

---

SVEN-ERIK KLINKMANN

## Elvis, "Coolness" and Masculinity in the 50s USA

This article discusses Elvis Presley in relation to the concepts of coolness and masculinity in the 1950's in the USA. One point of departure is that words can be used in a number of different ways; for example, as carrying either a more literal, or more metaphorical or figurative meaning. An example of the way in which words are given figurative meanings, without us even giving it further thought, is the song by the American country singer and songwriter Tom T. Hall. The song "Old Dogs, Children and Watermelon Wine" tells the story of the singer's encounter with, as the song goes, "an old gray black gentleman". The two adjectives signifying colours, that is, grey and black, here very clearly carry different meanings and are formed on different bases. The word "gray" metonymically, primarily based on hair colour, refers to the man's age, that is, how the man is categorised age-wise as an elderly gentleman. Also the word "black" is used metaphorically, but in a different way: as signifying that the man in question is ethnically Afro-American, thus also referring to the problem of colour, which is still highly topical in present-day USA. The concepts of "cool" and "coolness" are also, in my opinion, directly connected with issues of colour in a metaphorical sense.

But, starting my study purely linguistically: what does the word "cool" actually mean? According to Bartleby's

online dictionary "cool" has the following meanings: "1. Neither warm nor very cold; moderately cold" as in: "*fresh, cool water; a cool autumn evening.*" Its second meaning is "giving or suggesting relief from heat: *a cool breeze; a cool blouse.*" The third meaning given by the dictionary is something "marked by calm self-control: *a cool negotiator,* and the fourth "marked by indifference, disdain, or dislike; unfriendly or unresponsive: *a cool greeting; was cool to the idea of higher taxes.*" Fifthly, the word can be "of, relating to, or characteristic of colors, such as blue and green, that produce the impression of coolness." Sixthly, cool can, in slang, mean "a. Excellent; first-rate: *has a cool sports car; had a cool time at the party.*" or "b. Acceptable; satisfactory: *It's cool if you don't want to talk about it.*" Lastly, the word can be used in slang as expressing something "entire; full: *worth a cool million.*"

So, it is clear already at this stage that the adjective "cool" has a number of diverging meanings, from chilliness to indifference, from cool colours to calm self-control. Here, we can also add another meaning for the word "cool" which the online dictionary does not include, that is, "cool" as a noun signifying a certain musical style within jazz, as created in the 1950's by musicians such as Miles Davis, Bill Evans and Gerry Mulligan. In fact, the word "cool" came to virtually explode in

50's America, not just as a name for a specific style of jazz, but also as a much more fundamental pose and attitude associated with both a rock'n'roll artist such as Elvis, within rock'n'roll music, and, last but not least, within the entire teenage culture, which in the 50's was connected with rock'n'roll and jazz.

### **The pre-history of the concept of "cool"**

In order to trace the pre-history of the concept cool, I think we must assume that the USA is a strongly colour-fixated society, where, in the 1950's black artists, such celebrated jazz stars as Miles Davies or Charles Mingus could still, when stepping out onto the street from a jazz club in New York, be harassed by the police and thrown into "the nick" without any valid reason. Descriptions of this racist culture are found in, for example, Charles Mingus' autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*, or in *Blues People*, a history of jazz written by the black author and cultural critic Le Roi Jones, or Amira Baraka, as he later called himself.

Where do the roots of the concepts "cool" and "coolness" lie? The American art historian and folklorist Robert Farris Thompson (1973) traces the earliest history of "cool" to West Africa. According to him, the concept in its traditional West African context expresses a social and aesthetic ideal characterised by cultural control, individual restraint and social stability. The concept is also associated with the ritual use of water and chalk, or other substances saturated with meanings of coolness and purity. In a traditional West African environment, coolness pertains to a transcendental balance, Thompson notes. Based on his studies of coolness in tropical Africa and also in black America he has defined what he calls "an aesthetic of the cool". This is characterised by fundamental, intricately motivated, artistically aware

intertwined elements of sincerity and pleasure, of responsibility and play (Ibid.), which thus also can be described as a complex, artistic and even spiritual form of coolness. Being cool in the West African cultures means being calm, serene, composed, balanced, expressing atonement and offering sacrifices. According to Thompson (Ibid.), this West African form of coolness also expresses 1. discretion, 2. healing, 3. rebirth and 4. novelty, or purity. A central metaphor for people's "cool" qualities is the image of the strong, clean flowing waters of a river.

Thompson discovered the "cool" character of Yoruba art during a field trip in West Africa in 1963. In what follows I absolutely do not want to belittle the significance of Thompson's observations. The connections between Afro-American and West African cultural expressions are well established within, for example, jazz music. Therefore I find it an obvious fact that a general attitude such as coolness can also possess deep historical roots. However, the timing of Thompson's study of the traditional West African "cool" art might prompt a certain apprehension. In thus connecting a specifically American set of issues from the 1950's and 1960's with a totally different cultural environment, the West African one, or vice versa, there is a risk of a "transferred" interpretation of a cultural phenomenon from a mainly sacred and traditional context in West Africa to a secular and modern setting in North America.

Perhaps the roots of the concepts of cool and coolness should after all – at least as pertaining to a more limited time framework – be sought in the USA, and there particularly in the black music scene in the New York of the 1930's and 1940's. In his study of the concept of cool as a sign of adolescence in the America of the 1950's (*Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence*, 1994), semiotician Marcel

Danesi claims that the origins of the concept are to be found in the American jazz scene of the 1930's in the heat and smoky air of the jazz and night clubs (Ibid. 37ff). In order to get some fresh air to breathe in the clubs, windows and doors were opened to let in "cool air". By an analogy, according to Danesi, the type of jazz, slow and polished, played in these clubs was therefore began to be called cool, and the musicians playing this music – black musicians, but also others, including white "experts" of the music, were termed cool, too.

