

# Using new creative visual research methods to understand the place of popular media in people's lives

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- *Abstract:*

The new Centre for Creative Media Research at Bournemouth Media School has been exploring new qualitative approaches to 'audience' research, in which participants are asked to create media or artistic artefacts of their own as part of the process. This work, we hope, points towards a significant 'turn' in our understanding of the ways in which people consume and make use of popular media: a turn towards creativity, the visual, and the imagination.

Rather than treating people as 'audiences' of specific parts of the media, this approach acknowledges that most people in contemporary modern societies are bombarded with a range of media material, and then have to deal with this data using what is often a considerable level of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge regarding popular communications institutions and strategies.

In our qualitative research projects, individuals are asked to produce media or visual material themselves, as a way of exploring their relationship with particular issues or dimensions of media. Examples include research where children made videos to consider their relationship with the environment; where young men designed covers for imaginary men's magazines, enabling an exploration of contemporary masculinities; and where young people drew pictures of celebrities as part of an examination of their aspirations and identifications with stars. (Website: [www.artlab.org.uk](http://www.artlab.org.uk)).

The paper will discuss this approach, and some findings; and will consider the benefits – and some methodological problems – of using this approach. The paper connects with the theme of 'Communication and Democracy', by proposing a more democratic form of communications research, as well as offering a way of exploring the democratic potential of media participation.

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## Introduction

This paper 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 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*).

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.

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 a '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 time is taken thinking 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 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* the body, and that this bodily engagement is a significant part of the thinking-through of the piece.

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.

To summarise, then, this approach:

- 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.

## **The field of ‘visual culture’**

The emerging academic field of ‘visual culture’ has many exciting aspects, and seems to be based on a clear philosophy. However, it can be seen as an attitude without a method; a nice bunch of ideas, but little certainty as to what can be done with them. In the eloquent ‘Introduction: What is Visual Culture?’ in his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) rightly paints a democratic picture of that approach, emphasising the importance of the meanings generated in the minds of individuals in their routine, everyday experience of our all-pervasive visual culture. For example:

‘Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology, I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the internet. [...] Visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life from the point of view of the consumer, rather than the producer.’ (p. 3).

He goes on to say that the approach ‘hopes to reach beyond the traditional confines of the university to interact with people’s everyday lives’ (p. 5). This is all very agreeable. The problem is that *in practice*, visual culture scholars do not really do these things. In Mirzoeff’s own book, for example, beyond the audience-centred introduction quoted above, the author fills all the main chapters with *his own readings* of visual culture. Mirzoeff is an excellent writer, and his insights are readable and interesting. However, like many visual culture scholars, the concern for ‘meaning or pleasure sought by the consumer’ and ‘everyday life from the point of view of the consumer’ is gently dropped, with the interpretations of the academic expert being inserted instead. (Visual culture scholars who do this could perhaps argue that they are acting as the consumer *par excellence*, or as a representative of the people, but such a claim would not seem quite right; really, they are taking the role of the elite academic critic and connoisseur – the role filled by literary critics and art historians for centuries, and more recently joined by every bogstandard film studies lecturer –

whose supposed cultivation, taste and/or training enable them to ‘reveal’ meanings which neither the majority of viewers, nor the producer themselves, may have thought of).

In several – perhaps even *most* – of the most prominent ‘visual culture’ books, the same pattern emerges (see for example *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2001)<sup>1</sup>, *Practices of Looking – An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001)<sup>2</sup>, and *Visual Culture* (Howells, 2003)<sup>3</sup>). Towards the start of such books it will be asserted that ‘visual culture’ emphasises that:

- meanings are made in the minds of individuals in their encounters with visual material;
- all aspects of visual culture – around the world and in different spheres – are equally important;
- everyone interprets visual material in their own way.

