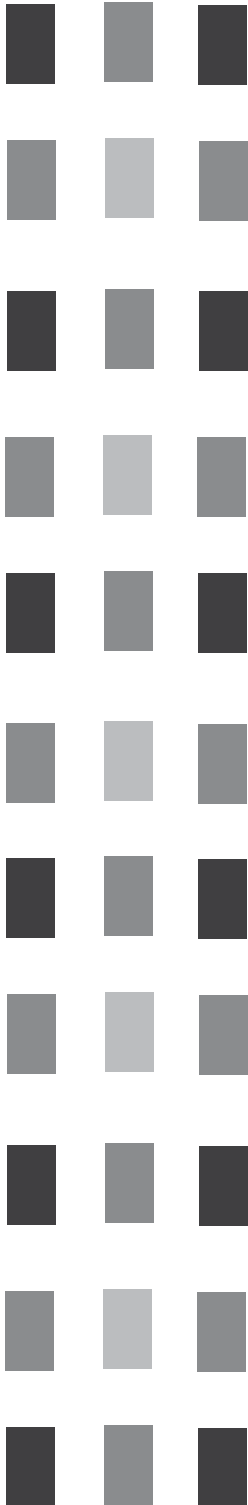


# The Queer Gaze

*Tim Wray*



This paper shall ask how the city is understood and is meaningful for queers, using ideas from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which I find resonate with themes common in queer culture. I use the term 'queer' because it describes a cultural position, rather than sexual orientation alone, better than labels such as 'gay' or 'homosexual' do. The word 'queer' has connotations of ideas of difference, transgression and subversion which are essential to gay culture, and being less specific it allows a certain leeway in whom and what it includes. Nonetheless when I talk about 'queers' I mean gay men, not lesbians, transsexuals or others, who all have their own particular relationships to the city. I do not want either to imply that I am speaking for all gay men, rather this paper is a personal exploration of my experiences of queer urban life.

Queer identity is constituted in modern urban experience – in the city with the opportunities it affords to live anonymously within society and to encounter our own kind. We depend upon cities, our communities are in cities, we are defined by cities. Up until recent decades, before homosexuality was widely legally or socially accepted, gay identity was founded in illicit, hidden, subversive practices. Since then there has been amazing progress, to the point where it is even fashionable to be queer. But there is an ambivalence about our place in this new world; we desire to be accepted and absorbed whilst also desiring to distinguish ourselves from others. We of course do not want to be excluded as in previous decades, but resist against becoming indistinguishable and unidentifiable within an all-consuming consumer culture.

What constitutes queer identity when, as Aaron Betsky writes, 'queers are disappearing'<sup>1</sup>: 'We are all becoming part of a consumer society in which there is a premium on interchangeable, malleable data, icons, and symbols ... we are increasingly post-middle-class, post-individual, post-body ... Out in the suburbs, queers are starting families that are no stranger than those of the single-parent, oft-divorced, and always-moving standard unit.'<sup>2</sup>

What then constitutes queer identity today? And how can we investigate this question? Despite being increasingly discredited as a science, and made potentially redundant as any sort of cure for treating psychological problems by medical advances in understanding how the mind works, psychoanalysis continues to appeal to theorists as a means of exploring how the individual understands and relates to them self, to others and to their surroundings.

For me its appeal as an architectural historian lies anyway in its poetic construction rather than in its medical legitimacy, and in its acceptance of memories, feelings, impressions, perceptions and names in determining the meaning of buildings

and places. Psychoanalytic theory allows for the hidden, for the mythic and poetic.

It also takes us beyond the meta-narratives of history, economics and social structures, to relate individual thoughts, perceptions and identities to our cultural, social and physical surroundings.

Psychoanalysis is useful in that it denies that sexuality and gender roles are solely biological. It is also particularly useful in reading queer experience in that it locates sexuality at the heart of subjectivity – if our sense of ourselves and our perceptions of our surroundings are determined by our sexualised identities and our sense of our own bodies, and if we can talk about particular feminist or patriarchal perceptions and imaginations, can we also talk about a queer subjectivity?

Examining queer identity through psychoanalysis also allows us to go beyond much existing queer theory, which understandably often focuses on predominantly political and social battles, and on exclusively gay spaces and sexual behaviour: on gay bars, back rooms and cruising spots. For me the most interesting sites for asking about queer subjectivity however are the shared public spaces of the city where we are confronted with how we identify ourselves in everyday life; just as they became the critical territory for Freud to learn about the psychoanalytic patient. To quote Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders: 'The commerce of everyday encounters constituted the primary source materials of interior reflection his patients brought to their private sessions with Freud. The transactions of the street quickly became the transferences of the therapeutic scene.'<sup>3</sup>

Psychoanalysis has been rightly criticised for the prejudicial assumptions it makes about female sexuality in particular, and the role it assigns to male sexuality does not rest easily with queers either; but this does not discredit it as an investigation into the way gender roles are culturally learnt and imposed, or into the way in which such roles are inscribed from childhood on within us. To study gender roles is not to accept their inevitability. My view is that while Freud might have perceptively understood the psychological make-up of bourgeois Viennese men living in the dying days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and their female counterparts somewhat less successfully; and Lacan the French society in which he lived; we need to revise their work to make it relevant to today. That is to say that psychoanalytic insights are culturally dependent, and not necessarily universally true.

