

**Gerhard Rupp, Petra Heyer:**

**Media Consumption and Production by High School Students**

**I. Introduction**

We are pleased to have been given the opportunity to report on our research project at the IGEL-Conference in Pécs today.

In our research project “Literary Reading and New Media Consumption: The View of High School Students”<sup>1</sup> we investigate the use of books and of the new media in today’s society. We would like to find out how people get to grips with the coexistence of old and new media nowadays. Up to now we have found out that

- social class,
- type of school,
- cultural background and
- gender

are the key factors, which determine the use of books and of new media. Moreover, reading seems to be a crucial qualification for the use of the new media, especially for the computer. Students who read books regularly also use the new media but not vice versa. This result has not only consequences on the meaning of reading and the cultural heritage in society but also on the instruction in classes at school and at university.

In our research project we want to find out what and how young high school students aged between 17 and 19 think about reading literature and what they think about the use of the old and the new media, e.g. the TV and the computer.

Our aim is to ask the students to perform and to present their use of literature and of other media in a productive way, e.g. by creative writing and making videos. We want them to reflect on their reception of literature, TV and the World Wide Web in order to find out the impact of these media on their way of thinking and on their way of life.

It is our hypothesis that the new media – the use of computer instead of books, paper and pencil – create new intellectual profiles. As young people still read literature, we have

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also in mind to characterize the cultural synthesis they produce from the variety of their cultural and media possibilities.

We hope that our results will enable us to consolidate the future of learning of literature at school. We want to prolong the learning of our students into their adult life. Apart from that we expect a radical change and widening of subjects and skills for the training of young teachers.

As one part of our project, we run an action research. That means that we investigate the problem in real life situations, in which our university students take the role of a teacher. The professors and research assistants take part in the situation by observing them teaching the high school students. So our research combines both teaching and research work.

Together with our university students we plan regular German literature lessons, in which high school students read literary texts dealing with watching TV. After that they compose their own literary version of the original texts. They also write creative 'free' texts showing their interests, their esthetic orientation and their feelings. In a last step of our teaching we aim at an analysis and at a conscious reception of TV-programmes (e.g. music video clips, soap operas etc.). Thus we prepare the high school students for producing their own video.

Alternating between reading, watching TV, creative writing and creative production of a video we cover the wide range between print and audio-visual media and between active and passive modes of reception.

Besides these class activities, we have worked out a questionnaire in order to get an insight into the curriculum vitae of each student as far as literary reading and media consumption are concerned. This questionnaire serves as a basis for interviews with those students, whose answers have been particularly interesting.

In the following we will focus on the first part of our research dealing with literary reading and with the texts of the students who have rewritten the end of a short story dealing with watching TV. We will concentrate on the first group of high school students, we investigated, in order to present you the whole range of the results in our research project.

We have asked high school students of a 12<sup>th</sup>-form German A-level class at a secondary school in Düsseldorf, the Cecilien-Gymnasium, to read the short story „Olympia Zwo“ by Günter Kunert (Kunert, 1984)

In this story the pensioner Wilhelm Zwart, who lives alone, is one evening personally welcomed by a female TV-announcer. Zwart tries to maintain this contact by embellishing his

flat and by beautifying his own appearance – but without success. When he finally comes in the TV-studio, he addresses the announcer, his sweetheart, and finds out that her belly and legs are made out of metal.

In Kunert's story, virtuality replaces real interaction and technical instruments replace the human body. With his title "Olympia Zwo" Kunert alludes to E.T.A. Hoffmann's novel "Der Sandmann", where the theme of the mechanical doll Olimpia occurs at first.

## II. How to analyse classroom conversation

In order to show you how the students of the literature class at Cecilien Gymnasium understood this text I will give you an example of the conversation in class.

It is taken from the final discussion of the high school students, where they commented on the realistic and fantastic features of the story. So **Gary** says:

Well, yes, I have to say that this phrase „as if he knew exactly“ ("als wisse er genau Bescheid") seems quite strange to me. This can be a hint to a kind of dream. Or maybe he has been in this building before, but that would have to be mentioned before. I'll read this bit to you: "He arrived at a kind of bar (...) as if he knew exactly where he was, he went to ..." ("Gelangte er an einen Tresen [...] Als wisse er genau Bescheid, schritt er auf [...]"). „As if he knew exactly“ ("Als wisse er genau Bescheid"), well, I wonder why he seems to know exactly where he was? Ok!, „as if“ („als wisse"), is a subjunctive form, but ... ähm, I think it's strange (to Isabel und Rose) Everyone finds this a bit strange! [...]

