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Do you see yourself?

Reflected subjectivities in youthful song texts

Johan Fornäs

Associate Professor of musicology and Principal Lecturer in media & communication studies at the Department of Journalism, Media & Communication (JMK), Stockholm University

Reflexivity has been a focal theme in much recent youth research, including my own. This theme connects studies of identity construction, subject formation and text reception with diagnoses of cultural modernization and methodological issues of qualitative ethnography. Popular-cultural mass-media texts are continuously drawn into reflexive practices in everyday life, apparently in increasingly intense and complex ways.

‘Reflexivity’ derives from the Latin ‘reflectere’: fold back. What is being folded back in cultural contexts are thoughts or symbolizations. Human *subjects* may be more or less reflexive, as people use texts (from talk and gestures to books and computers) in self-mirroring identity constructions, by explicitly defining who they are.

Cultural *texts* may also be (more or less) reflexive, in two possible senses. A text (dialogue, magazine, film, etc.) may be auto-reflexive, i.e., mirror itself, thematize or make explicit its own construction. Advertisements or television programmes nowadays often depict how ads or TV works, sometimes in an ironical mode (cf. Hutcheon, 1980/1984; Stam, 1985/1992).

Texts may secondly also be subject-reflexive, i.e., mirror the self-mirrorings of human individuals and problematize the identities of the subjects who are symbolically produced in these texts. Some youth cultural texts (including words, songs and images) used and/or made by young people depict the process of reflexive subject formation as an explicitly formulated theme. All these forms of reflexivity are closely interconnected, since reflexive texts mirror reflexive practices and in turn are used as mirrors in them. But it is this last sense of reflexivity as a theme in youth cultural texts, bridging subject- and text-reflexivity, which will be analyzed here.¹

Reading culture

The power of music, particularly rock and pop music, to move people, has been an underlying theme in my own research, ranging from music movements over microcultural identity work to interactive media use. The theories that have been found useful – of socialization and narcissism, public spheres and communicative action, subcultures and styles, symbols and narratives – all relate the power of cultural practices to the ways human subjects shape both themselves,

each other, their mutual relationships and intersubjective communities, and the worlds they inhabit, through the use of texts as mirrors of external realities, shared socialities and subjective selves.²

In these studies of movements, microcultures and media use, great emphasis has been put on empirical ethnographic studies. All cultural forms are contextually situated in specific practices which have to be studied through involvement in interaction, as in participant observation or interviews. Instead of just guessing about the behaviour of young people in sweeping generalizations based on impressions from various media texts about youth, it is indeed crucial actually to study these practices in the field.

But if even the most narrow aesthetic study cannot do without some references to how 'real' people use texts, it is as important to recognize that no close study of young people can manage without textual analysis. When I use the word 'text', I refer to any symbolic work or entity constituted as a structured web of meaningful symbols within any symbolic mode, including writing, speech, visual images and musical sounds. All ethnography contains moments of such analysis of collected texts, both of symbolic works made or used by the studied community and of the specific texts that the researcher produces: observation notes, interview transcripts, etc. The interpretation of such material calls for hermeneutical techniques.

Some suspicion seems to persist against such textual analysis, and indeed has resurfaced again in a kind of backlash against the somewhat problematic style readings that appeared in the poststructuralist wave some fifteen years ago. But the urge to return to real and basic facts of life threatens to forget the continuing relevance of a truly cultural perspective on the young. Many consider youth research as essentially a branch of social research about an age category in society, or perhaps a branch of psychology about a phase of life, with aesthetic or humanities approaches conceived only as auxiliary and marginal. But youth is not only a social category, a physiological age or a psychological life-course stage. It is also a cultural, symbolic, discursive and narrative construction.

Cultural youth can be understood as the sum of all interplaying symbolic thematizations of, by and on young people, including all ideas of youth or youthfulness, whether expressed by adolescents, children or adults, in subcultures or common everyday life. It is as such neither more nor less important or essential than social, biological or psychological youth. It is true that it is based on the existence of young people of a certain age, sharing both some institutionalized life conditions in society and some specific bodily traits and inner ambivalences. But it is exactly as true that youth, puberty and adolescence can only be understood through the mirrors of youthfulness that are constructed as symbolic representations of what it is to be young, including those implied by the everyday cultural practices of young people themselves.

There are thus several reasons to defend qualitative text analysis as an important but often neglected part of youth research. First, all studies in fact contain textual analysis, as part of the interpretation of every type of data, including surveys, interviews and ethnographic observations. It is through the interpretation of texts that we understand anything, including ourselves as well as youth. Explicit textual analysis is therefore a good way to develop better tools for studying intersubjective phenomena in general. Second, discourses of, by and on youth are as important objects of youth research as are the material or social lives of young people. To understand what youth is today, it is necessary to interpret texts that are either used by young people or that thematize youth in any way. Such texts are public domain, communicative tools that can be approached by anyone. Texts within popular culture are formulations and symbolizations that are filtrated both through the intersubjective symbolic systems of verbal language, visual and musical genres, and through the relevance criterion of popularity.

