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Cross-over culture and cultural identities

Kirsten Drotner

All normal people need both classics and trash
(George Bernard Shaw)

Two assumptions recur in much work on contemporary youth culture: the first is that young people of today are cultural explorers: they are often at the forefront in appropriating new cultural forms and the first to experiment with new cultural expressions. The second assumption is this: contemporary culture is basically a mediated culture obliterating old and well-established distinctions between art and commerce, so-called high and low culture. Furthermore it is argued, this obliteration furthers an application of aesthetic forms such as parody and pastiche that, in their turn, make for self-reflexion and distance in reception. This blurring of high and low culture has been termed cross-over culture to denote a 'cross-fertilisation between different arts, media, genres, styles and sub-cultures' (Walker, 1987: 11). The combined result of these two assumptions is that young people today are routinely regarded as cultural poachers (Jenkins, 1991) undermining established hierarchies with ironic panache. Examples range from scratch-video makers and devoted club musicians who use sampling as an electronic process of storing and recycling existing sounds and bits of music, to 16-year-olds who interrupt their reading of Norwegian Jostein Gaarder's bestselling history of philosophy Sofie's World (Sofies verden) in order to watch Beavis and Butthead's irreverent parodies on MTV – or who do, indeed, watch and read at the same time.

While I acknowledge that young people play a fundamental role in cultural change, I think we need to moderate the above assumptions. My account will be structured around two main concerns. The first of these deals with the empirical basis of the above arguments: I propose that the cross-over between high and low culture is no recent development. Rather it is inherent in 20th-century culture, not least in its more youthful departments. I shall exemplify this with regard to animated cartoons. My second concern is a theoretical one: I propose that we understand and analyse these cross-overs as articulations of cultural identities and not, or not simply, as textual constructs or cultural trends, as is often the case. In other words, I argue that in order to explain these recurrent cultural exchanges we must investigate how they have operated in young people's daily lives at different points in history. For this part of my account, I shall draw on a recent Nordic project on young women's cultures.
Cross-over culture as postmodern sign

Let me begin by staking out the empirical terrain. In the film Batman from 1989, the Joker (Jack Nicholson) enters in one scene the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the epitome of high art. Here, he and his gang destroy the masterpieces by spraycanning them, but the Joker stops at Francis Bacon's Triptycon. He leaves the painting intact with the comment 'I rather like that one'. Of course, the painting is never identified as a Bacon painting – like the Joker figure's allusion to Victor Hugo's The Man Who Laughs, it remains an ironic aside to be appreciated by an audience that is versed in art history without forfeiting the chance to watch a blockbuster film.

This is just a single example of the numerous ways in which high and low culture are brought into play not only in Batman, but in much of modern mediated culture at large. In cultural criticism, this self-referential playfulness is predominantly taken as a postmodern sign. Among the most well-known proponents of this fusion of reflexivity and postmodernity is the US critic Frederic Jameson.1 In a now classic attempt to link the economic, social and cultural aspects of postmodernity, Jameson describes a key feature of postmodernist culture as an 'effacement [...] of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture' (Jameson, 1988).1 Like Baudrillard, Jameson leaves no room for artistic change in contemporary cultures.

As is obvious, Jameson premises his account of the postmodernist conflation of high and low culture on a historical dichotomy that he postulates but does not investigate: 'once we had a divide between art and pop but postmodernism has done away with it' is his axiom that is never substantiated. I realise, of course, that the concept of postmodernism is both complex and diverse. Still, for the sake of argument I take Jameson as an exponent of a postmodernist stance whose sweeping conclusions are matched only by their historical disinterest. Or, to be more precise, its interest in a particular historical discourse. For I think that many postmodern conclusions about cultural expressions 'out there in real life' are in fact drawn from the discourse of cultural criticism, not from historical investigations of cultural practices.