I am not quite convinced by the analogy and metaphor of the opened windows. Rather, I am inclined to look for an explanation of the origin of the word and attitude to cultural phenomena such as drugs and the use of drugs. This is supported by the fact that the jazz scene in, for example, New York during the 1930's, displayed both a number of drugs and a number of metaphorical expressions poetically renaming the drugs in order to keep the white audience, including the police authorities, ignorant and outside of the entire phenomenon and culture. In his book on the American swing era in the 1930's (*The Swing Era*, 1989:332f.), jazz historian Gunther Schuller presents a thorough description of the armoury of slang expressions relating to drugs. Here, we should perhaps rather talk about argot instead of slang, which is to say, a language used by a specific subculture, in this case jazz culture. Words and expressions like "viper" or "kickin' the gong around" referred to marijuana or smoking opium. A secret language was created, which also left its mark in the titles of many of the popular jazz songs of the time – for example, "I'se a Muggin', You'se a Viper", "Viper's Drag", "Minnie the Moocher", "Kickin' the Gong around", "Texas Tea Party", "Chant of the Weed", etc. – and in a number of song texts. Marijuana was the dominant drug on the jazz scene of the

1930's and it was called hay, tea, shuzzit, muggles, muta, grefa, gunja, reefer, gauge or weed.

The spread of heroin in the jazz circles in the 1940's often resulted in the musicians being described as cool or withdrawn, emotionally indifferent. This, according to jazz historians, stood in direct relation to the intolerable racial situation of Afro-American artists and intellectuals after World War II. Older jazz artists, such as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway or Ella Fitzgerald, had been able to hide behind an attitude of a laughing jester, by carrying a nice and friendly mask (for a description of this defensive attitude of, for example, Armstrong, see Stearns 1956/1977:317–320). As this attitude was no longer adequate among the young black artists in the 1940's, they adapted a cool stance instead: a protective wall against racial harassment, personified not least by Miles Davies and the attitude he came to represent musically and culturally.

### Characteristics of coolness

George Elliot Clarke lists a number of typical characteristics of coolness in black America:

*(...) coolness involves a willingness to engage in violence (...), to risk death (...), to suppress emotion (in interactions with friends, family members, lovers, spouses, and children), to value spontaneity, expressiveness, and stylishness (...), and to prize verbal dexterity (...). These qualities of cool render it an essential survival mechanism in a society in which 'except for people over age eighty-five, black males are dying at a higher rate than any other group at any age' (...). Given this vicious context, any moral code that signals meaning, community, and purposefulness, that is to say, that combats anomie, is potentially irresistible. Coolness is one such code. (Clarke 1998)*

The question of a possible connection between coolness in black America and coolness in West Africa can hardly be answered adequately, based on the short descriptions above. The brief material points in different directions. There are both clear similarities and considerable differences between the ways in which the concepts are used in their respective contexts.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has taught us that something socially or geographically marginal, as for example the predominantly black, hip New York jazz scene in the 1940's (which also gave rise to the bebop style), symbolically speaking often might seem very central to its surrounding society. This is also the case with the black musicians who attracted admiration when playing in various joints and clubs on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York, but could get beaten up by brutal policemen as soon as they came out into the street. The unknown, the marginal, the Other becomes something attractive, exciting and desirable at a symbolic level, through cultural transformation.

As LeRoi Jones writes in *Blues People* (1963:234–238), quite frequent crossings of the so called racial boarder also took place in the 1940's New York artist and jazz circles. The black and white markings of American racism were no longer valid; the watertight bulkhead of the racist politics here leaked like a sieve. As a consequence, the black musicians' cool, emotionally seemingly indifferent attitude became adaptable also for others. This pertained, for example, to the New York based theatre school the Actor's Studio. When Miles Davis' album, *Birth of Cool* was released in 1957, the culture of the cool had already begun to penetrate American society to an increasing extent. The Actor's Studio was headed by Stanislavsky's former student Lee Strasberg and, using the so called *method acting*, the school trained what

could be called the new, cool heroes of film, such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman and, to a somewhat lesser degree, also heroines such as Eve Marie Saint. Method acting has been described as a method where the actors try to base their acting on personal and emotional memories and use improvisation and spontaneity to develop the character of their role (for a more detailed description of method acting, see e.g. an online interview with Richard Herskowitz 1998: *Cool. The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Virginia Film Festival*).

Alongside film, parts of American contemporary literature adapted an attitude characterised by coolness, particularly so in works by the beat writers Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and also LeRoi Jones. The link between cool jazz and the beat writers is very obvious and well documented. The beat writers borrowed a lot of expressions from the 1940's jazz/hipster slang, such as *square*, *cats*, *blow your top*, *dig*. And, of course, *cool*. But the influence from jazz was deeper than just words: the beat writers attempted to transfer the central ideas of the bebop aesthetics and ways of playing to literature. This pertains to both prose and poetry; for example, Jack Kerouac's beat poetry has been described as bop prosody (see Jones 1963:237). The beat writers, like the black musicians and the radical theatre people, came to stand for a mental revolution against the established American society, particularly perhaps against the backdrop of the experiences from the Korean War at the beginning of the 1950's. LeRoi Jones says he is "almost certain that the 50's got its own special ominous character by the sinister influence from the Korean War and the emotional chaos following it" (Ibid.:219).

