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Mirroring Meetings, Mirroring Media:
The Microphysics of Reflexivity.

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The Microphysics of Reflexivity

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There is today a growing reflexivity in individual and collective identity constructions. Identities are always formed in relation to others and through symbolic structures, but this process has been more mobilized, differentiated, focused and problematized in late modernity – the most recent phase of the process of modernization.[1] This is true for daily life as well as for research. Reflexivity has in various ways been an important theme within psychoanalysis, history, anthropology and sociology, as well as in some recent Nordic studies of youth and popular culture. The well-known linguistic, cultural or communicative turn has made everyday reflexivity a central theoretical theme, and it has also sharpened intellectual self-reflection.

At the same time, media seem to become more and more important as tools of identity work – in subcultural formations as well as in common everyday life. This historical process of medialisation[2] is intimately intertwined with the continuous increase in reflexivity, since media deliver many of those self-images used for identity constructions, including the problematizations of earlier ones. Media (mass or not) have various use values as cultural instruments for symbolic communication, and they are deeply ambivalent – both expressive and effective, communicative and constricting, emancipatory and authoritarian. Reflexivity is one of their many use values, in that they express and shape individual as well as collective identities by functioning in reception as vehicles and mirrors for self-definitions. But identities are also mirrored in non-mediated meetings between people: reflexivity can as well be carried by face-to-face interaction through symbolic forms like speech or gestures. A medium is in some sense always needed for communication but it need not be a technical apparatus – sound or light waves can suffice.

My aim is here to reflect upon the relation between mirroring, meetings and media, in order to explore the fabrics and processes of self-mirroring, or what can be called the microphysics of reflexivity. The reference point for my reflections is an empirical research project, where I and two colleagues studied the relationship between some young people and ourselves as researchers. We first studied twenty teenagers in three different peer groups playing amateur rock, and constructed models of their microcultures and of the uses they made of rock – and other symbolic

expressions or media forms – in identity work. We then let them read the resulting book, and discussed it with them.[3] The continued dialogue also included written statements from some of these (not anymore so) young people, then in their early twenties.

The process offers exemplary illustrations of mirroring and transference, influences and defenses, dominance and resistance, and gave us new insights in the interplay between young people on one hand, and researchers, adults and media on the other. Talking to researchers and reading a report about oneself is of course very different from interacting with parents and teachers or watching television programs that depict youth in general, but there are also parallels. I will treat reflexivity processes in this project as a model example that can shed light not only upon the general interplay between researchers and informants or adults and youths, but also on similar processes within all forms of media use (including music listening and making), as well as within ordinary everyday life interaction.

Our study heightened the reflexivity of our informants – and ourselves – in two ways. First, the research process itself gave them (and us) countless opportunities, in interviews and in talks, to mirror one's identity in the interplay with us (them) as 'others'. Secondly, the finished book could be read in a mirroring way. The teenagers also knew that others around could read about them in this public, printed and mass mediated text, reflecting and interfering in their lives. Its reception can thus be read as a very special case of general processes of late modern reflexivity and media use in identity work.

Dimensions of reflexivity

The words reflexivity and reflection derive from the Latin *reflectere*: 'fold back'. In cultural contexts, what is being folded back is thought or consciousness.[4] Conscious reflection is a special case of general self-mirroring processes of physical, psychic, social or cultural reflexivity. Reflexivity is not necessarily a conscious intellectual reflection. Self-mirroring can also take place by other means, as when you use certain style elements to explicitly express your position, or media texts to confirm your identity. Theoretical concepts are only one possible type of tool for reflexivity, and hardly the most common one. Neither is reflexivity always 'positive'. On one hand, reflexivity can imply a painful fixation to one's own person, a subjectivation that intrudes upon the ability to real dialogues with others. On the other hand, it can be connected to a societal colonization, a compulsory expropriation of the self by dominant symbolic systems, especially in connection with media and institutions that are under hard pressure from the demands of the economical and political systems. In such instances, reflexivity might need to be counteracted, but it can also be a useful

resource for communication and identity work. All depends on how it is used; it is highly ambivalent.

When identities – individual or collective, psychic, social or cultural – are mobilized and problematized, the ability and the need to view and define oneself increase. Reflexivity is intense in the life phase of adolescence and youth, where childhood is to be reworked into adulthood. It is also intensified among deliberately creative sub- or microcultures, cultivating styles and forms of expression. And when epochal shifts are taking place, reflexivity is also generally increased in society. In late modern youth culture, these focal points coincide.