There are two groups of speakers. Gary represents the first group. In the beginning of his contribution he refers to a sentence of the story, where it is said, that the pensioner Zwart enters the TV-studio "as if he knew exactly where he was". The quotation "as if he knew" leads Gary and most of the male students to say, that it is quite strange and that the whole story tells us a dream. The past subjunctive mood makes not only this sentence unreal and improbable, but the story as a whole. It turns it into a fantastic story.

Two girls of the second group of mainly female students, Isabel and Rose, take the story more seriously. They argue for a more realistic understanding of what happens to Zwart and they think that the reader is not allowed to see the text in the way the boys do.

According to Isabel and Rose, one should read the text more closely and the reader should be warned by Zwart's love affair, which turns out to be an impossible love to a machine.

Isabel maintains that it is possible from the technical side of the problem to produce a machine speaking like a TV-announcer. So there is no need to think that the story as a whole

is unreal or just a dream. To think it was a dream would be as arbitrary as to think an alien would have “beamed itself into the TV-set of Mr Zwart”.

Isabel turns out to be a close reader, who follows almost hermeneutic principles and who supports her statements by constantly referring to the text. According to her the story contains a moral message with an impact on the reader’s orientation in everyday life. For Isabel it is not a dream nor is it a science fiction story ‘with an alien beaming itself into Zwart’s flat’. In Isabel’s and most of the girls’ eyes the assumption that Zwart has dreamed of the TV-announcer addressing him is the result of superficial reading.

This short reference to the classroom conversation allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. There are – at least – two attitudes maintained by these high school students towards literary reading, literary understanding and media communication: a traditional and meaning-minded attitude and an avantgarde-orientated one.
2. The traditional and meaning-minded attitude aims at realistic implications, meaningful texts and hermeneutic ways of dealing with texts. This is primarily the position of the female students in this class. They tend to hold a rather pessimistic view of the technological progress.
3. The avantgarde-orientated attitude calls for a more complex understanding of Kunert’s story. According to this attitude, the story may refer to reality or to a dream. More likely it is a dream and thus a conception of a manifold reality and manifold text-meanings is preferred. This is primarily the position of the male students in this class. They manage to repress the disadvantages of modern life and they tend to hold a rather optimistic view of the world. Moreover, some of them say without reservation yes to the technological progress, which they believe to have a positive effect on literature and to stimulate authors to write fantastic stories.
4. As already pointed out, it is striking that these differences coincide with gender differences.

### **III. Rewriting the end of Kunert’s story: The students’ literary versions**

Up to now, most of the studies dealing with reading research have concentrated on conversation analysis. We on the other hand combine conversation analysis with text analysis of the students’ texts, which try to continue the story of the pensioner Zwart.

The ending of Kunert's text is the following:

His speech which was presented without any interruptions moved him in such a way that he unintentionally but appropriately bent the knee and the head, worshipping, curtsying in a servile attitude. Because of this his visual angle he changed to an area that he had often missed at home. However, below the table there were no shoes, feet, ankle, calves and knees framed by the hem of the skirt but only a number of aluminium poles, firmly screwed by wing-nuts with each other, different-colored strings and a tiny black oil pool on the flooring. At the same moment he heard voices approaching him from behind and he bent and crawled under the table, closed the eyes and bedded his hot forehead with the pulsating vein into the chilling lap. (Kunert 1984, pp. 127)

Zwart was moved by his own speech, so that he made a bow before the TV-announcer, his sweetheart. He looked under the table and thus detected instead of shoes, feet and legs some metal bars, electric wires of various colours and a nap of black oil. Hearing some voices coming nearer, Zwart shelters himself in the lap of Olympia, the mechanical TV-announcer.

The students were to rewrite this end, to imagine continuations as to the plot, the allusions, the possible meanings etc. It is interesting, in this respect, how the two groups of students in the class made out in the conversation analysis now reappear in the solution of this writing task.