The step from Miles Davies, Lee Strasberg and Jack Kerouac, who can well be called examples of coolness within an artistic highbrow culture, to popular culture is very short. Just think of the classic

composer Leonard Bernstein's American version of *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*, which first opened in New York in 1957 and was filmed in 1961. *West Side Story* is a love story set against the background of gang wars in New York between the white Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks. We all remember the chorus in "The Jets' Song": "Just play it cool, boys!" Here, we meet not only Marlon Brando and James Dean as angry young men, but also, and above all, Elvis Presley as representing a new social stereotype, the criminal teenager, *the juvenile delinquent*, or, to put it more nicely: "the rebel without a cause", to quote the famous 1955 film in which James Dean starred. Suddenly, the concept of cool was present nearly everywhere in American society. And one who was cooler than most was Elvis Presley.

### The "dangerous" youth in the USA of the 1950's

In the USA, the 1950's can be characterised as the era of the teenager. The difference compared to earlier periods pertained, for example, to the number of teenagers, their higher level of financial and other resources, and their group awareness.

According to James S. Coleman (1961:205f.), sociologist of adolescence, the American teenage world of the 1950's consisted of three relatively clearly distinguishable groups of adolescents. The connecting feature of the three groups was that their natural environment, above all, was high school, the drug store, the car and, to a certain extent, also the family. Coleman divides his teenage world, which was later portrayed in fictional form in the TV series *Happy Days* and romanticised and idealised in teenage films such as *American Graffiti*, *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Pleasantville*, into three groups; "the leading crowd", "the rough crowd" and "the middle majority". The leading crowd of the teenage world and in high school consisted

of the brightest students in the school system. This group publicly adapted adult values in America of the 1950's. However, the general cultural strategy of the group also included a manipulative ability to use breaches against these values for personal purposes. As Erling Bjurström points out (1997:44f.), Coleman's view of the American youth in the 1950's is based on two primary premises, or figures of thought. One figure of thought pertains to the gap between the adult and the adolescent world; the other, which is connected with the first, to the world of youth being a deviation from the world of adulthood. Bjurström draws the conclusion that both premises are static, because the development, values and norms of the adult world are never problematised but are regarded historically. One figure of thought that Bjurström does not explicitly mention, but which also seems central and which I will discuss in more detail further below, is that the strongly male dominated discourse of the music form of rock'n'roll has, from the very beginning, been a central expression for this teenage culture.<sup>1</sup>

The rough crowd consisted of a number of teenagers in different kinds of distressed situation. The group was replenished with other marginal groups, which, in the American 1950's, when teenagers and adolescents became known as being dangerous and unlawful, were defined within the frames of something called "subterranean traditions" in an oppositional triad of *delinquency*, *radicalism* and *bohemianism* – that is to say, the things that make up the roots of the different sub and anti cultures of the 1960's within the area of youth culture. Another sociologist, Philip H. Ennis (1992:247), has noted that it is as front figure for, above all, the sociologically regarded "lowest" group, that is, the rough crowd, of high school students that Elvis and rock'n'roll offered a solution to many of the teenagers' problems. While the adolescents could still "love their mother

and God”, they could also hunger for the wild promises of love and sex as conveyed by Elvis and rock’n’roll. Ennis further notes that various artefacts with a strong symbolic significance – such as the black leather jacket, pomaded hair, the cool gaze, but also, and above all, a general resistance to middle class values – found a home in rock’n’roll. At the same time, rock’n’roll could also find its most important symbolic frame of reference, its own symbolism, in this form of teenage culture with its (real or assumed) background in perceptions of juvenile delinquents, dangerous motorcycle gangs and hooligans.

In this case, the habit of regarding adolescents in negatively defined terms emanates from an American petty bourgeois of middle class horizon of understanding. This categorising of young people as potentially dangerous, and thus as objects for regulation by schools, teachers, supervisors, psychologists and criminologists, culminated in the 50’s in a number of debates and contributions to the discussion on the dangerous teenager, the adolescent, *the juvenile delinquent*.

The cultural researcher Luisa Passerini (1997:318) has shown that the construction of the dangerous juvenile delinquent reached a clear peak in time at the end of the 1950’s, that is, just after Elvis and rock’n’roll entered the scene. However, the roots of the dangerousness constructed as a double or combined image of the parental generation’s fears and worries and of the cultural industry’s codification of a dangerous adolescent behaviour, existed already in the USA of the 40’s. Important books that crystallized the dangerous, subversive adolescent were beat writer Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* and Robert Lindner’s novel *Rebel without a Cause*. Kerouac wrote his novel as early as 1941, then with the title *The Beat Generation*, but the book was refused publication and came out only in 1956, the same year as Elvis

won nationwide popularity. The novel *Rebel without a Cause* was published in 1944, but became widely read and admired only about a decade later, in 1955, after the book was filmed with young film stars James Dean and Natalie Wood in the leading roles.

Another film that mirrored many of the perceptions of the dangerous and subversive teenage and adolescent world of the time was *The Wild One* (1954) with its threateningly rebellious lead role played by Marlon Brando, donning black leather, as the leader of a motorcycle gang. The film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), with Bill Haley’s “Rock around the Clock” playing as background music to the credits in the beginning, also presented an image of adolescents as dangerous. The portrayal of young people as a socially and culturally dangerous category was emphasized in this film by the teachers appearing as an example of adults totally lacking in authority, terrorised by violent and criminal gangs of adolescents.

Adolescence thus became a legal and social status that had to be disciplined, protected and accorded its own institutions. Young people represented a danger both to themselves and to society. At a symbolic level, this discourse of adolescence came to function in two totally contradictory ways, depending on the position from which it was viewed. For those who embraced the dangerousness in the discourse – either in its fictive form, as in Elvis and rock’n’roll, or in a mimetic-realistic form as in the criminal youth gangs – the danger turned into a positive value, something to identify with and obtain strength from.

