# The city as queer playground

Lets go to bed with each other! Or fool around in parks if there are no beds. Boys with girls, boys with boys, girls with girls, men with boys and girls, women with men or boys or girls or tamed little panthers – what's the difference? Let's embrace each other! Let's dance!

Klaus Mann

The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of the body.

Elizabeth Grosz

# Learning objectives

- To understand the changing relationship of sexuality and the city
- To conceive of sexuality as intersecting with race, class, and gender mapped onto the city
- To distinguish postwar shifts in the cinematic representation of gays and lesbians and queer desire

# Introduction

This lecture’s title invokes the playful and liberating aspects associated with the city in contemporary gay and lesbian culture. In 1969 the Stonewall riots marked the earlier historical turning point from homosexuality as a secret, underground activity to “out” lesbian and gay identities. “Stonewall” refers to the urban rebellion of drag queens on the piers of New York City against the police that enabled gay and lesbian life to be “out,” the public display of gay and lesbian identities, affections, and lifestyles.

In 1981, the AIDS crisis gave rise to radical queer activism, which enabled the queer culture of the 1980s and 1990s, including an explosion of queer cinema. AIDS was also the context for films that presented a dystopian view of a dark underworld defined by sexual perversion, alienation, violence, discrimination, and deviance, mobilizing homophobic fantasies of an urban gay and lesbian underworld that can kill on contact or turn innocent characters into killers, for example in Brian De Palma's Dressed to Kill (1980) and William Friedkin's Cruising (1980).

Gay and lesbian directors have since developed a diverse cinema that circulates transnationally and ranges from lowbudget, avant-garde, political films, to mainstream genre films. This lecture discusses representative examples of films that mark these shifts regarding the ways in which sexual desire and non-normative sexual practices are cinematically mapped onto the city.

# The sexual city

From the inception of modernity, cities, and particularly their public spaces, for example the streets, have been sexualized, as this volume has outlined. But certain world cities have always been particularly associated with gays and lesbians: Amsterdam, London, Paris, Berlin, Alexandria and Cairo, Istanbul, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, New York City, and Toronto are the best-known examples.

In some instances, it is not the entire city but a particular neighborhood that is associated with the consumption of sex through porno theatres or with gay and lesbian lifestyles, such as gay bars. Most of the oeuvre of gay enfant terrible John Waters celebrates the seedy culture of Baltimore's Fells Point, a former harbor neighborhood that was originally frequented by sailors and catered to them with B-film movie-houses and bars. John Rennie Short points out that cities include areas in which "sex is a commodity and alternative sexual practices take place," for example the "gay ghetto," which is sometimes associated with gentrification.

Identity categories of race, class, and sexuality intersect in the shaping of neighborhoods but they can also create divisions. Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras's film FlagWars (2003) documents conflicts between gay white men who are at the forefront of the gentrification of a poor, Black neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, and the original inhabitants of the neighborhood who are being displaced.

In the 1960s, a subgenre ostensibly re-enacted educational narratives, such as Doris Wishman's Bad Girls Go To Hell (1965) or Joseph P. Mawra's Chained Girls (1965). These films pretended to educate viewers about deviant behavior as a pretext to show titillating images. The tradition of integrating narrative, documentary footage, and educational information can be seen as early as 1919 in Germany's gay silent film Different from the Others (Richard Oswald, 1919), which mixes footage from a gay bar in Berlin in the 1910s and a lecture by Magnus Hirschfeld, sexologist and gay rights activist in Weimar Germany.

Different from the Others is set in Berlin, where the main character, Paul Körner, a music teacher, falls in love with his student, Kurt. Their visit to a gay bar is presented through documentary footage from a gay bar in Berlin in the 1910s that shows same-sex couples in costume dancing. After their visit, Körner is blackmailed because homosexuality is outlawed. The film paradigmatically integrates a story with documentary footage, and activism with educational enlightenment. It addresses the gay and lesbian community by offering a positive self-image on the screen.

Short emphasizes the “tension between emancipation and commodification” of sexual culture in the city, which also applies to gay and lesbian film culture. Many young gays and lesbians nowadays experience gay and lesbian normalcy, surrounded by queer characters in mainstream film and television. They are less dependent on the anonymity of the city and its sexual subculture. On the flipside of these developments in the last couple of decades, particularly in the West, gay and lesbian culture has been increasingly commodified.

# 1960s–1970s: homophobia and gay desire in the city

This double characteristic is especially pronounced in the portrayal of the city and its liberating, but also dangerous, even murderous, sexual subcultures. Gay and lesbian cinema has undergone radical changes throughout the twentieth century from its beginnings in Weimar Berlin to the repressive films of the 1950s in the USA, the films that represent gay and lesbian liberation in the 1960s, to the explosion of queer cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, and finally to the commodified television shows and mainstream gay and lesbian characters that populate mainstream film now.

