

# Young People's Consumption of Visual Culture

## *Collector Gadgets, Sexuality and Democracy*

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Young people (6-18 years of age) today are approached as highly competent consumers of a visual market consisting not only of products, but also of ideas and values. Advertisements, food containers, collector cards, computer games, fashion magazines and TV programmes, etc., are sold to young people not only as products, but as whole lifestyle packages. Moral panics raised by different groups of adults (parents, teachers, journalists and researchers) concerning the influence these products have on young people in their everyday life illustrate a generational conflict, which is sometimes based on adults' lack of knowledge about how young people value and use these products (Cohen 1972/1987; cf., Buckingham 2000; Seiter 1993; Sparrman 2002).

Different visual media play an essential part in young people's everyday life. Therefore it is important to study young people's use of and attitudes towards visual aspects in their own lives, i.e. what they appropriate and how visibility (products and ideas) influences their way of understanding themselves and the world they live in. The purpose of the research project, *Young people's consumption of visual culture*, is to study connections between young people (6-18 years of age), consumption and visual culture from a participant perspective. Given that young people spend the majority of their days in educational institutions, this study will be conducted through after-school centres as well as regular school settings. This makes it possible studying what knowledge young people bring with them to school settings as well as the borders between traditional school knowledge and knowledge young people acquire from (visual) popular culture (i.e., mass produced and commercial culture, Storey 1997/1998).

In this research project, young people and visibility are discussed in three different ways: 1) young people's notions of the visual rhetoric directed to

them as consumers on the open market, 2) young people's consumption and conceptualization of sexuality in visual popular culture and, finally, 3) visibility as an aspect of democratic processes.

The empirical material consists of video-recorded focus group interviews, video-recorded auto-driven interviews, video observations, diaries and questionnaires as well as pre-produced visual material such as TV programmes, film, advertisements from magazines and product design.

### **Visibility, Consumption and Identity**

One main assumption of the study is that the visual shapes the social at the same time as the social shapes the visual (Mitchell 2002). This suggests a view of visual culture as socially and interactionally constructed. Thus, visibility is not isolated. The fundamental idea is rather that the world is constituted both through, for example, language (linguistic turn) and through visibility (pictorial turn) and that it is important to study intersections and interfaces between words and images (Mitchell 1994, 2002). Accordingly, in the present work, the concept of visual culture refers to the specific relation between vision and knowledge. It is in this relation that meaning is negotiated. By approaching visibility as a significant constitutive force in society, it becomes possible to reflect upon the important role visual culture can play in the continuous process of, for example, people's identity construction.

Today young people are born into a commercial society of consumption. Nonetheless, schools and education have long neglected the fact that education and entertainment are intertwined (cf., Giroux 1994; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2000). At the same time as it is possible to purchase educational material designed for domestic use, visual popular

culture is introduced in school settings, for example through Disney characters (cf., Giroux 1994; Sparrman 2002). Pleasure, entertainment and education are intertwined and the notion of 'edu-tainment', a hybrid genre, is introduced. This genre relies heavily on visual material, narrative game-like formats and on more informal, less didactic styles of address (Scanlon and Buckingham 2002). Scanlon and Buckingham argue that the pedagogy of these domestic educational materials is much less authoritarian and more interactive than is formal schooling.

As the Swedish school curriculum (Skolverket 2000) has introduced a new notion of learning as a constantly ongoing process, the borders between the knowledge young people appropriate in school and other cultural domains have loosened (cf., Hangaard Rasmussen 2001 for the new concept of learning). In the national programme for Art (Skolverket 2000), global image cultures are presented alongside images of commercial importance as moulders of public opinion and the importance popular images have for young people in their identity construction. Knowledge about visuality and visual communication is stated to be an important prerequisite of participating in society. Emphasis is put on understanding the ideas behind social and cultural patterns of visuality, and images are understood as an important device for development and learning. It is also stated that pupils should be able to express themselves and assimilate their cultural freedom of speech through visuality.

As I have argued earlier, the interdisciplinary theories of visual culture are especially productive when approaching young people's use of and relation to visuality (Sparrman 2002). By using the interdisciplinary terminology of visual culture (instead of concepts such as media, commercial culture, high and low culture), it becomes possible to move beyond dichotomizations between, for example, high and low culture or speaking solely or specifically about commercial culture because, as Ellen Seiter (1993) states, for young people all culture is commercial regardless of whether you purchase a Barbie doll or a Playmobil. By investigating young people's notions and ideas about visuality rather than isolating different media from one another, it is possible to understand how different visualities intersect in young people's everyday life, as well as how pedagogical ideas and commercial aspects are interwoven with young people's lives. The research project aims to understand how visuality intersects with children's subjectivity and their situatedness in the social world.

In theoretical terms, the purpose is to understand the dialectical and relational procedure of action

and structure as well as the ambition to show the concordance between objects, subjects and social aspects from a participant perspective. Therefore, Norman Fairclough's (1992, 2001) Critical Discourse Analytical method (CDA) is used to comprehend how young people can make change come about (agency) as well as how they are restricted by or have to conform to social structures and everyday visuality/materiality, i.e. considering how young people are both 'being' and 'becoming' simultaneously (Prout, 2005). CDA also allows to emphasize the power of the visual and its potential as producer of knowledge about the world. It also makes it possible to highlight the intersections between language and image taking place in the discursive practice.

To explore the ways in which visuality is important in young people's identity construction theories and methods derived from subject positioning theory will be used (Davies and Harré 1990; Walkerdine 1997; Bamberg 2004). In positioning theory identity is understood as accomplished and emerging through social interaction. Accordingly, one can investigate how, through social interaction (for example talk), the visual positions young people at the same time as young people position the visual and how identity is negotiated through this interaction. Combining the interdisciplinary theories of visual culture, CDA and positioning theory helps to intermingle the private and the public.

### **Case Studies: Collector Gadgets, Sexuality and Democracy**

One long-standing market strategy for targeting children as consumers has been to use cartoons on, for example, cereal boxes (Hill and Tilley 2002) together with extra gifts, gadgets, consisting of collector cards or objects and today computer games on CDs. As borders between advertisements and product design have been brought closer, food products today are more often designed to address young people directly. One reason is that young people in Western countries have an increased influence on the family economy. That does not necessarily mean that young people have more money but that they have more influence on family decision-making and consumption (Buckingham 2000). The aim of this first focus area in this research project is to investigate how young people themselves reason and argue with regard to the design of food containers marketed at them as well as the included gadgets marketing the food products. The aim is to understand consumer culture in context, i.e. the economic act of purchasing, the utilization of the purchased product

and finally its symbolic values, as a process (Cook 2004).

Secondly, when focussing on young people's notions, ideas and values concerning friendship, love, relationships and sexuality in relation to visual media, what is seen is the discrepancy between a common adult rhetoric about young people, visual media and sexuality and how young people themselves reason and argue about the very same issues in their everyday life. The purpose is to understand the ways in which visual media contribute to young people's conceptualizations of friendship, love, relationships and sexuality. In this part of the study, parents' notions of visual media and sexuality will be included.

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- According to my findings from a previous study on school pupils' (16-18 years of age) classroom discussions about sexuality in connection with the school film showing of the film *Lilya 4-ever*, these discussions turned out to be stereotypical in their representations of gender (Sparrman submitted). This raises questions about how the visual may be part of younger people's gender identity constructions and how this can be discussed in terms of equality, democracy and even notions of sexual citizenship (Weeks 2003). These issues will be the third large question investigated further in the present research project.
- Forthcoming publications and findings will be reported on the website: [www.liu.se/tema-b](http://www.liu.se/tema-b).
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