fully ‹know› a thing in itself. An artwork, then, could not be about the world, but about a person's experience of the world – giving much useful fuel to Romantic critics who were happy to celebrate artistic expression, and the mind's creative power, as superior to the ‹accurate› but unfermented view of the world produced by a camera obscura.

«In the light of this», as Julian Bell explains, «eighteenth-century artistic theory turned from how the painting related to the world towards how the painting related to the painter» (1999: 56). The artist David Hockney, whose work includes a range of experiments with representation – in particular rejecting the conventional Western approach to perspective – says that artistic depiction «is not an attempt to re-create something, but an account of seeing it». Hockney cites Cézanne as a painter who made this especially apparent: «He wasn't concerned with apples, but with his *perception* of apples. That's clear from his work» (Hockney & Joyce, 2002: 58). A similar point is made by Arthur C. Danto in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981): «It is as if a work of art were like an externalisation of the artist's consciousness, as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw» (p. 164).

In an attempt to provide an even broader account of creative production, Richard Eldridge suggests that the motive of all creators and artists is «To express, and in expressing to clarify, inner emotions and attitudes – their own and others» – in relation to the common materials of outer life» (2003:100). This useful phrase highlights the working-through of feelings and ideas, and the way in which creative activity is *itself* where the thinking-through and the self-expression takes place, *as well as* being a process which creates an artefact which represents the outcome of those thinking and feeling processes.

Indeed, many key thinkers on the meaning of art have similarly seen artistic making as an act which reflects, and works through, human experience. In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, originally delivered in the 1820s, Hegel describes the making of artworks as a universal human need to consider one's own existence:

> The universal and absolute need out of which art, on its formal side, arises has its source in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, i.e. that he draws out of himself, and makes explicit for himself, that which he is… The things of nature are only *immediate and single*, but man as mind *reduplicates* himself, inasmuch as prima facie he *is* like the things of nature, but in the second place just as really is *for* himself, perceives himself, has ideas of himself, thinks himself, and only thus is active self-realizedness (2004: 35).

Making ‹external things› upon which a person inevitably ‹impresses the seal of his inner being› gives that person the opportunity to reflect upon their selfhood; ‹the inner and outer world› is projected into ‹an object in which he recognises his own self› (p. 36). Hegel's implication that something made by a person will *necessarily* express something about its creator interestingly predates Freud's suggestion, which would emerge almost 100 years later and in a quite different tradition, that artworks – along with dreams, slips of the tongue, and any other product of the brain – will reflect aspects of conscious or unconscious personality.

Novelist Leo Tolstoy also felt that art communicated selfhood, but his model anticipates more deliberate action. In 1896, he wrote: «Art is a human activity [in which] one man consciously by means of certain signs, hands onto others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by those feelings and also experience them» (1960: 51). Although Tolstoy's transmission model – where feelings are implanted into a work by its creator and then ‹infect› its audiences – seems rather simplistic, his point is that art should primarily be about the communication of genuinely felt emotions. On this basis, he rejected numerous highly-regarded works of art, including many of his own, as decadent and ‹counterfeit›, because they were based on spectacle and an attempt to capture beauty or sentiment, rather than stemming from truly-felt emotions. Only works with this authentic base in feeling (whatever its character – joy or despair, love or hate) would be able to evoke a matching experience of such feelings in the audience.

In the twentieth century, John Dewey, in *Art as Experience* ([1934] 1980), argued that looking at artworks – or at least, particular works of art that are meaningful to us – ‹elicits and accentuates› the experience of wholeness and connection with the wider universe beyond ourselves (p. 195). Dewey does not mean famous ‹masterpieces› in particular (although those are likely to have become celebrated because of these properties, at least in part); for Dewey, art is part of everyday experience. «The understanding of art and of its role in civilization is not furthered by setting out with eulogies of it nor by occupying ourselves exclusively at the outset with great works of art recognized as such» (p. 10). Dewey suggests that understanding an artistic experience is like understanding how a flower grows – rather than simply noticing that it is pretty – and therefore involves an understanding of ‹the soil, air, and light› which have contributed to the aetiology of the work and which will be reflected in it (p. 12). This means that, just as we associate a botanist with the study of flowers, we could expect to associate a sociologist with the exploration of artworks.

Dewey suggests that art can introduce us «into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences». This may sound quasi-religious, but Dewey's concerns are pragmatic: «I can see no psychological ground for such properties of an experience, save that, somehow, the work of art operates to deepen and to raise to great clarity that sense of an enveloping undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience». This brings «a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves» (p. 195). Therefore, simply put, making or looking at a work of art encourages reflection upon ourselves and our place in the world.

These theories all suggest, albeit with different emphases and nuances, that creativity and artistic production is driven by a desire to communicate feelings and ideas; and that such works will almost inevitably tell us something about their creator. In particular, artistic works are a thinking-through and reflection of social and psychological experience.

