

**Popular Culture Media and New Learning Biographies**

**by**

**Caspar J.L. van Helden**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Educational Studies)  
in the University of Michigan  
2012**

**Doctoral Committee:**

**Professor Jay L. Lemke, Co-Chair  
Professor Elizabeth Birr Moje, Co-Chair  
Professor Manuela du Bois-Reymond, Leiden University  
Professor David M. Halperin**

© Caspar J.L. van Helden 2012

# Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES iii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS iv

## CHAPTERS

1	Introduction	1
2	Conceptual Framework	7
3	Methods	27
4	Fernand	43
5	Marnix	76
6	Gonzalo	100
7	The Others	129
8	The Four Foci	163
9	Discussion and Implications	183
	Bibliography	195

# List of Tables

Page

Table 3.1	Sample overview	41, 42
Table 7.1	Education and jobs listing	172



# List of Images

Page

Image 1.1: Brandon Walsh (Beverly Hills 90210) and President Bartlett (The West Wing).	4
Image 1.2: Me, being photographed while filming.	5
Image 2.1: The Flip camera is always ready to shoot.	18
Image 4.1: I am filming Fernand (him with back to camera) during an interview in his Berlin apartment.	46
Image 4.2: Eddie and Patsy. Gay icons from <i>Absolutely Fabulous</i> . (BBC)	52
Image 4.3: Simon and Kylie. Always hunting for the fabulous in <i>Beautiful People</i> . (BBC)	52
Image 4.4: Daughter Saffy in <i>AbFab</i> : the serious learner ridiculed by her fabulous mother (note the Apple).	54
Image 4.5: Law book open on Fernand's desk. "This is where I pretend to study."	55
Image 4.6: Macbook, iPod, Samsung, <i>AbFab</i> , <i>Queer as Folk</i> , <i>Butt Book</i> , Proust.	58
Image 4.7: Fashion: browsing magazines, watching shows online, reading designer biographies.	61
Image 4.8: Vuitton bag and Barcelona chair in Fernand's apartment.	63
Image 4.9: Antony Hegarty photographed by Inez van Lamsweerde.	67
Image 4.10: Cover photo on Fernand's Facebook page.	68
Image 5.1: Marnix and friends performing at a party (left), and in a photo shoot (right).	79
Image 5.2: Cover photo (main large photo) on Marnix' Facebook profile.	81
Image 5.3: Neatly organized photo albums (left). Geographical representation of identifiers (right).	84
Image 5.6: Marnix's favorite space to visit, post and study: Nieuwendam and Durgerdam.	85
Image 5.7: Structuring the party month with roommates and friends at Marnix's dining table.	88
Image 5.8: The caption with this set read: "It will always be Spring in my room."	90
Image 5.9: The bedroom, before and after, posted on Facebook.	90
Image 5.10: Article by Marnix about the Mazda Kuga.	92
Image 5.11: The simulated family: Marnix and Ron doing the dishes.	97
Image 5.12: Marnix dancing on one of the boats during the gay pride Canal Parade in Amsterdam.	98
Image 6.1: T-shirt he bought for an anthropology class: Que es Normal? (What is Normal?)	104
Image 6.2: Photo I took of Mother's Day advertisement in <i>Ay Not Dead</i> shop window in BA.	107
Image 6.3: "Intellectuals are really ugly and don't know what they are wearing." (Baudrillard and Barthes)	110
Image 6.4: Daniel Radcliffe as a nerdy <i>Harry Potter</i> and a sexy Alan Strang in <i>Equus</i> .	111
Image 6.5: Gonzalo filming and presenting himself on the beach.	113
Image 6.6: Gonzalo's Facebook uploads of him attending an Absolut Vodka party in BA.	114
Image 6.7: Self-made book shelves with elementary school books, Freud, Nietzsche, Marques and Hesse.	115
Image 6.8: Gonzalo gazing at the Manhattan skyline (Facebook).	117
Image 6.9: Gonzalo posing in the vast space of Argentina.	118
Image 6.10: Scenes from Argentinian TV soap <i>Botineras</i> (Endemol).	119
Image 6.11: University of Buenos Aires student center: left wing political posters, e.g. for legalizing abortion.	125
Image 6.12: Movie poster of <i>Plan B</i> : being gay between era's in Argentina.	126
Image 7.1: Screenshot of Momo's Facebook album with Gaga photos he took himself.	131
Image 7.2: Facebook post of a toast between Dacey and boyfriend after they move in together.	136
Image 7.3: Me filming Jakob during out interview in the gallery in Berlin.	138
Image 7.4: Jakob showing his Facebook photos: "It's almost Mondriaan, just lines and shapes."	139

