Girl meets boy: Aesthetic production, reception, and gender identity

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mention video, and people start talking about the young. This is not surprising. Video is perhaps the most directly influential of the new media, and its influence is felt chiefly by children and adolescents who are among its keenest users. And unlike older viewers, the cultural identities of the young are being shaped in a thoroughly visual era.

Since the early 1980s, when video first found a mass market in western Europe, public debates on video have focused on ‘the nasties’, on video violence and its alleged ill-effects on the innocent minds of the under-age. With almost tedious accuracy, the moral panic in most countries spirals into demands for firm policies banning the worst excrescences in the volatile video business. Concerned social workers, committed teachers, and critics have entered the debate with the express aim to counteract received notions of children and young people as a generation of would-be criminals imitating their hardhitting screen heroes or visual zombies devouring pictures more desperately than the gruesome characters’ devouring of victims: crime, the critics stress, is rooted in social and psychological structures more profound and complex than the watching of videos, and most youngsters are not the television addicts envisaged by the media hysteria.

Professional research on youth and video has emphasized two main aspects: (1) investigations of video consumption – what do adolescents see and why? (Roe and Salmonsen, 1983; Glogauer, 1988); (2) studies on media education – how can we make the young better, that is more critical, viewers? (Halloran and Jones, 1985; Masterman, 1985). Tackling those questions are pertinent, not least in Scandinavia where our long tradition of public-service media is currently being challenged by satellite and cable channels. For good reasons, then, public debates and professional discussion have stressed the commercial videos and their reception.

But at the same time, many young people use video in different ways that have almost entirely escaped serious adult attention. The video boom has
more or less coincided with an unprecedented growth of cultural production, shaped by a variety of adolescents outside the confines of flamboyant subcultures and avant-garde counter-cultures. Undoubtedly influenced by these visible groups, a growing number of 'ordinary' adolescents today experiment with media such as community radio, video and home computing, with musicals, modern dance, and rock music to a degree that not even the garage bands of the Beatles, or indeed the punk waves could envisage. Youth clubs, public media centres, and local activity houses may form institutional backdrops to these activities. But often they are part of informal and changing peer-group relations. Seen from a Scandinavian perspective, this growing interest is characterized by certain trends: (1) popular cultural forms are of focal concern (video, rock music, comics); (2) middle-class adolescents form key members in the self-styled groups; (3) girls occupy a central position within many of these cultural spaces.

To my knowledge, no surveys have documented the range of these cultural activities on a larger scale. But the above trends are borne out by my own work with adolescents and their video production. The impetus to this work was the glaring contradiction between adult and adolescent interests: while we concentrate upon their reception of the commercial media, many of the young are busy trying out those media for themselves. How do boys and girls use video? What are their productions like? What do those activities mean to them? Answering these questions may help us elucidate a blind spot in current media research. But the answers also throw into relief larger issues: what are the conditions of cultural production made by ordinary people in an age of post-industrial development? What are the implications of this production for cultural and media studies? While my own work does not resolve these complex questions, it is hoped that the following analysis may open a forum for further discussion.

The video project

For about a year I have followed a group aged 14-17 who made a video in a Danish youth school (ungdomsskole). These schools are a mixture of a youth club and an evening class. Open to 14-18-year-olds, these free schools are spread throughout the country and frequented by a national average of about 70 per cent of the age group. In smaller communities, the youth schools together with sports and perhaps scouting form the only organised leisure options for the young. They are open in the evenings, many arrange social events such as weekend discos, and most have pool rooms and bars where people hang around, buying soft drinks, meeting friends, and chatting up possible partners.

Originally intended as an optional training for the 'intelligence reserve' of statutory school-leavers, Danish youth schools now operate as age-bound social centres for adolescents, most of whom – like my video group – are still at school, living at home, and earning often good money for personal spending with a variety of part-time jobs. The public funding of the schools is dependent upon their annual intake of 'pupils' and so their teachers
develop a keen consumer consciousness that is now further enhanced by the decrease in the number of adolescents. Thus, in 'my' school, a large one located in a socially mixed but 'nice' suburb of Copenhagen, one might find courses in about eighty different topics ranging from computer programming and French to deep-sea diving, skateboard training, personal grooming — and video. Non-academic courses were by far the most popular in this as in other youth schools.