Interpreting visual material produced by research participants

When creative or artistic works are produced not as an exercise in ‹spontaneous› self-expression, but rather because a researcher has *requested* that they be made, questions about the interpretation of such work seem especially poignant. In studies where participants have been asked to produce material such as a drawing, collage, photographs or a

video, the problem of how this imagery can be used in a way which does not rely too much on the researcher's own subjective interpretation can seem to be a serious hurdle.

One response to this dilemma is to observe that researchers *always* have a job of interpretation to do; whether their data is a set of images, or a set of verbal statements generated in an interview or focus group, the researcher can only do their best to interpret this material. By reminding us that the meanings of language-based data are far from self-evident or self-explanatory, this point – which I have made myself in the past – is useful. However, it ducks the main problem: frankly, if we are looking at visual material in the hope of ascertaining how the artist/producer feels about something, this *is* more difficult than if we are faced with a verbal statement where a person *says* how they feel about something. Interpreting the latter is not necessarily straightforward either, but the researcher has something clear, intentional, and *verifiable*, to go on.

An example will make this obvious point even more clear. Compare two pieces of data provided by a participant called Sarah:

– Item A: A drawing of Tony Blair, where he appears to be frowning, and pointing.
– Item B: The verbal statement «I think Tony Blair is terrible, he's very arrogant and he's doing a bad job».

If we only had Item B to analyse, we would not feel uncomfortable asserting that Sarah believes that Tony Blair is ‹terrible›, ‹very arrogant› and ‹doing a bad job›, because she has said so in those very words and we have little reason to think she is being untruthful. Furthermore, the meaning of these words is widely understood, and so we could go beyond quoting those *particular* words and generate other adjectives which we could also be confident about: it would be OK to say, for example, that Sarah is disappointed by Blair's performance; she feels he is too single-minded and is failing to listen to others.

If, on the other hand, we only had Item A to analyse, we could be much less certain. Perhaps the drawing shows that Sarah finds Blair disagreeable, as seen in his dictatorial pointing and in the frown with which he dismisses other people's views; or perhaps she feels that Blair, a decisive leader, deals assertively with each day's challenges. Or something else.

In an attempt to find or develop a methodology of interpretation, I studied a lot of texts from the field of *art therapy*, since art therapists have for decades been eliciting artworks from patients in a bid to understand them better (for example, Betensky, 1973; Di Leo, 1973, 1983; Klepsch & Logie, 1982; Koppitz, 1984; Malchiodi, 1998a, 1998b; Matthews, 1998; Oster & Montgomery, 1996; Silver, 2001; Thomas & Silk, 1990). Of course, art therapy is a diverse field with different approaches and practices. Some have always used the art as a loose kind of starting-point for therapeutic explorations. Some believe that the psychoanalytic approach to reading dreams (first outlined in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900), in which images are read as metaphors, can be applied to children's artworks (Diem-Wille, 2001, and Furth, 2002, are recent exponents of this approach). Another body of art therapists, for much of the twentieth century, had sought to use art as a direct diagnostic tool. Specific tests were developed, such as the ‹House–Tree–Person› test (Buck, 1948, 1964) – where the patient would be asked to draw a house, a tree and a person, and then the clinician would use diagnostic charts to ‹identify› psychological problems based on aspects of the drawings. Unsurprisingly, in the past two or three decades this seemingly deterministic and simplistic kind of approach came to be less popular (Thomas & Silk, 1990; Malchiodi, 1998b). Today, it is more common for art therapists to encourage their clients to produce drawings (or other artwork), but then *talk* with them about the artwork. Instead of the therapist interpreting the image, the person *themselves* interprets their work – which makes much more sense.

In the traditional approach, the ‹expert› would impose their interpretation of the work. Such an *imposition* is a methodological problem and also, in therapeutic terms, devalues the knowledge and experience of the client. As art therapist Cathy Malchiodi writes:

> In my own work with children's drawings from a phenomenological approach, the first step involves taking a stance of ‹not knowing›. This is similar to the philosophy described by social constructivist theorists who see the therapist's role in work with people as one of co-creator, rather than expert advisor. By seeing the client as the expert on his or her own experiences, an openness to new information and discoveries naturally evolves for the therapist. Although art expressions may share some commonalities in form, content, and style, taking a stance of not knowing allows the child's experiences of creating and making art expressions to be respected as individual and to have a variety of meanings (1998b: 36).

From recent developments in art therapy, then, I learnt the answer to the problem of how you interpret an artistic or creative work: you get the artist to interpret it *themselves*. Therefore, to return to the above example, we would ask Sarah to do a drawing of Tony Blair and then, after she has spent perhaps 10 minutes thinking and 30 minutes drawing, we would discuss different dimensions of the drawing with her, asking what different suggestive parts of it might mean, which would probably stimulate a focused and thoughtful discussion of her feelings about the politician.