Image 7.5: Ron and Marnix watch illegal downloads of <i>Ru Paul</i> on Ron's iMac.	141
Image 7.6: Styling by Ron. Photos from his Facebook.	142
Image 7.7: JM's favorite pastime: surfing a dating website and marihuana within reach.	147
Image 7.8: Gay networking site Gaydar's slogan is: What You Want, When You Want It.	148
Image 7.9: Self-portrait. He's been kicked off Facebook once or twice for showing too much skin.	150
Image 7.10: Marco's hand over Pasolini's grave (from Marco's public website).	151
Image 7.11: On KLM from Amsterdam to Berlin: Marco edits Marnix on Macbook.	152
Image 7.12: Dimi's Facebook profile pictures.	153
Image 7.13: Later on, Dimi changed his Facebook profile picture to this.	156
Image 7.14: Dimi's latest Facebook cover photo: bourgeois heteros and passionate homos.	157
Image 7.15: Will's Bling Martini ritual. (Screenshot from my video.)	158
Image 7.16: "The barista at Starbucks is the cutest ever and she's just like me, totally sarcastic and into witty repartee."	159
Image 7.17: Tough Ryan, intellectual Seth, fierce Buffy. Adorable, individual characters with brains.	160
Image 7.18: One of Will's many anti-religion posts.	161

## chapter 1

# Introduction.

This dissertation describes the investigation of the role of popular culture and social networking in the educational, personal and work lives of 13 college-age students in a number of countries in the world. The findings are based on an analysis of video interviews and other data collected over a 3-year period and identifies 8 important themes that can inform our understanding of how they view such issues as identity and identification, attitudes to formal education and work, the popular cultural media that they interact with, and the social networking tools they use.

A growing body of research points at the increasing importance of popular culture and social networking in the educational trajectories and biographies of so-called 'new learners.' These young people choose their own paths, and their own sources to learn, and have less interest in a formal education that doesn't suit their needs. Traversal lifestyles (Lemke, 1995) have long taken over from more linear and predictable life-trajectories for many people. From one education, one career, one spouse, one religion, one country, and one political party we've moved to a hyperlinked complexity of jobs, plans, partners, politics, sexualities, (virtual) locations, social networks and learning trajectories. Especially thirtysomethings and fortysomethings find themselves in continuous 'design mode' to develop custom-made social, educational and professional networks and pathways (Diepstraten, 2006), against a backdrop of rapidly changing or crumbling traditional institutions.

But there seem to be major differences between the generations that went through their twenties in the 1980's and 90's, and those who are doing that now. The rapidly accelerating de-standardization of transitions to adulthood (du Bois-Reymond, 2006) coincides with an enormous growth and penetration of 'media' into the political, social and cultural arenas (Silverstone, 1999). Some researchers claim that the media, used as an umbrella term for all mediated popular culture capital, are now not just ubiquitous, but also central to the functioning of societies and shaping of identities (Castells, 1997, 1998, 1999). Particularly for young learners, popular culture media and social networks are increasingly important resources for affiliation and identification (van Helden & Lemke, 2009). It's likely that we have never before seen media and associated industries play a role on this scale and in such a rapidly changing society, as we do with the current college age population. And not only have these new marketing and communication technologies put young people around the world in touch with the same content and products, but also with each other, and through the same social networks often regardless of anyone's location or personal background.

These new realities are partly made possible by new and changing technologies that develop from existing media structures, so forming convergence cultures (Jenkins, 2006) that create affordances for highly individualized, fragmented life biographies. But at the same time, these media systems reinforce dominant beliefs and values, and are always in the business of recruiting consumer loyalties. We might see convergences in other arenas too: private versus public, learning versus living, real versus virtual, local versus global, and more. The place where these forces converge and are continuously contested is the identity market (Lemke: 2005, Baldry: in press). It's there where affiliations and identifications are discovered, learned, re-appropriated and performed and where identities are eventually influenced. These identities are not 'stable cores' (Moje, 2008), but they can change when new insights and contexts arise. It seems increasingly likely that many of these contexts and insights, for many twentysomethings, now mainly come from coordinated, mass-marketed popular culture capital and social networking, rather than traditional schooling.

The interesting apparent paradox that we seem to be confronted with is the simultaneous diversification, fragmentation and individualization of life trajectories, alongside the unification of popular culture media marketing and communication technologies. As life biographies and learning biographies are becoming more indistinguishable, there are likely to be consequences for individuals and educational systems. Although the current literature does strongly suggest the importance of these phenomena, it is somewhat less able to tell us why this is, or how it happens. Accordingly my central research question for this dissertation is:

How do popular culture capital and social networking strategies of young people play a key role in the construction of alternative learning biographies, personal identities and attitudes to education, learning and work?

