

Homo-normativity, hetero-normativity and socio-spatial difference

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper I argue that both ghettoised homo-normative gay spaces and hetero-normative spaces within which gay identity has been assimilated are driven by a totalising drive to disambiguate essentially ambiguous and non-identical forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. This opposition is read primarily in the post-marxist terms of Walter Benjamin's city texts. To these essentially impoverished modes of subjective and spatial self-articulation I contrast the notion of porous space and porous subjectivity which is to also be found in the thought of Benjamin. My primary intention in doing this is to counterpose an essentially post-modern queer politics of space to the spatial politics of both the ghetto and assimilationism.

The two primary poles of contemporary gay and lesbian politics are the politics of identity and various forms of assimilationist politics. Both of these political tendencies manifest themselves as projects directed towards the domestication and disambiguation of queer, or queering subjectivity and intersubjectivity. On the one side we have a politics that's manifested itself culturally through the development of spatially and culturally defined gay enclaves and the adoption of one, or other of a limited range of gay identities. On the other we find a politics that's spatially and culturally defined by the attempt to adapt gay, lesbian and queer subjectivity and intersubjectivity to heteronormative spaces, modes of cultural self-expression and identification. Both of these movements tend towards a reduction of complexity and a disciplining of queer intersubjectivity and queer socio-sexual and cultural networks, whether that be through culturally and financially limiting access to public, or semi-public space, or through withdrawal from urban public space into 'respectable' monogamous relationships in the suburbs, or into the virtual closets of the web.¹

In this paper I intend to read this opposition and these two modes of the disambiguation of queer subjectivity within the terms of the spatial politics articulated within Walter Benjamin's

cityscapes. There are striking similarities between the two poles I just mentioned and the respective characterisations of bourgeois and post-bourgeois interior space and subjectivity in Benjamin's work. The project of gay identity formation and ghettoisation parallels the process of bourgeois interiorisation and individualisation within Benjamin's work, just as the project of assimilating bourgeois gay subjectivity and individuality into a hetero-normative social totality has parallels with the attempted assimilation of the bourgeois individualist subject into a post-bourgeois mode of spatial organisation.

However what makes these parallels particularly interesting is that they're contrasted in Benjamin's work with another conception of spatial organisation and indeed subjective and intersubjective relations which is neither bourgeois, nor post-bourgeois. This is the notion of socio-spatial porosity to be found in Benjamin's short text on Naples. Porous spaces are spaces that are bounded and yet not totalised. What I'll argue is that queer spaces and queer modes of subjective and intersubjective articulation, ought to be more like the porous social spaces and modes of inhabitation which Benjamin discusses in his Naples essay. These modes of inhabitation and self-articulation would be distinct from both unambiguously atomised bourgeois space and

subjectivity and collectivised post-bourgeois space and subjectivity. The differences and ambiguities of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity ought to be preserved and publicly embraced rather than being eliminated through a process of disambiguation through either atomisation or collectivisation of space. The borders and boundaries that define our identities and the spaces we inhabit need to be continually tested.

Queer spaces ought to encourage the circulation of subjects and identities and the formation and expression of unexpected and unpredictable intersubjective networks, rather than demanding either a fixing, or an effacement of ambiguous modes of social being as a condition of participation. Following from this they ought also to make it impossible for subjects to avoid putting their own identities at risk to some extent through being in these spaces. Circulation through queer spaces ought neither to simply confirm nor to efface individual cultural, gender, class, or sexual identities and styles, but rather to continuously test their limits.

THE UN-AMBIGUOUS BOURGEOIS AND POST-BOURGEOIS DOMESTIC INTERIOR

To begin my discussion I'll briefly outline the movement of disambiguation of both urban space and urban subjectivity which I take to be at the heart of Benjamin's analyses of modernity and modernization in his city texts. As I briefly noted in my introduction the two poles of this process are embodied in spatial and subjective terms for Benjamin respectively in the bourgeois interiors and adult bourgeois subjectivities of the Berlin of his youth and in the 19th century interiors of Paris and on the other hand in the post-bourgeois interiors of Revolutionary Moscow which he visited in the nineteen twenties.

