Producing cultures – The construction of forms and contents of contemporary youth cultures

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As indicated from a quick look through published anthologies in the 1990s, much energy within Swedish (and possibly also Nordic) youth cultural studies has been spent on describing and analysing identity work in relation to media genres on a personal or individual level (see e.g. Bolin & Lövgren, 1995; Ganetz & Lövgren, 1991; Löfgren & Norell, 1991; Miegel & Johansson, 1994). Most research within this tradition has been qualitative, much of it informed by ethnographic methods (e.g. Economou, 1994; Fornäs et al., 1988/1995; Nissen, 1993; Petersson, 1990).[1] Since the concept of identity work, originally taken from Thomas Ziehe (1982/1986: 25f; cf. Cohen & Taylor, 1976/1992: 40ff), suggests an active part played by the individual in shaping his or her identity, this has led to a strong emphasis on the productive side of youth culture, exemplified by conceptualisations such as 'symbolic work' (Willis, 1990: 11ff), and even 'the productive viewer' (Winter, 1995).[2]

As a consequence of this identity focus, and the ethnographic methods used, youth cultural studies – as well as qualitative audience studies generally – have tended to favour a micro level analysis where individual interpretations of media texts have been highlighted, often in terms of pleasure, resistance, empowerment etc., which have mostly been studied from the perspective of the individual, i.e. which identities he or she comes up with as an end product. Few studies have taken the analysis further and linked this micro level analysis to a broader focus at macro levels; for instance linking identity production to the structural level of cultural forms, and how these cultural forms in turn deeply affect the possibilities at hand for the individual to construct his or her identity.

Although there certainly is nothing wrong with ethnographic methods, nor with a focus on identity *per se*, this research focus provokes questions concerning the

relation between cultural consumption and production, and between cultural form and content. My interest in these issues, which I will concentrate on in the following discussion, has evolved from some afterthoughts on a recently finished project on young men with a well developed interest in watching video nasties, i.e. action and horror films with graphically explicit depictions of physical (and psychological) violence (Bolin, 1998). In the project I tried to combine three kinds of analyses of the young men's cultural practices: firstly in terms of public spheres, secondly in terms of taste as distinctive practices, and thirdly in terms of identity. In the following I shall be drawing on examples from that project, and arguing that in spite of several problems with the combination of these different perspectives, there were also advantages that followed from the tensions between them. My aim in this article is, therefore, to make some theoretical clarifications concerning the concepts production, consumption, forms and contents, in order to contribute to, and possibly advance, the critical study of contemporary youth cultural studies, and thereby go beyond both reductionist dismissals of youth agency as all bad and unproductive (e.g. Strömholm, 1995), and celebratory affirmations of youth cultural practice as all good (e.g. Rönnberg, 1997).

I shall organise the discussion in four parts. In the first section I shall give the background to my research, and briefly introduce the young Swedish men that I have studied and their practices. I shall then go on to elaborate on the theoretical implications of the concepts production and consumption. In the third section I will extend the theoretical discussion on cultural forms and content to the empiric material, and lastly I will summarise and conclude the discussions.

Swedish Film Swappers and their practices

In the beginning of the 1990s I was involved in a project that was commissioned by a state council to make a content analysis of films and videos that had been the subject of censorship by the National Swedish Board of Film Censors, or had been forbidden to distribute in Sweden by the criminal courts. As these films were illegal, they were somewhat hard to get hold of, and consequently my fellow researcher and I had to turn to other sources than national film and video archives and other similar formal institutions.[3] As it happened my colleague had become acquainted with a boy who collected extremely violent action and horror films, and through this young man we came in contact with several others with the same interest. We soon discovered that collecting these kinds of films was far from unusual, and we gradually came in contact with several other young men, discovering a world I at least had not known of before. This fact made me increasingly interested in the young men's practices (as opposed to the films they watched), and led to a new project on cultural reception and production among these young men.

