



A Delicious Leisure Activity

Spatial resistance to heteronormativity in public spaces

In 2005 I wrote a bachelor thesis with as subject gay meeting places. By the time I had to make a choice what subject to take on for my master thesis Leisure, Tourism and Environment I decided to develop my bachelor thesis into a master thesis. This seemed and turned out to be a scientifically and empirically challenging subject rarely researched in terms of leisure and environment. In this thesis I provide an insight in the phenomena of gay meeting places as acts of resistance against the heteronormative nature of public space. Besides, I aim to achieve understanding for these kind of leisure places.

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Background

In 2005 I wrote a bachelor thesis about gay meeting places (GMP's) in the Netherlands. More than three years later, I decided to take on the subject again encouraged by two main arguments. Firstly, recent scientific research shows that 90% to 95% of the Dutch population accepts same-sex relations as a way of living as long as homosexuals adhere to the dominant behavioural codes of heterosexual society (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006), this especially involves behaviour in public spaces. An example of this behaviour is that people find it more offensive when people of the same sex kiss in public, than when this happens between people of different sexes. In general, people tend to have problems with the visibility and expression of homosexuality in public, in the media, etc. (SOCON¹, 2000; van Wijk et al, 2005). This concern with the visibility of homosexuality is what Keuzenkamp et al. (2006) call modern homo-negativity. In addition, it becomes clear when we take a closer look at the results of the research by Keuzenkamp et al. (2006) that shows that 9% of the Dutch population rejects male homosexuality, 11% perceives homosexual men not as 'real men', 21% states that homosexuality is unnatural, and 13% thinks that male same-sex sex is 'just wrong' or 'disgusting' (Buijs, et al., 2008). More in general it can be concluded that there is a more negative attitude towards homosexual men, than to lesbian women (Herek, 1988, 2000; Keuzenkamp et al., 2006). All these results indicate that homosexuality in the Netherlands is tolerated, however under certain conditions and to a particular degree. This general conclusion is the main reason to research gay meeting places as a spatial expression of male homosexuality within a predominant heteronormative, or as you like homo-negative, society. The wish is to provide a better understanding for these expressions of sexuality within

public space, in reaction to the heteronormative nature of our public spaces with this thesis.

The second reason for taking on this subject is of a more scientific nature, however linked to the first reason, it is only since the last decennium that research has been conducted into the trialectical relation between space, sexuality and leisure (see for example: Binnie & Valentine, 1999; Browne, 2007; Hubbard, 2008; Jenkins & Pigram, 2003; Pritchard, et al., 2002; Skeggs, 1999). With this research focusing on all three aspects as described above a contribution is delivered to the emerging body of work within the already established research inquiry connecting leisure with geographies of sexuality. Besides, it was and still is a great challenge to scientifically approach a rather 'banal' use of public space for leisure purposes through a critical engagement with both the spatial phenomenon, the users of gay meeting places, as well as with theoretical insights of different thinkers challenging the taken-for-granted heterosexual nature inherent in society. This challenge will be the focus of this article, as it is the main part of this thesis project.

This research is (partly) framed by two key thinkers on both sexuality and space, to know Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. First the main arguments of Foucault and Levebre are introduced. Followed by a theoretical discussion and the empirical insights gained through in-depth interviews with users of gay meeting places. In the last section a short conclusion by combining the earlier discussed theoretical and empirical insights will be given.

The theoretical challenge

Michel Foucault analysis and challenges common sense understandings sexuality present within contemporary society in order to challenge and resist these. In his work 'History of Sexuality'

¹ SOCON: *sociaal-culturele ontwikkelingen in Nederland*
(social-cultural developments in the Netherlands)



The Haagse Bos is one of the oldest gay meeting places in the Netherlands, existing for more than hundreds of years

(1984) Foucault analyses how sexual oppression in the Victorian age became a mechanism for the formulation of discourses of sexuality, which he calls the 'scientia sexualis', in which sex itself became a discourse rather than the creation of silence around sexuality. Power was not exercised through censorship, instead power was exercised through an incitement to speak about one's sexuality within different settings ranging from the confessional to schools to the doctor's office, and further. People were forced into a practice of truth telling in one of the administrations of life directed at sexual practices. The regulative discourse of sexuality spread out over the whole social body in the Victorian age. Thus, the deployment of sexuality was the predominant mode of power within modern times. Sexuality became a legitimate subject for research caught up in the production of 'regimes of truth'. These historical conventions had as an effect that people became in some sense their sexual preference, the sex of the person we have sex with determines to which category we belong (Mills, 2003). This is best reflected in the explanation of homosexuality given by Karl Heinrich Ulrich, who explained in the midst of the nineteenth century homosexuality² in terms of men having feminine souls, who feel attracted to men with masculine souls. This is what he came to call 'urning' (Hekma, 2007). Most doctors