On the other hand, in the eyes and minds of the “nice” adolescents – those listening to Pat Boone and Connie Francis and not to Elvis – and the well-adapted parents, concepts such as juvenile delinquency and rock’n’roll represented a dangerous Other,

an unknown that had to be rejected. For these latter groups, rock and adolescence thus appeared as symbolically charged issues that they strived to discard using all possible means. However, as cultural researchers Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986:193) have shown, this dangerous, so-called 'first grotesque' will, on a subconscious level and through what they call the political unconscious, invade the identity formations that have taken place on a conscious and political level. Thus, the second grotesque is born, of which the dangerous youth culture, rock and Elvis can be interpreted as clear examples.

### **Coolness as a mask – Elvis in action**

As I have said above, in his study of coolness as the central significant sign for youth in, for example, the American 1950's, Danesi notes that the concept of cool originates in the jazz scene of the 1930's. Accordingly, I find that there is good reason to suggest that coolness, as a quality in youth, is related to the entire set of unique types of cultural formation, which, beginning in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America, has had a very specific and powerful effect on the development of popular culture. As the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974:233, 252–259) and musicologist Peter Manuel (1988:18f, 60f, 77, 107, 127) have shown, the development of genres of popular music is connected to phenomena such as marginalisation and liminality. Turner describes those marginal groups which have a significant function in forming culture as being part of a *petty proletariat*. Important historical musical genres within popular culture, such as fado, blues, ragtime, jazz, tango, Paris chanson, flamenco and rebetika, have been developed by forms of anomalous, marginal grouping, often situated on the outskirts of big cities. These groups have

thus come to function within their society as experimental laboratories; pools through which various cultural influences have flowed, and giving rise to new hybrid genes which have spread and also become popular outside their original environment. A similar proletarian and marginal feature is also implicated in the birth of rock'n'roll. Or, as Judd Phillips (older brother of Sam Phillips, the man who recorded Elvis at Sun Records) states: "It was the poor white seeking the soul expression. Not the uptown white, but the poor white" (Bane 1982/92:125).

Something of the hesitation between an insider and an outsider perspective which seems to characterise these marginal groups is also, in my opinion, included in the adolescents' use of the concept of cool both as a style marker and a symbolic sign. According to Danesi, the central elements of coolness have not changed significantly since the 1950's. Thus coolness can still, as in the 50's, be signalled by activities such as smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, slow movements, the art of wearing "the right" clothes, listening to "the right" music and adapting "the right" postures; that is, signalling what is regarded as right and important within the group one belongs to (Danesi 1994:40, 60–67). The basic assumptions in Danesi's definition of coolness as an adolescent attribute is, on the one hand, that it is localised to the sub-group, the gang, the "tribe", or sub-culture that the adolescents belong to, and, on the other, that it is gender specific, that is, the expressions of coolness among boys and among girls are clearly different from each other. As Passerini notes, terms such as "tribe" or "sub-culture" are taken from ethnographic studies of persons or peoples who were "different", people who did not share a number of those perceptions that were central for a Westerner (Passerini 1997:320). The

concept of coolness thus functions as an attribute linked both to liminality and to reflexivity; two phenomena that, according to folklorist Barbara Babcock, are mutually dependent, in that the one presupposes the other (Babcock 1980:5). As an integration of unknown and dangerous symbolic material, transported from one discursive domain to another, coolness constitutes a root metaphor of the type that Stallybrass and White call a secondary grotesque (Stallybrass & White 1986:193f.).

In order to understand what the teenage idol and rock'n'roll star Elvis represented in terms of a concept such as coolness, the public image, the dramatic mask that Elvis constructed must be deconstructed. This mask is laden with many semantic and symbolic significances. A representative image of the various transgressions that the Elvis mask stood for in the USA of the 50's is provided by Elvis's rockabilly colleague Roy Orbison in his description of their first encounter when he was 19, at a country & western jamboree in Dallas on 16 April 1955. The description, included in a biography of Orbison, is a mixture of "direct quotes" of Orbison's feelings and a more reflexive meditation on what was special about the Elvis mask. It thus illustrates the complex web of significances attributed to incidents when they are recounted and, in a way, re-formed by the human imagination:

*It was like nothing the bespectacled Wink Westerner [Roy Orbison] had ever experienced before. Presley, sneering, didn't seem to care how badly he behaved up there – breaking guitar strings, spitting out his chewing gum, swivelling his hips in a rude way, doing the splits, knee-dropping and crawling to the very edge of the stage. He told jokes "that weren't funny, and his diction was real coarse like a truck driver's". Roy observed the "pandemonium*

*in the audience because the girls took a shine to him and the guys were getting a little jealous". Nonetheless, while pulling out all the stops and unfettered by slickness, the lurid Presley's instinctive control kept the mob just short of open riot – though females continued to shriek and faint in defiance of their boyfriends' sporadic heckling. By the close, all had tuned into the situation's epic vulgarity. (Clayson 1989:21)*

The vulgar, but also obviously irresistible creature that Elvis, according to Roy Orbison, constituted became, as youth researcher James Coleman notes, the favourite singer of that very rough crowd described above. In that group, practically everybody smoked and drank. However, their favourite singer neither smoked nor drank. Dressed in black rock'n'roll jackets as a symbol of an orientation towards entertainment, cars, music and roller-skates, this group had chosen Elvis as their favourite singer because of the implicit deviance and rebelliousness of Presley (Coleman 1961:205f.).