\*

In this research I draw both on previous work I have done, as well as on the domains of popular culture itself. I think it's necessary in a study that focuses on young people and popular culture, to take that popular culture as a serious context when discussing education and work issues. Throughout this dissertation, I will attempt to look at popular culture and learning using a theoretical framework that's described in the next chapter, but also look at education and work using popular cultural perspectives that the participants provide. In earlier research in discourse and media analysis, cultural and queer studies, adolescent identity and literacies, I have always approached popular culture in this way, and found that many young people draw heavily on those sources to find content to identify with, learn from, and create groups around. One more piece of evidence for this is my own biography and educational trajectory, which may be deeply entrenched in the formal education system (hence this dissertation), but was on the other hand influenced by my own popular culture experiences. I dare say both *Brandon Walsh* and *President Bartlett* had something to do with my colorful

trajectory to the completion of this Ph.D. despite my urge to live a *contrastive* lifestyle, about which we will also hear several participants talk in this dissertation.

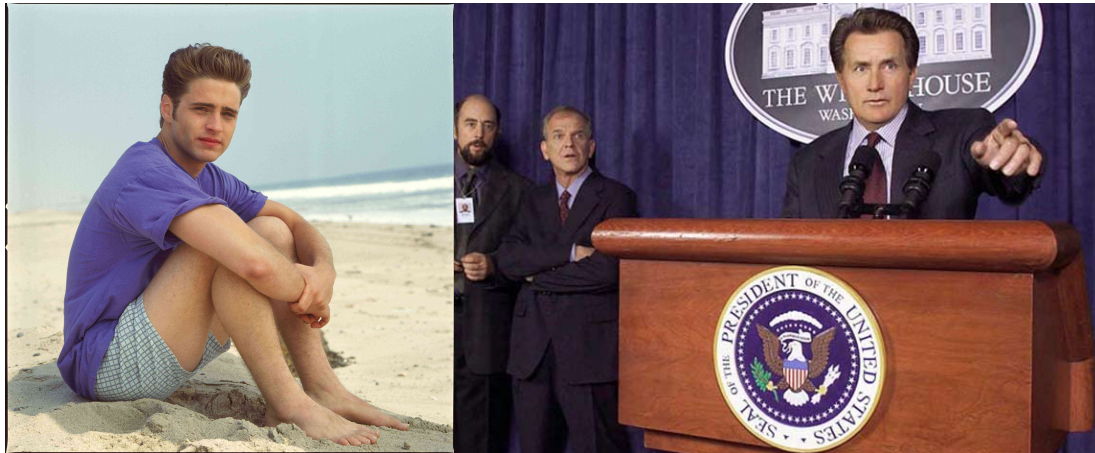


Image 1.1. : Brandon Walsh (*Beverly Hills 90210*) and President Bartlett (*The West Wing*).

*Contrast*, which I just mentioned above, is one of the eight themes that I created after analyzing the video interviews. From the video material and other data, it became clear to me that the wide range of topics that were discussed fell into eight larger themes, which connected the different participants. The themes are (and will be italicized throughout): *identity, structure, contrast, meaning, style, future, space* and *connection*. I describe the themes in the various biographies, before relating them to the four main foci of this dissertation: education, work, popular culture and social networking. In the final Discussion and Implications chapter, I'll talk about the specific challenges of doing (video-) ethnographic research in a socially networked world, as well as possible implications of this study for formal education systems.



Image 1.2. : My networked video-research environment: being online while being filmed while filming.

The dissertation consists of ten chapters, including references. After this introduction follows a description of the theoretical framework, and a chapter explaining the methods used in the research. Following that, I present the three main biographies of those participants that I believe were most suitable to demonstrate what role the eight themes play in their lives. Following those three biographies of Fernand, Marnix and Gonzalo, I will discuss the nine other participants individually in shorter sections, highlighting what I felt was the most significant theme for each. Throughout all the biographical chapters I will be cross-referencing among the participants, and so building up a case for the significance of the eight themes. Then, I'll relate the eight themes to the four main foci of the research, which I'll cover one by one: education, work, social networking and popular culture. And finally, in the last chapter, I'll discuss some of the findings that I think are important and can be useful for future research, as well as some implications for educational systems.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical Framework
3. Methods
4. Fernand
5. Marnix
6. Gonzalo
7. The Others
8. The Four Foci
9. Discussion and Implications
10. Bibliography.