I draw here particularly upon Steve Pile's interpretation of Freud and Lacan in his book *The Body and the City*<sup>4</sup>, both for the emphasis he places on spatiality, and for the lead he gives in showing how psychoanalysis can be appropriated for other discourses. The most fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis is that the mind works on more levels than

that of conscious thought alone, that our behaviour and perceptions are driven by inaccessible and often inexplicable forces. In the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan the mind is split into three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, which roughly approximate Freud's Ego, Super-ego and Id agencies. Psychoanalysis places critical significance for subjectivity in the process by which children learn to identify themselves and to interact with others, and Lacan's three orders can be usefully described as being taken on in phases of childhood growth, though they must be understood as being ever present in our development and experience, but taking on greater or lesser significance at particular times.<sup>5</sup>

I shall examine queer experiences of the city through a discussion of these three orders.

I

Firstly the Imaginary<sup>6</sup>: According to Lacan, a sense of unreality in human experience is rooted in how we identify ourselves in looking at the world. As children we encounter our mirrored image reflected around us. It is only in this mirror image that we can see our whole body, and so we assume the identity of this idealised body-image or imago. But we also discover that the mirror image has no substance and can be played with, and that although the imago is there in that it can be seen, it is of course also not really there. Internal and external spaces or absences emerge; between the body we occupy and the body imago with which we identify ourselves, between the real and mirrored worlds.

A sense of unreality comes to haunt spatial relationships, and to cope with the resulting confusion as children we strictly delineate 'me' from 'not me', distancing ourselves from our idealised imago. We thus mis-identify in looking as we seek to naturalise our place in the world. But in fact no object is seen without our thinking of ourselves in relation to it, and so when we look at any object it also looks back at us. So Lacan said that 'I only see from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides'<sup>7</sup>

An objectifying regime of looking and looking-back – the gaze – is thus established. The gaze is never innocent, it relates sight to our understanding of our own body, and institutes desire as we look at objects and want them to look back at us, to confirm our reality.

Queer codes of looking undermine the certainties of the gaze. Growing up queer there is always a point when we realise ourselves to be different, but this difference must immediately be controlled depending on where we are and who we are with. A tension is set up between the appearance we are obliged to project, and our sense of our own

image. Very early, often long before we can accept or understand ourselves to be queer, sexuality is related to an idea that identity is no more than a constructed image. Like surrealism, the queer gaze questions any 'natural' appearance, and the transformability of our identities contests that there can ever be a unified subject who is the spectator of the world.

There can be no assumption of a natural given identity when one so carefully chooses to construct identity through codes of dress, appearance and conduct. Nothing so defines queer behaviour on the street as the questioning gaze, constantly having to recognise the returned look which signals interest, as well as warning signs that we should hide our gaze. Joel Sanders, quoting D. A. Miller, writes that "(p)erhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men." ... [Q]ueers have had to depend not only on legible signs – clothing, grooming, mannerisms – but on the visibility of the look itself to identify other queers.<sup>8</sup>

The gaze is considered to be a male preserve: men assume the active gaze and make women its passive object, it distinguishes, objectifies, is used by men seeking otherness in women. But where the male gaze expects to find a compatible other object of attention the queer gaze looks to be reflected, looks for a mirroring of the same desires back, locates men as both subject and object, uncomfortably challenging the role-identity of all it surveys.<sup>9</sup> We play a game with the look, making ourselves visible then invisible through it, situating ourselves amongst the myriad gazes of the city as if on stage. Urban settings provide the perfect architecture for this game, whose ultimate prize is sex: underground trains and tunnels where we can exploit the forced proximity of other people, and whose rushing crowds give scope for manoeuvring to see and be seen; airports and stations where with nothing better to do with the time watching others is acceptable; streets where we judge the backward glance over our shoulders to see if the boy we just passed is looking too, or watch each other through the reflections in shopfronts; shops where display and the appraising gaze can be subverted.

Rather than resisting the eeriness of the world of objects looking back at us through the gaze we are always conscious of being watched, like ghosts devoid of substance, who exist only as an image. Instead of seeing space as a domain to be surveyed and ordered the queer gaze questions how we are situated in it, the reality of 'me' and 'I', what is here and what is there. It values appearance, spectacle and mirage over substance, permanence and order. The queer gaze contests the integrity and legibility of the façade, passes through it.