Reflexivity is in itself a cultural process of communicative actions relating human subjects to symbolic texts. It has, however, sources on different levels. There are *objective*, material, technical or institutional frameworks such as technology or the political and economical systems of state and market. Media technologies, cultural commodities and institutions like school present tools for mirroring identities and they force each of us to use them.[5]

Other roots dig down to the *subjective* level of inner driving forces within each person's psychic constitution. New socialization patterns give rise to a growing narcissistic potential in adolescent life, which means a growing ability and need for reflecting one's self. The narcissistic traits that flourish in particular during the unusually dynamic and open phase of adolescence are useful to identity development.[6]

There are, thirdly, also intersubjective mechanisms in group relations and symbolic languages. On a *social* level, a greater mobility and fluidity of social groups increase our collective self-awareness of positions, norms and life-styles, caused by increasing communications and modern individualization tendencies.[7]

Factors within the *cultural* level itself finally add yet other pushes towards reflexivity. Late modern aesthetic trends have cultivated reflexive themes, and new artistic techniques for intertextual references have been developed.[8]

All of these sources present demands as well as resources, and all levels need to be acknowledged in research. This means that we need polydimensional theories, or a bricolage of theories moving on different levels, to avoid any reductionism that sees reflexivity or media use as 'nothing-else-but' commercial consumption, inner need fulfilment, social status marking and relational interaction, or aesthetic rule games. Even if we can perhaps only study one dimension at a time, we should accept that the others are also legitimate ones.

Cultural phenomena not only have causes and motives on all these levels, but their meaning-constructs also 'point' in similar directions. When we 'read' our interviews and talks with young people, the styles they shape, the songs they sing or the media texts they use, we can search not only 'archeologically' for the *forces* that shaped them, but also 'teleologically' for the *meanings* they shape (Ricoeur, 1974).

And these meanings point at objective institutions, at subjective selves, at social relations as well as – intertextually – towards other stylistic formations.

Thus there is an *objectivizing* reflexivity, thematizing external life conditions, when young people define themselves in terms of class, gender or ethnic belonging to what is perceived as fixed cathegories or frameworks, or in relation to system-dependent institutions like school or work. As socializing institutions exert a greater influence on young people's lives, and as processes of systemic rationalization and colonization of the life world (Habermas, 1981/1988) increase these tensions, outer conditions are more often thematized and objectivizing reflexivity grows. 'I am what I am because I live in this place, belong to this social class and am shaped by these material and institutional forces.'

Another common reflexivity form is the *subjectivizing* one: an inner-directed reflexivity defining identities in terms of individual development through the life stages of adolescence. Adolescence and youth are years of fast identity development on all levels: in the body, in the mind, in social positions on the way from the parental family through the school system to an adult life, and in patterns of taste and symbolic expression. Our informants often talked about themselves as unique individuals passing through such personal stages of adolescence. 'I am what I am because of my unique childhood experiences and my present phase of development.'

Thirdly, a *normative* reflexivity points in a social direction, towards norms and group relations. In our time, young people are often good at analyzing their relations to teachers, parents and peers, and at describing their own ethical norms. 'I am what I am because I have chosen these basic ideas, values and convictions.'

In the cultural direction, expressions of *aesthetic* reflexivity finally relate to other texts within the symbolic field itself, to musical, visual or literary styles and genres. Teenagers shape expressions, in words, gestures and music, that intertextually thematize the symbolic field as such. 'I am what I am because I am influenced by these stylistic genres and traditions.'

To sum up, both adolescence and late modernity increase reflexivity of objectivizing, subjectivizing, normative as well as aesthetic types. And this in turn gives mass media an increasing role in the production of objective, subjective, social and cultural identities. New media and new socio-cultural tendencies facilitate and demand that the own identity gets explicit attention. This interacts with the general high self-awareness in adolescence, as our study showed.

Identities are sometimes mirrored spontaneously without much verbal and rational formulating, at other times however concentrated in conscious reflections. In face-to-face interaction with peers, parents or teachers, adolescents are often intensely engaged in such mirroring. Meeting an 'other' lets you know more about yourself through the other's reactions as well as through the perceived similarities and

differences between you. Intersubjective dialogues give you an opportunity jointly to formulate who you are.

Media are also used in several ways. Surrounded by musical sounds, posters or television flows you unconsciously get your self measured and positioned. Watching a film about youth or reading a novel can also give you impulses to think over your own identity and life choices. You can compare your own body with the pictures in teenage magazines and decide how you look and whether you accept certain ideals or not. Media use is also often a group activity. Our three groups used media as a pretext for meeting (gathering around the TV set or a new record), as a mood-shaping background (letting the music or images fill the room but staying out of perceptional focus) and as a point of reference (when talking about certain artists or programs in order to say something about oneself and the others). In any case, the chosen medium helped them define their positional identity and delivered tools for diffuse reflexivity as well as active self-reflections.

Our project contained examples of all these sorts, though in a very particular setting. Meeting us, being seen by us and talking to us was an intensified encounter inviting reflective mirroring but with many traits similar to common daily meetings with others. Reading our first book about themselves was an unusually focused reflexive challenge, but it was not a totally alien experience, since they had in principle met their own images many times before, in photo-albums, fanzines – or in a more indirect way in every mediated text that dealt with youth, Swedes or other categories to which they belonged.

Fully aware of the crucial differences between our project and general everyday interaction or media use, I will try to depict some general patterns in their reflexive responses. My aim is here not to give a full view of the particular traits of these three groups, or the specific meanings arising from our encounters, but rather to use them to exemplify some general aspects of the microphysics of reflexivity.

