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"Queer Visibility": The Predominance of Visual Exposure in Queer Politics

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Abstract
This paper examines how the narrative of activist progress, specifically related to the contemporary use of "queer visibility", relates to Guy Debord's concept of the "situation". Through a critical theory lens focusing on how identity is mediated through media, this study explores the relationship between queer identity and visibility, illuminating how being visible is also being partial. The paper argues that contemporary "queer visibility" may imply that being visible already means contesting the norm, however, the visible can make passive in certain instances while making active in others. By bringing Debord's situationist theory into conversation with Judith Butler's notion of queer identity formation and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of paranoia, this paper concludes that effective queer politics requires remaining critical and taking an active position in shaping dialogues between generalities and exclusions.

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1 Introduction

Around the 1980s, there was a shift making queer identities gain visuality in media; in order to survive, queer identities needed to become visible. In cinema, this meant a rise in experimental and activist films, also referred to as New Queer Cinema (Rich 2013). But were there seemed to be progress for queer activism on the one hand, there proved to be a remaining problem on the other as the term "lesbian invisibility" gained momentum (Castle 1993; Enszer 2021; Hart and Smith 1998). This meant that within the project of visibility certain identities remained hidden. Recently there has been an increase in lesbian characters in television series (Smith 2020). "Queer visibility" then remains to be a goal to be achieved in activism, but what does it mean to be visible in the contemporary political landscape?

This paper will look at how the narrative of activist progress, specifically related to the contemporary use of "queer visibility", relates to Guy Debord's "situation". The extent to which the relation between queer and visible triggers problematics will be examined through a critical theory scope focussing on how identity is mediated through media. Discussions between the terms queer and visible will illuminate that being visible is also being partial: when showing one thing, there is always another thing not being shown. This is crucial to examine further, as contemporary "queer visibility" might imply that being visible already means contesting the norm. However, the visible can in certain instances make passive, whilst in others make active.

First, this paper will lay out the relations between Guy Debord's explication of the spectacle and the term "visuality". The generalizing nature of the spectacle is contested by Debord's notion of the situation. The situation aims to play; meaning to actively change the rules of the game. This tactic will be brought in conversation in Judith Butler's notion of queer identity formation as a critical and political movement. This paper will then be concluded by relating Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of paranoia to the conversations between Debord's situation and Butler's critically queer subject formation.

2 Hidden within the Visuals of the Spectacle

It is crucial to problematize the term "visuality" in "queer visuality" in the contemporary state of queer politics. One cannot just be visible, there are complex structures at work beneath that what is shown. To further expand on this it is helpful to first have a look at thesis 10 from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle.* Debord first explains that the spectacle aims to unify: "The concept of the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. [...] the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth." (Debord 1995, 14). The spectacle operates through picking and choosing specific visual elements, appearances, in order to make an easily digestible sensual experience of a reality. The final sentence of the 10th thesis concludes by stating that what appears is a highly constructed form: "... any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself.*" (14). The realm of the visible is then not a given: the spectacle serves as a constructed form that differs from lived experience itself.

This generalizing quality of the spectacle has a specific relation to visuality, as Debord explicates in his 18th thesis: "Since the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society's generalized abstraction" (17). All other senses get overshadowed by the major sense of sight. This causes certain material realities to be hidden, one can simply not sense all reality with only one sense. The thesis ends by Debord stating that the spectacle is

"the opposite of dialogue." (17). This then refers back to the negation of life that the 10th thesis refers to. Human activity is always a conversation, a dialogue between the different senses. To be predominantly visible is therefore simultaneously to distance oneself from life itself; by being visible the spectacle hides that it hides behind the promise of a visual general truth.

The negation of the pluralistic nature of human senses also infects the political idea of identity formation, as Debord's 17th thesis states: "At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality *is not* that it is allowed to *appear*." (16). Being an individual, completely detached from their place within political hierarchies, is yet another illusion. The meaning of *appear* in this thesis is then not only connected to looks, but also to pretending: pretending to be detached. The spectacle's aversion to dialogue that the 18th thesis highlights is then also present in the construction of identity itself.

But, the spectacle's constructed reality should not be seen as something totally distinct from social reality. The interplay between spectacle and lived experience is further explained through thesis 8: "The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle [...] is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle's mechanisms of contemplation" (14). Debord illustrates here that reality bleads into the spectacle, and that in turn spectacle infects reality. Where the 18th thesis states that the spectacle is the opposite of dialogue, the 8th thesis shows that, even though the spectacle wants to be uniform, it is always dependent upon lived reality.