Why bother with words at all?:
The place of language in visual culture

Can we simply do away with words altogether? It seems not. Almost all formal academic communication takes place in language, and for good reasons: our clearest thoughts take the form of language, even when they are ‹only› in the mind and have not been expressed. In his book *Visual Thinking*, Rudolph Arnheim (1969) argues that thought operates primarily on the visual plane:

> Purely verbal thinking [without reference to non-language impressions and images] is the prototype of thoughtless thinking, the automatic recourse to connections retrieved from storage. It is useful but sterile. What makes language so valuable for thinking, then, cannot be thinking in words. It must be the help that words lend to thinking while it operates in a more appropriate medium, such as visual imagery (p. 231-232).

Arnheim argues that the kind of thinking which can be done in words alone – the logical form of thinking that computers can imitate – is fine but very limited. He suggests that humans routinely form thoughts and make judgements based on perceptions, impressions, feelings, and visual material which cannot be reduced to words – which are *beyond* words. Arnheim admits that language can then be helpful, bringing order: «It supplies a clear-cut, distinct sign for each type and thereby encourages perceptual imagery to stabilise the inventory of visual concepts» (p. 236). This idea of language bringing *stability* to the visual is fruitful. Arnheim himself, with his own mission to promote the visual as being at the heart of thinking, is not so impressed: «The function of language is essentially conservative and stabilising, and therefore it also tends, negatively, to make cognition static and immobile», he notes (p. 244).

Nevertheless, language helps enormously with reliable communication. We can readily propose ways in which images alone can ‹communicate›, of course, and it is easy to assert that images can express ‹so much more› than language. Such a view is always nice, and often true. But it is interesting to note what happens in Julian Bell's excellent book *What is Painting?* (1999), when, after many pages of writing about painting as the expression of ideas and emotions, he seems to get fed up with it all, suddenly shattering the prior assumptions of his own text with this passage:

> But let us be brutal: expression is a joke. Your painting expresses – for you; but it does not communicate to me. You had something in mind, something you wanted to ‹bring out›; but looking at what you have done, I have no certainty that I know what it was. Your colours do not say anything to me in particular; they are stuff to look at, but looking is not the same as catching meanings… [A work] has ‹meaning›, insofar as we open our eyes to it and allow them to wander and gaze in fascination; but that ‹meaning› is not an idea or an emotion, not a specific, unequivocal message. What we see is what we get: a product, not a process, lies on the wall.
> But we are not happy to accept this. We yearn for expression to be communication, for every wandering mark to find its home. As a result, alongside this two-centuries-old growth of the painting of personal expression, a massive institution of explanation has grown up to control and stabilise the market» (p. 170)[2].

It is interesting to note that Bell, like Arnheim, says that words are deployed to ‹stabilise› the meaning of images. In terms of academic research, or more specifically research about the ways in which individuals relate to media material, it would be difficult to ditch words altogether.

The feminist critique of traditional research methods

It should also be mentioned that the methodological approach proposed in this paper has been influenced by the feminist critique of traditional

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[2] Bell admits that his own book is part of that industry of writing words about pictures. «But the book is trying to point the way through the institution's dim interior, towards the exit. To steer a path through the maze of words, towards the complex, but largely wordless pleasures of looking – that is the broad intention of this text, because it comes from a painter, someone committed to producing objects specifically for viewing» (1999: 171).

research (see for example Roberts, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2003; Letherby, 2003). This is not simply in the sense of preferring qualitative to quantitative methods; and, in terms of its impact here, has little to do with gender issues. Rather, we note that feminists have criticised both qualitative and quantitative researchers for their tendency to use participants as mere suppliers of data. Traditionally, a researcher merely encounters ‹subjects› and takes ‹data› away, without giving anything back to the people involved. Participants are not involved in the process, are not consulted about the style or content of the process – apart from in the moment(s) in which they supply data – and do not usually get an opportunity to shape the agenda of the research. The process usually involves little real interaction, or dialogue. The creative/visual methods do not inherently or necessarily avoid this, but they provide more opportunities for participants to shape the content of the enquiry, to bring in issues and questions which the researcher may not have considered, and to express themselves outside of boundaries set by the researcher. (It is in the area of interpretation and analysis, as noted above, where the researcher regains the power to diminish and misunderstand the contribution of the participants; this is why the participants should be enabled to set the agenda here too, interpreting their own work rather than having an interpretation imposed upon them).