Reading oneself

To participate in the project and read the book was for our twenty teenagers a reflexive challenge and an important contribution to their self-constructions. Reading a book about 'oneself' means confronting a series of 'mirrors', asking to be used. The young people viewed themselves in the rear view mirror, as quickly changing and developing. They used the book as a source of memory, as a stock of possible self-images to be used in re-shaping the self. This was already noticed in our first study, i e before the book was written. But the book itself as a public text, open to everyone that can read, and much more fixated in space and time than our previous talks, made the impulse to self-reflections still more acute. In this it had some similarities to the way media function in general, with the important difference that it now was much

more obvious that it was precisely themselves that this particular media text wanted to mirror.

The mirrors we offered were used to scrutinize and handle both the relations to us as grown-up researchers and to their peers inside the groups themselves.

On an objective level, they discussed the problems of the institutionally 'given' relation between us and them, and of their own class positions (often in relation to the other two groups). What were the formal rules of academic research? How could they understand the inescapable frameworks given by school and work, or by their own gender, class and ethnic origins?

On a subjective level, psychic processes of transferences and projections in the interplay between us and them were treated. Which inner images had we created or fitted into? How had their own personal identities developed during late adolescence?

Socially, the interactive relations between us and them were thematized, as were the roles and relations within the groups by their own. What had actually taken place in our meetings? How had, did and should their groups function?

On a cultural level, our writings and other forms of expression were discussed, as well as their own language, music, style and taste. Could they discern differences in style between us three writers? Did they really talk and look the way our descriptions suggested?

These reactions to our 'mirroring provocations' made a cumulative analysis possible, that not only yielded new insights into their identity work, but also carried our original study a couple of years further. They sometimes explicitly and consciously verified or corrected what we had written in our book. On other occasions these verifications or denials were indirect or unintentional.

> *Olof:* It's quite funny, for the book looks from the outside on the whole sort of system – not only on myself but on the whole group. And it fits quite well, though from a different angle than we usually look. That makes it interesting to read. […]
> *Gustav:* It's fun to have it documented – to have one's life documented. […]
> *Håkan:* All is obvious, but we've never seen it that way.
> *Gustav:* Like, you interpret what we do, and we don't do that while we do it. We don't think that way.
> *Håkan:* We don't analyze our life.
> *Gustav:* No, and there are surely several ways to analyze this also. This is *one* way, and it is damn fun to see how someone analyzes us, what we do, our behaviour.
> *Olof:* One gets distance, and that's what's fun, isn't it?

The difference in perspectives is here thematized. There is a clear fascination of the 'undressing' of oneself, a pleasure of being biographically 'documented'. Several of

the teenagers were struck by their own surprising accessibility and/or by our seemingly magic power of seeing them. But there is also here a hint of a distance: 'this is *one* way…'. The collision between internal and external perspectives, between everyday self-understanding and structural interpretations, also contains the germ of what Paul Ricoeur (1974) has discussed as a 'conflict of interpretations'. What had we seen that they had been blind to, what had we missed that was important to them, and which interpretation was then the most correct or legitimate one? To be analyzed in a book is to be objectivized: their living processes were frozen into fixed objects and structures. This could offer narcissistic satisfaction in the form of an elevating and expanding self-mirroring. But to be inscribed into structures they didn't previously know of or care about also implied a reduction and a narcissistic infringement.

The way the group handled this challenge often confirmed our first study, where the members of this particular group were for instance shown to be very fascinated of being seen and of recalling their own history. In this way our first analyses were given a direct affirmation ('it fits quite well') as well as an indirect or implicit one. The reflective trait denied by the informants ('we don't analyze our life') was at the same time confirmed. The fascination of getting 'documented' and the readiness to think in terms of a play with different interpretations of oneself was easy to notice:

> *Barbara-Ann:* One ought to make such an interview with oneself once a year, going through one's expectations and apprehensions about life. How wise one would then become!

On some occasions, a protest against our first interpretation could in fact be interpreted as an indirect confirmation of it. One example was when Frasse, one of the Chans ('Chance' or 'Prospect') boys, who came from a business undertaking family, didn't like to accept our claim that the Chans parents generally had more economic than cultural capital. It was easy to notice that most of them actually had more money than education, and that most of their children (not least Frasse himself, who made his own business early and hardly read one book a year outside school) also were more interested in earning much money than in acquiring high exams or cultivating cultural interests. His protests can in fact be interpreted as a confirmation of this analysis, since the last thing the rising economic bourgeoisie wants is being seen as parvenues.

This counter-interpretation is however not unproblematic, since it touches upon the delicate issue of the preferential right of interpretation. With what right can we keep to interpretations that not only exceed the self-knowledge of our groups, but even go against it?

Some disclaimers could on the other hand help us make corrections of our first analyses, as when the girls in Chans convincingly argued that our picture of them as

two female types, one traditional and one modern, was only partly correct. Their later development shows that both were more complexly compound than we had been able to catch.

Cultural studies are always a constructing of models rather than a faithful copying of reality. What was unique and irreducibly nuanced in the twenty young individuals we studied, was unavoidably reduced to restricted roles and characters in the play we staged in our first book, inspired by and related to the play of the bands themselves. Each generalization from our study can therefore be called in question. Like all scientific or literary texts, the book has its own dramaturgy, its own narrative logic, producing constructions where individual traits have to be sacrificed for the clearness and purpose of its representation. For example, the groups came from different social contexts, but for the sake of clarity, these class patterns are somewhat exaggerated in our book, which makes some individual deviations invisible.