Thus, through the analytical lens of public spheres, taste and identity, and by the methods of *media ethnography* (including participant communication, ethnographic interviews and textual analysis of the films they watch and the cultural artifacts they produce), I studied these young men from late 1992 to 1996.[4] At the time there were five action and horror fanzines produced in Sweden (a sixth came on the scene in 1995). In addition to the fanzine producers, three groups of amateur video producers were part of the empiric material.

The most obvious feature that characterised the culture that I studied was the internal exchange of videotapes. Because of this communicative pattern I chose to call those involved in the exchange Film Swappers (cf. Sjögren, 1993: 31ff). Since the films they have a preference for are not distributed via the regular distribution networks in Sweden, these young men import them privately from abroad. Further distribution nationally is done by copying and swapping the films.

A second, and equally important, feature is the actual content of the videos: interest is concentrated especially on action and horror films with depictions of extreme violence – the films most often labelled 'video nasties'.

Thirdly, as already indicated, many of the young men were passionate collectors of videos (cf. Eckert et al., 1991: 79ff). One of my informants often called attention to his collection of original films (with original sleeves, etc.) and claimed it to be the second largest private collection in Sweden, comprising almost 700 videotapes (although another informant claimed to have just as many).

Fourthly, the Film Swappers are characterised by a high degree of internationalisation. The exchange of video films are mostly made on a national basis, but having extensive international contacts is far from unusual. Since the texts and genres that are the basis for interpretation do not have a large following, it is necessary to look for people with similar interests within a larger geographical area. This means that fanzines containing reviews, articles and ads for films are often written in English and have international circulation. Since the National Swedish Board of Film Censors' strict policy on violence has prevented the distribution of these films, they have to be imported, which makes international contacts important. There are of course fanzines written in 'minor' languages such as Danish, Dutch, German, Greek, Spanish and Swedish but those written in English have a greater international circulation. However, for those deeply involved, language does not seem to be an insurmountable barrier. Films are often watched in their original language. Films with Swedish subtitles are rare on account of the policy of the National Swedish Board of Film Censors mentioned above. The videos circulating in Sweden originate in countries with more liberal censorship legislation such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Greece, often with subtitles in those languages.[5]

The films watched by the Film Swappers can be roughly categorised, according to the type of violence portrayed, into the genres *horror* and *action*. Most of the films circulating among the Film Swappers would be considered horror films. Horror can be further sub-divided into *horror Italiano* – Italian horror films about murders of

young half-naked women by a psychotic killer – and the American *slasher, stalker* or *splatter* films. Among the more popular of the subgenres is *gore* which is a genre that concentrates on the visualisations of the effects of violence (cf. Jerslev, 1994). Another subgenre, *Zombie films*, obviously centre around the undead haunting the living, sometimes including a cannibalistic element, although not as often as in the *cannibal film*, where expeditions from the industrialised world meet their fate in the jungles of South America or Papua New Guinea.

Evading the dichotomy action/horror are the subgenres *women in prison* (WIP) films and its Italian equivalent *nazi camp* films. Both genres show women in captivity and often have sexual undertones where sexual abuse by guards and the prison management is legio.

These films are mostly watched within the private sphere of the home, although there are examples of more or less formally arranged film clubs and festivals. Inspired by the action and horror films that they watched and sometimes collected, some of the young men became textual producers themselves, either of *amateur videos*, or of *fanzines*, i.e. amateur writing by fans for other fans. As I have already stated, fanzines were central to the communicative organisation, and made up a public structure for the exchange of films, information on where to get hold of them and to read more about them. Through communicative action an *alternative public sphere* with its own forms of consumption, distribution and production was formed around the practice of film swapping, fanzine writing and amateur film-making (including zero-budget film festivals and other events). Thus, public spheres became my first analytical category, used mainly for structural analysis of the cultural forms.

The debates on the value of different films and videos were also used for strategic action and distinctive practices through the factor *taste*, which became the second analytical theme, and also used for the purpose of structural analysis. However, taste also involves components of structuring of individual and collective habituses, i.e. dispositions to orient oneself within social fields, which makes it apt also for the analysis of cultural content.