It is important to remember that such text analyses first of all prove something about the texts themselves – first, about these specific unique texts that are interesting as such; second, about certain streams in the genres to which they relate; third, about certain general cultural discourses about youth and identity in late modernity. Only indirectly, through interpretations that connect them to other texts and other evidences, can they let us know anything about the ‘non-textual’ youth experiences that are studied in sociology or psychology. But youth also exists as a cultural phenomenon, a symbolic theme in texts, songs and images, weaving discourses in which people construct identities through self-mirroring in symbolic works. Studying how reflexivity is thematized in popular cultural works makes it possible to notice some essential themes in late modern identity work, themes that interplay with those found in clothes styles, interviews, ethnographies or even theoretical texts.

Textual self-mirrors

Through reading some strategically chosen songs I will try to illustrate some important adolescent and late modern themes of reflexivity in identity work and subject formation. These songs are produced and sung by young artists in styles and genres oriented towards youth culture, with young audiences. The metaphorical associations between youth, media, identity-mirroring and modernity in themselves motivate the relevance of reflexivity for youth research.

My analysis is intended to give an idea of what could be done in a more systematic and thorough study of this kind.³ Many other types of texts can be chosen: films or novels, fashion or dance, fanzines or computer nets, diaries or interviews. However, pop music has a particular importance because of its widespread popularity, its presence in the daily life of virtually all teenagers, its

complex mix of words, sounds, gestures and images, its rich generic system and its specific mode of address that plays with many different options for identification.

I will mainly focus the verbal lyrics here, for the sake of brevity. To discuss musical or visual traits of the performances would demand an analytic apparatus that unfortunately extends the scope of this article. It will also be impossible to scrutinize the historical dimension, as the examples will have to be treated as if they were almost contemporaneous.

A human subject using a text in a specific setting can choose between a set of different identification-offers which function like entrances into its webs of meaning. A young person may relate her subjectivity to a certain pop tune in many different ways. First, she can identify with various figures in the song lyrics, marked by textual shifters like I/we, you or she/he/they. Texts offer a range of complementary potential subject-positions for identification processes in its reading, and one cannot be sure that such identifications always follow gender-lines. Second, she can relate to the (explicit or implied) narrator of the text, either positively through identification or negatively as its (listening) other in a dialogic communication act. Third, there is the origin of the singing in either the voice, the artist image as consciously shaped by artists and producers, the artist persona as a biography that fans reconstruct by using media and rumours of various kinds, or the (assumed) real personal identity of the singer. In most pop, one can also choose between the individual singer and the group of the band (or one of its instrumentalists) as an object of identification. Fourth, identification can be with or against the origin of the song in producer, composer and/or author, and then again as artistic positions and/or as psychological individuals. (In the cases I will use, this option collapses into the third one, since they all are in principle written and composed by the artists themselves.) A fifth possibility is to identify with the real or assumed audience of the song, singing or singer. These various options may be combined in complicated ways, and there are strong interferences between them, as can be seen in careful interpretations of such contextually situated texts, where there are always fascinating transferences between, for example, the I of the lyrics, the singer's voice and persona, and the collective author of the band/composer/writer behind her or him. This gives rise to interwoven networks of contemporaneous identification processes, with transferences and countertransferences running between all participants in such communicative processes.

Subjects become reflexively aware of themselves only through the detour over interpreting the embodied meanings of the works and objects they create (including spoken words, bodily gestures and other style expressions): 'we understand ourselves in the mirror of the word. The relation between the text and the mirror – *liber et speculum* – is basic to hermeneutics' (Ricoeur, 1969/1974, p. 386). Each subject must lose and retrieve itself by interpreting its cultural

expressions, and a theory of subject-formation therefore has to use the same avenue, i.e., via cultural analysis. By narrating themselves in the works, texts and discourses of symbolic modes, subjects reconstruct themselves as intelligible. Subjective experience becomes meaningful when it can be narrated or emplotted – given a temporal structure with direction, beginning and end.⁴ We develop subjectivity by investing our selves with meaning, and we begin to understand who we are by creating biographies, as narrative life (hi)stories. Reflexivity – the competence for self-thematizing communicative action that formulates the identity of a subject, making it meaningful and comprehensible – thus connects subjectivity to culture and communication. Like individual subjects shape their personal and inner identities or selves through self-thematizing texts, so microcultures, subcultures or other communities create their collective identities through their shared texts, that can be read by style analysis as narratives about these constructed collectivities. This is the background for the following tour through some recent texts on identity.

Adolescent agony: ‘Identity is the crisis’

One song has fascinated me very much since I first heard it in a small club in London in August 1977. X-Ray Spex was a short-lived British punk band with a female singer, who called herself Poly Styrene. Their song ‘Identity’ (on the album *Germ free adolescents*, 1978) is a terrific and terrifying text:

Identity!

Identity is the crisis, can't you see
Identity, identity

When you look in the mirror, do you see yourself?
Do you see yourself on the TV screen?
Do you see yourself in the magazine?
When you see yourself does it make you scream?

Identity [...]

When you look in the mirror do you smash it quick?
Do you take the glass and slash your wrists?
Did you do it for fame, did you do it in a fit?
Did you do it before you read about it? [...]