## chapter 2

# Conceptual framework.

During the preparations for this research, I co-authored two articles that discuss popular culture and learning biographies (Moje & van Helden: 2005; Lemke & van Helden: 2009). In “Doing Popular Culture: Troubling Discourses about Youth”, Moje and van Helden discuss how popular culture plays a central role in the forming of identity of adolescents, but also how the entire system of popular culture and its commercial drive have become a post-ideological force in everyone’s life, if not a new ideology itself. “New Learning Cultures: Identities, Media and Networks” (Lemke & van Helden) builds on these notions by exploring the importance of understanding popular culture capital in relation to learning biographies and the future of education (systems) altogether. This dissertation both further develops and builds on the ideas discussed in these articles, by expanding and deepening the larger underlying questions, but mostly by offering concrete insight into how the connections among learning, popular culture and social networking manifest themselves in real lives, through new technologies.

The ‘literature’ that has inspired me to do this work, and also forms its theoretical framework, comes from several fields of research, but also from popular culture itself (if we choose to see academic discourse as something other than another genre of popular culture). The word ‘literature’ is in quotation marks because I intend to use it

broadly, let's say in the sense that an episode of *90210* may be equally relevant as a scholarly article in describing the role of the family in a student's development. I fully realize that this, for the academy, is an unorthodox view of what the literature is, but I do feel that it's part the point of this work that popular culture, so omnipresent and influential in the lives of the very subjects of this study, should not be given second-class status.

I will frame this research within three areas of study, and to two of those I hope to make significant contributions. First, as it is one of the key reasons for starting this project, is work in the field of *learning biographies*. The research on new learning biographies, and the changes and trends happening to them, is relatively new and small. It is partly ethnographic, and partly statistical, bringing together a mix of sociological and educational theories and studies to understand what is happening to so-called 'new learners'. This research shows that there seems to be a mismatch between the realities that educational systems turn out to be for those who experience them, and the educational discourses of policy makers and politicians who speak of 'innovative learning', 'networked societies' and the 'information age'. In other words, the marketing seems to be there, but the practice falls short. This is partly because we know little about how 'new learning practice' actually happens, as it is designed by actual learners themselves. The research on life courses and learning courses is essential as a foundation under the research question of my study, as it established that youth cultural learning capital and social networking strategies are key components in the life and learning trajectory of 'new learners'. My own study builds on this insight, by exploring how these two components actually contribute and interact with patterns of affiliations and identifications that may eventually influence identities.

The second field of inquiry from which I draw to form a conceptual framework is that of *literacy and identity studies*. Literacy research is a vast area of study that touches all aspects of human activity, and must therefore be properly focused to be of use in the context of my research. For the purpose of studying the literacy practices of college age learners, I concentrate on work that connects online literacy with identity in young

people. The new literacies and media that we encounter in a study such as this one will not only need to be framed by existing knowledge, but also by exploration and experimentation with what we don't know. There are two large areas related to literacy that I want to explore further. One is what some of these seemingly new multi-literacies actually look like, and the other is about how these new literacies and media are connected to identity and to learning in general. In this project I focus on these questions specifically with my data, and discuss the cultural artifacts themselves as well as the literacy practices deployed to interact with those media.

The third field can be described as *cultural and media studies*, including *gay and queer studies*. Reflection on the role of the media, of commercial popular culture, and of youth culture through the eyes of academic research provides a context for the kind of mediated world that learning biographies emerge in. It also shows the development of cultural studies into a major field that relates to most other areas of research, not in the least because the media studied have become an important part of our lives and societies. Media studies also provide a theoretical background on what some like to call our modern 'information society' which is important for, but not wholly provided by life/learning biography research, or literacy research.

Together, the three fields look at the participants, or the data if you will, in three logical, complementary and interrelated ways. The individual's life, life style and learning biography is described against a background of work in learning and life biographies. The media are approached through cultural and media studies. And the interaction between both the individuals and the media, but also between life biography research and media studies, plays itself out in the realm of research in new and multi-literacies. Naturally, there are no exact boundaries between these fields, and they complement, overlap, or may even conflict with one another. In the last two chapters, I synthesize perspectives in the fields of literacy and learning biographies, in relation to the analysis of the data. I will use literature in cultural and media studies mostly to support my work, while the case studies in this dissertation aim to inform those fields.