adhered to the idea of Ulrich, and what was seen as a sin, became perceived as a pathology of men with feminine souls. Accordingly, Freud, one of the founders of psychoanalysis, argues that we either identify ourselves with a particular sex or we are attracted to this particular sex, only these two relations are possible. If you as a man are attracted to other men, Freud would argue that this is because you identify yourself with women (Klages, 1997). These developments led to a conceptualisation of homosexuals as invert, people who are pathologically perverse. Within a system of repressive discourses on sexuality and a system of biopolitics, homosexuality has become a social disease. The discourse of homosexuality was used to give a description of a group of people who needed to be controlled and disciplined, which simultaneously led to marginalized groups becoming aware of the need for emancipation (Foucault, 1984). Foucault challenges these theories of biological determinism. Foucault shows through his analysis of sexuality as discourse that the common sense notions of sexuality and appropriate sexual behaviour and desires are the result of historical conventions. He explains sexuality not in terms of sex, but in terms of a historical construct associated with modernity, thereby destabilising these notions, as things could have been different. Or as McHoul and Grace (1993, 121) argues "Foucault's arguments open up the possibility that sexual difference can be something other than the sexualised version of it we have inherited, and that the bodily differences between men and women can be conceived as something other than sexual difference."

Thus, the binary logic between heterosexuality and homosexuality is an artificial, or better said discursive one, when we consider the theoretical insights of Foucault. However, this seemingly natural distinction between

the sexualities is constantly inscribed into space, this is better known as the sexualisation of space. Sexualisation of space not only serves to maintain space as inherently heterosexual, but it also leads to the maintenance of heterosexual hegemony as natural, normal and appropriate. This can be explained by making use of the insights of the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre introduces a conceptualisation of space articulating how space is inscribed with power relations and ideologies, having its influence on our everyday lived spaces. Lefebvre distinguished in his work 'The Production of Space' (1991) the following trialectical relation of space:

- Representations of space: this is conceived space, as conceptualised by those who plan, map and design space. The representations of space are the dominant spaces of any society concerned with ideology, power and knowledge. These are the spaces of bureaucrats and planners.
- Spaces of representation: these are the directly lived spaces of people made up by the space of everyday experience. It uses the physical objects found in space as symbolisations of lived experience and for the production of meaning.
- Spatial practices: these are related to perceived space or spaces as we make sense of these and everyday ordinariness. These spaces are a mediation between the two other forms of space translated into everyday experiences and routines.

The relations between, respectively, the perceived, conceived and lived space are not ever stable, nor are they artificial or linear. The representations of space or conceived spaces, are the dominant representations of space within society. The conceived is an abstract space, which is usually the dominant representation of space within society. This abstraction of space becomes objectified and is the product of a materialization of what is

² The word *homosexual* appears for the first time in 1868 in a letter from the author Károly Mária Kertbeny to Ulrichs. He derived the word *homosexual* from the Greek word 'homos' (the same) and the Latin root 'sexualis'. Later he used the word in two anonymous pamphlets in which he criticised the laws that criminalised same-sex sexual activities. The word *bisexual* appears for the first time in one of his writings in 1880 (glbtq 2004)

conceived as space (Lefebvre, 1991), in this sense the dominant conceptualisations of space are transformed into our lived spaces, or spaces of representation. The implication of this process results in omnipresent power structures inscribed by the most dominant groups within a society, constraining, structuring, disciplining us all at different spatial levels. In the case of this research the most important implication is that space is structured around and inherently inscribed with the hegemonic position of heterosexuality in our society, and experienced as such by non-heterosexual individuals. Effects and reasons for the production of heterosexual spaces, Browne suggests, are “[h]omophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity, and the fear of these discriminations” (2007, 996). Many of these heterosexualised spatial inscriptions are only clear for those who do not comply to these norms, the deviant, as Jackson (2005, 107 following Valentine, 1993) states “[h]eterosexuality is so firmly inscribed in space that it is virtually invisible, until its boundaries are transgressed.”