Prior to the queer cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of mainstream depictions of gay life in the city were deeply shaped by homophobic anxieties. The danger of the bar is at the center of such films as Cruising (1980), which refers to the gay male practice of looking for men for anonymous sex in the city, in either bars or public parks. Cruising uses the gay male subculture of New York City as the setting for an action narrative in which a detective has to go underground to catch a man who engages in sadomasochistic practices with and then kills his sexual partners.

Here the city is synonymous with gay anonymous sex, which in turn is associated with murder. The film is part of a one-dimensional homophobic discourse that equates gay male sexuality with death, a dangerous equation that mirrored public anxieties during the emergence of the AIDS epidemic.

John Schlesinger’s earlier Midnight Cowboy (1969) paints a more sympathetic picture of its characters and the city, and complicates the relationship between the rural and the urban. Joe, an innocent and naïve young man from Texas takes a bus to New York City, where he intends to work as a – heterosexual – hustler. When his plan fails, the homeless Rizzo helps him survive in the city by showing him how to “squat” in empty buildings. Rizzo’s health is failing, and in order to save him Joe finally turns a gay trick (has sex for money) but kills his client for his money, so that he and Rizzo can take a bus to Florida. On the way Rizzo dies.

In Midnight Cowboy the difference between the country and the city is demarcated not so much by the presence or absence of sex, but by the ways in which sex is negotiated. The film suggests that in the city sex is open and liberated, while in the country it is repressed by individual and systematic violence. The city is inhabited by emancipated and sometimes  unscrupulous women who take advantage of Joe.

Walking the streets of the city structures Midnight Cowboy, a motif that has reoccurred throughout this all lectures. The film shows Joe alone, and later with Rizzo walking through the city, without dialogue or particular narrative development, one element that the following films share: The Last Laugh, Ángel Muñiz's Nueba Yol (1995), The Harder They Come, Lola and Billy the Kid, Boyz N the Hood, The Horse, Cléo from 5 to 7, Brothers and Sisters, Bush Mama, Shaft, and R'anan Alexandrowicz's James' Journey to Jerusalem (2003)

With the exception of Cléo, who is privileged and who finds her true identity through the city, all of the characters of these films are disenfranchised. Their walking is often necessitated by the lack of home and shelter, by an insufficient home as in The Harder They Come, or by lack of money for transportation as in The Horse. This kind of walking through the city is different from that assiociated with the concept of the flâneur suggested by Walter Benjamin, where the subject has a sense of being pleasantly lost in the city, lured by its attractions, and where desire is embodied by the prostitute, who is always assumed to be female.

# 1980s–1990s: new queer cinema and transnational urbanity

In contrast to the films from the late 1960s and 1970s that tie gay desire to homophobic discourse, the new queer cinema that emerged in the later 1980s and 1990s celebrates a queer life that validates the heterogeneous possibilities of the city in a transnational perspective, for example Monika Treut's Virgin Machine (1988) and My Father Is Coming (1991).

Both films by German lesbian filmmaker Monika Treut, Virgin Machine and My Father Is Coming, show the main character migrating from Germany to the gay and lesbian urban centers of the US, San Francisco and New York City, where she experiences liberated and self-confident sexual expression. In Virgin Machine the main character, journalist Dorothee Müller, travels from Hamburg to San Francisco in order to research “romantic love.” Instead of a realistic narrative, the plot meditates on the changing notion of love in late twentieth-century bourgeois society. The dividing line between romantic love and sexual play, however, coincides with the national boundaries of Germany and the USA.

San Francisco developed into the national and international center for gay life because of its strategic position as a harbor and military base which attracted both men and women who did not want to live by society's gendered norms in the rural USA, and it became a city where gays and lesbians could enjoy rights equal to those of heterosexual couples and thus attracted more gays and lesbians from around the world. Virgin Machine captures the moment in San Francisco in which the notion of a gay, male life that had dominated the 1960s and 1970s and was decimated by AIDS in the 1970s and 1980s gave way to a queer culture that brought together feminism and lesbianism and other kinds of marginalized sexual practices in the 1980s and 1990s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminism had regarded sexuality as one of the areas in which patriarchal norms reproduced themselves through the violation and objectification of women. With regard to the topic of cinema and the city, this attitude can best be illustrated by the resulting public protests at porn movie-houses, when groups of feminists aligned themselves with right-wing politicians and family-value anti-pornography activists to denounce the demeaning effect of pornography on women.

This attitude changed radically in the late 1980s, when feminists embraced sexuality and, as with the term “queer,” appropriated the position of the voyeur by claiming the pleasure for lesbians to look at sexualized women and the pleasure for straight women to look at sexualized men. These third-wave feminists also claimed the role of the sex objects as a potentially pleasurable and empowering position, and appropriated masculinity through crossdressing, and finally claimed also the pleasure in pornography by creating feminist straight and lesbian pornography.