Furthermore, the communicative and strategic action types could be considered of great importance in the construction of the young men's *identity*. The category of identity became my third and last, and was used as a way of describing cultural content.

Having briefly introduced the world of the Film Swappers, I shall continue with a more thorough discussion of the theoretical implications concerning consumption and production.

Consumption and production

Theories of identity work as well as active audience theory could partly be said to result from a heightened interest in ethnographic methods within media and cultural studies, as the methods as such favour a closeness to the informant's everyday life

practices. Theories on how these practises relate to the various informant identities, therefore, lie close at hand. However, one of the risks with ethnographic media and youth studies is to engage so strongly in the micro practices of the informants that one risks falling into 'ethnographic worship' (Garnham, 1995: 69), forgetting about the links from the micro processes to their wider results in macro structures (cf. Livingstone, 1998: 204ff). As has been argued by among others David Morley (1992: 275f) and Bo Reimer (1997), macro structures can only be reproduced through micro processes; so it is important to make detailed studies of actual media practices, although this focus should not blind the researcher to the wider connection to social and cultural structures. A combination of methods fitting for the study of micro processes can, therefore, if combined with a focus on questions concerning macro structures such as public spheres and taste, be a fruitful way to overcome the apparent opposition between the micro and macro levels of analysis.

As a consequence of the micro focus in recent audience studies as well as within youth cultural studies, much effort has been made to reconceptualise consumption as production. As a reaction to older, more social scientifically informed, mass communication studies, mostly of US origin, the active audience has been celebrated as resistant to ideological messages and meanings. Although this reaction is quite understandable since much early media research has concentrated on macro level analysis, either in the form of theories on uniform influences or, more recently, on the reduction of audiences to an effect of the structure of the media text, one danger with this approach is an over-emphasis on activity, individual action and resistance. It is therefore wise to keep the limits of audience activity in mind, and I would like to plead for a conceptualisation of the youth audience as active in some ways, but also as structured in some respects. In order to solve this apparent contradiction it is important to distinguish between different levels of consumption and production.

Audiences are undeniably engaged in production in different forms and at various levels. Already in the late 1920s, researchers like Herbert Blumer and Paul Cressey in their studies of youth audiences stressed meaning production as an important part of the movie experience (Jowett et al., 1996). Although this research subsequently became obscured by other paradigms, and was at that time not fully developed, it was evident to these researchers that it is impossible to see communication as a mere transfer of messages, and that a most significant role was played by the audience member in the interaction with the text. However, that the audience member is an active constructor or constructress of meaning does not mean the s/he is dominant in this relation – that s/he is likely to produce *any* kind of meaning out of a text, although there is always the theoretical possibility (cf. Hall, 1980/1993). Different kinds of audiences engage for different reasons and in various ways in narratives. Most media forms, for example, lend themselves both to highly intense engagement and as background for other activities. But it is not only the *degree* of commitment and engagement that is important; the specific *kind* of engagement matters as well. John Fiske (1992), in an argument around fans, has distinguished three levels of audience

productivity: *semiotic* productivity that essentially consists of the meanings produced internally within the individual, *enunciative* productivity, or semiotic meaning that becomes shared in social interaction, and *textual* productivity, which is social meaning in the form of artifacts that circulate among individuals. While much stress has been laid on the semiotic and enunciative productivity within audience studies, few have made the explicit distinction between this kind of production and textual production. I would therefore argue that it is imperative to distinguish between different kinds of audience production. It is quite simply pointless if the concept of consumption is reconceptualised as production as this would only confirm the lower status of consumption, i.e. that consumption is such an insignificant activity that it has to be renamed. Within media reception studies (in which my study may be said to be included), there has been a strong emphasis on the production of meaning that results from the text-audience encounter, stressing the identity work of the individual audience member. This is, of course, also true of the young men I have studied. However, in addition to this type of work the Film Swappers are also involved in cultural production at other levels: e.g. production of amateur films, videos and fanzines. As these products circulate within distributive fora, in turn making up communicative forms and structures, the practice of circulating them contributes to the organisation of culture (and is thus part of the production of culture). I would thus argue that it sometimes is necessary to make an analytical distinction between different types of production, as each type contributes to cultural form and content in different ways.