The video course that I followed had eight or ten regular participants, three of them girls, and all of them white except one boy from Turkey. (Cultural differences and language problems made him peripheral to the group activities.) Why did they choose this course? Some had tried to use video a bit at school or at home, one had media experience from community radio that he wanted to 'put into pictures', as he said, and three belonged to the 25 per cent of Danish homes owning a VCR. Pia, who had an interest in technical matters, gave as her reason for coming that she was irritated that she 'did not really know what all those different buttons were for' on her parents' video camera. The group's immediate interest was to play around with the equipment and experiment with its different uses. This was also the aspect emphasized by their young, male teacher. Professional films were included as objects of analysis and technical guidance: how is suspense created? which angles are shown in a woman falling, etc? The course ended with a group production of a 20-minute video story. This also marked an end to my involvement with the group. I had quickly been accepted as the odd but rather uninteresting person in the corner — from what I could make out and from their teacher's information, the group was too involved in its own activities to take much notice of me. Apart from my extended observations, I interviewed the participants individually either at home or, if they did not want that, at the school.

The process

Both boys and girls initially saw video as a technical and hence a male medium. Not unexpectedly, I found that without adult direction the boys would take charge of the lighting, the props, and the camerawork. Pia, whose best school subject was maths, never meddled with technical details but was a keen actress. But so were several of the boys. As Paul put it: 'I like to be behind the camera if I cannot be in front of it.' With feminist equanimity, I took these differences as yet another proof of male dominance. But Pia put me right. For a year she was the only girl in her comprehensive school to take a course in electronics. There she had been fighting the boys who would always direct the experiments and who, she said, 'put wet sponges in my hair and chalk on my dress. . . . Our teacher only laughed. I did not find that terribly funny.' She obviously did not want to continue struggling in her leisure time too. Although she liked 'fiddling around with things' and had never learned to knit (she found it a 'passive' preoccupation), she saw the boys' technical dominance in the video course as no problem. 'Did you know there would be so many boys in the course?' I asked her,
probing what I defined as a possible problem. ‘No, and this was not the only reason I came’, was her reply. Too many boys can evidently be a good thing when you are 15.

Gender differences were not only a hardware issue, however. They were apparent also in group discussions over small test productions as well as in the planning of the final video. The group was usually given a free rein with their ideas although the teacher would intervene if he disliked their suggestions. Everybody agreed that the long video should be fictional – real-life problems were ruled out as stupid. It should also have a story, a plot. These are youngsters who like watching the decentred narratives of pop videos, but who are less interested in experimenting with avant-garde forms in their own productions. So, something was to happen, but what? Naturally, their various answers depended upon their individual genre preferences. And not unnaturally, these corresponded to well-known gender differences in visual reception: the girls wanted realism touched up with romance, while the boys favoured action and suspense. Their mutual discussions and negotiations over a common plot were among the most exciting for themselves, and for me too. For the planning demonstrated very vividly their differences in visual pleasure.

The girls were very adamant and very inventive in advancing a girl-meets-boy theme, but they were hesitant in pushing the romance elements. The boys did not rule out the girls’ suggestions. But their immediate reaction was to rephrase the girl-meets-boy theme into an obstacles-to-girl-meets-boy theme. They clearly distanced themselves from empathy and emotional involvement, and they did so by concentrating upon violent and comic situations. The boys went off in a virtual brainstorm of possible gags (sound effects were much enjoyed) demonstrating a mastery of genre conventions – car crashes, drownings, stranglings – from Dirty Harry and Police Academy to Rambo and Alien. The girls attempted to check them by reference to reality (‘this would never really happen, you know’) while the teacher checked them by reference to realization (‘you cannot make this happen, you know’).

The common appeal of the girl-meets-boy theme highlights how self-defined video production is cultural production in the specific sense of aesthetic production: it makes visible pertinent problems and hidden desires by giving them concrete aesthetic form. The aesthetic process is contradictory because the feelings involved are contradictory. Developing one’s sexuality is naturally seminal to adolescence. Sexual experimentation is a source of profound pleasure. But the deep emotions involved are also threatening because they may be felt to overwhelm an unstable identity (Blos, 1962). Making video opened a safe space in which the participants could act out, test, and negotiate these contradictory experiences. It was safe because it was fictional, it was not ‘about’ the participants, and it was negotiable because its creative energy was pleasure: the group made video to have fun, not to have their problems solved.

Crucially, the aesthetic creation was a gender-specific process of signification. The girls clearly feared violence, and the aggressive expressions of
sexuality associated with violence, while the boys feared tenderness. The group found a common aesthetic meeting ground in a plot combining humour with realism and excluding violence and romance. It is inviting to speculate on the popularity of comedy in prime-time television, for example, as a result of similar gender negotiations played out over the years through the rating system. Many sit-coms, for example, combine the family focus of women’s afternoon shows with the rapid pace of late-night crime movies often enjoyed by male audiences. Comedy, by mediating between typical male and female genres, is accepted by men and women alike.

