5. Queer Diversions

A subcultural community's artistic express can constantly draw on its own forms and standards, in order to create specific narratives. In so doing, the conversation can be conducted either with a heteronormative society, or about the same, and be authored by queer and non-queer people alike. Even *the* location of gay liberation, the Stonewall Inn, which symbolized queer recreation in that period, was planned, built and run by the local mafia—i.e. by non-queer people.[1]

Queer entertainment encompasses silent pleasures like books and paintings alongside more visible expressions, including music, bars, clubs, and perform. It reflects itself at the level of the personal, in jokes, how people are addressed, innocuous-seeming conversational topics, and much more. Queer diversion functions as a meeting point, as an experience of what one has in common. Understood in this way, it's no twentieth century invention, but rather one with deeper historical roots. It should be added that queer entertainment is only formalized, or a component of productions, in some of its means of expression. It's much more common for queer interactions to be expressed in everyday situations, which follow a looser, less formal script. This cultural template can be broken down, within a queer culture, into subcultural narratives, can intermittently draw on international codes—through, for example, popular cult figures in public life—but can also demonstrate regional specifics. Queer diversions turn up to an equal extent in both public and

1 David Carter, *Stonewall, The Riots that sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: Macmillan 2004), 79ff.

private spaces, and can be continually produced and reproduced—if this is what the participants present want and are able to set in motion:

> Gay culture can refer to new works of literature, film, music, art, drama, dance, and performance that are produced by queer people and that reflect on queer experience. Gay culture can also refer to mainstream works created mostly by heterosexual artists, plus some (closeted) queer ones, that queer people have selectively appropriated and reused for anti-heteronormative purposes.[2]

At the end of his pioneering work on the reality of *How to be Gay*,[3] the American queer theoretician David Halperin attempts to define gay culture. But his attempt to do so without an overarching queer principle is somewhat off target. His bid references a broad understanding of the persons involved, by finding articulations for queer people and their reflections of queer experiences, although his investigative methods have also enabled contributions from non-queer persons: in history, as today. Moreover, Halperin concludes that this form of culture, or sub-culture, is an essential factor in the queer community both before and since Stonewall:

> It is clear that traditional gay male culture–that is, subculture–continues to provide queers of all sorts with emotional, aesthetic, even political resources that turn out to be potent, necessary, and irreplaceable. The open and explicit gay male culture produced by gay liberation has not been able to supplant a gay male subculture, grounded in gay identification with non-gay forms, or to substitute for it an original gay male culture grounded in the vicissitudes of gay identity. The impetus driving much gay cultural production still springs less from gay existence than from gay desire.[4]

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2 David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2012), 421.

3 Halperin, *How to be Gay.*

4 Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 427.

The culture in question here is not merely a part of queer diversion, but also a logical form of expression. It's queer forms of interaction that create a cultural feeling of belonging to a group in the first place, and thus express belonging. Many of these forms have remained unpopular codes, provoking little interest among societal majorities. But this seems to have changed, at least partly, with the end of the twentieth century and the coming of the twenty-first. Not only are series, films, books, and theater plays one part of a greater reception of (queer) entertainment: increasingly, they can now be experienced in the very essence of this subculture:

> When it debuted on TV, *Will & Grace*[5] was revolutionary. Not only was it the first mainstream LGBTQ sitcom on TV, but it was one in which gay life was portrayed in a naturalistic way; … Television–particularly on cable and streaming sites–has changed exponentially in the 20 years since the show began, with a myriad of diverse representations of the LGBTQ community …[6]

These subcultural insights, contextualized within the framework of a broad public, evidently affect queer labeling and stigmatization. Beyond that, amusing cultural forms such as these have the capacity to change the norms and ideals held by majorities. It's particularly television and internet images that extend, repress, form, and abbreviate queer perception patterns and their respective expectations. In so doing, normative parameters of the societal majority continue to be formative, for example in questions of how much intimacy and skin is allowed to be shown, or how explicit dialogues are allowed to become, but no one's claiming that the walls of the permissible cannot be shifted. Rather, these boundaries are mostly left unarticulated in the negotiation process—apart, that is, from clear legal stipulations—because media

5 *Will & Grace* was an American TV series that ran from 1998–2020. "Will & Grace," IMDB, accessed November 8, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0157246/.