Ennis points out that Elvis meant trouble from the very beginning, since he personified the contradictions "inherent" within the American family concerning the view on parental authority, the independence and sexuality of young people:

*His rebellion was masked in southern manners bordering on obsequiousness. Even the restraint religion imposed went awry in Elvis's case. His church training and gospel music experience did not prevent the incipient excesses of sexuality from living beside (being, in fact, augmented by) the religiosity that fired the most explosive emotional yearnings in southern Protestant life, white and black. Those themes of rebellion, religiosity, and ungovernable sexuality were emblazoned*



*in all his performances and in his public presence.* (Ennis 1992:244)

### **The logic of the Elvis mask: vulgarity, rebellion, sexuality**

Key words that emerge from these short descriptions of Elvis as a symbol for youth and teenagers are “vulgarity”, “rebellion” and “sexuality”. The texts also contain contradictions or oxymorons such as “He told jokes that weren’t funny”, “the situation’s epic vulgarity” and “His rebellion was masked in southern manners”. Thus, both Elvis and rock’n’roll stood, from the very beginning, for a transgression of various borders. Philip Ennis talks about the transformative symbolic process which Elvis and other rock artists started and maintained with a “capacity to transcend race, religion, gender or region in the name of music”.

The rebellious and challenging trace in Elvis’s masks, in his public personae or the impersonations of a rockabilly and rock’n’roll star that he constructed (in 1954–58) is based on borrowing a number of disparate elements from both the white hillbilly and country cultures, from the black street culture, and black and white popular culture. This reflexivity is a strong feature in his early rock mask. Elvis absorbed influences like a sponge. His reflexivity thus also meant that he, consciously or unconsciously, placed himself in a liminal position. Even at this early stage he is already both a transgressor of borders and a border guard. While his fans see him as an emblem of opposition and renewal against their parental generation and authorities, his opponents – who form a very heterogeneous group consisting of the “nice” adolescents and above all of somewhat older Americans – regard him as dangerously subversive. A statement by a witness before the Senate’s Subcommittee on Delinquency is very telling: “Elvis Presley is a symbol, of course” ... “but a

dangerous one... The gangster of tomorrow is the Elvis Presley type of today” (Passerini 1997:326).

Elvis’s first rock’n’roll mask – that of the 1950’s – appears, compared with, for example, his Las Vegas mask of the 1970’s, as a mainly realistic one, with its origins in forms of low and popular culture. Its models, particularly pertaining to clothes and choice of colour (predominantly dark and bright colours such as black and pink), are the black hipster and/or pimp. Other background figures for his early rock’n’roll mask are the young rebel and the truck driver. The mask also implies a way of moving (hip, leg and arm movements) that originates in black culture (blues, gospel). These various cultural signs in Elvis’s rock’n’roll mask can be said to comprise the stereotypical rock’n’roll rebel; a figure with pronounced low cultural, rebellious, “bodily” roots, and a person who constitutes a threat to the puritan and middle-class view of life and its cultural ideals during the 1950’s.

The figure of Elvis becomes liminal and marginal in relation to the 50’s general classification system of social control. This means that Elvis in his rock’n’roll appearance represents a threat against the existing order, a threat that somehow has to be integrated into the prevalent system. The rebel image is also clearly connected to Elvis’s southern background. An important feature of Elvis’s rebellion is that it is not focussed on any particular issue. Instead, this is “a rebel without a cause”; an angry, young rebel, aiming his opposition against the parental generation, just as Elvis’s rock’n’roll persona does.

However, the most dangerous and subversive feature of the mask and image that Elvis created in the 1950’s was the fact that he combined elements from black and white cultures. Elvis was a prime example of what the New York-based author Norman Mailer called “the white Negro”.

In 1957, the same year that Miles Davies released his record *Birth of Cool*, the same year that *West Side Story* opened and Elvis gained his international break-through, Mailer wrote an essay titled "The White Negro" in the left-wing journal *Dissent* (also published in Mailer's collection of essays *Advertisement for Myself*, 1961). In it, he defends the thesis that a new white social outlaw had been established in the American landscape, a hipster or a philosophical psychopath, whose primary inspiration consisted of the sexuality and music of Afro-Americans. "The hipster has absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for all practical purposes could be considered a white Negro", Mailer wrote in his essay. The description could be one of Elvis Presley, but Mailer found his musical sources of inspiration and examples in jazz.

Like the concept of cool, the hipster also originates in black jazz and black street culture; more precisely in the hip bebop-jazz scene of the 1940's. The hipster demonstrated, through a style of dress, gestures and a general cool attitude, that he was something very special: an urban young man who dressed fancily in order to impress people around him. In Elvis, teenage culture had found its hipster figure, a "hipster for the millions", as he has also been named.

What are the features in these cool rebels – "rebels without a cause" as they may be called after the film discussed above – that is, what is it in the make up of an Elvis Presley, a James Dean, a Marlon Brando that makes them so central to the decidedly masculine iconography of the USA of the 1950's? In order to find an answer to this question, I think we again need to explore both the sociological and the psychological roots of the phenomenon at issue. This shows that two important socio-psychological phenomena emerge at about the same time in post-war USA. One is the

culture of rock'n'roll and the teenage rebel. The other is a phenomenon usually called *mom-ism*: a misogynist concept coined by the American writer and debater Philip Wylie in his pamphlet *Generation of Vipers* (1942/1955), which was widely discussed in the mass media at the time. Wylie's aim is to find a scapegoat for the supposed degeneration of American culture caused by materialism, superficial popular culture, soap operas, fashion, TV, radio, sentimental pop songs, Hollywood and department stores. According to Wylie, all these phenomena are expressions of *mom-ism*, of a female or motherly sensitivity, which undermines the virile element in American culture. As Jacqueline Rose (1992:166ff) notes, the dangers of femininity and of mass culture have thus been linked very intimately together. This link was further developed *within* rock'n'roll culture where a gendered division between rock and pop was established according to the principles presented by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press in their study *The Sex Revolts. Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'roll* (1995:5): "Here the correct response (male connoisseurship, discerning and discriminating) is opposed to degraded feminine fan-worship (superficial, hysterical, idolatrous, at once fickle and blindly loyal)".