The gender differences were also evident in the shooting situations. These naturally offered the real testing grounds for role playing. Here, the girls were generally most explicit about intimate emotions and some of them openly enjoyed flirting in front of the camera – and with the boy behind it. The boys used a wider range of bodily expressions, jumping about, laughing loudly, and gesturing wildly. They were also eager to teach the girls (‘I’ll show you. I’m an expert in falling’). At the planning stage, both boys and girls had shown a vivid imagination for details, if of different kinds. 7 Now the girls restrained themselves from putting their ideas into action. Unlike the boys, they wanted to rehearse what to say, when to move, and how to leave the scenes. This was not just a result of the girls being in the minority. For they opposed the boys in other situations. More centrally, the girls differentiated between talk and action. This may have to do with a specific pleasure in language that is nurtured in many girls’ upbringing and which is central to their relations to one another in adolescence. So, while they would contradict the boys, they did not counteract them: their sexual play was clearly a body language exercised as an exciting form of communication, not as a point of intervention. The boys were generally more playful during takes and less afraid of making a fool of themselves in front of their friends: ‘Oh, I’m so beautiful’, Paul would remark only half-jokingly when parading his small 14-year-old figure in front of the camera and the group in obvious narcissistic enjoyment.

The boys’ playfulness was demonstrated one night when Paul and his friend, in testing the white balance of the camera, started a send up of advertisements. While Paul combed his hair, all big smiles, the cameraman said in imitation of a commercial intonation: ‘And here we see Model ’87 with the diffuse look in his eyes. He naturally uses the deoderant . . . Williams.’ (Both laugh). As in young children’s role-playing, the boys elegantly switched between different levels of ‘reality’. Their mutual understanding of the commercial codes left them free to improvise on and parody them. At the same time, they clearly liked the acting as such (Paul took much pleasure in his personal grooming). Moreover, they displayed their dependence upon a consumer consciousness that advertisements generally enhance. (At least in Denmark, Williams is regarded as a typical low-budget brand).

The small scene demonstrates a common pattern of action. It reveals an opposition between the boys’ need for approval through commercial integration and their mastery of commercial clichés shown by their
commercial experimentation: in that opposition lies the source of their laughter. But the opposition has a wider significance. It is the very standardization of commercials that allows the boys' improvisation. What many media critics and well-intentioned adults denounce as stereotypical trash, to these adolescents form a mutual reservoir of emblems fuelling their imagination and creating a collective framework of interpretation. The clichés become pieces in the construction of a variety of narrative jigsaw puzzles.

Judging from other video projects I know of, this playing with advertisements seems very common when children and young people begin making videos. The visual competences displayed, I think, challenge received theories of creativity in adolescence. These theories are chiefly derived from developmental psychology and are generally based upon a normative understanding of aesthetics as artistic expression: for example, unlike young children, most adolescents tend to draw the same objects over and over again while perfecting the details of what they draw. Taken out of the contexts in which they are put forth, such efforts seem 'mere' imitations made by passive and unimaginative individuals. My boys may have been poor at drawing, but they were certainly creative in other aesthetic fields.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the group's visual competences was their unwillingness to write scripts. They adamantly resisted their teacher's attempts to have them put their ideas on paper. 'We'll just decide when we get so far.' And so they would. The result was not MTV, but it was video. Naturally, this unwillingness partly stems from an opposition to tasks bearing the slightest resemblance to school work. But the relative success of this process equally demonstrates that, symbolically speaking, the participants carried possible scripts around in their heads including an intuitive knowledge of camera angles, lighting, and music. Brought up in a world saturated with visual media, they know about them without realizing it, so to speak. Asked about scripts, Ron stated that 'writing it all down restrains you because you cannot possibly get all your wild ideas down in some script... It might take you half an hour to just write down one stupid scene, see.'

Having witnessed the group's reluctance to harness the flow of their imagination, I expected them to find shooting a boring anti-climax to discussions. The pace in actually making a video is very different from planning, or indeed watching, one. But they generally concentrated during reruns of scenes as much as they would the first time. Often a sequence had to be repeated because of their laughter. Then they would start all over again as serious as before and enjoying the formalities of production ('ready, take five'). As is the case when children play, seriousness and fun were aspects of the same process.

As long as both these aspects were present, the group's pleasure in the process overruled the frustrations involved in having to ditch some of their marvellous ideas, of waiting around, or cancelling a scene because of rain. Significantly, the editing of the tapes - an essential element to the finished product - was performed by only two or three boys. While they were
concerned with the end-product and wanted other friends to see it and to approve of it, the group clearly considered the process to be the most important and enjoyable aspect of their work.