The title of the album, the generation-bound punk genre as well as the young age and almost childishly shrill voice of the singer all make it impossible not to interpret the song as related to youth. Its theme of identity crisis is deeply anchored in widespread discourses and widely shared but often painful experiences of teenage life. A young person tries to mirror herself in both glass and media, and is terrified. Identity not only is *in* crisis, it *is* the crisis. The constructing of identity itself is a great problem. Media and mirrors metaphorically mediate and mirror each other, as the teenager's fear for her bodily

self-image resonates with the agony of late modern individuals in front of the identities that media offer them. Even the desperate protest against this world of identity fails. First, it is self-destructive: when the mirrors are crashed, suicide threatens. Then, it is itself expropriated as an object of media attention. Yes, the whole I that protests is maybe itself created by these cannibalistic mirroring media, which is an experience that seems relevant both for youth, for punk as a subcultural style and movement, and for X-Ray Spex as a band.

This song thus illustrates at least three things. First, the hardships of a dramatic and highly problematic teenage identity search, that has been discussed by many psychologists (cf. Blos, 1962; Erikson, 1968; Kaplan, 1984). Second, the fate of youth subcultures in a commercial media society, as analyzed in the classical British sociologies and cultural studies of youth styles (cf. Hall & Jefferson, 1975/1976; Brake, 1985). Third, how modernization processes induce, on one hand, a cultural release through the partial de-naturalization of traditional identities, resulting in individualization both negatively as insecurity and positively as potential freedom; on the other hand a cultural expropriation as a growing demand, willingness and resource for self-mirroring, leading to reflexivity both negatively as colonization of the lifeworld by systemic state and market forces and positively as an enhanced communicative competence (cf. Ziehe, 1975, 1991; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1982; Habermas, 1981/1984-8; Beck, 1986/1992).

Authenticity: ‘The real thing’

These processes of modernization have intensified some themes that have long been central in adolescence, and are all implied in this song. I shall mention three of these themes, namely authenticity, openness and reflexivity.⁵ The first is the theme of authenticity vs. artificiality, that has become increasingly important as new media technologies have enhanced the construction of sounds and images of identity. Individualization has made it increasingly important to defend one’s lifestyle choices, since they are not so much anymore felt as naturally inherited collective belongings. Most of the songs on the X-Ray Spex album touch upon this old but recurrent motif. The name ‘Poly Styrene’ is an ironic celebration of plasticness, and the cover shows the band members in plastic clothes inside man-sized test tubes. The ‘you’ of this song text – a linguistic form that appeals directly to the listener, urging for an identifying response – seems to have lost herself in a labyrinth of mirrors. Modern media culture is often attacked for its commercial and technological artificiality, which is supposed to destroy natural authenticity of genuine, rooted, live culture. This theme is a central part of the self-understanding of rock in relation to pop, but it goes back to the ancient nature/culture-dichotomy and in fact turns up in new forms within virtually every genre. The English/Swedish pop/rap-singer Neneh

Cherry, in 'Money Love' (on *Homebrew*, 1992), constructs a typical opposition between money and love:

With the power that some lovin' can bring
makes the mountain high, stacks of money and things
that I need change and fade away sometimes

When I look in the mirror (uh-huh) I see a little clearer (uh-huh)
I am what I am. And you are you too
Do you like what you see? Do you like yourself?

Money, love and gold payments
We spend our lives thinking they are saviors
Money talks but love is for real
And you know that (uh-huh)

Then a picture comes into my mind
Everybody knows you need some money sometimes
Could it be that we need lovin' to survive?

So look into my eyes (uh-huh), I won't tell you lies (uh-huh)
Who do you see? Do you see yourself?
Do you like what you see? Do you like yourself?

Money, love [...]

Here, at first it seems as if it is not so much the media that are problematized, but the money – the commercialism and ego-centred materialism in that yuppie-life that has been so fiercely attacked in novels like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Money and material things are needed but not sufficient for survival. They just talk and make false promises of luck, whereas love fulfils what it promises, which it does by being truly communicative ('I won't tell you lies'). But this is expressed by almost contradictory metaphors. Neneh Cherry also 'talks' in this song, and so does the subject of the song: 'I won't tell you lies'. And in one way, money does not talk at all, which is its very problem. Money is a non-communicative tool for strategic interaction. Money and things work 'for real', but do not require understanding or genuine communication.

There are plenty of other recent examples of this theme. Many of the songs by the Swedish pop/rock singer Louise Hoffsten (on *Rhythm & blonde*, 1993) are ironic critiques of competitive commercialized modern life: 'Money bought you a little paradise, all created by perfect little lies'; 'All your gold don't excite me. That old trick just won't do. Still you keep spending money, but there's blood on the pearls'; 'You got greed mixed up with loving, and love mixed up with flare'; 'You might buy the others, but baby, I am not for sale'; 'You don't own all that money buys'; 'Moneymaking's all that counts, one thing is sure, it's not the quality. It's all about numbers, a matter of winning. No miracles or wonders is what life's bringing. It's all about numbers that'll make the world go round'. Or, in 'Let the best man win':

Dazzling colours came from the screen
I looked at the world like through vaseline

in the state of great confusion

I came to the conclusion:

Let the best man win. It's the chance of your life

Let the game begin. Start rolling the dice

and let the best man win, it'll give you,

give you all that life can bring

Let's roll and let the best man win

A man with a slick face explained the rules:

Gold, cars and TV-sets are all approved

He'll take your life as admission

give new, through television

Let the best man win [...]

Spend all your money to succeed

winning things you don't need

to bring it back to mother earth

She doesn't care who you are

If your meals are bones or caviar

You've always got a place reserved

Let the best man win [...]