History of the approach
Unsurprisingly, the idea of asking people to produce visual material within research is not new (although it seems that using it in *media audience research*, as outlined in this paper, is quite new). The book *Image-Based Research*, edited by Jon Prosser (1998), offers a range of interesting chapters on the growth of visually-oriented methods in social research. Many of them are about sociological uses of photography. Douglas Harper's «An Argument for Visual Sociology» (1998) is a good introduction to visual sociology, but much of it is about (documentary) photography – photographic records of life – rather than using image-creation within a new research process. Similarly, Prosser & Schwartz (1998) discuss whether photographs can be trusted as authentic representations of social life. (Of course, such questions are not significant if we are discussing visual material which is seen as a record of self-expression, rather than as a record of exterior realities).
Art and drawings are considered in some chapters of *Image-Based*

Research, though, most notably in the chapter by Noreen M. Whetton & Jennifer McWhirter. Back in 1972, Whetton developed the ‹Draw and Write Technique», as part of a project which established that although children aged 7–8 may not be able to communicate certain emotions through words (whether written or spoken), they could feel them and understand them in others. This was revealed through the children's drawings, and their subsequent faltering speech about the emotions depicted in the drawings:

> It became apparent that the children experienced and empathized with a wide range of emotions including anger, frustration, despair, remorse, guilt, embarrassment and relief as well as delight, enjoyment, excitement. The children differed only from adults in that they did not have the vocabulary to express themselves» (Whetton & McWhirter, 1998: 273).

Since then, Whetton, with colleagues, has used children's drawings to explore various aspects of their world, such as a study looking at how they drew a story involving drug dealers (Williams, Whetton and Moon, 1989a), a study exploring how children picture the insides of their bodies (Williams, Whetton and Moon, 1989b), and a study revealing children's interpretations of dental health campaigns (Whetton & McWhirter, 1998).
In media audience research which did use some visual material and asked participants to do a creative (writing) task, members of the Glasgow Media Group asked participants to write their own news headlines or reports to accompany actual news photographs or headlines which they were given, or sometimes asked to write scripts to accompany other material (see for example Kitzinger, 1990, 1993; Philo, 1990, 1996; Miller, 1994). These studies aimed to show how the public have been influenced by (or, at least, have remembered the discourses of) media coverage of particular topics.
More recently, new media researchers have looked at websites produced by fans, activists, and other ‹ordinary people› using the internet to express themselves, exploring these as a kind of unsolicited data, non-mainstream visual and textual constructions which can tell us something about people's relationship with mainstream media and mainstream politics (see, for example, chapters in Gauntlett & Horsley, eds, 2004).
And I have recently, belatedly, become aware of the work of Horst Niesyto and his colleagues at the University of Ludwigsburg, Germany. Niesyto has been working on the idea of using visual and audio-visual productions

within qualitative research since the *1980s*, mostly in German and in German-language publications (with English-language articles appearing since the late 1990s). His thoughtful discussions (such as «Youth Research on Video Self-productions: Reflections on a Social-aesthetic Approach», 2000) focus on the ways in which media materials are thoroughly integrated into the everyday experiences of young people, and are part of their construction of their social worlds. The method developed by Niesyto since the mid-1980s – projects in which «young people had the chance to express *personal images of experience* in self-produced video films» (p. 137) – is based on a philosophy which has much in common with that which I thought I had been originating (!), separately, since the mid-1990s. Niesyto writes:

> In view of media's increasing influence on everyday communication, I put forward the following thesis: If somebody – in nowadays media society – wants to learn something about youth's ideas, feelings, and their ways of experiencing the world, he or she should give them a chance to express themselves also by means of their own *self-made* media products! (p. 137).

More recently the methods have become more complex[3]; see, for example, the article by Peter Holzwarth & Björn Maurer (2003) which details the international collaborative project, Children in Communication about Migration (known as CHICAM – see www.chicam.net), in which young people used collage (with cut-up magazines), disposable cameras, various videoed activities, arrangements of photographs with music, and specific photo tasks (such as a photo essay on likes and dislikes, or on national symbols), as well as video productions, which were shared and discussed internationally via the internet. Holzwarth & Maurer suggest:

> In an era when audio-visual media play an increasingly influential role

in children's and adolescent's perceptions, it is important that researchers not rely on verbal approaches alone, but also give young people the opportunity to express themselves in contemporary media forms. Audio-visual data should not be considered an alternative to verbal data but rather a source of data with a different quality» (p. 127).

They conclude that:

> Using their own media productions as communication links makes it easier for children to talk about their world and living environment […] these works provide openings into the children's world which language barriers would otherwise render inaccessible (p. 136).

CHICAM is co-ordinated by David Buckingham, whose work on children's media literacy in the 1990s was undoubtedly an influence upon this emerging sphere of work (for example, Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Most recently, Buckingham & Bragg's study of young people's responses to media portrayals of sex and personal relationships (2004) gave teenage participants a blank notebook and asked them to keep a ‹diary› or ‹scrapbook›, containing personal reflections upon such material seen in the media, with intriguing results.

It is hoped that, as researchers become aware of the similarities between projects being developed in different countries, we can start to come together more, share ideas and collaborate.

Examples of the method in action

Our own examples of the visual/creative approach in action can be found at the website of the Centre for Creative Media Research, at ‹www.artlab.org.uk›. Some are more developed than others, ranging from a published book-length monograph to smaller pilot studies, as well as activities where the approach is used with an emphasis more on teaching, or art workshops, rather than for research. Here we will consider two examples of research projects, one involving video production, the other involving drawing.