The mechanisms of mirroring not only related to objective class structures or subjective maturing processes. They also had intersubjective – social and cultural – aspects. Talks and texts are no neutral reflections of the speakers' and authors' social or personal, external or inner identities. They are regulated discourses, laboriously constructed dialogues that use and shape specific rule systems of what can be said and written. A letter, an interview or a group talk are relatively open genres, ruled by certain conventions but containing rifts where innovations can be made.[9] Such single texts are knit together with each other in everyday cultural praxis, forming larger networks of textual structures that can be interpreted as youth cultural phenomena (genres, styles, subcultures, microcultures, identities…), and where new meaning is produced. This meaning is realized at the moment of communication, in talk, in music making or in media use. It is context-bound, polysemic and metaphoric, and it cannot be determined once and for all.[10] In order to interpret the dialogues between us and our informants, we had to give attention to the concrete forms of our language games, and ask not only what was said but also how it was said.

It is possible to discern three different discursive modes in our individual and group interviews. What we often strived for was a reflecting, personal, analyzing therapeutic talk that might be called the *mode of confession*. It could sometimes slide over into a more distanced and interpretative analysis, turing into a *mode of theorization*, which we welcomed as interesting starts of the interpretative work we later did ourselves in our close readings of the interview transcripts. But when we failed, our talks tended towards the much less productive *mode of interrogation*, where our questions were only answered reluctantly by 'yes' and 'no'. Especially with Lam Gam, this mode soon led to dead ends, as painful to the young informants as to us. They then took every opportunity to switch into a third mode: the *mode of narration*. In this mode, detailed experiences were related and made present, but at the same time put at a certain distance, avoiding the anguish that the confessional

mode easily produces. A fifth possibility was the *mode of play*, where jokes and miniature role games were enacted to illustrate experiences, avoid hard questions or just have fun.

Some such discursive patterns were common to all bands, others unique to single individuals or groups, still others might probably be age, gender, ethnic or class specific. Some belong more to the individual interview, the group talk or the letter writing. For example, play suits group talks, confession suits personal interviews. All are interrelated to other discourses in which we were not present – at school, at home, at work, in the street, with the best friend, in the band, by song writing, by media use, and so on. All in all, the interaction between them and us was embedded in highly complex discursive processes, as is each personal encounter and each single interaction with media.

Three tactics

Our informants first of all read the passages about themselves. In that reading, the book was directly used as a mirroring and confirming tool. Even passages about the other two bands were clearly read through 'narcissistic' glasses: as negative projections of one's own antithesis rather than by curiosity on the others or to look for parallels and joint problems. But the groups used three different main tactics in their readings. The result was in all three cases a continuous conflict of interpretations, but its form varied.

The socially most impoverished band Lam Gam ('Lame Vulture') from Gothenburg built massive defences against our reflexive challenges. They mostly avoided all our efforts to make them discuss what the book had meant. Our questions were answered by muteness, or by telling seemingly irrelevant stories of past events instead. They excelled in a *tactics of silence* that made it hard to get direct access to the ways in which they had experienced rock playing or dealt with our earlier study. But their silences also contained messages to be read by us, sometimes as questionings of our own role.

Our research to them had a threatening similarity with interview situations they had experienced from teachers and social workers. That was one reason why our efforts to start dialogues so often ended in the mode of interrogation, if they did not manage to escape into the mode of narration. They further found the book difficult to read and felt a great distance from the academic world of science to which we belonged. They also had strong psychic defences towards every challenge against their pre-existing self-images. The mode of theorization was thus not accessible to them. A main focus was on the polar relation to the well-situated and well-formulated upper-class band in the study. The boys in Lam Gam a priori felt socially stigmatized by such comparisons, no matter what we really had written. This mood prevented them

from working through what we tried to say, which was in fact not at all negative to them. The objective class position here worked as an effective blocking mechanism, cutting off other reflections than the ones confirming their pre-existing opinions on class injustice and their own stigmatization.

Sometimes irony was used to joke about this status hierarchy, sometimes they tried to elevate themselves and criticize the opposite band. Such tactics had an offensive edge that pointed towards positive, alternative values in their own class-based group culture. But in this particular group, the collective identity was presently too weak to carry a strong alternative value-scale – instead a bitter self-contempt and shame was obvious behind the aggressive tone.

> *Jonna:* It's no fun to read about such damn rich fellows as those in Stockholm [laughter] […] I won't say anything… No, but I don't care a damn about them, it's just tiresome to discuss… What the heck do you get out of it? We don't gain anything from talking about it, do we? The snob-band might like to talk, but we are just rabble, aren't we?… What's the use of talking?… It's ridiculous [laughter].