I would like to draw attention to a useful analytical distinction that is made by Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren. He talks about Sunday culture and everyday culture (Löfgren, 1990: 87–89). Sunday culture we may associate with the normative discourse of cultural criticism – how professionals conceptualise culture. Everyday culture, on the other hand, we may associate with descriptions of cultural practices.
In trying to understand contemporary youth cultures, it seems to me vital that we retain these analytical distinctions between cultural discourse and cultural practice. Thus, the relations between high and low culture must be understood in two ways: as an empirical relationship between different interpretive repertoires of culture and as a theoretical and epistemological relationship between cultural discourses. While actual cultural expressions and artifacts are always informed by and often upholding cultural concepts and vice versa, they two aspects are not identical and should be analytically separated. Such separation may prise open for analysis the fractures and fissions between the two aspects. For while it is manifestly true that cultural discourse until recently has seen the relations between high and low culture as a dichotomy, indeed a hierarchy, cultural practices exhibit numerous examples of interaction and exchange between the two.

Let me sharpen my argument in the following manner: I think that this fusion of cultural discourse and cultural practice may be a result of the fact that inhomogeneities between the two are often found at the margins of cultural criticism. Thus, youth cultures exhibit some of the clearest historical examples of cultural expression that traverses the gaps between art and pop. And these cultural expressions have often been peripheral to critical interest within the academe. Only when these practices materialise as distinct subcultures or become manifest more generally in cultural life, do they attain the professional interest of academics and cultural critics. Only then do they begin to influence critical discourse. Only then do we begin to talk about cultural cross-overs.

Thus, through the 1980s we have seen a resurgent interest in the pop art of the 1960s accompanied by analyses of art-school movements where young artists or artists to-be transcended the traditional borders of art and made concerted efforts to appropriate styles that were known, for example, from advertising or comic books. At least two of these analyses bear the illuminating title *Art into Pop* (Frith & Horne, 1987; Walker, 1987). While most postmodern critics have approached cross-over manifestations as textual manifestations, the analyses of art-school and pop-art movements have, indeed, linked these cultures to the participants’ social backgrounds just as they have acknowledged the allegiance of these movements to earlier art movements such as cubism in the 1910s and dadaism in the 1920s.

Yet it seems to me of vital importance that we look beyond the young producers – the conceptual artists and hardcore punk musicians – in studying how these crossovers have operated in the construction of youthful identities. Also, we must look further back than the 1960s as the alleged decade of cultural deconstruction. As is evident, I hereby endorse forms of cultural analysis that focus upon young people’s everyday cultures as changing yet concrete forms of meaning-making.
Cross-over history

Naturally, different types of cultural articulations and processes have always influenced one another in as much as every new form of cultural expression must find its place among the ones already in existence. Yet, it is fair to say that with the advent of modern mass media these mutual influences intensify and develop in new directions. The increased mediation of culture in modernity has two important implications. The first of these has to do with distribution, the second with differentiation.

Because of mass production, new media forms reveal their often artistic sources of inspiration to wider audiences than knew about the sources. Thus, film serves to introduce classical music to far more people than would the old concert halls. Conversely, popular culture influences art: an often quoted example is the way in which the narrative technique ‘stream of consciousness’ is influenced by film: the visual imagery and the inter-cutting perspectives in a James Joyce novel owe much to the existence of film. Still, the influence of art on popular culture is less visible in the sense that it is distributed to and experienced by fewer people (there are fewer readers of the modern novel than there are cinemagoers). Perhaps because of this incongruous influence, cultural critics have often reached the rather simplified conclusion that the modern media serve to empty art of its aura and integrity.

But the advent of modern mass media also spurs cultural differentiation. As new media appear in the cultural arena, they create an increase in the number of available interpretive repertoires, in both visual, aural and print forms. According to the American media researcher Jim Collins:

The necessity that discourses establish paradigms, set limits, and construct subjects [...] is a direct result of the competition among discourses to clear and maintain a space for themselves within a field of conflicting voices. In this situation, a high premium must be placed on the processes of differentiation justifying a given discourse as a privileged mode of representing experience.