The inauthenticity of this materialistic way of life is expressed by the 'chilly' sound of the music and the almost metallic voice, which reminds of Abba in their famous 'Money money' (in its turn reminding of 'Money makes the world go around' from the musical and film *Cabaret*), to which also some of the other songs of the record are clearly intertextually related. Here, money and media are intimately connected to each other, and to a competitive society geared towards career and success. The 'reality' to which this artificial struggle for material luxury is contrasted is here not love but death: 'mother earth' will eventually win the game over each player, independent of his status or market position.

Another Swedish pop/rock release, this time of the male group Atomic Swing, uses the television colours in an almost opposite way, in their 'Stone me into the groove' (on *A car crash into the blue*, 1993):

I woke up and the sun was dressed in blue

The Panavision colours ran out, out in my room

I wanna paint them wherever you go

I wanna thrill you but I want it slow

I wanna fly in the room of your arms

I wanna enjoy all of your charms

So just stone me into the groove

You're making everything beautiful and I think it's wonderful

Stone me into the groove

I wanna go!

Oh, my saviour, my friend, just take me away

from tonight and into today

Just take me out on a carpet ride

into a place where I mustn't hide

'cause I'm bored of the ancient truth
I'm a car crash in the blue [...]

Again, authenticity turns out to be a complex affair: a real uniqueness, a speaking voice, a spatially, socially and temporally rooted position, but also a reflective longing for something else. The vocal, organ and guitar sounds are echoes of classical forerunners, but this does not prevent them from speaking for these four young Swedish men localized in a rather small town. This is music born of a real group of people playing self-chosen roles as expressive subjects. They sing about longing for a place where they do not have to hide, a place for sublime jouissance, metaphorically painted with Panavision colours of pure sunshine. Signs of the real and signs of media reflexions intertwine.

The quest for the real thing and the critique of 'hypes' is voiced again and again in genres like hip-hop, rap and toast, emphasizing connections to specific social communities or individual bodies in motion. Here is Papa Dee from Gothenburg in 'The real thing' (on *Lettin' off steam*, 1990):

One thing I can't take is a media hype
You can fool some people but I'm not that type [...]
The real is real, a hype is a hype
You shouldn't pick the fruit before it's ripe
Give them the real thing!

Papa Dee returns to the theme of self-conscious genuinity on 'Ain't no substitute' and 'Original black viking' (*One step ahead*, 1993). Originality and hybridity are here joined in a surprising way, celebrating constructedness as authentic because it is real and unique, whereas purity is associated with copies that are deemed as fake and hype.⁶ There is a fascinating tension between originality defined as self-made-ness originating in a unique subject and the romantic pure and natural origin that is conceived as the opposite of artificial construction. Making oneself up is here proposed as the most authentic way of life, in a manner typical of many late modern styles and genres, even though this discourse has roots back to the early enlightenment idea of 'release from self-incurred tutelage' and 'confidence in one's own reason'.⁷ The artificial image of X-Ray Spex was conceived as an ironic and critical gesture against modern commercialism, but was immediately overtaken by punk fans and turned upside down into a joy of the plastic self, so that negative values were affirmed and assimilated in one's own identity. Similar carnivalesque upside-down mechanisms have been regularly applied in black, African-American movements, as well as in homosexual circuits, as ways to transform social stigmatization into rebellious self-pride. Such a self-made counter-identity was also constructed by the punk group Stockholms Negrer (The Negroes of Stockholm), in which the main immigrant element was two brothers of partly Italian origin. Identifying themselves as 'negroes' was a symbolic construction of great force:⁸

I love you [plural], love you [singular], and most of all I love myself
I am a white negro, it's a wonder that I'm alive
I am a white negro, for me there are no rules
I am a white negro, of money I get fever [...]

I am sent here, sent there, and everywhere it's the same shit
I am a white negro, I shit on your rules [...]
I am a white negro, and one day victory will come [...]

This kind of ironic but serious humour is similar to the black Swede Papa Dee singing 'Original black viking', that can be heard as a friendly answer to Stockholms Negrer's anti-white tune 'Död åt alla' (Death to all) with its main text line 'Död åt alla blonda präktiga vikingar' (Death to all blond, proper vikings). It can also be heard as a more serious reply to the nationalist viking-myths of extreme right-wing bands like Ultima Thule, who use Nordic mythology to identify themselves as heirs of a pure Swedish race – an ethnic 'purity' that is quite as much a construction as is any multicultural hybridity.

Money makes the 'white negro' sick, and in most punk culture and many earlier youthful counter-cultures, commercialism has not been easy to cope with. Some rap/hiphop deconstructs the money/love opposition, trying to reconcile the quest for success and richness with a search for love and solidarity. The new white, male Swedish pop-rapper Stakka Bo however revives the theme of consumption vs. solidarity, in a form where irony is used in ecological and 'political correct' songs. Let me just quote some lines from the album *Supermarket* (1993): 'The world is such a shiny place, shame about the poor / and I've got everything I need, but frankly I want more / This is me in the flesh, I'm a natural'; 'Here we go, go, go, to the temple of consumption'; "'Shop til you drop" has built this civilization'; 'Winning is all but what is actually the race?'; 'People doing anything to fulfil our greed'. Here is a feeling of living in the last of days, on the edge of the world, waiting for the collapse of the culture of the first world and the revenge of the third and of nature. Greedy egoism is contrasted to love and community that has been lost in modern civilization but should be regained. Similar polarities, often hidden under deep layers of irony, turn up again and again, even in the most commercial genres of pop and dance music.