The spectacle then hides dialogue on different levels. The 10th thesis explicated that the spectacle creates one general truth, and that this general truth opposes life itself. The 18th thesis then explains that this negation of life takes place in the realm of the senses, as it has a strong preference for the sense of sight above all others. To be able to sense is to be able to be in dialogue; the spectacle ignores this. The same illusion of monism is present in identity formation as the 17th thesis highlights how identity is always connected to political discourse, which is exactly what the spectacle aims to hide. But even though the spectacle aims to hide conflict on different levels of lived reality, it is also shaped through social reality, as the 8th thesis explains. The spectacles aversion to, and dependence upon, dialogue is crucial in critiquing the visual nature of queer politics, as this paper will examine further that to be queer means to be in conflict. Without directly talking about issues of queer visibility, Debord does propose ways to contest the spectacle.

3 The Situation and Play

How can one break its ties with the spectacle when general truth and social reality tend to blead into each other? Devin Penner lays out how Debord proposes the situation as a way to challenge this (Penner 2015). The situation defers from the spectacle, as it "point[s] towards a radical notion of politics as an inherently conflictual and divisive process." (165). Where the spectacle tries to hide dialogue, the situation is transparent in its dependence upon it. As a result to the generalizing truth imposed by the dominant appearance of the spectacle, the spectator "lives *passively* through such spectacular representations" (167). When all truth is digestibly handed on a plate to the spectator, what else can the spectator do but to lean back and consume? The situation proposes to organise active spectators. These active participants of the situation are expected to organise revolution amongst themselves (167). The role of the spectator in the sit is already fixed, as Debord's 18th thesis showed how humans cannot interfere with the spectacle. In order for a person to rip itself lose from the entanglements of

everyday spectacle, Debord insinuates that one should have "a 'higher' level of consciousness", an encouragement to "become dialecticians" (Penner 2015, 169). The social character of such dialects then challenges the appearance of individuality that the 17th thesis refers to: it is then an active identity which is formed through sociality instead of individuality.

Being a dialectician then implies a certain state of intelligence; a person must be able to think philosophically and bring this into a debate amongst others. This is closely related to Johan Huizinga's idea of "play" (169–170). Play here is a political tactic in which "the continual ability to change the rules of the game by all those who are subject to them" (171) is central. To be a dialectician is therefore to be a participant who is critical of political constraints that one is captured within, and to then take these constraints and change its conditions. A way in which the situation translates debates to the realm of the visible is through *détournement*: "Situationist *détournement* involves the purposeful and political diversion of something from its original meaning, [...] the appropriate translation of the term lies somewhere between 'diversion' and 'subversion.'" (173–174). This form of play is then not only a protest against the norm, the spectacle, but also an illumination of it. Instead of then simply highlighting the general truth that thesis 10 refers to, détournement brings into practise what thesis 8 aims to explain: spectacle and social reality are always intertwined with each other.

The situation is then a technique embracing conflict. It demands participants to be active dialecticians who aim to educate each other through philosophical debates. This social project is then practised through the notion of play: first being aware of the rules of the game, and then aiming to rearrange them. A way in which the situation does this is through *détournement*, which aims to both show and protest against norms of visuality. In order to see whether this tactic is helpful for queer activism today, Butler's *Critically Queer* will help problematize the role of dialectics in queer identity formation.

4 Queer Identity in the Margins of Repetitious Movements

Judith Butler shares certain positions of Debord regarding the mutually shaping qualities of lived reality and hegemonic power structures (as Debord has illustrated in his 8th thesis). Butler focusses specifically on the role of this mutual shaping in the process of identity formation: "Where there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will." (Butler 1993, 18). An identity is never isolated, it is always shaped through discourse. To be a subject is therefore to point towards an effect of political frameworks. Simultaneously, to be a subject is also to influence discourse. An "I" is therefore simultaneously a product as a producing entity. What Butler highlights here, is what Debord also states in his 17th thesis: an isolated individuality is mere illusion.