Video Critical

In this study, published as the book *Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power* (Gauntlett, 1997), the researcher worked with seven groups of children aged 7–11 to make videos about ‹the environment›. The participants were from Leeds, UK, and attended mostly

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[3] In 2000 there was a conference in Germany, 'Eigenproduktionen mit Medien als Gegenstand der Kindheits- und Jugendforschung' ['Self-productions with media as a subject of childhood and youth research'], in which German researchers presented several studies including video, graffiti, audio and computer-based media productions (see Niesyto, 2001). There was also the international project 'VideoCulture' (1997-2000, coordinated by Horst Niesyto), which explored the potential of images and music in the context of intercultural communication (see *Journal of Educational Media, Special Issue: The VideoCulture Project*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (October 2001); Niesyto, 2003; www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/medien1/forsch).

inner-city schools characterised by a diverse ethnic mix and relatively poor socio-economic backgrounds.

The study grew out of a need to assess the impact of the environmental messages which had been appearing in a range of media consumed by children in the early to mid 1990s. Having established that traditional ‹effects› research was unable to offer valuable models for assessing the influence of the media (Gauntlett, 1995, 2001), this study sought to take a distinctly different – or even ‹opposite› – approach. Where traditional ‹effects› research is interested in participants' responses on a pre-selected axis, recorded quantitatively (for example, how many times they hit a doll or press a button), the *Video Critical* research was interested in participants' responses, whatever they may be (for example, the children could choose what to put into their film, how to film it, what messages to include or narrative to follow). Where ‹effects› research sees children as passive receivers of media messages, this research was interested in participants as creative and thoughtful individuals. In particular, ‹effects› research would not offer young people the *opportunity* to demonstrate any intelligent or critical responses, whereas this research presented participants with a platform to demonstrate their abilities.

The ‹data› for analysis in such a study is not simply the videos that are produced, but rather also – perhaps more importantly – includes the researcher's ethnographic observations of the entire production process, from first thoughts and discussions, through planning and various filming sessions, and responses to material in progress, through to completion.

The study was able to demonstrate a high level of media literacy in even the youngest participants. In their few years of experience as media consumers, the children had learned elements of genre and presentation, as well as acquiring a lively awareness of the way in which things could be represented, and misrepresented, on camera. The children's familiarity with the constructedness of the media, their ability to imagine the final edited text even as they recorded elements of it out of sequence, and the sheer speed with which they picked up how to operate the equipment and began creative activity, all confirmed that an ‹open research method which allowed children to express themselves would lead to a much more positive picture of young media consumers than the ‹closed›, inherently negative methods used by ‹effects› researchers.

In terms of environmental issues, the study was able to show that the children felt quite a high level of concern about environmental issues, particularly pollution and the need for green, open spaces. The children related to environmental issues most closely at the local level, although some global extrapolations were made. However, the children did not focus on global issues primarily in their videos, and the published study (Gauntlett, 1997) discusses the idea that the absence of a global or ‹macro› focus in the environmental media coverage consumed by children led to their understanding of the whole issue being ‹bent› towards the individualistic, local level.

The time spent observing the planning and production of each video, over a period of weeks, revealed that the impressions generated in the group interview in the first week of the study (equivalent to the focus group which is often the only information-gathering element of other qualitative studies) were often inaccurate, with some being distinctly misleading. Children who had seemed indifferent to the environment in conversation were found to have quite strong views on some issues – particularly where related to the quality of their own lives – whilst others who had emerged from the initial discussion as keen environmentalists were found to be rather less committed where significant amounts of actual effort would be required. Over time, it generally became clear that the children were more familiar with environmentalist values and discourses than had been initially apparent; but also that environmental concern was not singular or straightforward, as conflicts were observed between the idealistic desire to be environmentally friendly on the one hand, and the more pragmatic or hedonistic pull of enjoying themselves and ‹not bothering› on the other. By the end of each project, one could see that the initial group interviews had represented a kind of ‹brain dump› of *potential* interests and concerns, which in subsequent weeks were sifted and filtered to reveal the more genuinely-felt opinions.

The video-making process gave children a voice, not only to provide considered answers, but to set their own questions. They were even able to use the persuasive vehicles of humour and satire to make their points. Such findings contrasted pleasingly with the findings of ‹effects› studies, which typically positioned young participants as likely victims of the media, and seemed most happy to find any partial evidence which would confirm this view. By contrast, this study was able to show that children are far from being simply passive or reactive in relation to the mass media. The content of television programmes and other media goes through complex processes of critical interpretation and integration with existing knowledge and

understandings, and so cannot have direct or predictable ‹effects› on attitudes or behaviour. Children are generally sharp and cynical readers of the mass media – as they are able to demonstrate when given the opportunity to be *writers* of such media. (For more about this study, see online presentation with photographs at www.artlab.org.uk/videocritical).