Everyday aesthetics

This emphasis upon the process rather than the product is a key point of distinction. The video-making of 'my' group is only one example of the aesthetic production performed by people as part of their everyday cultures. If everyday life can be said, with the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz, to appear as 'the world of directly experienced social reality' (Schutz, 1972: 163; see also Lefebvre, 1971), then everyday cultures can be defined as social symbolizations of our immediate, and often contradictory, experiences. Following this definition, we may understand aesthetic production as those elements of our everyday cultures in which we create symbols, and hence meaning, by giving these symbols concrete form. According to Christiaan Hart Nibbrig, such an everyday aesthetics is a 'realisation as materialisation [ein Erkennen als Darstellen]. This materialisation makes one realise hidden experiences that are now revealed to be unique precisely by their specific and concrete realisation.' (Nibbrig, 1978: 11). Thus, aesthetic production is not only found within drama, painting, writing, or singing. It may also be expressed through popular forms such as fashion, makeup, and rock music, or through interior decoration, painting motorbikes, even preparing a meal.

Everyday aesthetics is not limited to certain 'artistic' areas of life, it is a specific way of perceiving the world and understanding ourselves. The group of adolescents I followed made tangible their various anxieties, aspirations, and desires, not by sitting down describing and discussing them, but by making pictures and narratives fuelled by these emotions. What this process meant to them I shall return to in a moment. But to better understand the personal implications, let us dwell a bit on the concept of aesthetics.

Although rooted in antiquity, the idea of aesthetics as we know it today is shaped by modernity. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, aesthetics split in two directions: one a philosophical discipline of reception, developed chiefly by Hegel and Kant, the other a norm of artistic production (in Britain, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Matthew Arnold were key proponents). For our purpose, the important implications of this dichotomy are the distanciation of aesthetics from everyday experience and the concomitant specialization of aesthetics as a sphere for experts (and hence an area of education). Aesthetic reception becomes our distanced contemplation of the sublime, while aesthetics as a norm of production denotes the qualities of art created by a specially gifted minority. Aesthetics is viewed as a harmonious realm of the mind opposed to political strife and personal struggle, and transcending the concrete details of mundane reality.

In opposition to the inherent social and sexual elitism of this aesthetic tradition, the concept of an everyday aesthetics has been advanced from two professional fields on the Continent. Aesthetic theory has been reinterpreted
by the so-called Budapest School of philosophy (Heller and Fehér, 1986), and in West Germany cultural critics and art-school teachers have developed the term ‘everyday aesthetics’ with a view to its practical, pedagogical uses (Ehmer, 1979; Hartwig, 1980; Criegern, 1982; Otto, 1984). Despite some differences, certain characteristics stand out from these recent developments: (1) everyday aesthetics is regarded as a process encompassing both production and reception and engaged in by everybody; (2) it is lodged within everyday cultures and their contradictions; (3) aesthetic production is always a concrete process; (4) it does not transcend reality, nor does it merely reflect reality, but it may refract our experiences of ordinary reality in new ways. Bearing these characteristics in mind, what then did video-making imply to ‘my’ group of adolescents?

**Aftereffects**

Apart from a training in specific technical and practical skills, both boys and girls stressed that the video course had changed their modes of visual reception:

Like how the heads are placed in the picture, that sort of thing, how [the film] is made, all the presentations of characters and such . . . (Anne)

I think it’s so interesting to see how a film is actually created, with camera angles and all that, and all the possibilities you have. (Peter)

But when asked whether they liked their new analytical awareness, opinions were divided. Unlike the girls, several of the younger boys (14–15 years of age) favoured the possibilities of emotional distance that this awareness entailed. According to 17-year-old John, however:

you only think about [the film] afterwards. If you haven’t noticed all those things [when watching], then it has been a really good one, really absorbing.

He clearly prefers involvement. This difference in evaluation may be rooted in the ambiguity of looking. To look involves the power of gazing at others but also the pleasure of being watched – in Christoph Wulf’s cogent term, this is ‘the engulfed look’ (Wulf, 1984: 24). Video-making allows an experimentation with both these aspects as is evident, for example, in the two boys’ improvisation on adverts. Their interaction is an oscillation between active and passive visual power: the cameraman selects specific angles while the actor controls the character presentation. But at the same time his acting is a letting-go, an enjoyment of being a visual object for his friend who responds by a similar involvement in the game.

Looking trains emotional distanciation as well as emotional immersion. Judged within the context of adolescent development, it is understandable that the younger boys prefer the critical gaze harnessing emotionally charged images. That these images often invite an immersion into romance, tenderness, and intimacy are entirely in line with the gender differences already encountered.
One should not underrate the importance of distanciation. In the form of laughs and remarks it may create an emotional shield fending off the impact of excessive violence in the watching of many ‘nasties’ (my own investigation did not include such films). Distanciation certainly helped some of the more insecure participants in the video group gain a self-assertion that fed back into other situations. Ron said: ‘you get a chance of testing yourself, see what you are good at, learn to talk to people, having them say something instead of just “yes” and “no”’. For ‘people,’ one might read friends in general and girls in particular.