Ambivalent openness: 'I can do anything'

A second theme is that of openness vs. ontological security. If 'identity is the crisis', then, as every crisis, this one is double: a threat of loss and an opportunity for change. Youth is often seen as an age of opportunity, open towards the future – for good and for worse. By X-Ray Spex, this open identity is experienced as a terrifying void, but other voices are more ambivalent, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality, where floating identities have almost be-

come commonplace in popular culture. Like Boy George in Culture Club, the Swede Thomas Di Leva is in constant flux, exhibiting an androgynous identity as an artist, and singing about insecure identities in a chaotic world. Undecided identity is here depicted as a potential for change:⁹

Who that becomes I is just a riddle
The one who was I has been erased
Who shall I impersonate tomorrow?
Then I will go back to zero
and walk in a completely other direction
Tomorrow [...]

The open identity is understood almost as a narcissistic omnipotence, sometimes even involving fantasies of oneself as God. This also appears in some songs by the Swedish pop/rock artist Eva Dahlgren, who frankly declares ‘I am God’ (‘Jag är gud’) in a pantheistic vision (cf. Ganetz, 1994a, 1994b).

But this omnipotence in adolescent narcissism interplays with quite as strong feelings of powerlessness. An earlier, well-known Swedish punk group, KSMB, once expressed this pendulum between strength and weakness, radiant openness and melancholic void, in a sad reggae-like song:¹⁰

If I was a river, all would be drowned
If I was a storm, then I would devastate
If I was a fire, everything would burn
If I was a god, then everyone would disappear
I am nothing [...]

Here, omnipotence and nothingness stand as polar and mutually excluding opposites. A later version of a similar theme comes from the Swedish pop/rock group This Perfect Day: ‘Teenage monster’ (on *This Perfect Day*, 1993).

I can do whatever I want to
Grow my hair, take drugs, get a tattoo
I can go wherever I want to
Can go out and have my sexual debut
Ooh nothing can stop me today
I can do anything
Ooh hope you remember my name
I can be anything
My handshake feels just like a good-bye
And my kiss feels just like a snakebite
I belong to a new generation
Filled with hope and a new desperation [...]

Here the teenager and the new generation is depicted in deeply ambivalent terms. On one hand, it is invincible, on the other filled with ‘a new desperation’ and always doubting if it will even be remembered and identified. The new-won freedom of youth is deceptive with its large expectation gap between hopes and reality. Anything may be done but this also makes one invisible, meaningless.

As the words are sung in the tune, it sounds as if ‘I can be any thing’, i.e., any object, and also that it doesn’t matter what I choose to be – a quite frustrating experience indeed.

Being young is not only being not-yet-adult, but also being no-longer-child. The ‘teenage monster’ does forbidden things, transgresses borders that parents and teachers no longer can protect from him. Entering sexual relations, deciding over your own body and taking part in non-legitimate cultural forms (cf. ‘sex, drugs and rock’n’roll’) are signs of this new-born freedom that helps connoting youth with rebellion. This is an old male theme within rock music, but there are also female versions. Madonna’s self-determining image and songs like ‘Where’s the party’ (on *True Blue*, 1986) is one example, another is found in a rap by the Swedish male trio Just D, ‘Vart tog den söta lilla flickan vägen?’ (Where did the sweet little girl go?, on *Tre Amigos*, 1993), that thematizes the threatening sexuality in a teenage daughter who has suddenly become physically attractive and stays out with not so nice boys drinking, smoking and making other forbidden things.

‘Teenage monster’ explicitly refers to youth. Try to change ‘teenage’ to ‘child’ or ‘adult’ in any of the ones I have mentioned, and it becomes clear how much these themes are connected to adolescence. If a child said ‘nothing can stop me, I can do anything’, this collides so obviously with its helplessness that one would immediately understand it as only a defiant childish fantasy. An adult voice behind those words might, on the other hand, indicate a psychopatic villain, whose wilfulness sounds threatening. Only in the ‘second birth’ of adolescence (Blos, 1962) is this self-understanding ‘normal’, expected and found to some extent ‘true’, in spite of the facts that a child has even more open future to face than a teenager (and is allowed more childish behaviour) and that there are many things that an adult is allowed to do but which are outside the reach of many teenagers (such as exerting political and economical power).

Mirrors of love: ‘Do you see yourself’

A third theme is that of self vs. other in reflexivity and self-mirroring. It is no coincidence that the line ‘Do you see yourself?’ appears both by X-Ray Spex and Neneh Cherry in the first two songs cited above.

How do you know that it is yourself that you see in the mirror, on the TV-screen, or in the eyes of the Other? This is a question that has been answered in different ways throughout the modern period. To the German philosopher Manfred Frank (1991), the recognition of one’s self-image as self requires a pre-reflexive self-awareness seated very deeply in the pre-verbal and pre-differentiated body and mind. Else, the identification of ‘I’ as an acting subject with ‘me’ as an object of self-reflexion would never be able even to start (cf. Mead, 1934). In adolescence, rapid bodily, psychological and social transformations of

the self problematize one's own feeling of identity, so that the quest for who I am achieves a burning actuality. Real, mediated or interactive mirrors are then tested as ways to confirm or renegotiate and alter the self according to one's potentials and wishes.