The fact that consumption does not equal production does not mean that there are no *relations* between the two. Of course they are interrelated: there is a moment of production in consumption and a moment of consumption in production, as has been noted by Marx (1858/not dated: 11ff and 27ff). But these moments of production and consumption differ in kind and level, and each of these differ in their abilities to impose cultural representations on production and consumption at the other levels. And if one does not distinguish between production within the media industries, resulting in television and radio programmes, literary texts of all kinds, records, artifacts, and so on, and the meaning production that is the result of interpretive work by the individual, one will have a hard time explaining why we should worry over concentration of media ownership, advertising aimed at children, misogynic portrayals of women, ethnic stereotyping, and other controversial questions on the agenda in the late 20th century.

Culture as form and content

Bearing this in mind, it might be interesting to see how actual youth audiences create meaning, which leads to the organisation and production of cultural forms, and how these in turn affect cultural organisation at other levels. There are of course several ways to study how culture is organised, for example as subcultural styles (cf. Hall &

Jefferson, 1976/1991; Willis, 1978), or as class fractions structured by people's relations to the means of production. The way one describes formal aspects of course also reveals something about content, as form and content always presuppose each other (Ricouer 1973/1977: 144). Cultural organisation always involves how communication is organised; all cultures are the product of communication – one can say that communication is the technology of cultures (Hannerz, 1992: 26f). Communicative relations, however, can be described in several ways: as networks, micro-cultures, subcultures, counter-cultures, communities, social movements, etc. (cf. Bolin, in press). Not all of these concepts are in fact very appropriate to describe the Film Swappers' practices. Since they, for exemple, do not communicate face-to-face and do not 'meet on an everyday basis' (Wulff, 1995: 65), they do not make up a micro-culture. In fact none of my informants among the Film Swappers have met in real life. Their initial contacts are made on the grounds that they want to swap films. These contacts develop into exchanges of information, forums for evaluations and debate, and battlefields where tastes are developed and reconsidered, alternative canons formed, etc.

One possible way to look at how the Film Swappers are organised is as an *alternative public sphere*, with its own forms of production, distribution and consumption (cf. Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993). Although most Film Swappers strive towards autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant bourgeois public sphere, they cannot in the long run avoid contact with the mainstream media (national newspapers, broadcast television, etc). This connects them, as it does other alternative publics, together in a super-public sphere. Communication within the alternative public sphere is primarily maintained by the fanzines, but also via letters, the swapping of videos, amateur film festivals, telephone conversations, etc.

Their relationship to the dominant, bourgeois public sphere varies amongst individual Film Swappers. Some actively strive towards incorporation into the bourgeois public, and would have nothing against becoming 'real' magazine producers or film makers. Others try to isolate themselves from such contacts. Such differences make these kinds of alternative public spheres dynamic, since some people eventually get incorporated into the mainstream media, while at the same time new participants enter into the public discussion.

The Film Swappers also differ in their relation to the prevailing political and economic systems. Some of them actively want to make a career within the market system, while others underline their distance. Some also have contacts with the state system, receiving subsidiaries by being organised into study circles. These are more or less same individuals who are inclined to enter the mainstream media, and comprise a further indication of the market system's intrusion into the public sphere, and the way this systematic intrusion operates at an individual level. This was especially evident from interviews with one of my informants, who was engaged in publishing the fanzine *Shock*. While most of my informants mainly dealt with the contents of films, this informant frequently addressed questions of economy, how to

make possible profits, how to handle advertisements, how to get connected with the film industry in the form of arranged competitions where readers could win promotional T-shirts, signed posters, etc., how to distribute the fanzine more effectively via regular distribution networks, and so on.