## II

The second of Lacan's orders is the Symbolic.<sup>10</sup> In psychoanalytic theory, our sexual drives are represented not only by social laws and codes of conduct,<sup>11</sup> but by the prohibitions which we impose upon ourselves as we develop into thinking subjects in the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex arises with the realisation of desire for others, and the realisation that these desires must be censored.

Lacan reconfigures Freud's Oedipus complex as the entry into language. Before Oedipus we happily exist in a relationship with our mirror image (and our Mother). The threat of castration is the threat that this relationship might be broken, and the idealised complete body of the imago lost. The threat is not against the anatomical penis as for Freud, but against the symbolic Phallus – i.e. that our desires might be erased. Under this threat we must enter language, and suppress our desires and fears into the unconscious.

Both Freud and Lacan conceived of subjectivity as spatial,<sup>12</sup> and both describe hidden places in subjectivity – Freud the landscape of the mind like a hidden archaeology<sup>13</sup> – and Lacan an absent place between ourselves and our mirrored imago, and somewhere absent in language.<sup>14</sup> We must all learn to use language, words constitute our subjectivity. But according to Lacan because the language is not ours, but is something alien which we must adopt, we are unable to truly express ourselves in it, our words are never adequate. We are constituted in language, but are also alienated in it. We are unable to express our needs. There is always a gap between what is meant and what is said. Lacan argues that this absence or gap at the heart of human subjectivity can never be filled.

The definition of 'I', of oneself, is not only constructed, but is fundamentally unstable, because there is no fixed 'real' identity or place to return to. According to Diana Fuss the question "who is speaking" can only be answered by shifting the grounds of the question to "where am I speaking from?" But it is important to remember that the place of the subject is nonetheless, ultimately, unlocalizable ...<sup>15</sup>

Desire is alienated; in language we identify ourselves by comparison with others, through decisions along the lines of 'like me/not like me' or 'want to be like/don't want to be like', and so in language as in sight we exist only through others. Quoting Steve Pile: 'when Lacan says that "you never look at me from the place which I see you" and "what I look at is never what I wish to see", he is not only marking the impossibility of bringing the eye and the gaze together, but also the impossibility of recovering a "true" place through, and in language.'<sup>16</sup>

The impossibility of belonging is heightened in queer experience; and not only because we can

never altogether fit in the straight world. Our desire not for something missing in us to be found in the other, but for the same, for what we already know, brings us face to face with a reflection of our own incompleteness. Queer literature is haunted by a sense of alienation and something or somewhere missing, and a resulting searching.

This searching classically manifests itself in travel to cities whose names have acquired an almost mythic power; Thomas Mann to Venice, Christopher Isherwood to Berlin, Gore Vidal to LA, James Baldwin to Paris. Edmund White suggests that it is 'as though acceptance and adventure will be found only elsewhere, For E M Forster, who'd travelled enough to be disillusioned, "elsewhere" turns out to be supernatural'.<sup>17</sup>

There is a restlessness in queer desire. Aware of the artifice of image-identity and the way names trap us we resist the idea that we can have any 'true' self and however much we might long for a 'true' place we know that it also cannot exist, and that if it did it would deny us. There is a resulting nihilistic streak to queer culture, sometimes it seems that we desire more than anything not to recover or discover what we are, but to forget ourselves. We travel not to find somewhere, but to escape ourselves.

## III

A discussion of language leads us to the third of Lacan's orders, the Real<sup>18</sup>. According to Lacan in entering language we subjugate ourselves to its laws, we think through language but in doing so think following its codes and rules. We are labelled and defined in language, and because our subjectivity only exists in that same language, so we must adopt the definitions and behaviour it decrees.

Language says 'you're a boy' and what boys should do; boys shouldn't like other boys, and so being queer entails a transgression of your own 'proper' identity. For Freud civilisation and society are repressive, but in a modern city we cannot claim that they are particularly repressive of queers; nonetheless while not prejudicing against us society maintains the straight couple and the family as idealised models. More than a question of external sanction psychoanalysis would suggest that this creates internalised tensions.

Loss, and the response to it, are central to a psychoanalytic explanation of personality development. Under threat of castration we must renounce our cosy pre-Oedipal world, and defend ourselves by the super-ego locking up the lost place or time as an ideal to be aspired to and a moral standard. When confronted with the myth of an idealised pre-sexual childhood it can seem that Freud was right and maybe we do after all desire to return to the security of a lost infancy. So powerful is

the idea of the natural rightness of the family that queers often find it hard to reconcile memories with the idea that even as children we were gay. We become divorced from our own histories.