The experience of video production influenced the group’s modes of visual reception, just as it trained communicative competences that can be employed in other areas of life. But was it important that these competences had been gained through an aesthetic process? Answering this question must necessarily be more speculative. Not only because the personal benefits may not yet be proved because the participants are still too young. But equally because such benefits may not be ‘proveable’. By nature, aesthetic production is an experience through all our senses and thus involves more than can be put into words or rational cognition. The aesthetic process is less tangible though not necessarily less important than learning in a narrower sense. This makes the process harder to analyse as well.

Asked if they would pursue their video interest in the future, many in the group acted with surprise (‘well, I never thought of this as an option’), and all but one relegated video-making to the marginal, albeit absorbing, area of possible adult hobbies. Their rational rejection of incorporating their aesthetic experiences as important aspects of their future lives contrasted sharply with their undivided attention when talking to me about, and especially making, videos.11 This tension between conscious limitation and unconscious intensity is of course easy to explain at a surface level: young people know perfectly well that they cannot all be actors, film directors, or video technicians. Their schooling also makes them realize that ‘real’ training is seldom fun, from which they infer that if you have fun you do not learn anything worthwhile.

To such sociological explanations one may add more psychological reasons for their ambivalence. Aesthetic production is a playful testing ground for ‘excessive’ behaviour and unrecognized emotions (as Ron said: ‘you get a chance of testing yourself, see what you are really good at’). The process allows a negotiation of present problems and wishes along with a projection of future possibilities through an enjoyable regression to the safe patterns of childhood play. Most young people, however, desperately want to grow up, to grow out of their childhood ways. So aesthetic production becomes an inherently contradictory experience: cherished as a safety net of pleasure and dismissed as a constriction to what they perceive to be a ‘proper’ adult existence. Here, being an expert in falling seems in slight demand.

Only to the degree in which the sensuous experiences of aesthetic production are accepted as integral elements of both male and female identities in adulthood may these processes feed back as a conscious
enrichment of adolescence. To the best of my knowledge, this integration is not happening at the moment. Dissolution of local networks and economic rationalizations in the name of modernization and effectivity have not enhanced most adults’ possibilities of personal development. The current increase in adolescents’ aesthetic production might therefore be seen as a mostly unconscious resistance to disintegration and the narrowing of adult capabilities more than as a sign of widened opportunities for the young.

Aesthetic experiences entail an indirect critique of verbal language and linear reasoning. Through them, we regain what Schutz and Luckmann describe as the polythetic qualities of our first perceptions that include all the senses (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974: 119). Young people are ambiguous about these perceptions because they acknowledge the constrictions of existing reality without relinquishing their experiences of wider realities that unite sense and sensibility, work and pleasure. Unlike many of my own generation, who have sought to establish self-contained utopian communities, the middle-class youngsters I have encountered are pragmatics. Aesthetic production, to them, may be an arbiter in the chaos of everyday life, but it is still lodged within its conflicts and contradictions. Whether one speaks as a Marxist stressing youth unemployment and the increasing social pressure on the young in an adverse economic climate, or one emphasizes a post-modern perspective of cultural decentredness, adolescents’ aesthetic production develops against the grain of existing constraints. It momentarily suspends social demands through processes that are literally in the hands of the participants controlling its pace and shape. The growth and vitality of these processes reveal that, psychologically speaking, young people may be among the most capable in employing the energies that are also let loose by the complex cultural and social relocations of the 1980s.

Theoretical perspectives

The new media are here to stay. The youthful absorption of videos and other technological novelities are integral to social reality and cultural identities. Pictures are thrilling both to watch and to make. As for the latter, I think children and young people should be given wider opportunities to produce pictures and to control the production process themselves. Not for pedagogical reasons: as I have indicated, young video-makers do not necessarily become more critical viewers, and if they do they do not always like what they see. Not for social reasons: certainly no one in my group was kept off the streets or away from television because of their activities in the youth school: video production is no antidote to the visual bombardment of the professional media. Not for artistic reasons: the video group – perhaps because of their age – liked the aesthetic process and its substance more than the finished products and their aesthetic forms, unlike artists to whom form and product are essential qualities of their oeuvres; and it remains to be seen whether any of these adolescents will make a career in the visual arts. Aesthetic production in general and visual production in particular should be entertained for their own sake and on their own merits as a widening of
our ordinary experiences and sensibilities. It should not be a means to a predefined end. Strange as it may seem, freedom and openness are what in the final analysis make aesthetic production serve other purposes. As my own work suggests, the participants’ voluntary engagement is a precondition for their experience of visual pleasure through which the necessary frustrations in the process may be tackled. The aesthetic negotiation is what makes the process unique.