(Collins, 1989: 12)

The increased cultural differentiation is further eased by the fact that some of these repertoires share the same technology or the same form. A prime example of this is the animated cartoon that exhibits ‘a cross-pollination between comic books, comic strips, and film’ (Shale, 1988: 70). I would like to focus upon the cartoons for a moment since they offer perfect examples of the points I am trying to make. Born in 1906, animated cartoons develop along with the visual media from being a film form to becoming a television form. This development also marks a change from an all-age to a decidedly juvenile audience. The golden age of Hollywood cinema is the studio era from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s which also marks an unusually creative period in the history of animated cartoons. Universal Studio was the most prolific in producing short cartoon serials that were mostly shown as part of a double bill – i.e. the cartoon was followed by a feature film. From their inception, the cartoons offered
a rich repertoire of interaction between artistic and more popular forms of expression. Let me give you three reasons for this interaction: the audience, the production process and animation itself.

As I have already mentioned, in terms of reception the cartoons are part of cinemagoing, and as has been demonstrated since the early days of film sociology (Altenloh, 1914), an important part of the film audience consisted of urban adolescents to whom cinemagoing was one of their most favoured pastimes. Many of them remained truthful aficionados of the cartoons, and Britain's King George V allegedly refused going to the movies unless a Mickey Mouse film was shown – Disney's first animated star born in 1928 (Forgacs, 1992: 363). In the past then, cartoons were part and parcel of youthful leisure pursuits, and we should hesitate before judging reception in historical terms by contemporary standards whereby cartoons are largely relegated to the nursery.

In production terms, the studio era was an unusually fertile period. Animation was considered an all-age form of entertainment and hence production codes were considerably more liberal than would be the case from the mid-fifties on when Betty Boop and Little Red Riding Hood became docile little girls rather than sensuous adults. Young, enthusiastic men dominated the teams of the various studios, and the age gap between producers and audience was considerably smaller than is the case today. The fierce competition between these teams seems to have been matched only by their wild gags and enjoyment of surrealist experimentation.

This brings me to the third feature that makes cartoons a good cross-over candidate, namely technology. The very form of cartoons sets few limits to the imagination. Animated film can depart with logics of form, sequence, cuts and lighting that other types of visual representation have to obey and these possibilities invite formal experiments and non sequiturs that are explored in cartoons from their very inception. Already in 1928, the American newspaper *The New Republic* stated:

> When it comes to "pure cinema", "visual flow", "graphic representation", "the freedom of the cinematic medium", and all the other things learned foreign cinema enthusiasts talk about, nothing that Jannings or Lubitsch or Murnau or Greta Garbo or Rin Tin Tin can do has more than a roll of celluloid's chance in Hell beside Felix the Cat and the other animated cartoons. (Quoted in: Maltin, 1980/1987: 26)

This 'free' quality of animation may be a reason why irreverent humour abound in the short cartoon serials. But even feature-length cartoons, inaugurated by Walt Disney's *Snow White* (1937), have this quality, for example in their playing upon logics of space and time. This may be one of the reasons that *Snow White* seems less dated today than contemporary 'real' films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or *Gone With the Wind* (1939).
Film animation: a case

In 1953, Warner Brothers made a short cartoon Duck Amuck. It originates at a point of intersection between film cartoons and television cartoons (the first of these serials is Flintstone that is modeled on the television series). In reception terms, this is also a point of intersection between all-age cartoons and cartoons made for children. It is a time before what has been called the 'cutifying' of cartoons set in (Forgacs, 1992: 363). It is a time that by no stretch of the imagination could be called postmodern.