But when looking at what happens in practice, the reader comes to realise that ‘visual culture’ scholars typically:

- emphasise the readings of ‘experts’, such as themselves (instead of being interested in the range of interpretations generated by actual everyday consumers);
- select particular extraordinary examples which are deemed to be especially interesting (instead of looking at a typical spread of everyday examples);
- set out specific methodologies for reading an image (instead of exploring ways of understanding other people’s actual readings of images).

To get closer to its own goals, the field of visual culture needs to find ways of understanding the meanings that aspects of visual culture have for the broader population. Such methods might ideally be ones which include a visual component.

## **Interpreting visual material produced by research participants**

When research has been conducted in which participants have produced visual material, or audio-visual material, such as a drawing, collage, photographs or a video, the researcher is faced with the problem of how this material can be interpreted.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose highlights the importance of the viewer/audience in the introduction, but then ignores this for the vast majority of her book, with just a little bit about ‘audiencing’ tacked on at the end.

<sup>2</sup> In their introduction, the authors state clearly that ‘It is one of the central tenets of this book that meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulate among viewers’ (p. 7). To be fair, this book is more interested in the consumption of images than others. But it is also full of assertions about what the many different images reprinted in the book actually ‘mean’. The image (and its supposed meaning) remains primary. Most of the material about what such images may mean to consumers is speculation.

<sup>3</sup> Refreshingly, Howells does not pretend to be more democratic than he really is: he makes no attempt to conceal his intention to *teach* his readers in the art of reading visual images.

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 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, seemed not to value 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).

So, from recent developments in art therapy, 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)<sup>4</sup>.

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 research (see for example

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

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).

## **There is a history**

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 non-mainstream visual and textual constructions which can tell us something about people's relationship with mainstream media and mainstream politics (see Gauntlett, 2002, and 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; see, for example, the article by Peter Holzwarth & Björn Maurer (2003) which details the Children in Communication about Migration project (known as CHICAM – see [www.chicam.net](http://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. 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](http://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.

Research examples include:

- *Video Critical* – Study in which seven groups of children aged 7–11, at inner-city schools in Leeds, UK, were encouraged and assisted to make videos about ‘the environment’ (during 1995). This gave an insight into how they had processed media messages about environmental issues, as well as revealing a high level of media literacy in these young children. Published as the book *Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power* (Gauntlett, 1997). See online presentation with photographs at [www.artlab.org.uk/videocritical](http://www.artlab.org.uk/videocritical).
- *Drawing Celebrity* – Study in which young people aged 14–15 were invited to draw a celebrity or star that they would like to be, leading to an exploration of the lifestyles and aspirations that are associated with celebrity (2003–04). The work also considers changing perceptions of gender identities. The work is discussed in ‘Popular Media and Self-Identity: New approaches’ at [www.artlab.org.uk/inaugural.htm](http://www.artlab.org.uk/inaugural.htm) (and will be discussed in future publications).

- *Designs on Masculinity* – PhD project by Ross Horsley (2001–04)<sup>5</sup>, 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](http://www.artlab.org.uk), and see the developing website at [www.readinginto.com/magazines](http://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](http://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](http://www.artlab.org.uk/inaugural.htm) and a few earlier ones appear at [www.artlab.org.uk/projects.htm](http://www.artlab.org.uk/projects.htm).

## **A few more thoughts on visual methodologies**

Following on from my most recent research experience – the study mentioned 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,

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<sup>5</sup> Supervised by the author.

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](http://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.

The mental image we have of something is not usually fully-formed, like a photograph, but is more likely to be impressionistic, involving what Arnheim (1969: 108), after Titchener (1926: 13), calls "visual hints" and "flashes". Turning this visual concept (in the mind) into a simple two-dimension 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. And 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 mentioned 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 done 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<sup>6</sup>. 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**

To repeat the summary from 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.

A final point: This approach seems to usefully bridge the divide between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in media studies. At both school and university level, media and

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<sup>6</sup> 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).

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).

Anyone interested in this approach is encouraged to get in contact (email [dgauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:dgauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk)).

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