In the case of Elvis, his "rebel without a cause" iconography comes to appear as a restless, uncertain combination of, on the one hand, his way of imitating male black sexuality in "the white Negro" configuration (see above), and, on the other, an affirmation of his extreme dependence on his mother, Gladys (Klinkmann 1998:121f). Albert Goldman points out that as a young boy, Elvis was constantly in the company of his mother and was as frequently encouraged to speak out and reveal all his thoughts and feelings to her. Goldman notes that Elvis became so accustomed to sharing his inner life with his mother, so dependent on her opinion and

advice, that he later did not hesitate to wake her up in the middle of the night if he had something on his mind and could not sleep. Thus there cannot, according to Goldman, be any doubt about the reason for the extreme reserve that characterised Elvis during all of his adult life. His utter reluctance to confide in anybody or reveal his inner thoughts can be explained by the fact that, in his mind, there was only one single person in the world that could understand and guide him (Goldman 1981:62).

### **Cultural loans and social flexibility/inflexibility**

Blackface minstrel<sup>24</sup> researcher Eric Lott links the old black face tradition with the later white representations of “blackness” which are also included in the expression “white nigger” and in the Elvis figure: “To put on the cultural forms of ‘blackness’ was to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry” (Lott 1995:52). The “black” cultural element that Elvis “steals” in his persona of “white nigger” emphasizes (ultra) masculinity, adulthood and sexuality. However, Elvis’s complex and ambiguous cultural representations also include clear androgynous features (Klinkmann 1998:131f, 334; Garber 1992:367). Thus, the masculinity of Elvis can be connected with the new type of male role also exemplified by film stars such as Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift. According to Fredrik Hertzberg, the common feature of these three film stars was that they revolted against conventional masculinity. The new male role was both more masculine and more feminine than before. It was more physical and less verbal than the role typified by predecessors such as Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney and John Wayne. It demonstrated a new way of being cool, but also openly exposed its vulnerability, writes Hertzberg in a special, body themed issue

of the Finland-Swedish journal *Horisont* (1992:66).

This can be compared to the way in which the black, masculine and cool mask or pose, according to sociologists Richard Majors and Janet Mancini-Billson, functioned. That is, as an adaptive mechanism for handling the reality of the existence of Afro-American men: “... to enhance social competence, pride, dignity, self-esteem and respect. Cool enhances masculinity. Being cool also expresses bitterness, anger, and distrust towards an oppressive society for many years of hostile mistreatment and discrimination” (Majors & Mancini-Billson 1992:105).

Herman Gray (downloaded on 29 March 2001) notes that the image of the cool black jazz man was not lacking in contradictory features:

*As a “different” sign of the masculine he was policed as much as he was celebrated and exoticized by white men and women alike. Policed as a social threat because he transgressed the social role assigned to him by the dominant culture and celebrated as the “modern primitive” because he embodied and expressed a masculinity that explicitly rejected the reigning codes of propriety and place. Drugs, sexism, pleasure, excess, nihilism, defiance, pride, and the cool pose of disengagement were all a part of the style, personality, vision, and practice of an assertive heterosexual black masculinity that could not be confined within the dominant cultural logic. (The lives and careers of John Coltrane and Miles Davies illustrate the complex and wide-ranging relations of gender at play in the jazz world; Coltrane’s wife was a respected member of his band, while Davies often treated women with derision and abuse. My point is that, although the masculinity created by the black jazz man at once challenged dominant white discourses of heterosexual*

*masculinity, with respect to women this same powerful and defiant black masculinity just as often maintained unequal relations of power between men and women.)*

Against the backdrop of this complex black masculinity, this black bearing, as described by Gray, Elvis's coolness and masculinity expressed in his public persona of the 50's appears as something relatively playful and superficial. However, in his book *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (1974:226f) presents a surprisingly positive picture of Elvis and rock'n'roll. He says that rhythm & blues, the contemporary expression of blues in urban environments, was the source of the new vitalisation of popular music, and that rock'n'roll was the end-product of this: "And it is, as every American 'average mother'<sup>25</sup> thinks, music for 'non-intellectuals'. But an Elvis Presley to me seems like something of greater cultural significance than a Jo Stafford".<sup>26</sup>

According to LeRoi Jones, rock'n'roll nevertheless mostly constitutes a blatant commercialisation of rhythm & blues. In many cases, however, the music is based on enough material which is so unfamiliar to the average middle class and middle intellectual American culture that it, according to Jones, becomes interesting.<sup>27</sup>

The rhythm & blues historian Nelson George (1988:62f) says that Elvis's exposure to black culture, both blues and gospel, was as strong as it could ever be expected to be, when seen from his white Mississippi perspective. Elvis listened to the black radio stations WDIA in Memphis and WLAC in Nashville; his dress and hair style revealed an image with a clear background in black culture. George's conclusion of this cross-cultural collision is that Elvis adopted black styles from black people who had adopted a whiter appearance. And George adds:

*Of course, Elvis' reverse integration was*

*so complete that on stage he adopted symbolic fornication blacks had unashamedly brought to American entertainment. Elvis was sexy; not clean-cut, wholesome, white-bread, Hollywood sexy but sexy in the aggressive earthy manner associated by whites with black males. In fact, as a young man Presley came closer than any other rock & roll star to capturing the swaggering sexuality projected by so many R & B vocalists. (Ibid.:63)*

Nelson George then contrasts this superficial blackness, this mimicry effect that Elvis could attain in his stage performance and his singing, with the singer's lack of real insight into black culture:

*– Elvis was just a package, a performer with limited musical ambition and no real dedication to the black style that made him so dangerous. Presley, as his life later revealed, never put the time into developing his interpretation of blackness – the most important part in his appeal – in the way Mick Jagger has, for example. (Ibid.)*

Nelson George calls Presley "a damn lazy student" and describes him as a mediocre performing artist who, during his entire career was transfixed in the unyielding grip of his manager Colonel Parker. If Elvis had kept closer to the blues style of his early Sun recordings, he would, according to George, been able to produce 20 years of music that would qualitatively corresponded to what George calls the myth about Elvis Presley.