Duck Amuck is part of a series of Warner cartoons that pitted a frustrated Daffy Duck against the coolness of Bugs Bunny (Maltin, 1980/1987: 262). The entire cartoon focuses on Daffy's troubles in getting the action going in obedience to conventional narrative rules. The plot is structured on the principle of collision. This principle operates in two ways: as a collision among different narrative elements of causality, time and space, and as a collision among quite different narrative codes in the form of reference and allusion. As for the first, a primary logic is to evoke established features of time and space only to undermine them. Thus, figure and background continuously contradict one another: Daffy, for example, parades in a ski suit against a backdrop of snowy mountains that slowly change into a sunny beach scenery making skiing impossible. Moreover, at some stage a frame displays a sign, 'The End', which, however, does not mark the ending of the cartoon; and Daffy's remark 'Let's get this picture started' appears in the penultimate scene—just before Bugs Bunny is revealed as the animator of the cartoon declaring 'Ain't I a stinker'.

Another structuring principle is reference and allusion to other textual elements. This principle operates on at least three levels in the text: as intratextual reference, as intertextual reference, and as metatextual reference. By intratextual reference, I understand an explicit allusion to the action within the text: e.g. Daffy comments on his numerous obstacles in getting the plot going by saying 'I've never been so humiliated in all my life', just as he praises the right scenery when, for once, it fits his character ('That's dandy'). 'I don't feel like myself... I've kept my contract' he says later on in a rather shrill tone of voice when a brush changes his face into a flower. This is an allusion to the text, but it is also an allusion to standard conceptions of contemporary radio interviews with female stars. This comment therefore also operates on a different level, namely as intertextual reference.

This concept I take to include direct or indirect reference to other texts. In Duck Amuck, there is a constant play upon genre concepts when Daffy appears in a range of costumes that immediately associate themselves to e.g. the western, the historical drama, the romance. We also find clear examples of the ways in which the cartoon draws upon discourses of high and low culture: From a reference to The Three Musketeers in scene one, to the quotation of Henry Longfellow's poetry ('Under the spreading chestnut tree/The village smithy stands/The smith, a mighty man is he/With large and sinewy hands'), on to the remark 'Now mr. Rembrandt'. This last example invokes allusion to painting and hence points to the third level of reference,
This level may be said to comprise allusions to the medium itself and to other media. Thus, we find a number of direct address to the animator (‘Buster, it may come as a complete surprise to you that this is an animated cartoon’ Daffy says on being erased from the frame), to the audience (‘Ladies and gentlemen, there will be no further delays.’); and to the text itself (the frame collapses; Daffy says ‘give me a close-up’, and the camera moves in so far that the screen is filled with Daffy’s bloodshot eye; ‘If you wasn’t me, I would smack you right in the puff’ – he says when his character is suddenly duplicated within the frame; repeated contrasting of sound and image, foreground and background); to other media (again Longfellows poetry is a case in point – and perhaps the tune ‘Dancing through the snow’, that is heard at some stage, is an ironic aside to the rival Disney Studio?). The result is a cartoon with a highly self-conscious and reflexive mode of address.

Other cartoons in the studio era would mix classical and jazz music, a mixture that in itself nurtures cross-overs of reception. Indeed, in the first short cartoons such as the Silly Symphonies, the sound track was laid down first and pictures were drawn to a perfect match that stunned early cinemagoers (Forgacs 1992: 363). Jazz music – e.g. in early Betty Boop cartoons – also helped transmit the new style to a wide audience. To non-American cinemagoers, perhaps, jazz was primarily transmitted through (animated) film rather than through records that were often expensive and hard to come by.

From their inception, then, cartoons offer numerous examples of cross-fertilisation between different cultural discourses, including the principal ones of high and low culture. Also, I have attempted to show that youth culture is a fertile source of reception for this cross-fertilisation. Animated cartoons may be particularly rich in ‘textual dialogue’ but they were by no means the only instances. I do not claim that these dialogues were the order of the day, nor that the hierarchy of high and low culture never existed or was not heeded. I would venture, however, that not only has mass culture ‘always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project’ as US literary historian Andreas Huyssen cogently states with an echo of Adorno (Huyssen, 1986: 191). It has also in many cases operated as a resource in the creation of new cultural expressions – such as certain comics and cartoons – beyond existing notions of art and pop. Perhaps because such expressions now assume mainstream status, we see an intensified need to conceptualise these cross-overs.