Of course much work has already been done, and is being done right now, in all the areas I mentioned above. However, there is not very much research where video-ethnography has been done with a group of students who share an interest in a particular subset of popular culture artifacts, media and technologies, interviewed across a range of countries and over a period of more than three years. The somewhat unusual design of this project is itself a methodological experiment that is, in my belief, crucial to increase the chance for new insights into new social realities. And not only is the project design unusual, also some methodological approaches are (e.g. combining video ethnography, discourse analysis, and cultural media analysis) for the same reason. Finally, and to return to the project in relation to the literature, I want to see this study as cumulative with many others, so that large combined data sets about different groups of people can eventually be used to make more valid comparisons, and enable us to learn more. This is a small, intensive study, which may influence how 'representative' it can be, but a qualitative study such as this can be extremely valuable in identifying new phenomena. Larger, quantitative studies are limited in the quality of data that they can collect, but can be useful afterwards to test how widespread the phenomena are that are found in this more in-depth project. It is in this exploratory and qualitative role, and as one among many other small and large studies present and future, that this work intends to be a valuable addition to the literature.

## LEARNING AND WORK BIOGRAPHIES

Over the last two decades, discourses of educational policy, both within academic and governmental paradigms, have typically been centered around popular phrases such as 'information society', 'networked society', 'knowledge society' and 'lifelong learning' (European Commission: 1995, 2000). All this terminology signals a perceived change in the way our societies are organized and in the way we (should) learn about them and prepare to succeed in them. However, it seems hard to describe exactly what it is that is different about this new, more modern society, or about the new generation that is growing up in it. The consensus seems to be that it's time for something very different, but what exactly that is or how we are going to get there is much less defined. And not

everyone agrees on the terminology, or its meaning. Castells (1997, 1998, 1999) is rather critical of the idea that we are moving towards a service society or a knowledge society, because industry and knowledge were important aspects of our societies in the past as well. He sees a particular type of knowledge as typical for the changes we see around us, which he describes as a revolution of information technology. It's in that sector that we see an enormous growth of specialized jobs and services that focus on the production and distribution of information, but we also see a simultaneous trend that creates large numbers of low-skill, low-income work. Apart from this specific form of information society, Castells also qualifies the modern society as a networked one. He describes the network society as one where more and more loose, short term connections are established between parties to exchange information, and to create new information, which make the information and the network trends integral parts of the same development.

It is in this context that educational policy makers and researchers produce discourses that aim for 'lifelong learning'. It is also in this context that more and more researchers seem to agree that institutionalized education can and should play a role in learning, but by no means the only role, and that the system is not doing a good job serving many students at this point in time (du Bois-Reymond: 1999, 2001, 2006). But changing the system is difficult, to say the least, and that might be a reason why much of this discourse speaks of a new type of learner. At the same time, many young people are finding different ways to learn by themselves, without waiting for changes to happen to educational systems. Diepstraten (2006) describes how two ideal types of new learner, one from a sociological and the other from an educational perspective, overlap. Discourses in education innovation often refer to a 'late modern learner', while sociological discourses describe the ideal type as a 'biographical self-determinator'. According to Diepstraten, these two ideal types overlap on a number of key features:

- The importance of a late modern conception of learning as a lifelong and 'lifebroad' process of self-development.

- The importance of a different kind of non-codified knowledge ('soft skills', personal and biographical competences) and other, non-school related contexts to attain such knowledge.
- The emphasis on cooperative learning and learning in 'authentic', real-life contexts.
- The notion of a 'new generation' that is less motivated to engage in school mainly because of competition from non-school contexts in which young people can learn for themselves and by more attractive means.
- The notion of learners as active actors.

There are also a number of differences between the ideal types as they are described in the two discourses (Diepstraten, 2006). In what she calls the 'education innovation discourse' the focus is on structured and organized school and non-school learning, where the ideal type is someone with a meaning-oriented learning style who plans learning actively and sets out for clear goals that are socially desirable. In youth sociological discourses life and life courses take a central position. They note that learning trajectories are becoming less standardized and predictable, that life phases are blurring and that individualization increases. Diplomas do not guarantee jobs, and no singular trajectory delivers success. Paths laid out by older people, in other words, are mistrusted and motivate young people to develop their own networks and learning contexts, both online and offline (Goodfellow: 2009, Leander: 2010). Youth cultural learning capital plays a key role, but to be successful in this self-determining role young people need access to the tools that are needed for it. Life chances are very different for different groups of young people, and socio-economic backgrounds and geographical location can greatly determine how successful someone can be in developing their own biography.