The superficial and playful adaptation of the black man's bearing that Elvis, according to Nelson George, represents, might perhaps explain the socio-cultural mechanism as a basis for the famous rumour that spread in black cultural circles

and was obviously believed also by leading black cultural persons. Relatively early in Elvis's career, according to Peter Guralnick (1994:425f) already during the spring and summer of 1957, a rumour spreads in black housing areas in the USA claiming that Elvis had said: "The only thing Negroes can do for me is to buy my records and shine my shoes."<sup>28</sup>

In my doctoral thesis on Elvis Presley as a king of carnival (Klinkmann 1998:284), I have, in accordance with the title, characterised the persona of Elvis as markedly carnivalistic. In my view, Elvis comes very close to the Harlequin strategy essential to the Renaissance *commedia dell'arte* theatre; a strategy that seeks to amuse in a chameleon-like way, incorporating aesthetics that balance between the high and low, the serious and the humorous. Elvis constantly moves between the sublime and the grotesque, between the cultivated, which, with him is particularly expressed in a form of dandyism and a strong feature of "mummy's boy", and the burlesque, grotesque, which, however, with Elvis is never directly transferred from black culture, but slightly changed, parodied, or, to use Elvis's own expression, "goosed up".

Taking all of this into account, it is perhaps somewhat easier to understand why a rumour such as the one described above, claiming that Elvis would value black people only for their ability to buy his records and clean his shoes (that is, to be subservient in all to him, the white master) has started.<sup>29</sup> The thought that Elvis had stolen the music of black people and gained fame using feathers he had borrowed from them, or that he, to use the white rock reviewer Greil Marcus's words about the same phenomenon, like a present-day American Prometheus had stolen the black musical fire<sup>30</sup>, makes it slightly easier to discern certain possible background motives for this bizarre rumour. It is also

possible to see the social need there might be today for such a rumour, which has resulted in several black cultural persons believing in it. Gilbert Rodman (1994:465f) quotes a writer, Dan Heilman<sup>31</sup>, who points out that black cultural figures such as Vernon Reid (from the group *Living Colour*). Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour) from the rap group *Public Enemy* and film director Spike Lee have all heard the rumour and believed it.

### Concluding remarks

To summarize, it can be noted that in his public persona, Elvis appeared as a white Negro, but his commitment to black people and black culture do not actually seem to have been more than superficial in nature. While in his persona he included important elements that at this time by many whites were seen as a black, animalistic, strongly sexual image, he continued, as the person Elvis Presley, in all essential aspects, to defer to the culture that he came from, a white southern culture of a lower class character. In this culture, in the kind of racially segregated society that Elvis grew up in, poor white people were a "caste" superior to black people, but also in a situation where the "racial sexualization" of society made relations between white men and black women, and between black men and white women threatening, forbidden and dangerous.

Despite Elvis's proven lack of racial prejudices (Klinkmann 1998:280-284), the impression remains that the rock artist and entertainer Elvis, notwithstanding the black elements in his persona, consciously chose to maintain a certain distance from black culture and black Americans. Thus he appears as a carnivalistic figure, a Harlequin or trickster figure, who can wear black features – and particularly the cool and masculine ones – as a mask, but who avoids making this black bearing a more integral feature of his personality. Compared to the

grotesque and for black people, strongly degrading, parody of black culture that the blackface comedians performed, Elvis's mask of the 50's (a mask with certain selected black meanings, connotations) appears as a slightly ironic paraphrase of black culture, performed with an entertaining, playful twinkle in his eyes. Thus also the dangerous and subversive element in Elvis's representation of coolness and masculinity is disarmed or neutralised fairly quickly. This happened gradually with his entry into military service; the establishment of Elvis as a film entertainer and, finally, with his Las Vegas persona, in which the cool and masculine elements of Elvis as a "white Negro", a "rebel without a cause" were almost turned to their opposites through the increasingly grotesque and self-parodying aspects of the representation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the one-sided gendered construction of rock discourse, see also, for example, Lähteenmaa (1988/1989, 1989) and Swiss, Herman & Sloop (eds.) (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Blackface, or blackface comedy, was a sub-genre within the popular American type of stage entertainment, called the minstrel show, where to begin with white and later also black artists imitated black people by painting their faces black with charred cork. The genre was born within English music hall entertainment and artists such as Charles Dibdin and Charles Mathews, but was soon exported to the USA, where it became popular with, among others, George Washington Dixon and Thomas "Daddy" Rice.

<sup>3</sup> Note the clear reference to mom-ism in LeRoi Jones's wording.

<sup>4</sup> Note, however, the clear male chauvinist feature in this comparison: Jo Stafford was a contemporary female white jazz singer. Comparing Elvis to her appears to be unfair, not least considering that Jo Stafford was not nearly

as famous as Elvis.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Jones's arguments can be interpreted as a kind of confirmation of Norman Mailer's reasoning about the concept white Negro.

<sup>6</sup> Guralnick says that trying to trace a source for this rumour is "like running a gopher to earth". Elvis is supposed to have said this in Boston, a place he had never visited at this stage, or in Edward R. Murrow's nationwide TV show on which he had never appeared (Guralnick 1994:426).