Conceptualising cross-over culture

‘Cross over’ is a term that has been used for many years in US popular music. Facilitated by the historical segregation of white and black consumer markets in the US, the term describes instances when black music, for example, crosses ethnic
divides and becomes popular with a white audience (Walker, 1987: 11). But in fact the concept of cross over is nearly 200 years old. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term is first used in 1795 in the manufacture of cloth. Here, cross over denotes 'a fabric having the design running across from selvage to selvage' and in calico-printing it is 'a stripe of colour printed across another colour'. The etymology of the term is illuminating in understanding its application in contemporary cultural analysis. Noting that the term is born at the verge of economic modernisation, one may stress two other aspects: cross over involves two dimensions (fabric and design) and these two dimensions overlap in certain places while being left separate in others. Together, these aspects serve to delimit the concept of cross over.

Applied to cultural analysis, one could define the term cross over in its broadest sense like this: it denotes cultural articulations that in their substance or form draw on both art and popular culture without conflating one into the other. More specifically, I propose that cross-over cultures may exhibit certain key characteristics. Firstly, they operate in a field of tension between art and popular culture. Tensions and gaps are foregrounded, and as the etymology indicates areas of interchange do not obliterate difference. Secondly, this operation is integrated as part of the production process — i.e. the people making these artefacts know that they draw on different codes, genres or cultural discourses. Thirdly, cross-over articulations exhibit a certain amount of self-reference — to themselves as texts, to other texts within the same genre, to other genres or, indeed, to other media. There is often a certain tongue-in-cheekness about such productions and inverted commas abound.

These characteristics immediately link my conceptualisation of cross overs to theories of intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva (1967) as a translation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’ among literary texts. In its broadest sense, the term denotes how every new text invokes other previous texts whether by the author’s direct allusions or by the reader’s tacit understandings. Theories of mutual influences between sign systems is a stable of literary criticism where one may find two main positions: what we may term the ‘reader competence position’ and the ‘authorial design position’. To the first group of critics the focal question is this: is the allusion to other texts explicit in the text or does it hinge on readers’ decoding competences? To the second group of critics the focal question is this: did the author intend the allusion or not? The French Pierre Macherey and Roland Barthes may be regarded as belonging to the first group of critics with their notions of all-pervasive and often tacit traces of other signs, other texts, that are accessed through the process of reading. Conversely, a proponent of the second position is the American critic Harold Bloom who limits intertextuality to an author’s explicit modelling, or even plagiarising, themes and plots from earlier texts in obedience to T.S. Eliot’s dictum ‘bad poets borrow, good poets steal’.

Rephrasing British Stuart Hall’s critique of marxism, I will state my own position on intertextuality like this: authorial design is not a determining factor of intertextuality in the last instance, but in the first. A complete conceptualisation of intertextuality...
must encompass acts of production as they surface in the text. Conversely, a theory of intertextuality cannot end with the text: each new reader situates his or her act of reading (viewing, listening) within an already exiting field of textual competences what the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco calls ‘intertextual frames’ of reference (Eco, 1984: 21), that may be activated whether the author intended it or not.

Theories of intertextuality may certainly illuminate our understanding of cross-over culture. Still, I propose to retain the latter as a separate concept. I do so in order to stress two aspects that are rarely treated by the more literary theories of intertextuality. Firstly, the term cross-over culture points to articulations that invoke the wider discourses of high and low culture. That is, we move from a literary perspective to a larger cultural perspective. Secondly, the term cross-over indicates a process: a space is being traversed by someone. That is, we move from a structural to a more processual way of understanding. The term serves to stress processes of meaning-making that involve actual people as opposed to textual positions. Cross-over analysis necessarily involves the process of reception, for the interaction and interplay of different textual elements obviously only work if the recipients recognise and understand what is being played with: they must know the discourse both of high and low culture. But how do we investigate the ways in which certain textual positions are not only articulated but also located as gendered identities? This is one of the least explored aspects of cultural analysis (Ang & Hermes 1991: 316, Drotner 1991), and its exploration necessitates a shift of analytical focus from a textual to a more ethnographic perspective.