Widening the opportunities of visual production, however, should not establish a hierarchy of visual pleasure. We should hesitate to regard visual production per se as a necessarily better, more genuine or creative, activity than visual reception. For by doing so we only perpetuate the standard notions that it is better to read a book than see a film, but that it is even better to write a book. To my group, and I think to most young people, aesthetic production and reception, high and low culture, form integral parts of an everyday culture that needs no value judgements to be created and enjoyed. Popular culture forms an important source for their aesthetic imagination whose results feed back into their perceptions of the commercial output.

Seen from the vantage point of the people involved, aesthetic production has some important implications for cultural studies in general and for media studies in particular. We must widen our conception of aesthetics: aesthetic production and reception are mutual aspects in the formation of everyday cultures and should be studied as such. This perspective necessarily challenges the modernist notions of ‘high’ art as the locus of aesthetic production, just as it serves to undermine the elitist dichotomy between aesthetic production and reception. By insisting that we all actively shape and recreate a variety of everyday cultures by employing a varied assemblage of aesthetic forms and conventions, high and low, we may help to redirect the perspective on aesthetics. More important in the present context, we may help to redirect the perspectives of research.

Youth groups have long been very visible cultural catalysts in most western societies, and studies on youth culture have been central to the development of cultural studies in several countries over the last fifteen or twenty years. In British cultural studies, ‘style’ has been the concept commonly used to analyse, and to critique, a homology between social and cultural levels of youthful expression (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). Theories of everyday aesthetics, in their emphasis on aesthetics as a variety of concrete practices, may further elucidate the diversity of cultural production and reception. More centrally, they may help specify how aesthetics serve contradictory needs for ordinary adolescents, boys and girls. By extending and diversifying the cultural field and by discriminating its uses, the concept of everyday aesthetics may even be an eye-opener to women’s private and more hidden cultures that have largely been bypassed by existing investigations (McRobbie, 1980).

Within media studies, the current growth in reception theories suggests that an increasing number of researchers have taken to heart Jay G. Blumler’s affirmation that ‘the study of mass communication as a process without systematic investigation of audience response is like a sexology that
ignores the orgasm' (Blumler, 1980: 373). As one way of overcoming the impasse governing dominant traditions of communication research, reception theories focus on the interaction between texts and recipients. In my view, investigations of people's own media production may prise open for analysis aspects that reception researchers consider essential but which they have difficulties in substantiating analytically. I am thinking, in particular, of the unconscious and semiconscious aspects of media experience which, as my description should have made clear, surface with exceptional clarity through the process of aesthetic creation and which feed on and feed back into codes of visual reception. An inclusion of visual production as an element in media research may widen its scope and specify its analyses of visual pleasure.¹³

Importantly, my investigation demonstrates that the interaction between media contents and media users is not only a dynamic and changing relation, it is also a multi-layered and gender-specific process of social signification encompassing both an aesthetic and a socio-psychological level: both we and the media are reinterpreted through the process.¹⁴ Multiple uses require diversified analyses. Along with the familiar stock of semiological and ethnographic methods my own work has benefited from phenomenological theory because of its particular sensitivity to the processual characteristics of immediate experience and interpersonal communication. These characteristics are essential also to in-depth studies of the personal implications of the commercial media flow.

The theories of everyday aesthetics, incorporating both production and reception, are essentially critical theories. Based on an often unacknowledged ideal of a holistic personality, they directly or indirectly critique the priority of abstract rationality and the linearity of language over other modes of perception. This critique makes them essential in clearing the ground for an analytical understanding of visual pleasure that is nurtured by non-verbal and semi-conscious sensations. Visual pleasure is, indeed, more than meets the eye.

The emphasis in theories of everyday aesthetics upon the senses as genuine elements in human cognition, their equal insistence upon playfulness and pleasure as ends in themselves, may all seem to put these theories squarely in the postmodern camp at its most populist: the appropriate answers to social chaos and cultural dissolution are individual emotional kicks and an enjoyment in playing the game of illusion. But contrary to such visions of a postmodern free for all, the theories of everyday aesthetics never lose sight of reality and its contradictory production of experience. The theories challenge received notions of rationalist essentialism and monolithic ideological criticism without resorting to cultural relativism or elitist generalizations. Aesthetics remains a concrete element in reality and an essential aspect of everbody's cognition of that reality and ourselves: everyday aesthetics may be a submerged area of analysis. But that does not make it a luxurious or even superfluous detail of daily experience.