Simple feelings of loss are complicated by an ambivalence about the value of that which is lost when we must reject dreams of our old lives to build new ones now. We have to embrace loss; loss of our old selves in inventing a new identity, loss of ever fully belonging to the world of 'happy families', loss of belief in our memories of home. We are ambivalent about the symbolism of 'home'; it is somewhere we long for but somewhere which denies us.

In the end we belong to the unhomey, to the artificial, to the city. We have little to identify with but our urban existence, and so queer culture exploits its ambiguities and transience, its strangeness. Instead of travelling to find a geographically different place we find imaginary alternative worlds in our own cities, find myths and stories in them. Aaron Betsky writes that an 'embrace of yearning floats through queer literature, intensified by a sense of loss and the impossibility of integration with everyday life. It gives an opening toward mythic landscapes that remain closed to those searching for a rational space of belonging within the metropolis.'<sup>19</sup>

'Mythic landscapes' are normally confined to the world of dreams, images and ghosts. This is the territory of the Real, a place of residues, fragments and memories, of unconscious thought. The Real is the place which remains 'us' despite the values and roles we assume through the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Real is beyond language and exists only in images.

Queer questioning of identity and place also provokes the normal boundaries of objectivity, seeks out the unconscious. This is not only a question of transgressing social codes, though in the past this has been more important; it is a question of transgressing definitions, of escaping words.

Queer identity is found not only in roles and relationships, it is also an idea. The queer city is as much an idea as it is a way of using urban space, or political or social practice. With so many of our

queer ideas, dreams and fantasies set is it the city becomes myth and image as much as material, even an apparition. There can anyway be no stable identity which is founded in modern urbanity: cities are constantly shifting and reshaping, their identity in flux. The psychoanalytic description of the mind as a place of instability, tension and hidden drives finds its perfect case study in the ambivalence, confusion and contradictions inherent in living between the idea and the shifting realities of the queer city.

## To conclude

It has been suggested to me that what I am discussing is not in fact specifically the queer city, but modern urban existence, and perhaps this is true. The experience of the city as an unstable, alien place is by no means a uniquely queer phenomenon. It is not only in queer literature that we find a loss of identity or a sense of instability in urban existence, or a feeling that the city is somehow unreal. But perhaps such symptoms are so prevalent in queer culture because our identity is so grounded in urbanity.

Psychoanalysis tells us that how we perceive and understand our surroundings depends on who we think ourselves as viewers to be, which is to say on where we are looking from. There is an inherent contradiction in the idea of queer identity, in that this identity is founded in a questioning and deconstruction of identity roles. To discuss or to seek to define queer identity is thus also problematic. Queers are ambivalent towards, sometimes even resentful of, identity; we want to belong and we don't; and so we celebrate ambiguities in boundaries, definitions and roles – ambiguity is perhaps the key identifying feature of queer culture. Looking through the queer gaze we search for these ambiguities – for the hidden, disguised and imaginary in the city.

Author:

Tim Wray

The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL,  
London

## Notes:

- 1 Betsky, Aaron: *Queer Space, Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, New York, 1997, p. 14.
- 2 Ibid., p. 14.
- 3 Fuss and, Diana, Sanders, Joel: *Berggasse 19: Inside Freud's Office*, in: Sanders Joel (ed): *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity*, New York, 1996, p. 115.
- 4 Pile, Steve: *The Body and the City*, London, 1996.
- 5 See *ibid.*, p. 137.
- 6 See *ibid.*, pp. 123–129.
- 7 Lacan quoted by Pile, Steve: *The Body and the City*, London, 1996, p. 128.
- 8 Sanders, Joel, Introduction to Sanders, Joel (ed): *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity*, New York, 1996, pp. 23–24.

- 9 See *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 10 See *op. cit.*, note 4, pp. 129–137.
- 11 Steve Pile writes that according to Freud 'civilisation requires the renouncing or displacement of sexual drives: culture frustrates human beings, while economic relations dictate the amount of sexual liberation that can be tolerated. Civilisation legislates which sexual objects are appropriate and at what age sexual behaviours are permitted: the perverse is forbidden. There is a requirement for a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregarding dissimilarities amongst people.' in: Pile, Steve: *The Body and the City*, London, 1996, p. 105.
- 12 See *ibid.*, pp. 142–144.
- 13 See *ibid.*, pp. 241–243.
- 14 See *ibid.*, p. 142.
- 15 Fuss, Diana: *Essentially Speaking, Feminism, Nature and Difference*, London, 1990, p. 30.
- 16 *Op. cit.*, note 4, p. 131.
- 17 White, Edmund: 'Foreword' to White, Edmund (ed): *The Faber Book of Short Fiction*, London, 1991, pxii.
- 18 See *op. cit.*, note 4, pp. 137–139.
- 19 *Op. cit.*, note 1, p. 191.