Drawing Celebrity

This study, conducted 2003–04, explored the idea of asking participants to do drawings as the way of getting into participants' responses to media material. The research sought to explore how young people think about celebrities, and whether ‹celebrity culture› (seen as being especially dominant at this time in the UK) was having an impact on their aspirations or lifestyle values. The work also considers changing perceptions of gender identities.

The study involved 100 ‹Year 10› students (aged 14–15) in the south of England. Participants were asked: «Draw a star, celebrity or famous person who you would like to be. If there's nobody you'd like to be, at all, then choose someone who you think is good or cool». They were also asked to «put them in a particular setting and/or doing something», and were reassured that their drawing skills were of no concern.

See fig. 1 for examples of some of the images. Clearly, it would be difficult to interpret such pictures in isolation – and indeed, as discussed above, I do not feel that one can justify a researcher imposing their, or any other, ‹external› interpretation (since we could never agree why one interpretation was correct and another one was not), and therefore the solution has to be that the artist interprets their work *themselves*.

Therefore, after spending 30–40 minutes on the drawing, participants were then asked to complete a single-sheet questionnaire, the most important part of which was the open question «Do you think it would be good to be like this person … and if so, why?». (It would have been better to conduct interviews, so that aspects of each drawing, and specific points expressed in answers, could be explored; but time constraints – in terms of how much disruption school teachers would allow – meant that a written response was often the only practical solution). Answers to this question included, for example:

- Female who had drawn actress Julia Roberts: «Yes, because she's rich, famous, pretty and is a fantastic actress. I like all the film's she's in. She deals well when the public criticises her. She's really talented and

fig. 1

secure».

- Male who had drawn rugby star Johnny Wilkinson: «Yes because he's the best in the world. He has lots and lots of money. He plays rugby (better than football)».
- Female who had drawn pop star and actress J-Lo: «Have lots of money». Very famous. Can have anything she wants. Loved by lots of people.
- Male who had drawn singer Bob Marley: «Yes, because he was out of this world (if you get what I mean). He wrote a lot of good songs, had a lot of wives and solved a lot of political problems in Jamaica».

In a relatively small number of cases (16 per cent) the artists had decided that they did not actually want to be that person after all, or had mixed feelings. For example:

- Male who had drawn football star David Beckham: «No, because even though he is really rich and famous, he's always in the papers. I wouldn't be able to cope with all the media coverage he gets. It would be good to play for Real Madrid and be that rich but not so famous».
- Female who had drawn Friends actress Jennifer Aniston: «Maybe. Because it would be nice to be married to Brad Pitt. Being famous would be nice but maybe a bit annoying. She is very attractive».
- Male who had drawn singer-songwriter Badly Drawn Boy: «Some parts would be good, like having lots of money and having singing talent. Also having the lazy lifestyle would be good. But the fans and fame I would not appreciate».

A second question, «What setting did you draw them in, and what are they doing in your drawing? And why do you think you drew them like this?» usually only elicited descriptive responses, although occasionally they were a little more revealing. For example:

- Female who had drawn pop star Christina Aguilera: «I drew her singing at the Europe Music Awards. I drew her in this setting as I would love to sing live in a stadium in front of all those people and have them all love you».
- Male who had drawn Virgin entrepreneur Richard Branson: «Richard is posing in front of his planes, trains and his shops and phone services. I drew him like this because it shows what a good business man he is».

- Female who had drawn Friends actress Jennifer Aniston: «She is shopping and is by her big house. I drew her like this because she is able to go shopping and spend a lot of money and can spend her money without wondering if they can actually afford to spend that amount of money.

Arguably the most interesting written responses were given in response to a third, more ‹closed› question, which said: «Can you think of *three words* which might be used to describe this person, and which also describe how you would like people to think of you?». Although apparently offering less scope for rich qualitative responses, this question drew consistently interesting, thoughtful answers. David Beckham, for example, was described by one young man as ‹happy›, ‹a family man› and having ‹lots of friends›. This choice of three phrases interestingly leaves out football skills, and positions Beckham as a father and family man. Other responses from males included:

- Bob Marley — Sound; Funny; Warm
- Roger from Less Than Jake — Cool; Modest; Friendly
- Orlando Bloom — Talented; Cool; Good looking
- Matthew Perry — Funny; Original, unique; Interesting
- Bruce Lee — Focused; Mellow; Supple

Coming from male teenagers, responses such as these – which are emotionally reflective rather than ‹macho› – suggest either that young masculinities are changing (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2001; Gauntlett, 2002), or that the drawing process gives research participants time to develop more nuanced thoughts about the subject-matter. (In fact, I believe both of these to be the case). Studies of gendered self-presentation have found that the school context still typically requires young males to create a performance of masculinity within very particular boundaries. In terms of media research specifically, David Buckingham (1993) discusses how his efforts to discuss television with groups of boys aged between seven and twelve, in English schools, encountered serious difficulties because masculinity was actively ‹policed› by the boys themselves. Although they were able to have relatively complex discussions about sexism in cartoons, the boys kept each others' masculinities in check, so that any boy who began to step out of line – by expressing a more ‹feminine› view, or even by suggesting that they liked a female character – would quickly be ‹corrected› or made fun of, so that their self-presentation was hastily

pushed back into the more traditional masculine mode.