Talking is seen as only good for the rich, for the poor it's safer to shut up. The language itself seems like an enemy, colonized by claims of power and control. As researchers with the written word as tool we were automatically classified as enemies, as belonging to those 'above'. The weapon left was a tactics of silence, of refusing to talk. Each discussion about the book was immediately focused upon the issue of class and status, thus preventing other subjects to be developed. But the band they reacted against was to a high degree a construction, a projection of their own inner images of upper-class kids as the 'Others' that they themselves were not and could not be. In this way, defense mechanisms protected their own integrity, but also led to a distortion of their image of the others and of their own social reality.[11]

These structural factors were reinforced by the individual and collective development of the band members. The band had split, and was thus in one way a failure, and some of the boys had big troubles in their personal road to adulthood. Objectivizing, normative and subjectivizing reflexivity joined to motivate this problematic tactics of silence, which nevertheless showed us that we were used as identity mirrors, even if they tried to blind these mirrors to us in order to escape the control of institutions they certainly were right to defend themselves against.

The other two bands actively contributed to our interpretations by coming up with counter-interpretations. The well-off male working class OH ('One Hand Beats Five Fingers') from Helsingborg in South Sweden managed to play much more freely than Lam Gam with several of the discursive modes. In wilful manners they utilized the modes of play, of confession and of theorizing in a *tactics of conquest*, a counter-

offensive strategy to take over the analytical concepts we suggested and carry them further. They tested them in new ways on themselves and each other, and they even turned them around and critically tried them on us. They actively shaped new metaphors, developing the ones we had constructed in our book, eager to conquer our analytical way of thinking as a weapon to use in their resolute self-determination and ego-expansion, oriented at development, mastering and leaving traces in history. This group engaged in reflection upon the self and the peer group as projects, concentrating upon the psychological dimensions and mirroring first of all their subjective processes of adolescent development. For them, subjective reflexivity was thus much stronger than the objectivizing one, opposite to Lam Gam, whereas both used a normative reflexivity, related to their sense of justice and rightness. This confirmed how our study first interpreted this group, which gave so much attention to personal relations and to the joint project of 'carrying the peer group to the stars'.

The middle class group Chans sometimes also used the reading of the book as a therapeutic tool in their personal adolescent identity work. One of the two girls in this group compared this reading to the writing of a diary, a typical adolescent habit, especially by young women:

> *Betty:* You managed to […] uncover certain moods in an objective and thus neutralizing way. It is as when one is sad: I then always want to (even though it is now actually quite long since!) write down my feelings, as sort of a diary. And zip! the immense sorrow, that previously was so elusive and therefore hard to treat, gets concretized and written down on a piece of paper. Suddenly one can put one's finger on what it is that hurts. And thus (to a great extent) get rid of it in a much easier way, or at least treat it.

This is strikingly parallel with a quotation from a member of Lam Gam:

> *Conny:* A boy mustn't cry in Sweden, everyone knows that, that's the way it is… The only way to get this out then, is standing on a stage, to sing it out. 'Cause then they [the feelings of sorrow] disappear; I can convey to others what I feel, 'cause if you keep it inside it only grows and grows. Sometimes you want to just stand up and shout, it can help too, [but] it's better to write down a text […] and then get up on the stage and rather sing it oneself.

What Conny as a lower-class boy only can get out through rock playing, Betty as middle-class girl can also channel into writing and reading. In both cases, learning to use a cultural form of expression (writing, music) enhanced reflexive self-understanding and thus aided identity development.

Several members of the middle-class group showed a readiness to get surprised by new insights and to change their opinions. Our book has been added to earlier self-mirrorings. The reflexivity induced by it was mostly seen as positive, as a distancing source of new (self-)knowledge. There was a narcissistic desire of being seen, which could sometimes open itself towards deeper self-reflection and more flexible learning processes. Like the other two groups, Chans liked the mode of narration, and like OH they also found the mode of confession rewarding to their narcissist desires. Unlike them however, in group discussions they seldom engaged in the mode of theorizing. Instead they favoured the mode of play, to have fun and to test or hide behind different roles and positions. Their quest for mobility, needed to hold all opportunities open, never allowed them to stand still and fixate their identities long enough to be classified. They excelled in an intensity-seeking *tactics of flexibility*, which made it possible to shift between naïve innocence, narcissistic self-exposure and childish games, combining and maximizing the pleasures of being youthful, being seen and having fun. In some of the later, individual comments, especially the written ones from the girls, a more 'mature', OH-like self-theorizing developed, showing the agile range of their identity flexibility.

> *Betty:* I think all this meant quite much at that time; now it feels mostly as picturesque anecdotes from 'the life with Chans'. And this leads us to the constant recalling of joint experiences that the Chans gang always excelled in. You saw it – and it fitted enormously well! Now, for natural reasons since we don't have time to meet so much anymore, it doesn't happen as much as before. But I think it was important. One wanted an identity – one's own of course, but it was yet more important to be part of a group, of a context. WE had experienced that and that, WE had fun then and then, WE like each other and amuse one another. To mean something to others – be *somebody*. Cause we were actually a peer group, and it was probably only by chance that music happened to be our medium.