Diepstraten's analysis of her own interview data eventually describes a number of common features in 'new learners'. All trendsetters engage in non-school learning, with some participating in hardly any school learning at all. They engage with youth cultural capital while developing cosmopolitan networks consisting of "weak ties with

likeminded peers and members of older generations”, and those networks give them access to information and opportunity. They prefer paid projects which they can create and design along the lines of their biographical orientations, in network-like structures with a mix of disciplines and cultures, while using their knowledge of youth cultural capital. The networks of people in which they operate also serve as a ‘backup’ in case things don’t turn out the way they had hoped. Peers can support them, lead them to new opportunity, and form a sounding board to exchange experiences.

The changes that are happening in our societies clearly coincide with, or even cause to some extent, the changes that new learners are making to their learning biographies. On the one hand school systems don’t seem to offer them what they want, and on the other hand organized schooling seems less and less necessary or suitable as an efficient trajectory. Du Bois-Reymond and Moersch (2006) propose a focus on ‘valid learning biographies’ that are co-produced between learners and institutions. Valid learning biographies are trajectories formed by actual learning experiences, meant in the broadest sense. The experience is ‘valid’ in the sense that it’s a meaningful, valuable and viable track for the learner, and will help learners develop in the way that they desire. But school systems generally offer rigid, linear pathways that do not involve or include the new learner’s preferred ways of social networking, or the popular culture capital they want to engage with and identify with. This means institutionalized schooling fails new learners in three key areas of their preferred, highly non-linear life trajectories and styles. If schools want to make the slightest change of even starting to adapt to some of these new requirements, we should first study how non-linear trajectories, popular cultural capital, social networking and identification processes interact with each other, with learners, and with learning. The research project described in this dissertation aims to make a contribution specifically by addressing those issues.

The changes and challenges in and of young people’s learning trajectories are obviously directly related to the more and less successful ways in which transitions to work happen. And those transitions in turn have direct impact on social integration

(Walter: 2006). A holistic view of learning, work, and social integration is required to create policies that allow for environments where young people can develop their subjective self-interests and have access to learning opportunities and work. So far, the literature shows that our governments and educational systems fail in achieving to create such environments for large groups of young people. Part of the problem is the lack of recognition of the fact that non-formal and informal learning plays a more important role in many people's lives than it used to. In light of the purpose of this study I will look at the role that strategic networking and popular culture capital play in acquiring competencies and creating opportunities, and how they are deployed to facilitate transitions to work.

### LITERACY, IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

This research project describes why the participants pick the things they pick to surround themselves with and express themselves through, how they use those artifacts, and what these identifications say about a possible shift in affiliation away from education and work, and towards paradigms of popular culture. I do this by studying individual cases, and describing biographical data obtained through video ethnography along an analysis of artifacts and expressions displayed in social media and elsewhere. Each biography will describe, in some sense and in different ways, the path the participant has 'chosen' in a continuous navigation through traditional educational and professional institutions and notions, while being exposed to and engaged in a wide variety of literacy practices ranging from law books to video games. And the interaction between all this content, and all these practices, influences the choices that are made, the behavior and expression displayed.

When I did my Masters in Communications at the University of Vienna (Austria) I spent most of my time in a lecture hall with 400 students, listening to a professor who read his lectures from his notes. These were the same notes he had read from for the past 15 years, and that the student union had recorded and turned into a transcript, which I bought and had in front of me. The jokes were still in the same place. When a student



would raise her hand and ask if she could ask a question, the professor would look up slowly from his notes and say “no”. Was this an exception, or is it a thing of the past? Only days ago my mother called, after four days of university seminars on Saint-Exupery and mysticism and said with anger in her voice: “He just read from his book, for four days! The book that I had bought and read! Are we still doing that in education today?” In my own case, I bought my first Mac computer soon after those lectures, and two years later I was a certified programmer. Two years after that, I was marketing manager for Europe and head of management information systems for a large Dutch multinational. And after that, I started my own interaction design company and now work all over the world. I am also writing a dissertation on life biographies and literacies. I believe that in part, the inspiration for writing this dissertation can be traced back to that day in the lecture hall, when every cell in my body rejected the specific literacy practice that was forced on me.

This story, however anecdotal, is not unique. The move away from in-school learning and literacy to out-of-school accomplishments by youth has been well documented (Alvermann: 2002), as have the challenges of mixing in and out-of school affiliations and literacies for students and teachers (Ito: 2006, 2008). Only years after my own move away from the coordinated literacy reinforcement efforts of the school system did I understand the many reasons why my own digital worlds, networks, creations and games came much easier to me than any of ‘theirs’ (Gee: 2003).