The drawing exercise does not necessarily get around this problem – indeed, drawing may be a more self-conscious activity than speech – but it seems that once young males have decided to participate in the activity, they are then perhaps a little more willing to engage seriously with associated issues. Rather than being a study which leads to confident assertions of findings, this study was useful in developing ideas about the use of drawings in research – some of which are discussed a little more in ‹A few more thoughts›, below.

Other studies

Further projects which have made use of this approach include:

– *Designs on Masculinity* – PhD project by Ross Horsley (2001–04), in which young men aged 16–30 (some in school or college, some working men, some in prison) are asked to design a men's magazine «which you would like to read, but which you also think would appeal to men in general». Horsley's findings suggest an equation between the process of constructing a magazine and the process of constructing one's own gender identity. Some information at www.artlab.org.uk, and see the developing website at www.readinginto.com/magazines.

– *The Passport of Me* – Art and identity project in collaboration with Peter Bonnell at Royal College of Art (2004). Young people were given a blank passport, art materials and polaroid camera, and asked to create a document recording aspects of themselves (tying in with the exhibition about documentation, *This Much is Certain*). See ‹www.artlab.org.uk/passport.htm›.

Some other recent studies and activities are mentioned in «Popular Media and Self-Identity: New approaches» at www.artlab.org.uk/inaugural.htm and a few earlier ones appear at www.artlab.org.uk/projects.htm.

A few more thoughts on visual methodologies

Following on from my most recent research experience – the study outlined above in which teenagers were asked to do drawings of celebrities – I would like to mention a few aspects of this approach which are worth thinking about.

Avoiding linearity

A valuable aspect of static imagery, used in research – such as drawings or collages, for example, but not video in this instance – is its lack of linearity. When we seek verbal or written responses from research participants, that data has to necessarily be sorted into an order. As Rudolph Arnheim notes in *Visual Thinking* (1969):

> Intellectual thinking [as expressed in language, and as opposed to visual thinking] strings perceptual concepts in linear succession… Intellectual thinking dismantles the simultaneity of spatial structure. It also transforms all linear relations into one-directional successions – the sort of event we represent by an arrow (p. 246).

When visualising a concept or a problem, we might picture a number of things at once, and perhaps see them as interconnected, but language forces us to put these into an order, one first and then the others, with the former often seeming to act upon or influence the latter. As Arnheim put it later, in his *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (1986):

> Propositional language, which consists of linear chains of standardized units, has come about as a product of the intellect; but while language suits the needs of the intellect perfectly, it has a desperate time dealing with field processes, with images, with physical and social constellations, with the weather or a human personality, with works of art, poetry, and music (p. 20–21).

Pictures obviously offer us the opportunity to reveal «everything in one go», without the material being forced into an order or a hierarchy. Often it is useful to have some explanation in words, *after* the initial (and central) impact of the imagery; but the primacy of the image can be retained. The example of the ‹mind map› of Beethoven's ninth symphony prepared by Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, illustrates this nicely (see www.artlab.org.uk/inaugural.htm). After much research and immersion in the symphony and the world of its composer, Zander created his visual guide to the piece, which is then presented to the orchestra. Although some of the meaning of this mind map will be translated into language, as the orchestra discusses it with Zander, the visualisation itself remains the primary reference point. Similarly, when a research participant creates a static artwork, their work offers a simultaneous range of themes and interpretations which may be explored.

Pictures as propositions, and as reflections of mental concepts

Nicholas Mirzoeff, whilst defining visual culture, notes that «visual culture does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence» (1999: 5). If modern living is primarily an experience of the visual, then getting this imagery ‹from› the mind, and ‹into› the realm of analysable research material would be a central goal for researchers. Art and drawing would seem to be the most direct way to do this. Of course, it is not direct at all: individuals have different levels of artistic skill, and on top of that, have different levels of confidence – or more usually *lack* of confidence – in those skills. Furthermore, as Gertraud Diem-Wille reminds us, in psychoanalytic terms, artworks will always be ‹compromise formations› – ‹compromises between the instinctual wish and all forces that oppose instinctual gratification› (2001: 120). In other words, even when artworks are intended to be expressive of something particular, they are always compromises between a revelation of something, and the social and psychological forces that prevent the artist from simply showing it.

Even the idea of putting a mental ‹picture› onto paper is far from straightforward, since the image we have of something in the mind is not usually fully-formed, like a photograph, but is more likely to be fractured and impressionistic. Virginia Woolf described consciousness in this way:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms … ([1919] 2003: 69).