Self-reflexivity used media but could also function otherwise. The girls for example talked about their fascination with looking at photos of themselves in different moods, but found a similar curiousity and pleasure by looking carefully into a common mirror. In the case of Chans, this normative, aesthetic and subjectivizing reflexivity was also mixed with portions of objectivizing reflections upon class relations towards Lam Gam, where they excelled in self-ironic jokes about their own wealth and the others' poverty. Comparisons with the other bands also thematized issues of personal growth, as when they complained that OH sounded older and more mature than they themselves did. Their old childish innocence was now becoming outdated, as it clashed with their increasing efforts to achieve a distanced self-control needed in late modern adult middle-class life, but their tactics of flexibility enabled

them progressively to take the painful steps towards new outlets for exhibitionism and playful performance.

Whose text?

In a study like this, there is a real danger that the theoretical concepts lead to false conclusions that need to be corrected by the voices and self-interpretations of those persons studied.

It is, on the other hand, not a viable solution just to reproduce the conscious self-understanding of the groups, since there are, in all cultural and social praxis, forces and structures that are unknown or unconscious to the actors themselves. Nobody is aware of all aspects of the objective, the social, the cultural or the subjective world she or he lives in. This implies that cultural interpretations cannot do without phases of distancing from the first intuitive self-concepts. Cultural hermeneutics has to be reflexive, and accept the need to go through a set of distancing movements in different directions.

On an objective level, there are always material, technical, institutional, economic and political conditions and forces setting up limits to what human beings can achieve. These forces often act silently behind the backs of the actors. The young people we studied could not be wholly conscious of the frames and conditions for their lives that were given from outside – and the same applies to us. We are all integrated in inescapable institutional structures, and our gender, ethnic and class positions will affect our relations to different informants differently, whether we know it or not. For instance, we are all subject to systemic demands from market and state, and we can never see them quite clearly in every detail. What we can do is to accept in principle that these objective forces and structural limitations exist, and bring them into focus by reflexive moves.

On a subjective level, psychoanalytical theory is a forceful tool for understanding the psychic unconscious of each unique individual's subjectivity. This level can only be discerned through a very tight and continuous interplay between each individual and her interpretor. Between them, there will always be transferences and identificational mechanisms that can only partly be made visible. Personal relations will sometimes aid the development of deeper understanding, sometimes hamper it. Mechanisms of transference and projection can produce blindness, but can also be used as an instrument for deeper insights, if for example different researchers co-operate and analyse each other's interactional patterns to gain new insights into the subjectivity of the informants.

On a social level, there are unconscious norms and relations that function in our interactions and which may not be explicitly formulated. There is a rising degree of reflexivity concerning such social relations, which a systematic treatment of them in

research can develop still further. Careful social analysis shows us hidden mechanisms, for example concerning the way we as researchers take part in the concrete interactional patterns of the groups.

On a cultural level, all symbolic systems have rules that are only to a small part more than intuitively known by those who use these systems in their communicative actions. Systematic semiotic analysis and interpretation is needed to disclose the forces, structures and processes at work here. Such analysis can show, for example, the differences between the languages used by the researchers and the adolescents they study. Everyday language and theoretical language cannot be translated directly into each other, even though there are bridges between them. We can connect these discourses to each other, but never make them the same.

On all these levels, the unconscious is a complex hidden network of connections that can be made more intelligible and manageable by interpretative strategies. Were reality transparent, no interpretative acts and certainly no research would be needed. In intersubjective communication through which interpretations are evolved, the young people we studied got new chances of development, and so did we.[12]

We were sometimes ascribed almost magical qualities in a mutual narcissistic mirroring relation with the groups. It seemed almost as if we had created them. Our relations were somewhat similar to the complex play of transference and counter-transference between psychoanalytician and analysand, as when the youngsters expressed almost paranoid thoughts about us as all-seeing or a wish to live up to our expectations of them as good study-objects.

> *Karl:* In one way I think it feels stupid that we almost have finished playing, since you spent so much time following us. As long as you did that, it was like a kick for us to continue for a while more and to try.

We obviously did not vanish without a trace. But we cannot rule out that other actors had been given our roles if we had not been there. Perhaps some teacher, parent or other adult, a friend or older sibling, or the group itself had then taken over some of our functions.

The way our interpretations were accepted and used by the ones we studied does of course run the risk of making them self-fulfilling. They respected our authority as adult representatives of the knowing, and might have taken for granted that what we had written was 'true', and then acted in such a way that it (apparently?) *became* true.

But it is also important to remember that they were not just passive objects for our manipulation, as little as they are passive objects in their acts of media reception. Transferences and counter-transferences between us and them were often unconscious for both parties, but they still remained active subjects in these processes, rather than mere innocent victims of our interpretations. What they accepted of our

analyses, and of media images in general, was that which was able to interact fruitfully with their inner subjectivity and social position, both developed in a complex life history, where our particular influence was after all only one component. The influence of media is more continuous and extensive, but each media image is likewise relativized by accumulated everyday life experiences and subject structures.

It is therefore not really true that our perspective always was the dominating one. We too are intersected and surrounded by forces unconscious to us. We too were tools in one aspect or another; governed by institutional, social, cultural and psychic rules that we only partly knew of. To a certain extent we had even been unconsciously governed by the intentions and acts of the teenagers we studied. We might have helped them to keep going, but in several ways they also helped in forming the image of them that we chose to believe in and present in our book. Who really wrote our texts is therefore an open question.