However, the Film Swappers' practices also reveal a contrasting tendency, where the life world intrudes into the systems. This could be seen in the production process of the fanzines, where some of the Film Swappers did use copying machines and other equipment at their (or their parents) workplace.

Taste also functions as a structuring device for the Film Swappers – both internally and externally. As the Film Swappers' evaluations of films differ from what is generally considered legitimate, it is useful to make an analysis of their practices based on Bourdieu's (1979/1989) theories of taste as a marker of social status and a tool in social organisation; *fields* as the spheres wherein this systematic organisation of relations takes place; *symbolic capital* as the value at stake in the social struggle; and *habitus* as the incorporated capital that structures the individual's practices, preferences and actions.

Fields must have a relative autonomy in order to be able to produce symbolic capital, i.e. the power to consecrate certain values must rest within the field. This makes Bourdieu's theories problematic when used to analyse popular culture. Institutions within popular culture are often relatively low on autonomy, and often directed towards fields of large scale production connected to the economic field of power, whereas *cultural capital*, as a specific form of symbolic capital whose supreme value is widely agreed on, is produced within restricted fields of cultural production, and has strong links to the educational and the political fields of power. However, all fields are dependent on outside institutions before they develop their own autonomy. Erling Bjurström (1997) has suggested the term *embryonic social fields* for those that can only produce symbolic capital specific to a well defined area of interest.

Amongst the Film Swappers there are two different ways of arguing cultural value. Although all have a preference for films that are depreciated by the gatekeepers of legitimate culture, one fraction strives to incorporate the films into the legitimate film canon, either by expanding it, or, more rarely, by replacing it. This I call the *countercultural strategy*, as it ultimately aims at solving contradictions within legitimate culture. Within this fraction of the Film Swappers one can find statements on 'the fine art of murder' and references to recognised artists like Poe and Antonioni (Svensson, 1991). It is also more common within this strategy to relate to the formal features of the films:

> It's a weird piece, with the first full hour fully dedicated to hardcore sex only to turn into a splatter feast with various gore effects (mostly bad ones). The photography is clumsy, the story stinks like shit and the film has a really awful soundtrack by Nico Fidenco (remember that *Dr Butcher M.D*-theme?). But as with all films by Joe D'Amato it has a certain charm that's very hard to resist. It's ultra bad, but you'll love it anyway.
> (*Violent Vision* no. 2 [1996], p. 36)

Other Film Swappers totally refuse to discuss the films in terms of art, and do not at all relate to formal features, but rather to the emotional impact of the films, or to the films as simply relaxing or fun to watch.

> I'm not really sure what I see in blaxploitation films that I like so damn much. I'm white, I don't listen to soul of any kind and I'm not American. Some of the films have a very high turkey value and I have always enjoyed a good turkey, the jive is also a very important ingredient, it took some time to appreciate it, but now I love it, it's great. The action is many times more violent than in standard action films and since I'm a sucker for cheap gore, violence, nudity I get all this in these films (not all, but many). the flashy 70's clothing these studs often use is also incredibly groovy, big collars to shocking flares and on top of that a dangerous hat in the latest pimp fashion!
> As you understand I can never see the films in the same perspective as the blacks must do, they live in the ghetto and they are the ones pushed around by "The man", they probably have more respect to these films. In spite of all, I'm just a confused white sleazy guy enjoying this for the fun of it. (*Black* no. 12 [1992], p. 22)

Although revealing a highly reflexive stance on part of the author, this fanzine editor does not try to discuss formal features, although the opportunity lies close at hand when he mentions the 'turkey' value of the blaxploitation films. He rather dwells on the expressive aesthetics (although not discussing these from a formal perspective either), where the key expressions 'groovy' and 'fun' can be related to sensuous experiences rather than intellectual. This *subcultural strategy* does not change the canon at all, as it denies the existence of any legitimate canon concerning action and horror films. The author does not offer an argument for why this genre should be considered legitimate, and the text ends in an unresolved contention that he cannot answer the question posed at the beginning. By denying taking part in the processes of canonisation an embryonic field of its own is produced.