Thus Isabel writes:

The voices approached and became increasingly louder. His heart hit faster and more strongly, he held in his breath, closed the eyes very firmly and hoped to become invisible and to dissolve. His fear increased into an immense one, just the same as his confusion. Zwart began to see white little stars that began to swivel faster and faster and started to mix, his chest seemed to want to tear when a voice said to him: "Hey there! What do you do there under the table? Get out there immediately!" [...] In front of Zwart there were two young, very tall men who looked at him wondering what he was doing there, however, but also being kind of amused.

"Hey there old man, did you get lost in here? [...] Is there something you are searching for in here? "

"I ...well ... the announcer ... I wanted to explain everything to her ... but", Zwart stuttered, "she is only a doll". [...] Zwart told them the whole story that he had experienced and expressed his astonishment about and his admiration for the modern technique and the interactive television.

When Zwart had finished his story, the man who had introduced himself as Mr Schulze laughed out loud. "Yes, the modern technique is a phenomenon but interactive television? No, Mr Zwart, in fact there isn't something like that" !" [...] Your fantasy obviously played a trick on you." After this conversation Zwart went home. [...] After he had arrived there, he did not turn the television on as he used to do but chose a book instead. It appeared less dangerous to him.

The fourth sentence of Isabel's continuation: „Zwart began to see white little stars that began to swivel faster and faster and started to mix, his chest seemed to want to tear“ shows that she is familiar with E.T.A. Hoffmann and his dancing mechanical doll Olympia turning around and shining brightly. She looks back to the ending of Kunert's story, which takes place in the TV-studio and so does the character Zwart, a victim of the technical progress, which he cannot cope with. What had happened in his flat before, as it is described in Kunert's story may have been a dream but its outcome as such is real and dangerous. It confuses Zwart, that the announcer really did not address him via TV, as the technician, Mr. Schulze, reveals in his conversation with Zwart. Due to his confusion caused by the discovery that the announcer is a machine and that the technology of interactive television does not yet exist, Zwart picks up a book, which is not as “dangerous” as the TV-set. Even if it was a dream that the TV-announcer spoke to Mr Zwart, it is present to him and so he cannot do away with it.

With quite a different view of things Gary writes:

... Blood vein in his cooling lap. Used to the cooling firmness of her thighs, which had often appeared as hot and passionate in his imagination, Zwart feels a soft flash, a quiet pounding and a gentle leg movement of the TV-announcer, who's been regarded mechanical. A blow of life seems to have caught and fulfilled her. A nod of the head and a blink of her eye-lashes enable Zwart to get up, to leave his hiding-place underneath the table and to free himself.

The voices, from whom he just hid a minute ago, appear to him now with his announcer on his side as timid and silly. They both – like Bonnie & Clyde – run screaming through the voices within the studios out into the street. Zwart recognizes the faces, sees bloody-red laughing and black staring eyes while they cast an eye on him and his Bonnie.... The eyes, faster and faster running, drift past. The voices are only fragments recognized as broken pieces of a bottle. A bright whipping light, which is thousand times stronger than that one of the sun, escorts Zwart along his way: The announcer halts, falls apart. Light, love, emotions & success: everything breaks into pieces and is dashed at the bottom of his life.

For a very last time the muscle in Zwart's chest pumps blood through his body

----- Salvation.

Gary, too, refers to E.T.A. Hoffmann when he writes that the TV-announcer comes to life before the eyes of Zwart just as E.T.A. Hoffmann's Olympia came to life before the eyes of Nathanael. This shows us on the other hand that Gary writes according to the assumption of a fantastic story because the mechanical doll *is not* really alive. In Gary's story Zwart sees his love through rose coloured glasses when he escapes from his hiding-place under the table and leaves the studio side by side with the animated mechanical TV-announcer. Zwarts feels free

for the first time with her by his side. Like Bonnie and Clyde, who by means of their guns manage to escape from the police again and again, they run through the streets. But in the end this phantastic vision collapses: the bright light at the end of the street indicates the passage from life to death. So Gary imagines a short moment of resistance against the impact of technological determination, only to let Zwart end up in death as a release from his struggle and from life.

Let me now sum up the results of these writings.