6 Jane Mulkerrins, "'We had death threats': the defiant return of Will & Grace," in: *Guardian (US Edition)*, January 20, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jan/20/we-had-death-threats-the-defiant-return-of-will-grace.

formats count on generating interest and not disapproval amongst the target audience: this can, in the case of early evening programming, be the general mass of viewers. Programmers aim for precisely this fine line between social disgust and witty surprises. Despite this is tightrope act, the whole premise that the format aims at is a comprehensive success. The thinness of this line also encompasses the boundary, vital in subcultural terms, of whether audiences laugh with a TV character, or about him.

Since the start of the millennium, further queer formats have been able to establish themselves in a generally perceptible context. In so doing, these formats have placed specific facets of a queer subculture in the public spotlight. Media-based processes during recent decades also clearly exemplify how rapidly notions of adequate entertainment have changed in postmodern, virtually interconnected societies. Or, as an alternative summary: how strongly the virtualization of media formats was able to conquer global markets, and subcultural target groups—and how this virtualization influences, in turn, societal imaginations:

> Through Drag Race, the language of drag is not just gaining recognition by a wider public–it is being turned into a new art form through memes, GIFs, and content that floods millions of people's social media feeds. … On Drag Race, language stops being just subcultural "lingo" and is a vehicle for spreading and popularizing drag slang, which is heavily used, explained, and commented on during the show and subsequently adopted by pop culture.[7]

Drawing from a particular kind of New York ballroom dancing scene,[8] the artist and performer RuPaul created a series format, which had what it takes to blow queer boundaries and heteronormative ideas to the wind.

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7 Carolina Are, "How 'RuPaul's Drag Race' changed the way we speak" (02.10.2019), in: *Quartz*, October 2, 2019, https://qz.com/quartzy/1715788/how-rupau ls-drag-race-made-lgbtq-culture-mainstream/.

8 Presented, for example, in: Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* (Documentary film, 1990), available on IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100332/.

His *Drag Race* pulled drag performance, one segment of queer performance culture, onto center stage, a position from which it has enjoyed uncanny levels of media popularity ever since. Drag performance, which has not always been appreciated lovingly within queer subculture, has gone on from here to achieve cult status. This status is expressed in the most various ways, by a spectrum of artists of all genders—and amusement always remains at the heart of this entertainment format:

> Much of the openly gay-themed culture that has emerged since Stonewall continues to share the revolutionary goals of gay liberation. Its originality, artistic experimentation, and sheer brilliance are very far removed from the standard gay identity politics of the mainstream gay movement. But that genuinely inventive gay culture has suffered the same fate as the identity-based culture that emerged in the same period, insofar as both seem to arouse in gay audiences a similar sense of tedium. It is as if contemporary gay people have a hard time distinguishing truly original, innovative queer work from the comparatively trite, politically earnest, in-group cultural productions that you find on the Logo[9] Channel.[10]

Indeed David Halperin, who I've already cited in previous chapters, thinks that media representations of queer contents in today's world threaten to make queer, creative inventive richness banal. It's an open question whether Halperin is right in this assertion. But it's indisputable that RuPaul's show format, and the queer contents which this stages, certainly exert a profound influence on postmodern queer communities, and on society in general.[11]

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9 "Logo is a television and digital entertainment brand inspired by and for the LGBTQ+ community. From entertainment to activism, Logo features one-of-a-kind personalities, shows, specials, and stories with a distinctly queer lens." Logo's description of itself, on: *YouTube*, last accessed X November, 2023, https://w ww.youtube.com/user/LogoTV/about.

10 David Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 428.

11 See: Cameron Crookston, ed., *The Cultural Impact of RuPaul's Drag Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

We can say, and therein lies the viable compromise implicit in David Halpern's appraisal, that queer amusement is subject to constant and permanent social influences, which can emanate from the queer community itself, but also, evidently, from far-reaching trends, or popular measures. Gay Liberation in Manhattan in 1969 had, for example, a genuinely fundamental influence on which forms and structures pertaining to a queer subculture were then relayed to a wider public. In his dissertation on the queer economy in New York City, historian Christopher Mitchell concludes:

> [Q]ueer people themselves–as the central entrepreneurs, displacing the older system of the closet economy in which straight outsiders, typically under the aegis of organized crime, dominated. As a movement that has occurred largely within markets, Gay Liberation and liberalization is a remarkable achievement for a social group whose very emergence was defined by and limited to stigmatized and criminalized markets. However, the history of the market also suggests some important limitations.[12]

Queer amusement of that period underwent a radical transformation, which must ultimately be traced back to changes in societal systems and politics. However, such transformations in queer life are a continuous development, which makes a moment or period of fixity seem impossible. Queer recognition of wanted and high-demand entertainment forms has altered constantly, and fitted into the givens of any particular period or place. It would be wrong to believe that queer illegality could completely prevent queer amusements happening, or that global interconnections could not also unleash their impacts in those regions of the world, in which queer life in everyday culture can be threatened with strong repressive measures.