X Ray Spex' mirror seems to answer with a scaring emptiness, whereas Neneh Cherry's is clear and affirmative. 'When I look into the mirror I see a little clearer: I am what I am' – this self-assuredness is almost opposite of the self-doubt in 'Identity'. Reflexivity here is not a problem but a solution, not a threat but a promise. The mirror tells me that I am I and 'you are you too': our identities are there, we exist as separate and clear persons. So far, this can have different effects, in relation to the money/love opposition outlined above. I and you are two separate persons, we exist, but do we like ourselves? In this song, the answer seems to depend on how we have chosen to rely on either money or love. The listener could answer 'no, I don't like myself, because I lack love' or 'I don't quite know', or even 'in the mirror I see not my true self, but another, fake person', as the 'you' in 'Identity' would probably have done. But the sequence of questions seems to encircle one preferred and implied answer: 'Yes, I see myself, I like what I see and I therefore like myself.' This argumentative syllogism is a somewhat strange way to convince someone to love her/himself. It is the singer's voice that leads the listener into this conclusion, symbolized in the text itself by the eyes of the text-subject: You see yourself *in me* (i.e., in this song) and I as an honest, non-lying, authentic artist promise you that you should like what you see.¹¹ Through the correlation between 'love is for real' and 'I won't tell you lies' we understand that the singing subject of this song is honest, able to love, and therefore also able to survive, which explains the self-assuredness of her voice.

Here is also a link between the themes of reflexivity and money/love. Love is connected first to the basically narcissistic pleasure/terror of self-mirroring, and then to the affirmative mirroring of the self in the other, who may be the love-object but is here also the pop artist, as a source of identity-images. At last, media enter the discourse again, but instead of the closed monological-narcissistic circle by X-Ray Spex, it is here conceived as a dialogical I-you-relation.

Multiple identifications are possible. A young listener may identify with the you, looking into Neneh Cherry's mediated eyes and asked to like her/his own mirror-image as she reflects her/his identity through this song. Or s/he may instead identify with the 'I' and assimilate this text as an expression of his/her own position in relation to a real or imagined beloved and insecure other/you. The text in fact not only offers different options but even invites the listener to alternate between the two readings. Reflexivity leads to a certain ambivalence, where, on the one hand, identities become clear and separated, visible and dis-

tanced, while, on the other hand, this process tends to merge them in a never-ending mirror-game.

First, as I and you look in the mirror we both see ourselves and ask if we like ourselves. But then as you instead look into my eyes to hear the truth told, you are supposed to see yourself again in my truthful eyes, and to be convinced (by my love?) that it is you who are mirrored, that you like this mirror-image and that you therefore must like yourself. Narcissistic mirroring alone cannot give this satisfaction, only the mirroring through an other's eyes. When you (here typically a man!) see that I (a woman!) love you, then you can like yourself and become an autonomous, separated subject. This love-relation is what lacked in 'Identity', which made its self-reflections so disastrous. Its 'you'-subject was crucially alone in front of the mirroring screen (glass/TV/magazine) – not getting the love back that alone could have transformed self-mirroring from a ghostly, circular and self-destructive horror into a more fruitful narcissistic pleasure which gives new strength to turn towards the other in loving interaction.¹²

In references to the myth of Narcissus, his counterpart, the nymph Echo, is often forgotten. Narcissus is stuck in front of his own mirror-image and does not hear the voice of the other, of Echo. Her voice is unfortunately not her own, but his: she has been deprived of the capability to speak her own words, and can only repeat the words of others. When he sighs to his own self-image: 'I love you', then she can only echo him, and though this happens to fit what she wishes to say, he does not hear her as a subject of her own. The borrowed words are correct in content but lack the authentic voice of subjectivity needed to hear them as meaningful utterances. In many ways, Narcissus and Echo mirror each other. His visual mirror-image cannot hear and answer his loving voice, while her acoustic mirror of him makes herself invisible. In both versions of mirroring – male and female, pictorial and verbal, visual and aural, of the self and of the other – intersubjective encounter is avoided. Echo's predicament reminds of a melancholic, who, according to Kristeva (1987/1989), lacks the ability to find pleasure in language. To the melancholic Echo, words are dead and do not mean anything, and she cannot express what she feels to anyone. The words are felt as foreign or dead, just as cultural expropriation through the media made all symbolic images dead and deathly for X-Ray Spex.

The dialectics of narcissism, love and identity is discussed by Julia Kristeva in her two books on love (1983/1987 and 1985/1987).¹³ It is also found in many other love songs, and it has a connection to youth as well. A crucial way through adolescence to adulthood involves finding and giving love. The cold game of narcissistic self-mirroring can only be broken by the encounter with a different Other, someone who can love and be loved, in a relation both of mutual, dialogic, reflexive reciprocity and of asymmetric difference – i.e., in communication. This Other may be anyone, including a sexual partner or a child.

The advent of such a seemingly ‘magical’ encounter or communication prevents self-mirroring to turn into a self-dissolving spiral, and instead opens a development of growth.

In ‘Revolution’, the singer of This Perfect Day complains:

Try to face the truth:
nothing in the world can bring you back your youth
Time will let you down
No one gets away, I promise you my friend

You’re 32 years old now
but you think you’re 17
You’ve lost yourself completely
and it’s all so sad, yes it makes me sad

Oo-oo-oo-oooh I guess we need a revolution oo-oo-oo-oooh [...]
Oo-oo-oo-oooh I guess we need a new religion oo-oo-oo-oooh [...]