In spatio-social terms the bourgeois interior is for Benjamin akin to and in some ways derivative of the synoptic narrative that constitutes the book as a grand expression of one's view of the world. (Filling station).² The bourgeois interior desperately attempts to overcome and defend itself from the messiness, corrosion and uncontainability of the ambiguous urban crowd and the life of the street that flows around it and threatens its exterior. It strives always for a certain completeness (Moscow, Pg 188).³ However the synoptic, or narrative wholeness of the bourgeois interior is only made possible through careful editing of the self and its traces within public and semi-public space. Hence the bourgeois interior is also always a space of cellars (No. 113) and closets (Betting office).⁴ Indeed it's only the child who unwittingly and unreflectively sees the interior for what it is; a space comprised of hiding places (Enlargements – child hiding).⁵ The child plays hide and seek with bourgeois propriety within the bourgeois interior. To be able to perform on the semi-public stage which is opened up within the bourgeois interior is as Benjamin notes, to leave politics, finance and religion at the stage door as one enters. Needless to say the erotic is also expunged from these evacuated spaces where one performs one's rational, up-standing bourgeois self before one's audience.⁶ To be enculturated into such spaces is to learn what one may and may not talk about and which relationships one may and may not make public even within the privacy of the interior itself. One carefully edits out scenes that might offend the col-

lected audience in order to produce a seamless narrative. By attending school the child is enculturated into the disciplinary timetable cage that's at the ideological heart of the rationalistic and calculative bourgeois interior.⁷

Benjamin argues that the alterity of subjects and cultures that are other than properly bourgeois can indeed appear within this interior, but only as signs, or markers of the occupants' sophistication and breadth of experience, or taste. It's only the digestible traces of the other that are integrated into this interior (Manorially furnished ten room apartment).⁸ The atomised bourgeois subject is genetically constituted for Benjamin then, both through architectural and geographical processes embedding of the subject and through the imposition of a restrictive normative framework for public self articulation.

In his reflections on Moscow in the Moscow diary and the short article simply entitled Moscow which I already mentioned above, Benjamin notes a quite different mode for the organisation and disambiguation of ambiguous modern urban social spaces and intersubjectivities.⁹ In the Moscow of the nineteen twenties, Benjamin found a striving to overcome the atomised spaces and subjectivities of the patriarchal, bourgeois, capitalist interior which he discussed in "One way Street" and "The Berlin Chronicle". He found there an allocation of interior space which is driven not by the demands, or needs of the individual but rather by the needs of the social collectivity as mediated by the party itself. Apartments which had been designed for, and indeed previously housed, a single family were used to house multiple families.¹⁰ The net effect of living in these interiors was that one felt, according to Benjamin, as if one were camping. They didn't contain the rich array of possessions to be found in the bourgeois interiors of Benjamin's childhood recollections and of his research into the Paris of the 19th century.¹¹ They were in this sense, no longer the private theatre's, or museums of conspicuous consumption that the bourgeois interior still often is now, but rather simply living space and no more. So in a sense this way of organising social space at least overcame some of the consumerist excesses and hypocrisy of the Bourgeois interior.

However in the process of managing space and intersubjectivity, collectivization of space and assimilation of bourgeois subjectivity also eliminated the positive effects of bourgeois private space as well. There was, as Benjamin noted a "...withering away of private life."¹² The two primary losses which resulted from this withering of the private were, space to think freely and articulate views that were not simply the views of the party and the state (Moscow, Pg 187) and an even greater loss of space within which one could articulate even the somewhat limited erotic intersubjective relations than had previously been present even within the bourgeois interior itself. Indeed the latter of these points is all the more noticeable in the Moscow Diary since one of Benjamin's motivations for visiting Moscow was in fact to pursue an erotic relationship. At numerous points in the diary lack of private space thwarts any possibility for this relationship to be pursued further.¹³

So we see here the idealized and dis-ambiguated models of atomised and collectivized social space as embodied in two concrete modes of social life and domestic socio-spatial organisation.

THE CAFÉ AND THE INTERIOR OF THE GAY CLUB

But what of gay spaces? Can they simply be read in relation to Benjamin's socio-spatial categories as being yet another articulation of bourgeois interior space? In asking these questions and in using the word 'gay', rather than 'queer' here I intend to make a specific theoretical point. The spaces that I'm concerned with in this section are primarily the commercialized spaces of urban gay ghettos in the US, Europe and Australia and even more specifically with saunas, bars and dance clubs. These are the built spaces and networks of social and aesthetic norms within which contemporary gay male identity is largely performed. What interests me specifically here are the implicit normative expectations one needs to satisfy in order to comfortably participate with many of these spaces.

At one level it's clear that the essentially heteronormative bourgeois interiors that lie at the heart of the Benjaminian analyses I briefly outlined before are not in fact spaces that would normatively allow for the articulation and performance of a gay identity in any sense, since in the process of accepting and building such a gay identity one has to transgress in at least some senses the moral and in some cases also legal strictures and boundaries of heteronormative bourgeois subjectivity, intersubjectivity and socio-spatial organisation. Nevertheless I'd argue that at least some heteronormative bourgeois spaces share characteristics with gay spaces.