But recognizing that one is shaped through history does not automatically mean that one is contesting the norms of spectacle, with this it is important to see the significance of naming as an act: "What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim [...] often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity [...] As much as identity terms must be used, as much as 'outness' is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production." (19). Butler suggests here a paradox inherent in all naming; the inevitability of leaving something out. Relating this to the visual predominance of both the spectacle and *détournement* means that the construction of an image always means exclusion of phenomena not framed in the specific appearance. It is then not only the spectacle that excludes complete constitutive history, but *détournement* also inevitably cannot capture entirety. So even though the situation itself cannot repeat (Penner

2015, 168), the possibility for a situation to happen emerges in similar movements as the movements of power itself. The act of making power structures visible inevitably opens up to the next project of incorporating exclusion into the field of visible knowledge. Power is then not so much a single instance, but instead a movement: "This [power] is less an 'act,' singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power." (Butler 1993, 17). A norm is not isolated in time, it moves in a repetitious motion, this movement creating its power. Debord also implicates such repetition, as thesis 18 states that the spectacle opposes dialogue; without conversation it closes itself of to change, the only movement left then is repetition. By not only opposing the spectacle, but also subverting its structures, *détournement* appropriates certain movements of power for their own activist ends.

As the movement of power is mimetic, to be critically queer then means to keep organising new ways to visualize existence in the margins. Butler exemplifies this by explicating how the word "queer" derives from homophobia, but is reused as a way to form communities (18). But again, the notion of exclusion is inevitable, and they therefore also state that the use of the term "queer" is always related to specific discourses and to specific moments of exclusion (20). Both the existence, as the exclusory powers of the term "queer" reflect the continuous movements between norm and critical performance; spectacle and *détournement*.

The visible can then be both an opportunity to contest the norm as it is to affirm it. A contemporary example of "queer visibility" is helpful to further look into how it remains to be important to be critical of the process of naming in a queer context. In HBO's *We're Here* (2020-present) drag queens who have previously participated in *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) aim to transform US citizens of varying cities into drag queens. In the fifth episode of the second season they do this by performing a marriage ceremony between two lesbian women of Evansville; the women then marry in drag (Warren and Ingram 2021). On the one hand one could sense a rearrangement of norms: a marriage ceremony between two women in a conservative environment. But, as a media form, this episode mostly repeats norms without being critical of them. The women are put into drag make-up which they did not choose themselves, and which look very similar to the make-up style made fashionable by *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This kind of drag therefore does not play with notions of the spectacle, but merely repeats the norms of "acceptable drag"; visual identities that have already been proven to be liked by a large public (as *RuPaul's Drag Race* is widely popular (Campione 2023)). Drag, in this case, is then a pre-conditioned suit they put on, failing to critique heteronormative matrimonial structures. This is also done through formal techniques themselves, which hide the inner workings of film as a medium. The cuts are invisible, the people do not look at the camera; the spectator is made to forget that they are watching a media form. The spectator becomes passive.

Butler, in a similar fashion as Debord's 17th thesis, highlights that identity is shaped through discourse, whilst effecting discourse. But by naming oneself as an "I", there are inevitably dimensions which are left out. This makes the project of queer identification one that must move amongst the repetitious movement of power itself. Queer identity exists then between the gaps of such movements. The example of *We're Here* shows how such movements of power infect the queer subject; risking to fail in continuing the critical project of reusing the term queer in a situationist fashion of subverting and protesting homophobia. Strategies of Debord's situation are then still helpful for queer criticism, as Butler shows that dialectics inherent to identity formation keep opening up new opportunities for a situation to appear. This whole repetitious movement of power also signifies a certain inevitability. The inevitability of the spectacle will be examined through Sedgwick's problematization of paranoid reading.

5 Anticipatory Mimicry in the Situation

Sedgwick further expands on repetitious movements of power in her description of patterns in paranoia: "embracing the twin propositions that one understand paranoia only by oneself practicing paranoid knowing, and that the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating and embodying it." (Sedgwick 2003, 131). Sedgwick highlights here that in paranoia a cycle emerged were one understands through repeating itself. This tactic of paranoia is similar to the project of the situation: subverting and diverting from the rules of the game as a way of understanding, and hereby aiming to oppose those rules. As argued in the relation between mimetic power and the possibility of the reoccurrence of critically queer positions, the situation as an act must repeat in order to challenge the generality of visuality.