Dialogues through media

The reflexive use of texts and of 'others' are intervowen with patterns of dominance. Some protested against our analytical power, others submitted to it, still others took a relativistic position of negotiation:

> *Karl:* When reading your conclusions and observations one might think that some things don't fit. This actually doesn't matter, since it is the way you and others outside [of the group] experience it, and then it's correct in itself, isn't it?

Our intervention was a special example of what Thomas Ziehe (1982) has called cultural expropriation – an offer of external images and identity ideals that one has to relate to, in one way or another. All the time, the media offer images of youth, gender, class, ethnicity and local cultures – images that press individuals and groups into definitions and frames imposed from outside. Our teenagers were forced to reflect on themselves through such imposed images and languages, and this is a more complex effort in late modernity, owing to the processes of individualization and medialisation.

Our activities functioned in some ways like media do: our stories, interpretations and concepts framed our informants and invaded their own inner worlds of imagination. After our book, their self-definitions had, in one way or another, to be tinged by what we had written. In some cases (as mostly with Chans) this was accepted and used in the formation of a personal identity, in other cases (as often in Lam Gam) it provoked resistance in the form of passive defense mechanisms, evasion and a refusal to read, in still other cases (OH provides the best examples) it enabled an active counter-offensive to win back the preferential right of interpretation. Whatever

strategy was chosen, nobody could avoid responding to the challenge of mirroring offered by us and our book. The same holds for the offers and demands put forward by the mass media: you can accept, resist or rework them, but hardly avoid them.

The reactions of our groups exemplify a conflict or oscillation between a striving for intense, close, symbiotic devotion and a distancing reflexivity. This seems to have become a main cultural theme in late modernity. There is today a very active searching in both these directions, not least in rock and media use. This can be seen in subcultures like Hip Hop and House, where forgetting oneself and merging into ecstatic dancing collectives is mixed with a highly sensitive consciousness of one's own motives, position and taste.

Youth culture – not least rock and pop music – is full of media critique, as authenticity, closeness, directness, living presence and bodily vibrations are valued higher than distanced analysis and objectification. This, somewhat paradoxically, also holds for much new super-reflexive Hip Hop and sampling music, where being 'the real thing' is again and again used as a mark of quality, opposed to the competing 'hypes' of the music market.

On the other hand, rock culture is also saturated with self-reflection. As Simon Frith (1986) has pointed out, even the most immediate living presentation is today a carefully planned construction using advanced technology. Youth culture is more and more imbued with media. Youthful activities and expressions are more often and quickly adopted, spread and transformed by mass media, whose presence also increases in young people's everyday life. When defining themselves as young, men or women, they cannot avoid using images and concepts of the media. And now and again local subcultures get absorbed by the music industry and spread on record and airwaves as medially reshaped pop-styles.

The bedroom culture of best girl-friends is mirrored by the weekly magazines they read, in a complex spiral movement: modern girls form their identities aided by reading magazines writing about girls' friendship activities. Similarly, peer group amateur rock playing is mirrored by MTV, which has increased the importance of visual images and gestures for bands.

In our study, all groups often referred to media phenomena. They were inspired by rock bands known to them only through certain radio or TV programs. They well knew how rock playing, as well as their own age, class and gender position, was usually depicted in various types of programs and articles. They defined their cultural positions by expressing taste values for and against different media channels and genres, reflected as related to social, gender and ethnic positions.[13] And they used media creatively to present themselves to others, in their own demo-tapes, singles, fanzines and amateur video productions. Our writing was therefore just an intensified and subjectivized moment in a continuous self-mirroring process.

Media use is a tool for implicit self-mirroring, sometimes sharpened to active self-reflection. Objectivizing, subjectivizing, normative and aesthetic reflexivity can all be unconsciously acted out or consciously cultivated, depending on which level of identity that is thematized. Discursive modes like those of confession, theorizing, interrogation, narration and play are found in every dialogue with parents or teachers, or between the peers on their own. They are all relevant in the interaction around and about media too. The use of media itself also activate a widening range of discursive modes, for example in video watching or computer games. Different people use various tactics in their media induced discourses. For example, some use a tactics of suspicion, with a principal scepticism against what media offer and always trying counter-readings against the ones preferred or implied by the media texts. Others use a tactics of affiliation, affirming and trusting strong authorities for protection and safety. A tactics of silence can be used to keep painful images on distance. A tactics of conquer tries to negotiate with and get control over powerful concepts in order to test their use values and their power. A tactics of flexibility is used to throw oneself into the enjoyable games offered by texts of pleasure.

It is important to see the difference between the colonization of the life world, medialisation and reflexivity. The first occurs when bureaucratization and commercialization let power and money supersede symbolic communication in areas where this is dysfunctional for the development of knowledge, norms and identities. Medialisation refers to the (increasing) use of media in identity constructions. Reflexivity occurs when intersubjective images, symbols and discourses affect the same identity production. Colonization is only the negative side of the other two – their positive side is a growing symbolization and communicative competence that actually increases communicative rationality and the power of the life world to resist colonization. Medialisation can be one important tool for a growing reflexivity, adding to direct face-to-face interaction. Getting exposed to media may increase reflexivity, but growing reflexive needs in everyday life may also induce the spread of media.