If seen in relation to a total field of film tastes, including all opinions and evaluations of films, all Film Swappers would be placed on the small-scale production side of the field, in a position close to the illegitimate pole. Those comprising the subcultural strategy would, however, be placed closer than the others to the illegitimate pole. On the other hand, seen from the perspective of a subcultural, embryonic field, the subcultural fraction would be dominant, since it – in this context – is more inclined to refuse to judge the films in terms of art, legitimacy and Culture. This makes the gaze 'purer' and more disinterested, more in line with the canonised aesthetic disposition, and thus renders the bearers of the gaze a higher social position.

Cultural content can, of course, also take different forms, for example in the shape of values, attitudes, certain types of knowledge or, as I have conceptualised it in my study, in the form of identities. As I have already indicated, this area is well covered within the literature, and I shall therefore be very brief, only sketching my analytical categories.

In my identity analysis, I have worked with a multi-dimensional conceptualisation (building on Fornäs, 1995). I consider *cultural identity* to be the symbolic expression (in speech, style and practices) of the different aspects and orders of a person's identity (thus in fact also making it a kind of cultural form which communicates, or

represents, the identity aspects and orders). Identity can be separated into *subjective* and *social* aspects, both of which can be either *ascribed* to a person by another person, or *experienced* by oneself. Each of these aspects consists of *identity orders*, where I have concentrated on sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, age and generation.

Identity orders are elucidated through consumption, production and in interviews, and are expressed differently by the individuals in varying forms. Gender, for example, is hardly ever openly emphasised in interviews, but pronounced in the preferences for actors, actresses and genres.

Ethnicity and *race* are highlighted in the fanzine *Black*, written by one of my informants (who is white). As can be seen from the quotation above, this fanzine has the blaxploitation genre as its focus (i.e. action films from the 1970s with black actors in leading parts, including explicit racial and ethnic thematisations). According to theories on youth subcultures, marginalised young people tend to identify with other social groups in marginalised positions, such as criminals or ethnic minorities (Hebdige, 1979/1988). Young people in general are socially, economically and politically marginalised. In addition to this marginalization, the Film Swappers experience a feeling of subordination in other areas as well (e.g. in school). Identification with other subordinate groups can therefore function as empowering, especially in relation to blaxploitation films where the black heroes seem to be in total control of their actions and social environment.

Concerning *age*, the practice of watching videos is connected to youth, both when it comes to amount of time spent on watching video, and in relation to content. The amount of time spent in front of the video and in producing fanzines and amateur films decreases when they grow older and get girl friends, and when they become fathers (which has been the case with two of them). Genre preferences also tend to broaden with increasing age, indicating that the young do not need the provocative power of having an illegitimate taste, when identity becomes more fixed in early adulthood.

Many of my informants have been introduced to film in general, and sometimes also to its violent genres, by older *generations* (parents or grandparents), which indicates that taste in films is to a certain extent inherited. On the other hand, as revealed by some of my informants, the relation to technology, especially media technology such as the VCR, tends to separate the generations. There is thus a bridging between generations connected to art forms and media content, at the same time as technology seems to widen the generational gap.

Sexuality is a central theme in many fanzines and amateur videos. Derogatory remarks on homosexuals is, for example, common among the Film Swappers as well as generally in society (Henriksson & Lundahl, 1993). Such remarks can be seen as a way of convincing others as well as oneself that one has a 'normal' heterosexual identity and is consequently part of the construction of male identity. The same can be said about the focus on gender relations in the films, where jokes about nude females are common in collective viewing situations, for example when the young

men watch their 'party flicks', as WIP films are commonly called. One way to interpret this is that boys in a transitory phase of life, when their sexual identity is not yet stable, try to convince both themselves and their male friends that they are 'normal', heterosexual males, since they admittedly take pleasure in watching naked women (as opposed to naked men).