As I wrote earlier, I am interested in looking at two key questions in relation to the data and the theoretical framework concerning literacy: *what do the participants’ new multi-literacies look like, and what does that say about how we think about identity in relation to literacy?* We don’t actually know a great deal about how people use and re-use the overwhelmingly present popular culture texts that surround them, or how people move and shift positions and selections to fit their long and short term needs (van Helden & Moje: 2005). The lack of empirical work in this area is a key reason for this study. But what we may know even less of, is how this constant interaction with the popular cultural world relates to our notions of identity, or even our concepts of literacy and

learning. We seem to be maneuvering between increasing theorization of the rather elusive idea of 'identity' on the one hand and a slowly growing body of work describing actual new and multi-literacy practices on the other. To cut to the chase, one could say that the much needed and exciting connections that must be made between theory and data should be part of the next phase in the emerging field of *literacy and identity studies*. This project aims to contribute by providing insights in what those connections might look like, or by asking which connections need to be made, and why.

Within the somewhat newly defined area of literacy and identity studies, however, a range of theoretical perspectives on identity and literacy exist that may help focus research, which in turn can inform further development of theory. Most contemporary approaches see identity as a social construct, which can be performed in a range of ways while being recognized by others (Gee, 2001). But there are also differences. Moje and Luke (2002a) offer five 'metaphors' for identity as they have documented in a survey of the literature: identity as difference, sense of self/subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative and position. They argue that although few studies have recognized these different views on the conceptualization of identity, the subtle differences between them can have a significant impact on how people think literacy is related to identity.

If it is desirable or necessary to frame the methodological approach of the proposed study by placing it in a theoretical perspective, then *identity as position* would certainly be the most suitable candidate. This 'metaphor' employs not just the notion that identities and subjectivities are produced while moving through and acting within spaces, but also by the positioning of the self in relation to the interactions, time (scales) and spaces (Butler: 1997). This positioning activity is a dynamic, constantly fluid arena of acceptance and resistance. The notion of identity as position is, apart from being inclusive of all other metaphors that Moje and Luke describe, also suitable as a theoretical framework because it aligns well with the methodological approach of this study. Positioning your self in space and time, and being simultaneously positioned and cast in a role by places and events, means a continuous interaction in which a

human being assesses what in the environment is more, and what is less desirable. That range of desirability is also the most important and prominent evaluative category (Lemke: 1997a) in the data analysis and data itself, which consists of materials collected from the participants' real and virtual spaces within time.

When we are speaking of taking up one's surroundings, one's spaces, or resisting them, we are in some sense always speaking of desirability, and eventually of desire. In some possibly over-simplistic sense the world can always be divided between things you like, or desire, and things you don't like, or resist, on a scale from least to most. Halperin (2002) equates desire with identification in a way that is helpful in this research. Studying what people desire, what they identify with, is much more concrete than theorizing identity, which will remain a problematic, abstract, conceptual entity no matter how many books will be written on the subject (Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema: 2008, Lin: 2008). In fact, we could question whether or not it's even possible to prove that 'identity' actually exists, or that every person has one. My own perspective is that the concept of identity itself, at least within academic environments, may have become more prominent than it deserves to be or than it should be in relation to the role it might play in the lives of the people it is often assigned to.

Focusing on identification, rather than identity, means paying more attention to process, to activity, to behavior. It means stepping away from the discussion around the perceived reality that we all have 'identities' and what they might be, to the actual multi-literacy processes that we employ throughout our lives and learning biographies. This shift in focus, in angle, I believe might at least shed a different and hopefully productive light on literacies and learning, in a way that theorizing identity won't. But there are less ideological and more practical reasons to select the specific 'identity as position' metaphors as a theoretical backdrop as well: they focus on activity, rather than state of being. They need research that follows participants through the real and online spaces they move through, to record the activities they engage in, the artifacts they interact with and the cultural materials they produce (Moje: 2004). This is exactly what video-ethnography does.



Image 2.1. : The Flip camera is always ready to shoot.

Having placed so much emphasis on identity as position, on identification, and the relevance and linkages to methodology, it is also necessary to place 'identity' in a larger theoretical frame. In a critical socio-cultural approach, which is what I am advocating is most suitable here, we have to pay close attention not only to identity/identification, but also power and agency (Lewis & Moje: 2007). Critical socio-cultural theory, apart from combining discourses and theories from many other disciplines, is particularly well equipped to identify ideologies and power relations, and shares this quality with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough: 1995), which I make use of throughout this work.