Not being able to face one’s increasing age and adulthood is depressing, and the chorus bursts out in crying: ‘Oo-oo-oo-oooh’, and, reminding of a famous Beatles song, reluctantly wanting ‘a revolution’. In the last chorus, this is twice subtly changed into ‘I guess we need a new religion’. These young adult males (whose ‘you’ reminds a little of a nasty image of youth researchers) continue looking for a new faith to make them accept adulthood.

In some of her songs, Louise Hoffsten also formulates the intense longing for love as a salvation from loneliness and identity-loss: ‘I’ll do anything for your love’. She is however no total victim of this quest for love: ‘The only thing I got baby it’s you, and I can do without you, too’. And it is most interesting to study how she claims to have found a solution, in a song called ‘New religion’:

A little boy with big blue eyes
thinks it rains when heaven cries
He’ll have an interesting talk with a bird
a conversation without a word

Power, he’s got power you wouldn’t believe
Power, he will bring you to your knees

Baby you’re my new religion
Take me to your paradise
Baby you’re the true religion
travelling through the magic sky

I know that love is the reason
for your mission here on earth
You have saved my soul from evil
and given me new birth

Baby you’re my new religion

Baby you’re my new religion
Take me on a magic ride
throw away all superstition
loving is the perfect high

I'll eat your body and drink your blood
for better or for worse
guided by your shining star
to the end of the universe

Baby you're my new religion

Baby you're my new religion
travelling through eternity
devoted to the new religion
you have given me the key

I want your lips to whisper sweet
the gospel in my ears
Lay your warm hands on my body
protect it from all fears

Baby you're my new religion

Giving birth to a child of love is a recurrent deliverance, mainly in female pop texts (Chrissie Hynde of Pretenders in 'Thumbelina' on *Learning to crawl*, 1983, and Neneh Cherry's 'Manchild' on *Neneh Cherry*, 1989, are but two examples). If the conventional man/woman-relationship today feels too problematic or too burdened with clichés, the mother/child-dyad seems to contain more hope for many young women.¹⁴ In this song, the baby is both a male love-object, a little boy child and a Messiah, God's child Jesus, with the mission of love on earth. The 'cannibalistic' phrase 'I'll eat your body and drink your blood' seems to refer both to the holy communion and to phrases like 'I love you so much that I could eat you'. Here is an oral fascination with the little, defenceless other whom I must love and care for, which gives me meaning in life.

In whatever way love breaks the narcissistic circle, it involves an affirmation of the self in the mirror of the Other, but it does not make self-reflection or even narcissism superfluous. When the subject sees not only itself but also the Other in or behind the mirror, then a deeper self-understanding in relation to others can be reached. Reflexivity then expands rather than imprisons or destroys the self, and in at least three ways. First, when I disclose hidden depths in me for myself and for others, I am enlarged with formerly candid or unconscious aspects. If I openly show bad sides of myself, at least I add a certain richness and complexity to my self-image. Second, the distancing involved in self-observation lets me transgress what I was before by integrating this very self-observing position itself in me. Even self-criticism can widen my identity by showing me as capable of being otherwise than I have hitherto been. If I confess that I know of weaknesses in my way of writing this text, we can perhaps agree that this self-insight somewhat increases my credibility. Thirdly and most importantly, the symbolic forms used in all self-mirroring (e.g., through song texts) introduce elements of the Other, of other people's eyes and ears, and of the symbolic order that enters me from my social and historical context, thus

letting me incorporate more of this Other and thus again letting me grow rather than being reduced.

Maybe this is one goal of youth: to widen the circles of self-mirroring outside of parents and school, in order to discover both oneself and the world. Then, the subject will continue to be open, flexible and in process, but not more alone in front of echoing screens. Interactive communication may then evolve out of mirroring pleasures, which help us see each other as well as confirm and experiment with our identities, rather than get stuck in them.

Instead of a conclusion

These textual examples illustrate some facets of the complexity of adolescent identity work, as it balances between childhood and adulthood, openness and loneliness, authenticity and construction, individualization and reflexivity, narcissism and love.

To conclude is to end and close a text. While this one has to be finished here, its closure is not meant to be definite. Like the intertextually 'open' and multi-positional or dialogic literary texts that Kristeva (1990), inspired by Bakhtin (e.g., 1981), conceives of as 'adolescent texts', homologous with the openness of youth, this discourse tries to open up an area of inquiry and exploratively pose some new questions.

The actual self-constructing and self-problematizing practices of adolescent identity work should be studied by a combination of ethnographic and text-analytical methods. Late modern genres of self-thematizing auto-reflexive texts should also be carefully interpreted, in order to clarify some recent tendencies in youth culture. These phenomena can thirdly be approached by analyzing more ways in which media and popular culture construct narrative images of the complicated dynamics of reflexive subject-constructions. Methodological self-reflection is fourthly to be tested in various research settings. A detailed historical study of how these forms develop over time would finally counteract the tendency to construct a simplified then/now-polarity which this article, unfortunately, has been unable to quite avoid. All in all, multiple reflections on reflexivity are as necessary and fruitful to youth research as is reflexivity to youth itself, which is simultaneously an argument for the legitimacy of textual analysis and the increasing centrality of youth *cultural* studies within this interdisciplinary field.