To clarify what I mean here, when Benjamin discusses the cafes which he and his young friends went to during the years of his undergraduate study in an attempt to escape the airless bourgeois interior he describes them as being "...strategic quarters...".¹⁴ However they function as strategic quarters whose primary target is the bourgeois space of the familial home in relation to which they allowed the young Benjamin at least some autonomy. They are in a sense staging posts on the way back to the bourgeois interior. In just the same way as this Gay spaces are also often simply semi-autonomous outposts of the Bourgeois interior even though they occupy a position of relative alterity in relation to the strictly hetero-normative bourgeois interiors I've just discussed. They adopt a critical position that's nevertheless still in some respects internal to the bourgeois interior itself. In that sense they're ultimately another expression of the bourgeois dynamic of socio-spatial atomisation as a means towards the disambiguation of the social world. They become strategic points from within which one demands space within the bourgeois interior for a homo-normative articulation of gay identity.

However the identity performed within these semi -autonomous interiors is not a heterosexual bourgeois identity, but rather a gay bourgeois identity. This identity is constituted by the confluence of a series of meaning laden personal styles and attributes. The gay male subject is youthful, hairless (unless he's into BDSM), dressed in the latest fashions, muscular, in Australia usually anglo-celtic, or perhaps southern european in descent and bourgeois in socio-economic terms insofar as money is frequently required if one is to be able to access the muscles, clothes and relative hairlessness which constitute the currently ideal gay male identity. This is the subject who occupies the pinnacle of desire in gay space and the gay interior. Subjects like this are the ones who in being within the gay spaces of the

sauna and the bar succeed in the performance. Those who can't adequately satisfy these pre-requisites become either the audience of the bourgeois gay interior and perhaps also a fetishised sexual other. The fetishised others in question here, are frequently either the ethnic, or class other of the consuming, totalising bourgeois gay subject. The working class other for example can appear as 'rough trade', or as a character within the endless array of gay hustler films and fiction. In Australia a common gay ethnic other is exemplified by the positing of gay asian men as the passive objects of white male sexual interest.

But what remains in the closet for these supposedly out and proud gay subjects? Although there are not literally closeted spaces here as there were in Benjamin's bourgeois domestic interiors, both saunas and bars are often not spaces where discursive interaction of any sophistication is either possible or readily encouraged. So what may well remain in the closet in these spaces may be the details of one's personal life and of who one is aside from the surface packaging and even if conversation becomes possible admitting that you're bisexual, or have children, just to give a couple of examples, may not be readily acceptable, let alone delving into ones sexual tastes in too much depth if they aren't mainstream.

The coming out narrative itself demands that one see one's entry into these spaces as an expression not of a self interpretation, but rather of the truth of oneself. Intersubjective relations and subjective self relations are both aesthetically and normatively restricted within these interiors. Rather than having the freedom to interpret and articulate one's own experience and life as one will, one is forced to impose a certain self interpretation and self formation at the cost of exclusion, or at the least alienation from these interiors. A particularly good phenomenology of the violent struggles for recognition that go on within these spaces and the exclusionary hierarchies they presuppose is to be found in the John Rechy's work in particular. In novels like *Rushes* and documentary fiction such as the *Sexual Outlaw* we find a subtle analysis of the fragility and potential to wound and exclude of these gay spaces.¹⁵ Indeed as one can see in *The Sexual Outlaw* even the arena of non-commodified public sex has its potential to wound and exclude.

ASSIMILATION AS THE EFFACEMENT OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE INTERIOR AND THE EXTERIOR

So gay identity politics tends on the one hand towards an atomization of social space and on the other towards a reinforcement of normative and spatial boundaries. But what then of the opposing tendency towards the assimilation of non-heteronormative subjectivities into hetero-normative space and hence also the effacement of the boundary lines between hetero-normative spaces and the homo-normative spaces I just discussed? In the previous section, I presented an account of homo-normative gay space that drew on Benjamin's notion of semi-autonomous strategic interior spaces and emphasized the tendency towards reification, or solidification of norms and identities within these spaces. In this next section I intend to note a couple of those social tendencies which exemplify an implicit, or explicit commitment to an assimilative politics of

space, such as Benjamin discusses in his account of domestic space in Moscow. The first is manifested within the dynamic of heterosexual gentrification of gay and lesbian urban spaces and the second in a withdrawal from gay urban public spaces into suburbia on the part of gay communities themselves.