12 Christopher A. Mitchell, "The Transformation of Gay Life from the Closet to Liberation, 1948–1980: New York City's Gay Markets as a Study in Late Capitalism," (PhD diss., Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2015), 408.

> [T]he creation of a public discourse of gay pride and the practice of "coming out" enervated the power of anti-gay stigma to constrain gay social, cultural, economic, and ultimately political activities. Rather than a successive chronology, my framework views this long period of liberalization as one in which the market-based aims of liberalization and the more politically intersectional and transformative aims of Gay Liberation overlapped and sometimes competed. … If, as my introduction suggests, the more recent past has been characterized by the collapse of the local gay market, then it behooves activists and thinkers in the LGBTQ movement to look not only at the ways in which market strategies can help us to break down the barriers of racial, gender, and economic justice as well as the ways in which those strategies have been incommensurate to the task.[13]

And it would be truly pointless to deny this shift. There's been a substantial decrease in the number of establishments in New York's queer bar scene, which has been celebrated for decades far beyond the city boundaries:

> While all gay bar listings declined by 36.6 percent between 2007 and 2019, the number of listings for bars serving people of color declined by 59.3 percent, cruisy men's bar listings declined by 47.5 percent, and bars for women declined by 51.6 percent. Discussions of gay bar closures should pay attention to those LGBT communities at greatest risk of losing their places.[14]

This is a transition that runs through entire queer neighborhoods, which have crystallized in urban centers across most of the globe. But attempts to put the brakes on this trend have had little success to date:

> Some worry about cities losing prominent cultural identities as neighborhoods shrink, even to the point of suggesting municipal

13 Christopher Mitchell, *The Transformation*, 409.

14 Greggor Mattson, "Are Gay Bars Closing? Using Business Listings to Infer Rates of Gay Bar Closure in the United States, 1977–2019," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5, (2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119 894832.

> interventions such as rent controls. But the shift appears to be happening organically as cities and societies undergo a variety of changes, and even the best-intentioned government interventions have the potential to backfire. Municipal leaders largely seem to be working with the changing neighborhoods and embracing the progress and innovation that comes with more integrated cities.[15]

Indeed, social change in a queer community cannot be artificially delayed and is, exemplified in the histories recounted in the above, a continuous process. Demand, in the early twenty-first century, for queer amusement as a core ingredient of recognizable neighborhoods, is lower than in preceding decades. The experiencing of omnifarious queer social needs, and concrete wishes and demands for queer and amusing ways to spend free time, has largely moved into the omnipresent virtual sphere: accessible any place, any time.

Virtual dating platforms make getting to know people via one's cellphone or computer easy, and ordering queer-specific products online is equally straightforward. Analogue dates arising from such digital encounters take place in liberal—although not specifically queer—settings, or relocate to the private sphere.

This queer-cultural transformation, which has barely been reflected on in some quarters, can unleash questionable ramifications, particularly when the marginalization of queer individuals in structuring any kind of entertainment and its reception—especially in the context of queer entertainment—fosters negative associations:

> But it's an unavoidable truth that the rise in cultural representation in the US and UK is also at odds with the lived experience of many LGBTQ+ people. The last 10 years might have brought with them new legislative freedoms–but these have been met with a backlash, including a shocking rise in hate crime on both sides of the Atlantic. … As

15 Katie Pyzyk, "The disappearance of the modern-day 'gayborhood'," in: *Smart Cities Dive,* November 7, 2017, https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/the-disappearanc e-of-the-modern-day-gayborhood/510134/.

> capitalism tightens its grip on queer stories, we should pay close attention to the type of LGBTQ+ stories that are becoming marketable–and also who is benefitting from the way that these stories are being told. While culture might appear to be embracing LGBTQ+ stories, if it fails to embrace LGBTQ+ creators too, then this decade's queer awakening might end up being "just a phase."[16]

Discrepancies certainly can result in the tension between the reproduction of reality, and real circumstances. When the queer ideal assumes entirely other forms in everyday life, so that images transmitted by the media have merely a partial effect—or none at all—then a danger arises: a deceptive illusion of recognition can mislead people regarding the genuine depths of influential attributions. This can influence individuals that could and want to be part of any kind of entertainment, but don't match with the arbitrary ideals pertaining to these. Moreover, these deceptions can become a tough, quotidian experience for all those who cannot, or don't want to fulfill the clichés they're suddenly confronted with.