Crucially, I think the perspective of everyday aesthetics may re-open a politicized engagement with the important question of aesthetic value which
the dissolution of the high/low dichotomy has largely left unanswered within both media and cultural studies. If we acknowledge that everyday aesthetics and the production of social relations are aspects of the same process, then it follows that aesthetic value cannot be separated from aesthetic use. The nexus is people's actual needs and experiences, their conscious problems, and unconscious desires: what are those varied and varying experiences? How are these given concrete aesthetic form? What are the implications of these aesthetic creations for the people involved? Making video may not be a more enriching experience than watching *Dynasty* which, in turn, may be as engaging as reading Kafka's *The Process*. All of these activities may be abandoned for a night out with one's friends. The relative value of these cultural processes may be judged only in relation to the different social and sexual needs that they serve.

**Practical implications**

Research on everyday aesthetics as a critical widening of media and cultural studies becomes particularly pertinent when we see this research in relation to current trends within education and the social services. In Scandinavia, radio, video, and other means of aesthetic expression are becoming hot issues in obvious response to the failure of social and pedagogical practices based on verbal cognition and attitudes of 'we-know-what-is-best-for-you'. Critical teachers and social workers, who actively seek new ways of working with young people, grasp the making of murals, musicals, and media programmes as meaningful activities: the young participants immediately take to them, the aesthetic expressions strengthen their self-worth which in turn may be recycled into other, more marketable, means of training. Within the social services, aesthetic production is used primarily with unemployed adolescents and 'at risk' groups. In schools, media education (analysis and production) occupies an optional, but often important, position in aesthetic activities with young people.

Most aesthetic productions involving young people are a success if judged by the criterion of their active participation. But no one seems to ask if success is a good thing. My own work experiences suggest that asking that question is essential. The apparent aimlessness of the video course was at the heart of its success for the participants, as I have suggested. When aesthetic production is used as an element in social and pedagogical processes, it is vital that the aims of these processes are clarified. So far, the organizers have been very committed and enthusiastic, and the aesthetic experiences have been valuable to adults and adolescents alike. But this may not last. Current technological development, apart from its world-wide political implications, on a more limited scale is likely to foster decisive pedagogical changes in many western societies: individual versatility and collective mobility may become even more important abilities in the struggle for economic survival facing diminishing working populations. How are these personal qualities to be nurtured in the western youth generations that
before the year 2000 will decrease by about a third and who know that they are a scarce human resource?

Because of its immediate appeal and its creative potential, aesthetic production could well come to play a key role in the attempts to answer this intricate question. If so, then there is a real danger that adolescents' aesthetic activities – which now operate as important physical and mental breathing spaces – will be co-opted as a handy pedagogical tool that is all the more effective because it is more subtle. Rather than telling young people what to do, we let them do what they want and then judge them by their results. The outcome of such an approach may very likely be either the participants' rejection of these activities or an acceptance of them as superfluous entertainment.

More research is not going to resolve these complex problems. Still, researchers are agents in the process. Speaking from the limited perspective of video production, I find it important to stress that aesthetic production is not a value-free method of teaching, it is an attitude to learning covering a specific commitment and attitude to life. Used as a generalized and instrumental method applicable without these commitments and attitudes, aesthetic production loses its importance. The problem is to find a balance between voluntary and open processes and continuity of social and pedagogical goals.

Video is an obvious choice for aesthetic production: it is relatively cheap, easy to handle, and its novelty makes it escape the cultural biases that many young people entertain in relation to more traditional forms of aesthetic expression such as drama and drawing. These are either regarded as childish pursuits or as activities enjoyed only by a minority of weird artists and culture snobs. Video production, then, could become an important catalyst to cultural rejuvenations within education and social work. But the point of departure must be the visual practices, not pedagogical or social problems. Both researchers and practitioners must describe what video does in an aesthetic sense before we decide what it should do in a social sense.

This relation between contents and contexts may be particularly relevant within a gender perspective. Everyday aesthetics has traditionally been relegated to the female sphere: home furnishing, knitting, and generally adding the aesthetic airs and graces have long been regarded as proper feminine pursuits. It may therefore come as no surprise that girls are often keen participants in the aesthetic processes of adolescence. What is more remarkable is that girls, at least middle-class girls, increasingly transcend the home and the family with which feminine aesthetics is so closely associated. Their everyday aesthetics is shaped and performed in the streets and other public arenas traditionally dominated by boys and men. Whether the girls attend dance courses, go training on their rollerskates, or rehearse a rock musical, they widen the female space and their own presence in it.