If one understands gay spaces and regions to embody the adoption of a strategic position in relation to hetero-normative spaces and identities, then it also seems reasonable to understand the influx of the heterosexual middle classes into the inner city as being akin to a counter attack. Heterosexual gentrifiers are in effect the foot soldiers of a process of reclaiming and re-assimilating homo-normative space for hetero-normative socio-sexual cultures. In the supposedly gay heart of Sydney, Darlinghurst, one is just as likely these days to see corporate mothers pushing baby strollers, as to see the sexually and socially experimental flocking to the freedom of the inner city. The alternative inherent in such street life and such gentrification more generally is not in fact a more diverse alternative to the strictures of bourgeois gay identity politics, but rather their replacement with an even more restrictive, if supposedly tolerant, upper middle class metro-sexual heteronormativity. One might say that in a sense homo-normativity and its spaces are themselves under attack in such movements.¹⁶

However as well as this tendency for inner city urban space to be taken back from marginalized social groupings and re-assimilated into hetero-normative space, there is also a contemporary drift towards not even 'coming out' into the spaces off inner city gay identity politics at all. There is in this sense also a marked withdrawal from inner city spaces and their socio-sexual diversity into the suburbs or onto the web. This movement embodies either a giving up of public space, or a failure to embrace the deviant public socio-sexual cultures of the inner city itself as spaces of possibility and experimentation. Instead of adopting a semi-autonomous socio-spatial and subjective position in relation to hetero-normative bourgeois space and subjectivity, such a withdrawal engages in a conciliatory politics which is primarily concerned with covering over, or leaving as private, the differences between them (the heterosexual majority) and us (the sexually deviant minority).¹⁷ As was also the case in Benjamin's analyses of Moscow, such an assimilative spatial politics loses or lets go of space both for erotic diversity and experimentation and also for the articulation of confident political, ideological and social alternatives to hetero-normative forms of socio-spatial organization. The cultivation and growth of complex erotic and political inter-subjectivities requires more than just virtual space. It requires public spaces that have some continuity of presence.

SOCIAL POROSITY AND QUEER SPATIAL POLITICS

As an alternative to both the semi-autonomous atomization of bourgeois gay identity politics and the radical loss of political autonomy, identity and culture characteristic of the politics of assimilation, or withdrawal from homo-normative space, I'd argue that we ought to adopt a politics and indeed also a spatial self articulation which is driven by the desire to open porous social spaces and to encourage porous subjectivities and inter-subjectivities. In order to describe more clearly what I mean by

this, I'll briefly discuss the notion of socio-spatial porosity which Benjamin develops in his writing on Naples.

In Benjamin's discussion of Naples, you find an account of a city in which space is neither fully atomised, nor fully collectivized. The boundaries of subjectivity and of inter-subjective groupings are instead allowed to remain messy and ambiguous within Neapolitan urban space. Benjamin tells us that in Naples, "...building and action interpenetrate.." and make possible a never ending array of new constellations because there is never an absolutely definitive articulation of the relations between built spaces and activities.¹⁸ What happens, where things happen, how they ought to occur and who they ought to involve is always left open to further re-articulation. Porous social spaces and porous subjectivities are, as Benjamin further notes, at least partially improvised spaces and subjectivities.¹⁹ By contrast with the bourgeois interior there is here no striving for completeness, or totality. This porous way of building and indeed also of inhabiting buildings is as much a response to the moment as are the placards, leaflets and brochures Benjamin recommends to the engaged intellectual in One Way Street (Filling station). There is within porous social spaces, no absolute definition of the boundary lines and borders between interior and exterior. Private life and the life of the street and the broader surrounding community wash into each other and continually bring each other into question.²⁰ More generally porous social space is space within which opposites interpenetrate. Day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness and street and home all bring each other into question within such spaces.²¹ The private individual subject, or family and the private domain which reflects his, or their wealth and achievements is not sacrosanct in these spaces.

Having given this brief account of porous social space in Benjamin, the question is how this theoretical framework can be applied to a queer socio-political context and also what kinds of events and spaces are exemplary of such porosity. In my final comments here I intend to offer some more explicit examples of what I have in mind when I speak of queer porous spaces.