Gender seems at first to be highlighted by phenomena such as cross-gender identification. This is a viewer position traditionally ascribed to women (Mulvey, 1981/1990), but since the portrayals of role characters in action and horror cinema are shallow, boys seem to be able to identify with the female protagonist. However, unlike the female spectator position constructed by the film apparatus (and by Althusserian *Screen* theory), it could be argued that the young men identify with the low status *position* of the heroine, rather than with her gender. Several of the young men also emphasise the emotional impact of the films they watch, which could be seen as a female response. However, if closely examined, the emphasis is on the affective impact of the films (i.e. that they have a relaxing, gruesome, gory, etc., effect), rather than the identificatory possibilities offered by emotional realism that is stressed in some descriptions of female viewing behaviour (cf. Ang, 1985/1991). Gender is also thematised in ironic portrayals of traditional muscular, active and determined masculine identity in amateur videos, where the role characters and the 'musculinity' of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone are ridiculed.

The different identity aspects and orders are differently organised into an interpretable cultural identity. Some informants have, in my interpretation, a more integrated identity, with pronounced homologies between the social and the subjective, the ascribed and the self-experienced aspects and how the identity orders are structured. Others are more heterogeneous.

The relation between form and content is of course varied within different youth subcultures, as the specific content of communication naturally has effects on the forms (and vice versa). The genres preferred by the Film Swappers have definitively had a deep impact on the way they have organised their communication. As the films that the Film Swappers prefer have been barred from screening in Sweden, it has been necessary to communicate by making informal contacts via alternative media. Since it is impossible to have ads for swapping these types of films in mainstream media, they have had to develop their own alternatives in the form of fanzines.

There are, however, other examples of kinds of relations where the violent content of the films has had an impact on the forms of communication. It is, for example, very common among the Film Swappers to have an ironic or humorous attitude towards violence and pornography in their writings. One way to interpret this fact is that the extremely violent content in the films would be unbearable to relate to if it was not displaced as jokes and black humour. The same can be said about the 'boyish' jokes about nude females in collective viewing situations, for example when the young men watch their 'party flicks'.

On such occasions there might be advantages in keeping form and content

separate, although one should be careful not to disregard either one. Most important, however, is to avoid loosing sight of form because of the overwhelmingly interesting content of communication and social practices that many young individuals are involved in, be it controversial matters as sex and violence, or more 'mundane' activities. It might also be rewarding to think of traditionally problematic subjects connected to young men's activities in a formal way, to go beyond the problem side to the problematic so to speak (while not downplaying the presence of such a problem side either) as well as it could give new insights to see girls' more 'peaceful' identity work with the help of popular culture from other angles than the mere functionalistic 'empowering' perspective (while not denying the existence and importance of these aspects either).

The production of producing cultures

To summarise, one possible result of the identity focus could be that questions of macro structures have become downplayed to the benefit of micro processes. Although micro processes at an individual level obviously are important in the study of youth cultures, one consequence of this might be that macro questions concerning social and cultural organisation have been overlooked, i.e. how specific youth cultures are related to society and other youth (and adult) cultural formations. Such questions of cultural organisation (on macro as well as on micro level) deeply concern questions of *cultural form*, i.e. how and with whom agents within cultures communicate, and what are the outcomes of these communicative practices. However, the focus on identity processes within youth cultural studies has tended to favour the discussion of *cultural content*, i.e. which meanings get produced by youth cultures and media audiences. If one wants to understand the complicated relations between individual practices at the micro level, and its links to the production of macro level structures, one possible way is to separate analytically cultural form from content. The distinction is especially important to maintain when dealing with cultures formed around controversial or provocative practices, as questions of cultural content tend to be dominating in, for example, discussions on media violence – at the cost of neglecting cultural form. This leads to a risk of loosing sight of possible similarities with other kinds of cultures, formed around other kinds of media content. By an analytic dichotomisation of form and content it might be possible to see how practices that seem subversive at one level actually reproduce existing structures at another level of analysis.