Notes

Where original titles and texts are in Swedish, translations are made by the author, and the original versions are put either within parentheses or in footnotes. Thanks to Kirsten Drotner and Hillevi Ganetz for useful comments.

¹ Studies of subject-reflexive practices actually always have to pass through analyses of subject-reflexive texts (e.g. interviews or observational data). A special case of textual reflexivity is methodological reflexivity in research. Youth studies may consciously analyze the two-sided interplay between researchers and informants in ethnographic fieldwork and interpretation, thematizing either its own constructedness and mirroring mechanisms (cf. textual auto-reflexivity), or the self-mirroring practices of the informants (cf. textual subject-reflexivity). This type of meta-reflexive science might also be increasingly important, as an intrinsic part of a generally reflexivized modernity. Cf. Beck (1986), Clifford & Marcus (1986) and Fornäs (1994a).

² My first studies concerned how the Swedish music movement of the 1970s used various media to construct counter-public spheres that formulated and formed collective and individual identities in alternative ways, and what highly elaborated discourses of self-understanding that developed inside this movement (cf. Fornäs, 1993). These young people discussed at great length the motives behind the choice of gestures and melodies, in relation to class, gender, age, ethnicity and political affiliation, indicating a partial dissolution of those patterns of misrecognition that are so crucial to Bourdieu's (1979/1984) model of taste formation. Reflexivity is a force that enables recognition, even though neither of them can ever become total. Similar conclusions were drawn from my following, collaborative micro-study of identity work in three peer groups playing amateur rock (cf. Fornäs et al., 1988, 1990; Fornäs, 1994a). Here, reflexivity was focused, first as an important theme in the groups themselves, then as a matter of cross-influences in the research process. In still later studies on karaoke and other recent forms of interactive media and genre discourses in rock and pop music, the interplay of authenticity and reflexivity has been crucial (cf. Fornäs, 1994b, 1994c, 1995a, 1995b).

³ Cf. Ganetz (1994a, 1994b), Lindberg (1994, 1995), Sernhede (1994) and Boëthius (1995) for analyses of rock texts in relation to adolescent identity work.

⁴ Ricoeur (1983-5/1984-8) shows how both historical narratives and fictional literature create temporal structures by 'emplotment'. Cf. also Ricoeur (1965/1970, 1975/1986), Burgos (1988), Madison (1988) or Kristensson-Uggla (1994).

⁵ Cf. the tendencies towards individualization, makeability and reflexivity that often turn up in literature on late modernity, e.g., Habermas (1981/1984-8), Giddens (1991) or Ziehe (1991).

⁶ For discussions of musical hybridity, see Stephens (1992), Gilroy (1993a, 1993b) and Sernhede (1994).

⁷ Kant (1784/1963: 3). Cf. Fornäs (1994c) on social, subjective and cultural (or meta-) authenticity in rap, house and techno music.

⁸ Stockholms Negrer: 'Jag är en vit neger' (I am a white negro), 1985:

Jag älskar er, älskar dig, och mest av allt så älskar jag mig
Jag är en vit neger, det är ett under att jag lever
Jag är en vit neger, för mig finns inga regler
Jag är en vit neger, av pengar får jag feber [...]
Jag skickas hit, skickas dit, och överallt är det samma skit
Jag är en vit neger, jag skiter i era regler [...]
Jag är en vit neger, och en dag kommer seger [...]

⁹ Di Leva: 'I morgon' (Tomorrow), on *Vem ska jag tro på?* (Who am I to believe in?), 1987:

Vem som blir jag är blott en gåta
Den som var jag har suddats ut
Vem ska jag föreställa i morgon?
Då sätter jag klockan på noll
och går åt ett helt annat håll
I morgon [...]

¹⁰ KSMB: 'Jag är ingenting' (I am nothing), on *Rika barn leka bäst* (Rich kids play best), 1981:

Om jag vore en flod skulle alla dränkas
Om jag vore en storm så skulle jag föröda
Om jag vore en eld skulle allting brinna
Om jag var en gud så skulle alla försvinna
Jag är ingenting [...]

¹¹ On the album cover, the text of the last chorus is 'misprinted' (in a handwriting that appears to be by Neneh Cherry herself) in relation to the sung version, so that it ends not with a question but with a demand. Several corrected mistakes in the two preceding lines give the impression that the author has had a tendency to think of this chorus as more affirmative than the first one, as if unconsciously wishing it to be 'Do see yourself. Do like what you see. Do like yourself', but then correcting it (only partly) by adding one question-mark and some of the other missing words:

DO ~~SEE~~ YOU SEE YOURSELF
YOU \DO/ LIKE WHAT YOU SEE ?
DO LIKE YOURSELF.

¹² Another example of destructive narcissistic self-mirroring is found in 'Mirror in the bathroom' by The Beat (on *I just can't stop it*, 1980), where obsessive self-observation leads to a psychiatric surveillance, and where the additional implicit presence of the song's listener makes it significantly hard to know who is the 'you' in the central line 'you're my mirror in the bathroom'.

¹³ Cf. also Lévinas (1947/1983), and cf. Fornäs (1995b) on the gendered aspects of the myth of Narcissus and Echo and its relevance for late modern youth identities.

¹⁴ A parallel example in popular literature is the Betty Mahmoody's best-seller: *Not without my daughter* (1987).

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