Firstly then, following on from Benjamin's own suggestions that porous spaces and intersubjective networks are spaces and social networks within which there is never an absolute allocation of what happens where and who does what and also of who is allowed to use which spaces, I'd argue that porous queer spaces would be spaces which make themselves available for a range of socio-sexual minority groups. Gay spaces in Sydney frequently don't make themselves available even for lesbians let alone other sexual minority groups. But what follows from this as well is that we ought in fact to be continuously thematising the normative rules of inclusion and exclusion that hold within the spaces we occupy and considering the ways in which they wound and exclude others who may have some right, or need to use, or share the spaces we've opened up. Socially porous spaces would be more like community spaces, rather than just places to rake in the pink dollar. In allowing diversity of subjectivity and intersubjectivity they'd also not just encourage those relationships which form on the basis of tactile and visual connection, but also encourage those which begin through language and discursivity.²²

However as well as queer spaces, I'd argue that there is also need for us to adopt more queer ways of inhabiting social space more generally as well. These would be modes of inhabiting

social space which were marked by a tendency to circulate through a diversity of spaces, rather than simply moulding and editing one's fragmented and ambiguous identity in order to fit into this, or that space. We ought indeed not to occupy spaces simply as if they were fortresses within which we can build an identity that protects us from the invasions and intrusions of the other (whether the other is homo, or hetero-normative), but also to leave ourselves open to continuously having our boundaries and identities, penetrated, abraded and shattered by the others. The normative rules ought always to be open for further discussion.²³

¹ In using the word disciplining here I'm gesturing towards a link I take to exist between Benjamin's analyses of the urban and Foucault's critical analyses of space and disciplinarity. Benjamin lies within that broad tradition of thinkers whose central though is a critique of modern social rationalisation.

² Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street', in Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (Trans.) *Walter Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso, 1985, p. 45

³ Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow' in Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (Trans.) *Walter Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso, 1985, p. 188

⁴ Benjamin, 'One Way Street', pp. 46-47, pp.100-101 respectively

⁵ Benjamin, 'One Way Street', p. 74

⁶ I'm emphasizing here the tendency I take to be inherent in Benjamin's work towards the articulation of a performative and genetic model of the self. In this sense I see proximities between his work and that of thinkers like Erving Goffman, and Hannah Arendt.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle' in Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (Trans.) *Walter Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso, 1985, p. 303

⁸ Benjamin, 'One Way Street', pp. 48-49

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1986

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow', p. 187

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow', p. 186

¹² Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow Diary' p. 85

¹³ George Chauncey explores this question of privacy explicitly in relation to gay male sexual self expression in Ch. 6 & 7

of his magisterial history of gay New York. George Chauncey, *Gay New York, Gender urban culture and the making of the gay Male world 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', p. 310

¹⁵ John Rechy, *Rushes*, New York: Grove Press, 1979 and also John Rechy, *The sexual outlaw*, New York: Grove Press, 1977.

¹⁶ Concrete examples of the negative impact of such social processes can be found in Samuel Delany, *Times square red, times square blue*, New York and London: New York Uni. Press, 1999 and Micheal Warner, *The trouble with normal*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard Uni. Press, 1999, Ch 4, in relation in particular to the gentrification of 42nd street in New York. But see also Benjamin Shephard, 'Sylvia and Sylvia's children : a battle for queer public space' in Matt Bernstein Sycamore (ed) *That's revolting, queer strategies for resisting assimilation*, New York: Soft skull press, 2004, pp.97-113, for another example of heteronormative assimilation of inner city public space in New York.

¹⁷ Even if one grants along with Foucault that it may in some cases be better not to be seen, it seems to be more of a loss than a gain to lose those built spaces which previously made individual and collective self description and self articulation possible.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Naples' in Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (Trans.) *Walter Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso, 1985, p. 169

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Naples', p. 170

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Naples', p. 174

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Naples', p. 175

²² This process of normative self reflection has links to the notions of discursive ethics to be found in Habermas although I understand such processes in more open discursive terms than does Habermas and I would also be loathe to suggest that I can even give an account of the limits and parameters of discursive rationality. I'd argue that emancipated social spaces ought to be neither disciplinary in the sense Foucault understands it, nor overly rationalistic as they appear to be in Habermasian terms.

²³ The kinds of spaces I'm gesturing towards here are approximated within a number of discursive and social contexts. Just to offer a couple of examples. Firstly, the early films of Greg Araki and indeed earlier of John Water's point to

wards the kind of fluidity, negotiability and plurality of sexuality and identity which I am gesturing towards here. See for example Araki's films *Nowhere* and *The Doom generation* and Waters' *Pink flamingoes* and *Desperate living*. Secondly as noted by Delany in *Times square red, times square blue* and also in Mark Turner, *Backward Glances Cruising the queer streets of New York and London*, London, Reaktion, 2003, sex venues and street cruising can be contexts where there is also a significant crossing of class and ethnic boundaries. To offer a final but rather famous example, the catacombs, the well known San Francisco fisting venue, managed to cross over the boundaries of both gender and sexual orientation in its clientele. See Gayle Rubin, 'The catacombs: a temple of the butthole' in Mark Thompson (ed) *Leatherfolk*, Los Angeles: Daedalus, 2004.