Virgin Machine deconstructs the idea of romantic love via queer pleasure found in the city of San Francisco, which becomes the site of a queer Bildungsroman for Dorothee. Her voice-over states her political manifesto: “Susie Sexpert is right. The sex industry is so lousy because women have no say. Feminists should go there instead of being uptight. It’s the perfect place to live out their fantasies.” The city of San Francisco becomes a utopian space for a feminist and queer agenda, and documentary cinema verité strategies are used to claim the authenticity of the historical and geographical moment of San Francisco in the late 1980s: the city had long represented a sort of sexual utopia, but this was a radical transformation in San Francisco in the 1980s for women.

The city as queer playground also includes the possibility of alternative family structures. Takehiro Nakajima's Okoge (1992) – the title is the Japanese term for straight women who are attached to gay men – offers a complex portrayal of straight female and gay male desire, of femininity and masculinity, of liberation and the traditional values of family and work.

Most of the films considered in this lecture show us maturing or mature characters who move or travel to the metropolis to develop a gay, lesbian, or transvestite identity in a community that supports the individual in alternative social structures. New York, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Berlin, and San Francisco become the setting for anonymous exchanges of desires, non-normative identity formation, and urban communities.

The increasing social acceptance of gays and lesbians throughout the 1980s and 1990s makes queers less dependent on the anonymity of the city for their self-expression. Thus, films addressing gays and lesbians can now situate their stories in other spaces, suburbia, for example. Alain Berliner's film Ma vie en rose (1997) is set in a Belgian suburb and tells the story of Ludovic, a boy who thinks he is a girl. The film suggests the possibility of retaining one's birth family, with its care and attachment in the face of non-normative desires of children that threaten the normative social order, played out not in the city but in suburbia.

The city in the present promises sexual liberation but a gay past is filmically invisible, and for ethnic, migrant, and racial subjects that liberation is a more complex process than is suggested by Treut in Virgin Machine. Isaac Julien was part of a group of emerging filmmakers of color in Britain, some of whom were queer, who were funded by Channel 4 in the late 1980s and early 1990s for their aesthetically and politically innovative films. His Looking for Langston (1988) is a transnational project with Black, gay masculinity at its center, so it is perforce set in Harlem and the historical point of reference is the Harlem Renaissance.

While the film pinpoints a crucial time and place for the articulation of Black, gay desire, it simultaneously points to the limits of representation by integrating historical footage with fantasy scenes of gay, Black life re-enacting the past. Looking for Langston is subtitled “A Meditation on Langston Hughes (1902–1967) and the Harlem Renaissance//With the poetry of Essex Hemphill and Bruce Nugent (1906–1987//In Memory of James Baldwin (1924–1987),” and captures the process of remembering through emotional attachment.

While there are several shots of Harlem’s main streets in the film, the general setting is an interior fantasy space coded as beyond time. Beautiful Black men dressed in tuxedos are dancing with each other, and as the film advances they move into modern dance movements to contemporary music. The dangerous urban space that represses homosexual desire is contrasted with the liberated selfexpression and celebration of beauty possible in interior spaces. The expression of Black, gay, male desire contradicts the notions that gayness is white and Blackness is straight.

Turkish filmmaker Kutluğ Ataman's Lola and Billy the Kid (1999) is similarly concerned with the urban landscape, but that of Berlin, a city traditionally associated with gay liberation, as portrayed through the lens of a minority group, in this case of Turkish-Germans. Like many of the films discussed in this chapter, Lola and Billy the Kid tells the story of a group of young, gay, migrant, Turkish-German men, the grown-up children of "guest workers" in Germany.

This film juxtaposes traditional Turkish woman with the performative, queer, female identity of the main characters who are men cross-dressing as women. In one short but telling scene, Sherezade, one of the cross-dressing male characters, leaves her Kreuzberg apartment for good. Dressed provocatively in a miniskirt, she meets her neighbor, a traditionally represented Turkish woman in a long coat and headscarf, in the hallway. This woman has known Sherezade only as a man, and she is upset to see her as a woman and harasses her for her socially unacceptable behavior. Sherezade mocks her by telling her that in the past she cross-dressed as a man simply to ward off the hungry husbands of the neighborhood. She thanks the neighbor for being so kind, only to throw in her face on her way out: “But your husband was much nicer.”

Lola and Billy the Kid is one of the films – like Paris Is Burning, discussed in the case study – that integrates the city as the playground for queer desire with acknowledgement of discriminatory social, economic, and psychological structures. Importantly, the friends celebrate Lola's birthday on a merry-go-round in a playground. Performing the high-heeled femininity in the park in the middle of the night, the cityscape becomes a playground for performances of gender and sexual desire. Yet, in contrast to Virgin Machine, the light moments do not lead to a coherent utopia but instead point to utopian possibilities beyond the narrative of Lola's violent death, which reflects the violent social reality for gay and ethnic migrants in the city.