The students' literary versions of the text dealing with watching TV confirm what we found out with regard to the classroom conversation. In the two texts there is a virtual interaction with the mechanical doll but the outcome of this interaction is quite different. For Isabel and for most of the female students Zwart, who is not able to distinguish between the constructed imaginary reality on TV and real life, stops watching TV. Instead of watching TV he picks up a book or goes out to meet friends. In some of the female students' texts Zwart cuts off the electric wires of the mechanical TV-announcer or even commits suicide because he is not able to cope with the disappointment that he cannot get in touch with his sweetheart. For Gary and most of the boys media consumption cannot take place without phantasy. So Gary imagines Zwart and Olympia fighting against TV like Bonnie and Clyde fight against the police but there is no good end to this. Zwart is released without having obtained his aim. In another text Zwart starts a public campaign revealing the true nature of the automata Olympia. Even though the student lets Zwart start a campaign against TV, he reveals in his story that Zwarts motives for doing so are actually selfish and ridiculous.

#### **IV. Video-production: coming up of a new esthetics of perception and identity**

I am now going to show you some aspects of the videoclip produced by the high school students from Cecilien Gymnasium. It is a music-video clip of the song „Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit“ (Vanity fair), which has not yet been produced as a professional video clip. The song is about small talk in social meetings and about self-conceited young people belonging to the yuppie-class.

The students were free to 'illustrate the song' line by line and/or to tell a story about the songs figures and places.

It is striking that the male students take a major part in producing this video, e.g. Gary is at the same time director and script boy whereas Ray takes the part of the main character. Most of the girls like Isabel do not take part in these activities, except for the role of extra.

In the videoclip Ray plays the role of a gipsy man – this is a protagonist created by the students meant as a contrast to the self-conceited young people in the song.

### **Ray as a gipsy-man on the Königsallee**



Ray can be seen in various places in Düsseldorf trying to communicate with other people, however, without success except for the very last scene.

### **Ray at the ice-hockey-stadium:**

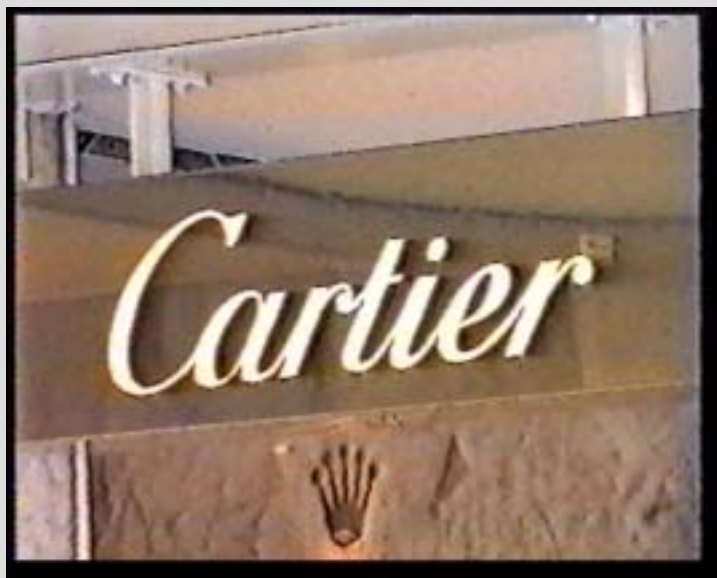


**Ray at a party****Ray kissing a girl:**

The different appearances of Ray are connected by the refrain of the song “Sommerschlußkauf der Eitelkeit“ (sort of „vanity fair“). The motive of vanity is represented

by a jaguar-car and by the emblem of a Cartier-shop at Königsallee, Düsseldorf's famous mall.

**Jaguar car; emblem of a Cartier shop:**



The car and the emblem stand for wealth and for consumption, i.e. for the status symbols of the western consumer society whereas Ray's guitar stands for gipsy life connotating freedom, independence but also financial insecurity.

Besides these images full of symbolic meaning there are scenes without any special significance such as the view of Königsallee and of the streetlamps of this mall.

As to the whole meaning of this video, it tells the story of the protagonist apparently originating from the upper classes who tries to escape from his situation. In vain does he communicate with people in the street or in the ice-hockey-stadium – he cannot communicate to anyone beyond his own social class.

So what does this video tell us?

For one thing the video serves as a means of self-expression. The students create images to express the story of the song, but at the same time they create images without meaning.

Furthermore, the students do not exclusively create a plot: they use the camera for experimentation, they cling to the process of video production and they do not concentrate so much on the outcome of their efforts.

Nevertheless, we can make out traces of filmic perception in this video production of the students. One example is the filming of emblems, which are highly symbolical for the upper class. These close-ups transport meaning as this is often the case in Hollywood cinema (Hickethier 1996). Another example is the pattern of storytelling typical of classical Hollywood cinema. Research on music videos have shown, that this pattern prevails despite of collage-techniques and despite of more and more rapid cuts (Aufderheide 1986).