In ancient Greece sex between men was an ordinary part of everyday life

The users of gay meeting places

From the in-depth interviews with the users of gay meeting places (GMP's) it becomes clear that they appropriate parts of public space for their leisure activity, or in other words, sexually oriented encounters, and with this appropriation they challenge and reinforce the heteronormative character of our public spaces. In this research the focus is on those GMP's located in public green areas. When we look at these places it turns out that there is a preference for places with a high density of bushes to create leisure spaces out of the sight of the public and the state. All co-researchers agreed that their sexual encounters should remain out of sight of the general public, however some of them did enjoy being looked at during their sexual practices by other visitors of GMP's. The reason for this is that it creates some additional arousal, besides the arousal of meeting (and possibly having sexual encounters with) other men. (Sexual) arousal is an important component of visiting GMP's. The co-researchers describe the activities taking place at gay meeting places as a game, a game of being looked at and looking at, of finding a possible partner and being preferred as a partner, of agreeing on the kind of sexual activity, and, of course, the actual sexual encounter. The most important motivation to go to GMP's is a desire for sex, for letting of some sexual tension, although the co-researchers agree that an actual sexual encounter is not a strict necessity. It is a form of leisure for most men as it gives them an opportunity to relax and get out of the routines of everyday life. Besides, the co-researchers describe the activities at GMP's as pleasurable and enjoyable with a high degree of mutual respect for each other and the general public. To use a public green area for sexually oriented encounters means that part of it is appropriated by the visitors of

GMP's, it is through this appropriation that the heteronormative character of public space becomes spatially challenged and resisted. However, this is not without problems. There is a strong reinforcement of the seemingly heterosexual nature of public space. Often GMP's are closed down by means of cutting down bushes, introducing cattle, and police control³ in an attempt to make the places unattractive for the men making use of GMP's. Besides, there are often incidents of gay bashing and robbery at GMP's. In this sense the heteronormative character of public space becomes reinforced through GMP's. Besides, a look at newspaper articles with the possibility to respond to news items on GMP's shows that most reactions are signs of disgust, repulsion, and aversion, not seldom related to the idea that GMP's are visited by married men. The co-researchers are reluctant to give an approximation of the percentage of married men visiting GMP's, however some approximations made indicate that about 90 to 95 percent of the visitors is married. Three of the co-researchers were/are themselves happily married to a woman in the period they visit(ed) gay meeting places. In this respect they challenge and subvert the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, as it is surely possible to enjoy both being married to a woman, and at the same time having sex with men. Obviously these men cross the 'clear' boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, thereby challenges the seemingly natural distinction between the two sexualities. And indeed, when asked whether they identify themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual the co-researchers were mostly hesitant to answer, because there is according to them not a clear distinction between the two categories, and most of them therefore identified themselves as being bisexual.

³ In criminal law the activities at GMP's can be described as violation of virtue, by which is meant wittingly behaving in such a way that under the given circumstances the normally developed feeling of shame is violated. This involves showing in public your personal intimate body parts (*seksueel misdrijf.nl*, 2009). However, police men are only allowed to act when the activities are visible from public roads. Thus, police men are not allowed to go into the bushes to track down men who are sexually or sexually oriented active (Lochs and Van Ommen, 2008).

Conclusion

In short, it becomes clear that the visitors of GMP's in two ways challenge heteronormativity. Firstly, by the appropriation of public space for 'homosexually' oriented sexually encounters they challenge the hegemonic inscription of heterosexuality into our daily spaces. This appropriation can be seen as spatial acts of resistance against the heteronormative character of our public spaces, or in the words of Lefebvre, against the dominant heterosexual representation of space, which in its turn is transformed into our lived spaces. However, these acts of resistance against the heteronormative character of our public spaces are not clear-cut in their effect, as the acts of the men at GMP's are in general seen as disgusting, repulsive and aversive, which leads to a reinforcement of the idea that homosexuality (especially sexual acts between (married) men) is not tolerable. Secondly, the reluctance of men visiting GMP's to identify themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual as these categories do not appear to fit to people in general challenges the seemingly stable and hegemonic binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, which is in line with the idea of Foucault that the dichotomy between homosexuality and heterosexuality is a discursive one. It can be concluded from this research that identifying yourself as either homosexual or heterosexual is a form of categoriza-

tion imposed upon us by society, and the results show that this is not possible for some as they do not experience a clear-cut differentiation between these two categories.

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Samenvatting

Met dit onderzoek naar homo-ontmoetingsplekken hoop ik een bijdrage te leveren aan de ontwikkelingen binnen het wetenschappelijke onderzoeksgebied waarin een koppeling plaatsvindt tussen vrijetijdsbesteding en de sociaal-ruimtelijke analyse van seksualiteit. Dit onderzoek is gericht op de vorm van vrijetijdsbesteding van 'homoseksuele' mannen; het gebruik van openbare, groene ruimtes voor seksueel georiënteerde ontmoetingen, ook bekend als cruising. Door gebruik te maken van de inzichten van Michel Foucault en Henri Lefebvre, in combinatie met diepte interviews met gebruikers van homo-ontmoetingsplekken, toont dit onderzoek hoe deze mannen weerstand bieden aan heteronormativiteit door de toe-eigening van publieke ruimte voor het ontdekken en genieten van hun seksualiteit.