Spatial and emotional distances within a queer neighborhood may be to blame for this individualization process. Swaps are made, whereby community activities, and a collective sense of being together, are exchanged for opportunities to structure one's own life. Because it can be understood as a "law of nature," that individuals have only a limited time on earth to fulfil their needs, many forms of real entertainment remain unused and ignored in our modern era. The virtual collective appears to provide sufficient fulfillment, and what's on offer in the field of queer entertainment, and the welcome side effects accompanying such pursuits—fun, love, friendship, and sex—exist merely as phenomena for an occasional weekend. In so doing, the autonomously led organization of private relationships, as a part of free individualization, alters not only

16 Louis Staples, "Did culture really embrace queer people this decade?" on *BBC Culture,* December 26, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191218-the-de cade-that-saw-queerness-go-mainstream.

the collectivity of real queer communities, but also the classic configurations of social constructs, including family and partnership:

> However, alongside this, there was also strong evidence amongst the people interviewed of a set of interrelated relationship practices that served reparatively to suture the selves undone by processes of individualization. These practices can be understood as counter-heteronormative, in that they challenged the dominant heterosexual model of personal relationships that values and privileges the co-residential conjugal couple relationship above all others. These practices were: the prioritizing of friendship, the de-centring of sexual/love relationships, and the forming of non-conventional partnerships. … This meant that very few people constructed the sexual/love relationship as the exclusive space of intimacy in their lives, and indeed for many it was not even the primary space of intimacy. This de-centring of the sexual/love relationship was understood self-reflexively by many interviewees as consequent on the experience of divorce or the ending of a long-term cohabiting relationship; the pain and disruption this caused was seen as giving rise to a new orientation to relationships—the linked downplaying of sexual/love relationships and the increased valuing of friendships.[17]

Based on this qualitative analysis, I can articulate a suspicion: communities of interest, centered on the agency of queer collectives, are not alone in experiencing a symbolic form of anti-solidarity. Beyond this, such communities now only play a partial role—if any role at all—in the perceptions of a queer individual.

The queer cultures that lie behind such communities—in a trend comparable to the cultures of relevant NGOs—are increasingly being lost, together with their regional, social, and societal politics components. When they are kept alive, this labor is carried out by just a few, an endeavor with more chance of success when grants and membership

17 Sasha Roseneil, "Queer Individualization: The Transformation of Personal Life in the Early 21st Century," *NORA—Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 2–3 (2007): 92n, https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740701482952.

fees ensure support their continued operations, and they don't rely solely on turnover.

Are we threatened with the end of a diverse queer entertainment scene? Or, and possibly worse, its exclusive reduction to experiences of sexuality?

> Of all the men going to sex venues, 75 % went to public cruising areas and 61 % to baths. We found that 39 % of men who went to sex venues went only to public cruising areas (cruisers), 25 % went only to baths (bathers), and 36 % went to both types of venues (multi-venue users). The demographic characteristics of the men were similar across the 3 possible patterns of venue use, although men younger than 26 years and men older than 55 were more likely to be cruisers (50 % and 57 %, respectively) than were men in their mid-20s to mid-50s (33 %–46 %).[18]

Despite the virtual options, physical and sexually entertaining locations are demonstrating an impressive tenacity. Several different arguments could provide explanations for this: earlier convictions, that an individual could operate anonymously online, have been taken down several pegs, by a growing and general awareness about data protection issues. On the other hand, nigh on unerring profiles of desire can be extracted from virtual behavior patterns, which can compromise and disadvantage precisely those individuals who want queer sex and sexuality, but don't want to join a queer community. Moreover, certain groups opting out of virtual sexuality realms means that those deciding to subject themselves to heteronomous or autonomous virtual representation accumulate a critical potential that's larger than other groups have, but also more vulnerable. There are also considerable numbers who regard such virtual abbreviations, the reduction of oneself to just a few labels, and the self-marketing that goes with it, as a mystery, or simply

18 Diane Binson, William J. Woods, Lance Pollack, Jay Paul, Ron Stall, and Joseph A. Catania, "Differential HIV Risk in Bathhouses and Public Cruising Areas," *American Journal of Public Health* 91, no. 9 (2001): 1484, https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.91.9.1482.

unsatisfying. In any case: while virtual forms of getting to know people do work for large numbers—user statistics speak for themselves—the physical consolidation of these encounters still requires real spaces to be put into practice: such spaces are usually shared, or only available within the framework of tight-knit social groupings. Beyond this, a virtual initiation into a new relationship can take much longer, because the personal situations of the interested parties can remain unknown to the other for long, or because mobility, under particular circumstances, hardly seems possible. And this without even providing an account of the power with which social media reduces individuals down to a couple of pictures, which, when swapped between persons, leads to decisions, taken within seconds, about whether a meeting is desired, even possible, or has already been ruled out. Users of queer, sexual amusement locations are spared some of this hassle, because the location, a shared time, and by and large a shared motivation—why one's come to the location in the first place—seem to be unequivocal. With this background, it won't surprise readers to hear that such locations that are happy to facilitate their users paying in cash, and know how to protect their customers' anonymity.