Secondly, questions of the relation between *consumption* and *production* have become highlighted within contemporary media and youth cultural research. Traditionally audiences have been considered as taking part in consumption, but recently a rethinking of this type of consumption has occured, stressing the productive

side to it. However, sometimes this stress on the productive side to media use has tended to overemphasise production and the activity of the audience. And this is also why at times it is of utmost importance for the ethnographer to raise his or her eyes above the horizon; to take a step back from the material, to focus on both structure and agency and interpret the ethnographic material in a broader macro focus. In this way it can be possible to interpret individual pleasure in relation to broader structures of feeling (Williams, 1961), experiences (Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993) and habituses (Bourdieu, 1980/1992), creating structures in the form of cultures, public spheres and taste patterns. Such a perspective might help us to bear in mind both structure and agency, and help to overcome the theoretical separation of individuals and society. Hopefully this could be a way of holding on to the critical potential in youth cultural studies, which was pleaded for at the beginning of this article.

There is, however, yet another level to cultural production involved in studies of this kind, a level of crucial importance for how cultural practices are valued: the production of cultures through constructive ethnographic practices (cf. Bourdieu, 1980/1992). In analytically describing a phenomenon, the researcher also to a certain extent constructs it: the researcher makes lived cultures come alive, so to speak. Culture is lived and the researcher is producing a narrative that can be enunciated and subsequently re-produced in textual form, and is thus engaging in textual productivity. Which kinds of production the researcher highlights in his or her textual productivity has inescapable effects on the way in which culture is reproduced. And if the researcher produces a text in which the culture in question is represented as engaged in production (rather than in consumption), this is truly a production of producing cultures.

Notes

1 Cf. Fornäs et al. (1990) for an attempt to overcome the division between the qualitative and quantitative paradigm. In spite of this emphasis on the need to use both kinds of methods, the qualitative strand within youth cultural studies seems to have become dominant in Sweden, at least. For arguments on the importance of quantitative methods, see Czaplicka (1994).

2 Although my discussion departs from a Swedish perspective, it is my belief that this tendency is not confined to this particular geographical area, and thus is also indicated by some of my international examples.

3 The project was funded by Våldsskildringsrådet (Council on Media Violence) and Arkivet för Ljud och Bild (The National Archive of Recorded Sound and Moving Images), and was carried out by me and my fellow researcher Olle Sjögren. It resulted in two reports in Swedish (Bolin, 1993; Sjögren, 1993).

4 As the Film Swappers are geographically dispersed it is not possible to engage in participant observations over longer periods of time. However, I argue that a more appropriate way to take part in the cultural life of the Film Swappers is to engage in their communicative practices on

the same terms as they do themselves. In fact, none of my informants have met in real life, and as they communicate via letters, video swapping and telephone discussions, I came to consider this type of participation in their practices *participant communication*. For a more elaborate discussion on method, see Bolin (1998: 22-27 and 233ff).

5 Although the Swedish youths' interest in communicating with others abroad could be explained by the Swedish legal system, it does not explain the engagement of those who live in countries with a more permissive legislation. It could well serve as an explanation for Swedish boys' interest, but is hardly valid for Dutch youth.

6 Further discussion on these subgenres including the problematics of the concept of genre in relation to these categories of films can be found in Bolin (1993).

7 Arguments for the expansion of the canon can be seen in academic writing (e.g. Shusterman, 1992: 140), which further indicates its countercultural, rather than subcultural, affiliations.

8 In the late 1980s it was common to advertise for the exchange as well as selling of extremely violent and graphically explicit video films in *Gula tidningen* (a Swedish advertisement paper). This soon proved to be impossible, since film production companies and distributors kept an eye on the ads, mainly in order to protect copyrights. Strangely enough the legal authorities representing the state system seem to have been less interested in this kind of surveillance.

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