<sup>7</sup> The untrustworthy nature of the rumour is revealed by the fact that each time it emerges, it seems to have taken on a new, slightly altered form. The following are some examples of the wordings of the rumour, taken from Rodman (1996:34ff, 43, 54, 56): "All I want from blacks is for them to buy my records and shine my shoes" (source V. S. Naipaul), "The only thing niggers are good for is to shine my shoes" (source Greil Marcus), "The only thing niggers can do for me is shine my shoes and buy my records" (source N. M. Zuberi), "The only thing they [blacks] can do is shine my shoes and buy my records (source Eddie Murphy), "The only thing a nigger is good for is to shine my shoes" (source Dave Marsh). Rodman summarizes the collection of quotes by saying "While the statement's general theme of contemptuous prejudice is consistent from one version to the next, the precise words Elvis reportedly said vary an extraordinary amount for a statement that's 'on the record'." This, obviously is a folkloristic legend.

<sup>8</sup> See Marcus's essay "Elvis: A Presliad" (Marcus 1975/90).

<sup>9</sup> Heilman's text "Trying to get to you: Greil Marcus chases the ghost of Elvis Presley", is published in *Rock & RollDisc*, March 1992:9ff.

#### REFERENCES

##### Literature

**Babcock, Barbara A.** 'Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations.' *Semiotica* 30-1/2 1980, 1-14.

- Bane, Michael.** *White Boy Singin' the Blues. The Black Roots of White Rock.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1982/1992.
- Bjurström, Erling.** *Högt & lågt. Smak och stil i ungdomskulturen.* Smedjebacken: Boréa, 1997.
- Clayson, Alan. *Only the Lonely. The Life and Artistic Legacy of Roy Orbison.* London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989.
- Coleman, James S.** *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education.* New York: Macmillan, 1961
- Danesi, Marcel.** *Cool. The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Ennis, Philip H.** *The Seventh Stream. The Emergence of Rock'n'roll in American Popular Music.* Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.
- Garber, Marjorie.** *Vested Interests. Cross-dressing & Cultural Anxiety.* New York: Harper-Perennial, 1992.
- George, Nelson.** *The Death of Rhythm & Blues.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- Goldman, Albert.** *Elvis.* Stockholm: Norstedts, 1981.
- Guralnick, Peter.** *Last Train to Memphis. The Rise of Elvis Presley.* London: Abacus, 1994.
- Hertzberg, Fredrik.** Kroppens artikulering. Om Marlon Brando. *Horisont* No 5, 1992.
- Jones, LeRoi.** *Blues People.* Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1963.
- Klinkmann, Sven-Erik.** *Elvis Presley – den karnivalistiske kungen.* Åbo: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 1998.
- Lott, Eric.** *Love & Theft. Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Lähteenmaa, Jaana (ed.).** *Rockin seksuaalisuus.* Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1989.
- Lähteenmaa, Jaana.** *Tytöt ja rock.* Helsinki: Kansalaisvalistuksen keskus, 1988/89.
- Marcus, Greil.** *Mystery Train. Images of American in Rock'n'Roll Music.* London: Omnibus Press, 1975/1990.
- Majors, Richard and Janet Mancini-Billson.** *Cool Pose.* New York: Touchstone, 1992.
- Mailer, Norman.** *Advertisement for Myself.* New York: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1961.
- Manuel, Peter.** *Popular Musics of the non-Western World. An Introductory Survey.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Mingus, Charles.** *Beneath the Underdog.* Porvoo: WSOY, 1971/1995.
- Passerini, Luisa.** 'Youth as a Metaphor for Social Change: Fascist Italy and America in the 1950s.' In Levi, Giovanni and Jean-Claude Schmitt (eds.): *A History of Young People in the West.* Vol. 2. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Rodman, Gilbert B.** *Elvis after Elvis. The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend.* London: Routledge, 1996.
- Rose, Jacqueline.** *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath.* London: Virgin, 1992.
- Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press.** *The Sex Revolts. Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'Roll.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Schuller, Gunther.** *The Swing Era. The Development of Jazz 1930–1945.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White.** *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Stearns, Marshall W.** *The Story of Jazz.* London: Oxford University Press, 1956/1977.
- Swiss, Thomas, Andrew Herman and John M. Sloop.** *Mapping the Beat.* London: Blackwell, 1997.
- Thompson, Robert Farris.** 'An Aesthetic of the Cool'. *African Arts*, Vol 7, No 1, 1973.
- Turner, Victor.** *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Wylie, Philip.** *Generation of Vipers.* New York: Pocket Books, 1942/1955.

#### Electronic references

##### Bartleby's Online Dictionary

<http://www.bartleby.com/61/17/C0621700.html>

Downloaded 29 March 2001

##### Britannica.com

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=3659>

Downloaded 29 March 2001

**Clarke, George Elliot 1998: Cool Politics**

<http://152.1.96/jouvert/v2i1/Clarke.htm>

Downloaded 29 March 2001

**Cool. The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Virginia Film Festival**

<http://www.therealestateweekly.com/Archives/>

[Edit%20Archives/FilmFestivalCool.html](http://www.therealestateweekly.com/Archives/Edit%20Archives/FilmFestivalCool.html)

Downloaded 29 March 2001

**Gray, Herman:** Black masculinity and visual culture.

*Cultural Politics*. Three Essays from the Whitney Museum of American Art's "Black Male" Show.

[http://jhupress.jhu.edu/quick\\_tour/18.2gray.html](http://jhupress.jhu.edu/quick_tour/18.2gray.html)

Downloaded 29 March 2001

**Herskowitz, Richard 1998:** Cassavetes' Dance. Virginia Film Festival 1998.

[http://www.vafilm.com/1998/cool\\_essay.html](http://www.vafilm.com/1998/cool_essay.html)

Downloaded 29 March 2001