The goal of mimicry of power as a way of appropriation for activist ends is then to expose the inner workings of the spectacle. The situation aims to wake up the passive consumers who are simply to blind to see the power to which they are subservient. This aim to expose can also be connected to paranoia: "... paranoia is characterized by placing [...] an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure. Maybe that's why paranoid knowing is so inescapably narrative." (138). The project of the situation is mostly about exposing hidden reality, and claims that sharing of knowledge will eventually lead to this becoming visible of the real truth underneath the spectacle (especially in the demand for participants in the spectacle to have a higher sense of consciousness and to become intelligent dialecticians (Penner 2015, 169)). The confidence in exposure as an activist tactic relates Debord's situation to paranoia. But does this then mean that Butler's stressing of the critically queer position is also a form of paranoia?

Sedgwick senses that within specific feminist and queer oppositions to psychoanalysis thinkers have adopted "anticipatory mimesis" which is a "strategy whereby a certain, stylized violence of sexual differentiation must always be *presumed* or *self-assumed* – even, where necessary, imposed – simply on the ground that it can never be finally *ruled out*." (Sedgwick 2003, 133). She refers to Butler when she explicates this (132–133), as she argues that a critique of certain phenomena can be so rigorous in its persuasion, that it leaves out all surprise: the outcome is persuasively predicted.

However, as previously argued, Butler stresses that in order to shape queer politics, one must be open to play. Play as a tactic can also be sensed in Sedgwick proposed alternative to paranoia: "It takes the weak theories and rearranges them into a new strong one. While paranoid theoretical proceedings both depend on and reinforce the structural dominance of monopolistic 'strong theory', there may also be benefit in exploring the extremely varied, dynamic, and historically contingent ways that strong theoretical constructs interact with weak ones in the ecology of knowing – an exploration that obviously can't proceed without a respectful interest in weak as well as strong theoretical acts." (146). Here, a strong theory is one which covers a "wide generality" (134), whilst weak theory is more tangible: "affect theory must be effective to be weak" (134). Sedgwick argues that both strong and weak theories are nourishing for a healthy formation of knowledge. With a reparative reading one recognizes weak theories, things left out of the general picture, and rearranges them into a new image; a new strong theory. This makes her project quite similar to that of Butler. Both aim to play: to remain critical about the marginal outside the freeze frame, outside general truth.

Where anticipatory mimesis rules out all surprises, for reparative reading "it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise." (146). And where Sedgwick argues that Butler's critique has a strong predicting sense, a quote used earlier in this paper proves otherwise: "Performativity, then, is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms." (Butler 1993, 28). Here the word "unanticipated" is crucial; the norm gains its power in repetitious motion, but discourse changes, making

the outcome always a surprise (23). Butler and Debord then both play with exposure. What makes Debord more paranoid than Butler is how he leaves out the repetition of the situation. Butler lays out how exposure is always incomplete, even the term "queer" inevitably leaves out new specific marginalized entities (20). Combining then Debord and Butler makes the situation as a political queer project a nourishing conversation between paranoid and reparative reading.

6 Conclusion

Just because something calls itself queer, it does not mean that it is critical. Just because something is now visible, it does not mean that it exposes hidden truth. This paper has laid out how Debord explicates that social life is constructed out of inner conflict, and that it is the aim of the spectacle to hide such conflict under the predominance of a visual general truth. The situation is then proposed as an activist tactic; a form of play in which its active participants rearrange the parts of hegemony. Butler illustrates how the norm gains its power from a movement of repetition. This makes queer identity always a project, as the relations between discourse and identity are ever shifting. The reason why it is productive for contemporary "queer visibility" to be brought into conversation with Debord and Butler was argued through Sedgwick's explication of movements between paranoid and reparative readings. When adding the mimicking aspects of power to the definition of the situation, a strategy of activism open to surprise emerges.

So where New Queer Cinema was aiming to radically make hidden queer identities visible (Rich 2013), the repetitious movement of powerful images risks that contemporary queer visibility becomes spectacle. *We're Here* therefore does not simply solve the problem of "lesbian invisibility" by showing lesbians (Warren and Ingram 2021), but through its form it lacks critical engagement with norms linked to identity formation. The situation as a supposedly strong theory could be further examined by comparing it to other different activist movements. By doing this, one could bring nuance to critical statements about the generality of situationism.

It is then not to say that exposure has no importance in queer politics. The project of queer visibility should still aim to infiltrate the realm of visuality, but in this it remains important to reexamine the picture that has then been formed. Therefore queer identity formation means remaining critical: taking an active position in shaping dialogues between generalities and exclusions.

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