This continuous ‹shower› of new material could be said to run down the valleys of the brain and enter the ‹stream› described by psychiatrist Anthony Storr:

> Although we may describe what goes on in our own minds as continuous, the ‹stream of consciousness›, we cannot actually perceive this. It is more like a stream of unconsciousness, with elements we call conscious floating like occasional twigs on the surface of the stream. When something occurs to us, a new thought, a linking of perceptions, an idea, we take pains to isolate it, to make it actual by putting it into words, writing it down, stopping the ‹flow› of mental activity for the time being as we might reach out and grab one of the twigs floating past. (1992: 169).

When not translated into words, elements in the stream may be revealed to us as what Arnheim (1969: 108), after Titchener (1926: 13), calls ‹visual hints« and ‹flashes'›. Philosopher Susanne Langer (1942) notes that certain perceived images may be deliberately stored, in a way parallel to Storr's grabbing of twigs, in a process where the raw perceived moving image data is ‹projected› … into a new dimension, the more or less stable form we call a *picture*' which has «a unity and lasting identity that makes it an object of the mind's possession rather than sensation» (p. 66). Nevertheless, of course these mentally stored perceptions are not the kind of recollection which might easily be mistaken for ‹actual› perception; rather, Langer says they «have all the characteristics of symbols», and therefore that we «attend to them only in their capacity of meaning things» since they are «symbols whereby those things are conceived, remembered, considered» (ibid). Langer, who felt that language is «a poor medium for expressing our emotional nature» (p. 100), sought to systematise the interpretation of symbols, with a debateable degree of success; but here we can simply take the point that humans store particular symbolic images – or at least, visual notes – for particular meaningful reasons. Turning this visual concept (in the mind) into a simple two-dimensional drawn image (in the physical world), is not likely to be simple.

Nevertheless, a person typically makes an effort and is able to put down something; something we can look at and consider. Here another point made by Arnheim seems provocative:

> Every picture is a statement. The picture does not present the object itself but a set of propositions about the object; or, if you prefer, it presents the object as a set of propositions (1969: 308).

If we apply this to the example of the celebrity-drawing study outlined above, it would suggest that we could examine each artwork as being *a set of propositions* about that admired celebrity. To avoid imposing a reading, once again, this would need to be explored as part of a dialogue with the artist; the researcher could ask the participant to suggest what these propositions might be, and could offer some for discussion, ultimately perhaps agreeing on a list of such statements.

Further possibilities

Instead of asking participants to produce just one image, it may be more fruitful to ask them to produce as many as they like – partly so that a

thought can be refined and presented in different ways, and partly because we often have a *range* of thoughts about any particular topic[4]. This would also mean that the participant could talk the researcher through each image and construct an account, or a narrative, of the connections and differences between the different images in the overall set.

Furthermore, future developments of this kind of work might allow participants more choice and variety in the ways in which they are enabled to express themselves. Instead of the researcher saying «Here's the video camera», or «Here's the pens», participants could be allowed to select their own forms as well as styles.

Conclusion

As was outlined at the start of this paper, this approach, in which participants are asked to provide a visual, creative response to a certain question or issue in media studies:

– Is different to most methods in audience/social research, which require participants to produce *instant* descriptions of their views, opinions or responses, in *language*;

– Is a *different way into* a research question: inviting participants to create things as part of the research process;

– Operates on the visual plane, to a substantial degree (as does most media and popular culture);

– Involves a *reflective process*, taking time;

– Recognises the creativity of ‹audiences›, and engages the brain in a different way;

– Generally avoids treating individuals as mere ‹audience› of particular products.

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[4] The idea that we might need more than one image comes, once again, from Rudolph Arnheim: ‹I mentioned earlier that drawings, paintings, and other similar devices serve not simply to translate finished thoughts into visible models but are also an aid in the process of working out solutions of problems. Of this, one receives little evidence from studies that yield only one drawing for each task. Therefore, in the experiments of Miss Caplan [a student of Arnheim who had asked fellow students to do drawings of concepts], subjects were encouraged to «use as many pieces of paper as you need: a new piece for each new idea; a new piece each time you want to correct an old idea. Continue until you are satisfied with your drawing! Think aloud as you draw and explain what you are doing as you do it!» Eleven subjects produced an average of nine drawings each; one drew as many as thirteen, and nobody settled for fewer than six›. (1969: 129-130).

This approach – to make one further point – seems to usefully bridge the divide between ‹theory› and ‹practice› in media studies. At both school and university level, media and communications studies is often taught as a subject of two halves – the ‹practical› work (making media) on the one hand, and the ‹theory› work (studying media) on the other. This dichotomy is often a source of frustration for both students and teachers, and unhelpfully carves up the field. The approach to media studies discussed in this paper fuses the two together – studying media *by* making media; or, to be more specific, studying media and its place in the everyday world *through* working with people in the everyday world to make media productions.

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