A reflexive hermeneutics

All this means that ethnographic cultural studies cannot anymore avoid the issue of media – and vice versa. The theme of reflexivity in late modernity gives clues to both media studies and cultural ethnography. In these converging fields an intensified sensitivity for the complexity and polydimensionality of cultural processes is today needed.[14]

Cultural studies need a polydimensional communication theory, a reflexive hermeneutic that unites understanding and explanation in a dynamic arch. To understand the polydimensionality of cultural phenomena such as reflexivity, dimensions have carefully to be acknowledged and separated, in order to be then re-joined in creative

and non-reductive forms of interdisciplinary theoretical bricolage. The connections between media, everyday life ethnography and the dynamic construction of subjectivity ought to be rethought. Cultural studies should explore how cultural processes are produced by institutional frameworks of state and market, structures and forces of subjectivity, social norms and relations as well as aesthetic genre rules. They must also seek to understand how cultural phenomena shape meanings that point in the same directions, so that objective structures, social relations and cultural expressions are continually given meaning and transformed, by subjects always in process, producing themselves in interaction with nature, each others and a range of symbolic forms.[15] This means that semiotics needs to be inserted into a rich, critical and reflexive hermeneutics of the type that Paul Ricoeur has developed, with space for the various dimensions of human communication and culture.

Our own studies of learning processes where media are used as tools of identity work in several dimensions are meant as contributions to a different, open and searching interpretative strategy for cultural studies – a dialogic, reflexive and non-reductionist hermeneutics. We have to learn to be at the same time the mirroring actors, the mirror images and the mirrors of polysemous identities.

Notes

[1] Fornäs (1987 and 1990d; also Fornäs et al 1988 and 1990b) used the concept of late modernity as an alternative to the highly problematic concept of 'post'-modernity. Since then it has turned up now and again in various contexts, e g in Willis (1990) and Giddens (1991).

[2] The useful term medialisation was probably introduced by the Swedish media researcher Kent Asp (1986).

[3] Fornäs et.al. (1988), summarized in Fornäs et.al. (1990b); Fornäs et.al. (1990a). Methodological issues are also considered in Fornäs (1991). Our study was strikingly similar to what Radway (1988) asks for, as a collaborative interdisciplinary effort to use the study of whole group cultures to understand the way certain media and forms of expressions functioned, instead of a priori focusing only one single activity, medium or genre.

[4] Manfred Frank (1991) discusses the complicated relation between self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Compare also how Paul Ricoeur (1974), Julia Kristeva (1983/1987) and Jean Laplanche (1987) analyse the necessity of subjectivity to develop by detours through externalized symbolic forms, which does not reduce the subject to any mere illusionary effect of the game of sign systems. Other followers of Jacques Lacan (1966) have not managed to avoid that pitfall.

[5] Jürgen Habermas (1981/1984 and 1981/1988) develops the interaction of the state and market systems with the communicative processes of the life world, while a long tradition of media research have studied the technological factors of culture.

[6] This has been pointed out by psychoanalytical theorists like Peter Blos (1962) and Julia Kristeva (1990). Ziehe & Stubenrauch (1982) have developed the most interesting theory of increasing narcissistic tendencies.

[7] Cf Beck (1986), Melucci (1989), Ziehe (1991) and Giddens (1991).

[8] A rising general mirroring preparedness, caused by expanding media or other cultural trends, can give rise to more intense narcissistic tendencies in many individuals, as well as the other way

around. Cf Fornäs (1990a and 1990c). Hutcheon (1980/1984) uses the concept of narcissism for metafictional narrative text types, that I would prefer to call reflexive, to avoid collisions with the specific psychoanalytical theory of narcissism.

[9] Burgos (1988) and Ehn (1990) are narrative analyses of interviews as culturally specific ways of producing life-stories. Ricoeur (1976) has inspired the following passage.

[10] Hartwig (1980) formulates a relevant critique of the use of style analysis in the earlier studies of youth culture. He thinks the concept of style can lead to a reification of symbolic systems, and prefers the concept of aesthetic praxis. The intersubjective dynamics of meaning production causes us to oscillate between distance and closeness, between reductive structural analysis and active meaning reconstruction.

[11] This is similar to the distortions and limitations of the 'lads' analyzed by Willis (1977).

[12] All this is well expressed by Ricoeur (1981).

[13] This reflexivity worked against a traditional 'misrecognition' of taste patterns. Johnny in Lam Gam could for example explain that he didn't like synth-pop because 'it is for such spoiled villa children that live in thousand square meter villas with swimmingpool and where the old man has bought them a car when they are five years old.' Similar socio-cultural reflections were common in all three groups.

[14] Cf among others Marcus & Fischer (1986), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Hannerz (1992), and journal issues like *Semiotica*, vol 30, no 1/2 (1980) and *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol 13, no 2 (1989).

[15] Patrick Brantlinger (1990) thinks that a Habermas-like framework of system, life world and communicative action is more fruitful for cultural studies than was the old structuralist one. Angela McRobbie (1991) belong to the growing number of researchers that feel uncomfortable with the reductionist dangers of postmodernism and other post-isms.

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