These traces of filmic perception refer to camera techniques (such as close-ups) and to the narrative. They can be conceived of as sort of constraint of the medium film.

Inspite of this affinity to professional film making, we notice students' efforts to create images without meaning – images that are mainly images. It is a characteristic of music videos that most of the images have no precise meaning and if at all only within a larger context. Perception of a music video means then to understand a visual symbol in its context. As Dieter Baacke points out, by their frequent consumption of music-videos (e.g. on MTV and VIVA) students are particularly trained in decoding pictures, of allusions and quotations in music videos (Baacke 1996, 202/3). So the images allow us to speak of a new esthetic of video production and reception.

Beyond this use of images we can discover the outlines of a profound change of the concept of identity. If it is true that visual objects and images change their meaning in accordance to context and situation, then this also implies that identity has to be built up constantly from the beginning. Young people make this experience in our consumer's society, in which the identity of a person is made up of signs, status symbols and trade marks. On the one hand this means a farewell to the idealistic concept of identity. On the other hand it allows to change meanings, to rearrange symbols and to act as a conscious creator of one's own identity. Such an identity becomes an assembly of signs, which can be continuously rearranged and reassembled, because they don't have an inner meaning.

It is significant that this freedom of expression has been experienced in the audiovisual medium video and not in the print medium book, where meanings and symbols are not so easily exchangeable.

The video production of the students can be connected with one of the intellectual profiles in our sample that is the peer-group and new media-orientation. This type consumes the new media and shows a good competence in this field, benefiting from its advantages: such as communication, exchange, positive thinking and a positive attitude towards the technical progress of today's society. The student, who acts as the gipsy man in the video, represents this type of new-media-orientation.

## **V. Conclusion**

One can hardly avoid to feel empathy for this open-minded media profile, which somehow lessens the dramatic tension that characterizes the antagonism between books and new media. With regard to reading promotion, however, we really have to ask ourselves what the future of our cultural heritage will be like. If we cannot take for granted that books are being read, the existence of a common memory will be replaced by cultural individualism in peer groups or media events. On the other hand one has to acknowledge that the representatives of the tradition-minded orientation towards reading books (e.g. Isabel) – although emphasizing the value of our cultural heritage – fail to communicate the personal benefit, they gain from reading to their peers.

Never before has there been such a great variety of cultural activities to choose from – it is our task to help young people make the most of this opportunity. Instead of either reading books or watching TV, they should do both and they should exchange their views about

books, TV etc. Intellectual education then means being open to the world of tomorrow without being forgetful about the richness and the advantages of the past.

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(video clip "Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit" ("vanity fair")/Caecilien-Gymnasium)

**Element of Crime: Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit (songtext)**

Öffne nicht die Zähne, wenn du etwas sagst.  
Denk dran, nicht zu lächeln, wenn du nach Zigaretten fragst  
Hier geht es nicht um Freundlichkeit  
Lächeln fällt bloß auf.  
Und dann sind alle wichtiger als du.  
Das ist der Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.

Red nicht über andere, rede über dich  
Du bist hier nicht zum Spaß, halt nur das Glas und trinke nicht  
Hier geht es nicht um Wahrheit  
Trag etwas dicker auf  
Denn sonst sind alle wichtiger als du  
Das ist der Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.

Bist du denn nicht der, der damals mit dem - ja -  
Und dich hab ich gesehen, als seinerzeit - genau -  
Ich bin ein Schnäppchen auf dem Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.

Daß du mich beachtest, wie mich das wieder freut  
Ich küsse deine Füße, wenn du erlaubst, Oh Seligkeit.  
Jetzt muß ich aber weiter  
Halt mich bloß nicht auf.  
Da sind noch welche wichtiger als du.  
Das ist der Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.

Bist du denn nicht der, der damals mit dem - ja  
Und dich hab ich gesehen, als seinerzeit - genau  
Ich bin ein Schäppchen auf dem Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.

War das nicht wieder herrlich, war das nicht wunderbar.  
Keiner hat gerufen, und trotzdem waren alle da.  
Hol dir etwas Wichtigkeit  
Pump dich etwas auf  
Greif ganz tief hinein in den Grabbeltisch  
vom Sommerschlußverkauf der Eitelkeit.