Cultural identities

Identity is a category that is as slippery as that of culture. While I have approached the slipperiness of culture by evading it, I shall try to address the concept of identity more directly. I do not claim to come up with final definitions but offer my considerations as they have developed as part of an interdisciplinary Nordic research project. Informed by the theoretical assumption that gender fundamentally serves to define and delimit the process of modernity, we have based a major part of our empirical project on in-depth interviews with three generations of women: young women aged 18–19, their mothers and their maternal grandmothers. The youngest generation all belong to the urban middle classes in Uppsala, Oslo and Copenhagen respectively.

Identity-formation and its changes has been a major focus of the study. We have applied a multi-faceted understanding of identity that initially was mostly a pragmatic result of our different professional backgrounds. But this kaleidoscopic understanding has proved a theoretical resource of considerable strength (Drotner & Rudberg, 1993). I see at least three dimensions of identity: a social, a psychological and a cultural dimension. Social identity may be related to group norms, attitudes and values that we may relate to larger social institutions such as school, work and family; and
traditionally sociologists account for identity as an interaction between a relatively stable self and relatively stable institutions. Psychological identity is often connected to the concept of the self and to ongoing process of individual identification in forming our gendered subjectivities (Nielsen & Rudberg, 1989). Part of this process will always be beyond the reach of intersubjective communication and understanding: we can never tell other people our dreams, not even in film, but we may tell others about it, or evoke dreamlike images in visual accounts.

It is precisely this intersubjective domain that can be termed the domain of cultural identity. It is the dimension of identity formation that may be communicated most directly. Cultural identity, I propose, may be analysed as socially located articulations of meaning, articulations that are produced via various sign systems so as to form interpretive repertoires of ‘who I am’. The concept of cultural identity, then, is a dynamic concept, and it is precisely the signs which make it tangible as a process that we may also trace analytically. Stuart Hall cogently stresses that we create stable identities by creating narratives of ourselves: ‘Identity is formed at the unstable point where the “unspeakable” stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture’ (Hall, 1987).

In recent years, these points of intersection have assumed increasing importance in cultural analysis as internal and external borders are redrawn in commerce, politics and culture. Particularly, the aspect of national identity has been appropriated to invoke allegiance to both left and right causes. The commodification and internationalisation of the mass media both express and help to explain these relocations.

In the Nordic project we wanted to go beyond the national level and see how individual narratives are articulated and internalised. In this process, the discourses of high and low come into play; are they both articulated? Do the cultural competences of these women encompass both as interpretive repertoires? To answer questions such as these is fundamental to any analysis of the high/low divide that attempts to investigate how textual codes operate in the formation of cultural identities.

Let me therefore briefly introduce you to one of the mothers in my own study. Lisbeth is born in Copenhagen in 1945 in relatively poor circumstances (her father was a baker and her mother was a char-woman working morning shifts from 5 to 8 o’clock so that the oldest children got the youngest ones to school) – she is part of the generation that grew up as cartoons and comics proliferated within a cultural discourse that was still firmly lodged within the cultural politics of social democracy: art should be disseminated to the masses, and chief venues of dissemination were the public libraries and the public-service radio (the first time young Danes are put on the cultural agenda is in a library act from 1933). How did Lisbeth juggle the discourses of high and low culture? When describing the mass media of her home, Lisbeth immediately starts off by describing her father:

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We had a radio, an old, fancy radio, and I remember my father, he was sort of a strange type, so he bought this kind of record player where you could place 10 records at a time, and they would pop down as you played them – it was sort of automatic.