Similarly, the growth in aesthetic production enjoyed by young people implies a widening of boys' experiences. Even if many still opt for the most physical and/or technical activities such as motorcross riding and home
computing, boys’ increasing engagement with music and media, for instance, nevertheless signals an unprecedented openness to explore areas of experience beyond narrow conceptions of masculinity.

Aesthetic reorientations do not spell social or gender realignments in a wider sense: they are still mainly middle-class phenomena. Even so, they indicate how everyday aesthetics may serve different needs: for boys, the widening of aesthetic contents may be the most important challenge to traditional masculine roles, while for girls, the contexts of aesthetic production may prove the most decisive. For adults and adolescents alike, the new media are going to change our perceptions in an aesthetic as well as a social sense. If postmodernists have tended to interpret this change as a replacement of the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* by a *video ergo sum*, I suggest that we start acting on the basis of *video ergo cogito*.

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Proper names in the article have been changed. All translations are by the author if not otherwise indicated.

**Notes**

1 Video reception encompasses a range of media types and viewing situations. Most important for young people in Scandinavia are rented video cassettes watched together with peers, and satellite television, dominated by pop videos and watched more individually, such as Sky Channel, Super Channel and Scan-Sat/TV-3. Access to video, whether through cable or cassette, generally enhances viewing time, particularly for boys in their early teens. See Danmedia (1984); Filipson and Schyller (1982); Montén (1988).

2 Within a Scandinavian context, Sweden has witnessed the clearest government proposals to curb video violence. See Väldsskildringsutredningen (1987, 1988); and critique of the debate in Roe (1985).

3 Finland and Iceland already have commercial television. In Denmark, the challenge from satellites and foreign commercial channels has spurred the introduction by the Danish government of a second, commercial and state-subsidized, channel modelled on the British Channel 4 and opening in October 1988. In summer 1988 the Norwegian government made proposals for the introduction of commercials on the public television channel: profits should go to the financing of a second national channel from 1993. So far, the Swedish public-service system retains its two non-commercial channels.

4 In Denmark, there are currently about ten media centres aimed specifically at children and young people (about 1 million in all) and offering a variety of technical facilities as well as practical advice.

5 This work was part of a larger project on the gender-specific role played by aesthetic production in adolescence in general and Danish youth culture in particular.

6 The boys’ imitation of these films correspond to their actual pattern of reception. In both the film and video markets in Denmark, British and American productions make up 75 per cent of the total output. Only 15 per cent of titles are
Danish, and all of these are subsidized by public funding. (Schmidt, 1987: 50, 52).

7 Paying attention to details has traditionally been regarded as a characteristic of women (Schor, 1987). My project (see note 5) indicates that at least in adolescence boys as well as girls take pleasure in details, both in a literal and a symbolic sense. They differ, however, in their use of details, girls often stressing the working together of details to form a whole (cf. their interest in a realistic plot) and boys emphasizing the single details or the heterogeneity in their appearance.

8 For a detailed critique, see Hartwig (1976).

9 Schutz's definition is used here about the level of reality as it appears to us. Although few scholars today would embrace his insistence upon primordial, direct, or spontaneous experiences, Schutz's theories may nevertheless help us explore the various ways in which we naturalize most experiences as a routinized basis of our everyday lives. Such an exploration may be of particular relevance at a time when many critics are busy deconstructing modern reality without paying much attention to its various forms of expression and their varying significance to people.

10 Lodging aesthetics within the contradictions of real experience makes these theories different from philosophical studies defining everyday aesthetics as a specific ‘organising place, “above” particular concerns’ (Kupfer, 1983: 6).

11 The contradiction between conscious and unconscious evaluation of video production could only surface because I not only interviewed the group members about their activities, but I also followed the actual production process. This dual approach gave me more opportunities to analyse different levels of experience and their incongruities than is possible with the in-depth interviews normally employed in qualitative media research.

12 Recent studies in Britain and the United States on the crossover between art and popular culture substantiate the infelicity of the high/low dichotomy to cultural research (MacCabe, 1986; Walker, 1987). Still, these investigations keep firmly within professional aesthetic boundaries, be it car design or record sleeves, and in that respect they are in perfect accord with both modernists and postmodernists in their neglect of the more elusive processes involved in everyday aesthetics.

13 Investigations of ordinary people's visual productions may perhaps even elucidate the aesthetic processes that are involved in the creation of commercial products. Rational calculation is still not enough to make a box office hit or a number one rating.

14 This process of mutual interpretation and reinterpretation is best seen in a longer historical perspective. For a theoretical discussion of this process and an empirical substantiation of its results, see Drotner (1988).

References