Yet doubts remain. Can and should the whole gamut of queer entertainment in postmodern and virtually interconnected societies really be reduced to sex alone? I presented an initial response to this question at a 2017 conference:

> Backrooms and darkrooms still exist, and are still being set up anew. First because there are still many men without options of intimate sexual contacts in their everyday heteronorm-designed life, and second, queer culture is inevitable pinned on sexual desire. Same-sex intimacy is, unnecessary what intensity, something "different." Every space where this intimacy can happen without disappointing social concepts of normality, are decent for all queer-defined people at many steps in their lives. Moreover observing the social interaction in back/darkrooms it becomes clear that such spaces are much about an egalitarian understanding on basic principles of sexual attraction, where – because of the non-conformity of this rooms – other social

> and informal customs, bias or social rules are not that relevant in a Bourdieu'ish self-understanding and self-representation. Comparing to the all-embracing heteronormativity, back/darkrooms are perhaps spaces of impossibility of living queer companionship and intimacy.[19]

Spaces that have a primary connection to sexuality are genuinely more than merely locations of desire. Rather, these zones provide possibilities for queer-social interactions, which detach themselves, markedly, from a heteronormative understanding of space, and thus open up spaces for gender and sexual diversity. These geographical points have been, and remain, often places with traditions of consistently providing options for activities/modes of being that have been condemned socially in many locations. These niches of queer freedom have been and still are tightly defined bubbles, which must house an incredible amount, and endure, in the smallest physical spaces imaginable. That said, what is self-evident about them often shoves its way into the foreground of etic perceptions: sexuality.

But such exclusive forms of perceiving would do both queer locations and queer amusement an injustice—focusing too narrowly on the self-evident here covers up a wealth of significant facets. Of course, gender and sexuality build a strong connection between those present in a queer context, but this doesn't necessarily mean that one singular intention informs this attendance. Instead, a plurality of motivations join together, which make such spaces seem exclusive: verbal and cultural exchanges, being how one is, getting to know people, or the wish to spend a few minutes with kindred spirits, for whom what is usually one's own seems so utterly normal. The queer amusement happening at such locations is, in community terms, broader, and socially deeper, than people think, and is thus closer to the miscellany of variegated human needs than I suspected when I began these deliberations.

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19 Martin J. Gössl, "Dark/Backrooms: The Meaning of Queer Spaces of Sex" (unpublished Conference Paper given on November 3, 2017). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328686195.

In this light, it makes sense that certain forms of entertainment, image, and language are deeply anchored in almost any form of queer amusement. Whether we're talking about drag culture, displaying naked skin covered only by limited clothing (worn by both guests and staff), political discourse pertinent to the subjects at hand, the commonplace and visible screening of queer pornos, rapid wit and banter that hits its targets, the discarding of gender-based normativity in behavior, the omnipresence of HIV, and much, much more: queer amusement provides space for all these elements. In specifying certain elements, and in projects counter to heteronormativity, queer entertainment is a lived, performative activity—not at all times and everywhere, of course, but certainly interpreted in terms of superordinated significance—to quench not only sexual desire, but also individuals' needs to be in a collective, queer, cultural world. While this queer cultural normality may occasionally serve profane forms, these very same forms contribute to the construction of a different normality. This is what makes it inappropriate to judge the quality of such cultural offerings. Queer entertainment, and the locations at which this happens, are synonymous with political and historical spaces. This subculture has had no choice but to establish itself within the confines of the possible—and under the circumstances prevailing in any given era. Even when particular large media-based productions do get a positive, and queer-cultural reception in the perceptions of the general public—and this is unquestionably welcome—local structures remain essential, in terms of the specificity of their provision, and thereby subject to other rules. A general appreciation of queer intimacy, closeness, and distance is still subject to a heteronormative foundational structure in postmortem and virtually interconnected societies. In some locations, this structure can be left behind, at least for a while, so that these locations can provide real alternatives. A queer community cannot turn its back on queer-media formats, and queer-regional niches—even when the particulars of what's on offer aren't to everybody's taste.