Lisbeth’s father was also the one in charge of buying the records. He was very interested in classical music ‘and he loved to sit thinking he was the conductor’. In their teens, Lisbeth and her two brothers started buying Beatles records but they only played this ‘modern stuff’ when the parents were away. It does not seem as if Lisbeth’s mother influenced her cultural preferences, but her father was a staunch comunist and loved to discuss politics with his children after listening to the evening news on the family radio (absolute silence during the news). He went to the public library at least once a week and would often take Lisbeth with him. She remembers him fondly ‘always sitting in his armchair with a book in his hand’. This paternal combination of left-wing politics and classical culture has influenced Lisbeth as a tacit norm of cultural taste: she is not a reader of classical literature, she enjoys light music and light reading, but she has strong opinions about the negative influences of television particularly the commercial channels and rent videos.

Lisbeth is not the only one in the older and middle generation of my study who knows, traverses and reflects on the discourses of both high and low culture, and who juggle them as interpretive repertoires in constructing her own cultural identity. The women’s descriptions of cultural artifacts and activities indicate that many of them possess cultural competences in both high and low culture, competences that call for self-reflection and that make for appreciation of the cross-over gags found in Duck Amuck and similar forms of cultural expression. Also, it is important to note that the media operate as particularly important sources of cultural identity formation when their codes can be linked to personal memories. This is indicated by the quotes above and it is confirmed in other parts of the interdisciplinary project (Ekerwald 1993).

Cross-over identities?

By way of conclusion, Frederic Jameson describes the culture of modernity as a rigid dichotomy between commodified entertainment and what he terms ‘an opposition art’ (Jameson, 1988). My analyses of the generation of women growing to adolescence in the 1950s – i.e. before Jameson’s moment of postmodern birth – do not support this account. Nor, and this is important, do my analyses endorse more populist reception studies in recent years that equal variety of use with wilful use if not directly subversive use (Fiske, 1986; Jenkins 1991; Lewis, 1991; Schwichtenberg, 1993). It is vital that we do not make blanket equations between textual reflexivity and oppositional forms of interpretation: irony, parody and pastiche are not in and of themselves subversive categories. Moreover, a number of reception studies are limited to analyses of ardent fans (see critique in Hermes, 1993; Drotner, 1996), and

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their conclusions are informed by what the English media researcher David Morley has termed the ‘don’t worry, be happy’ strand in postmodern thought (Morley, 1992).

The Nordic study, of which my own investigation forms a part, focuses upon ‘ordinary’ women, not ardent fans. Its methodology of life-phase interviews situates the informants’ mediated culture within a complex context of use and evaluation that in itself is open to analysis and speculation. What is important in the present context is to stress that by taking one’s point of departure with particular groups of people, not with particular media or texts, the researcher (and, indeed, the informants) may detect and illuminate intertextual references between different media forms, intertextualities that are obscured by conventional forms of media analysis where we proceed from analysis of a single medium. Elsewhere, I have argued for this approach as a sine qua non of ethnographic analysis (Drotner, 1993), an approach, it should be stressed, that does not exchange textual analysis for contextual use.

My preliminary analysis of my own data seems to suggest that the public-service culture that is fundamental to welfare politics has, indeed, succeeded when it comes to young women raised outside the solid middle classes: from the interwar period on, welfare politics brought about a situation in which a good number of women have formed their cultural identities through what we might call ‘dual cultural competences’ that invite cultural reflection and, in some cases, even invoke self-reflection. The continual exchange between different codes, genres and media in the lowly parts of cultural expression such as cartoons and comics aimed at the young has now reached the mainstream in contemporary culture. Rather than signifying a qualitative change towards a postmodern culture of historical amnesia, this development, as I see it, signifies a quantitative extension. This extension, however, may serve to ultimately weaken the dual cultural competences that many older people possess.

Because paradoxically, the widespread deconstruction of cultural hierarchies today is matched by a reinforcement of social hierarchies: one has to be a real media connoisseur in order to appreciate the many allusions and implicit references to old television series, film-noir lighting and classical tunes. It is routinely maintained that especially young people today are what Eco has termed ‘instinctive semioticians’. But, in my view, it is still an open question how many of them retain the dual competences that are necessary to enjoy such playfulness. What is certain, however, is that the power to answer this question does not rest solely with the creativity and resourcefulness of the audience, nor with researchers’ blanket belief in such abilities. Rather, the future development of multifaceted cultural competences is decided in the more powerful domains of educational and labour-market politics. I, for one, would like to see more cultural cross-overs in the years to come. And I do hope that we will be able to foster a generation of young people who are in a position to appreciate such cross-overs – and to create them.

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Notes

1 It should be noted that Jameson (1988) is taken here as a typical example of a recurring conflation of stylistic self-reflexivity and postmodernity. I realise that Jameson’s analysis of postmodernism has since been modified (Jameson, 1991).

2 Potter & Wetherell (1987) have introduced the term ‘interpretive repertoire’ to denote that people interpret cultural artifacts and processes by combining a variety of available sign systems (codes). This understanding of cultural interpretation is an alternative to one often applied in cultural studies, namely interpretive communities, which implies a one-to-one relationship between socio-demographic and cultural characteristics. The term discourse, as applied in the context of the present article, derives from Michel Foucault (1969) to denote not what we understand and interpret, but the ways in which it is possible to speak – and remain silent.

3 Perhaps the interaction in the past between the circuits of high and low culture has been particularly prevalent in film that is unhampered by the discursive hierarchy of literature and which, moreover, could be enjoyed relatively easier without formal qualifications of literacy.

4 The growing popularity of film animation between the wars is suggested by changing relations between comic strips and animated cartoons. Until the 1920s, cartoon figures were primarily modeled on strips, but particularly after the Disney studio’s invention of Mickey Mouse in Steamboat Willie, 1928, this relationship was reversed (Shale, 1988: 66).

5 Indeed, it seems as if humour in general offered a favoured form of intertextual experimentation in the past as may be seen, for example, in a number of Abbott and Costello films.

6 Collins mentions crime fiction as an area of cross-breeding between high and low cultural codes, particularly in its US versions because of the ‘lack of an established canon of High Class literature in American fiction’ (Collins, 1989: 57). Jane Feuer points to the Hollywood musical as another example of textual dialogue, particularly in the form of metatextual references (Feuer, 1982).

7 Gerard Genette’s elaboration of Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s respective conceptualisations is probably the most inclusive classification of intertextuality (Genette, 1982). From his coinage of the common term ‘transtextuality’, Genette distinguishes between five different types of textual dialogue: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, hypertextuality. In my own analysis of Duck Amuck I draw on Genette’s concepts but modify them to three levels intratextuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality. For each of these levels I distinguish between existence or lack of authorial intention, and between explicit and implicit references whose decoding depend on reader competences and historical contexts. For good overviews of intertextuality, see Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992: 203–10; Worton & Still, 1990: 1–44.

8 The project ‘Young women’s everyday life and culture in the Nordic countries’ was subsidised by NOS-S 1989–94 (project no. 5-34-10.03) and centred on continuities and changes in young women’s everyday lives and cultures in modernity. Apart from the interview study, the project comprised a historical study of conceptions of femininity and youth 1800–1840 and a statistical analysis of young women’s relations to work, politics, sexuality and education in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, respectively (Drotner & Rudberg, 1993). Participants in the project were as follows: Eva Lis Bjurman, Magdalena Czaplicka, Kirsten Drotner (project coordinator), Hedvig Ekerwald, Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen, Monica Rudberg, Liv Emma Thorsen.

9 The term articulation, which is widely used in media studies, derives from Laclau (1977). As an alternative I have elsewhere proposed the term actualisation which is unhampered by linguistic associations (Drotner, 1991).

10 Stuart Hall maintains that these relocations of national identities may take three courses:
they may strengthen existing national identities into nationalist identities, they may undermine these identities, or they may help develop new forms of multi-cultural identities (Hall, levels: intratextuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality. For each of these levels I distinguish between existence or lack of authorial intention, and between explicit and implicit references whose decoding depend on reader competences and historial contexts. For good overviews of intertextuality, see Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992: 203–10; Worton & Still, 1990: 1–44.

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