Some side notes on the use of power and agency and the role these notions play in this research. In general I will agree with a notion of power in the Foucauldian sense, as a distributed system of influence and resistance that exists on all levels and (time) scales of human existence. However, I do intend to exercise the right to be 'critical', both in the socio-cultural as well as in the discourse analysis sense of the term, and discuss the inequality of power relations when it comes to youth and media. We may have lived through Adorno's and McLuhan's era's focus on media domination, only to

arrive at Foucault's universe of more democratized and distributed power, but our time of hyper-marketing (what clothing store A&F in its marketing strategy called "coordinated lifestyle reinforcement") may be just the moment to take another look at who exactly holds the keys to paradise, and how those keys are used. In other words: everyone may have power and make use of power, but not everyone has the same amount of power and very few people (or corporations, to be exact) control the actual distribution channels through which these powers flow.

Which brings us to agency: "strategic making and remaking of self and sometimes the material conditions surrounding the self" (Moje: 2007). The notion of agency relates directly to a key theme in this study, which discusses the role of 'strategic social networking' in life biographies, and in learning. My main concern in relation to agency, however, is whose is it? Again, we have seen times where discourses on the dominance and importance of 'the media' ruled the scholarly world, and we've seen much work on how individual consumers of media can re-appropriate commercial mass pop culture to their heart's delight. But where did it get us, and where is it going? How much influence do the participants in the proposed study, for example, really have in determining their own position in relation to their mediated environment? Part of this story concerns the local versus the global (Latour: 1993), surely, but I propose we take another look at just how much the sometimes praised re-appropriation of commercial popular culture might be the result pre-formatted re-appropriation opportunities created by the media complexes themselves. Convergence culture (Jenkins: 2006) may be a reality in flux for all of us, but what I am most interested in in relation to the data, and what I hope the contribution of the study in this area is, is gaining better insights into how the powers of agency operate in new, online multi-literacies saturated with commercial popular culture. Not that I'm being pessimistic, necessarily, as I do believe there are lessons to be learned and opportunities to be created by studying online experience and gaming (McGonigal: 2011). But we do need to take an extremely critical look at agency again, to see whether it's authentic and valid, and for which players it actually leads to a better world.

## CULTURAL AND MEDIA STUDIES

In her article in the New York Times (23 June 2011), Katrin Bennhold writes that posting something on Facebook is much like choosing what you are going to wear. Your 'identity', or what you want others to believe your identity is like, goes local, global and hopefully (or sometimes unfortunately) viral, instantly. It's here that an exciting connection between literacy practices, identification processes, and concepts of identity becomes real (and virtual). This connection is not implicit, or the domain of clever researchers, but boldly front and center of very conscious, intentional identity marketing production and consumption by young people, older people, governments and corporations alike. And, for the first time in history, we're doing it instantly and through the same technologies, from Buenos Aires to Oslo, from German to Arabic, from economic refugee to Prada addict.

Looking at cultural studies, media studies, queer studies, communication studies, and all other fields that explore human interaction and cultural production, can be hugely enriching and informative, but also confusing and mystifying. Each of these fields, let alone all of them together, have produced large bodies of work that inform each other, complement each other and sometimes conflict with each other. Just take the notion of 'culture' itself as an example. The number of definitions and descriptions are uncountable, even when it is somewhat narrowed by adding the word 'popular.' I do not try, in this research, to define or redefine what 'popular culture' actually is or might be. For the purpose of this research, I am prepared to accept that popular culture is any object or representation in existence in our universe that is one way or another used by human beings to identify with *and* this identification process is purposefully shared with others. To identify with something or someone, here, means having a special interest in something or someone, liking or disliking it or them more than other things or people.

From all of the areas of 'cultural' research mentioned above, a small subset of work must be selected. For this project, I chose to select a few notions that I have found to be very productive in the past, and that I believe point at key issues in the data. One important and over-arching concept is 'convergence culture' (Jenkins: 2006), which explains how old and new media form hybrid technologies out of existing and new media systems. Corporations, but also consumers, continuously adapt to new offerings, or put more pessimistically, are cut off from old ones or forced into particular modes of consumer and producer behavior, which in turn affect identification processes. These new offerings are convergences, hybrids, mixes of both older and newer technologies, but also of older and newer content, or product. Technologies develop through ongoing innovation (or sometimes regression) that takes place in a process influenced by three groups of people: the technicians (engineers, designers), the content makers (marketers, producers, artists) and the audience (consumers, 'private' producers). Changes that take place in one group always result in changes in another, and they can originate anywhere. Sometimes a new technology may facilitate a new way of communicating, sometimes a new type of behavior results in designers creating a new or better tool for it.

The notion of convergence is important for this and other research in cultural studies, because our societies have become enormously dependent on and organized through technologies that run our economies and communications. Without the new media and social networking technologies of the last fifteen years or so, this dissertation could not even have been written. It was created by interaction with participants through social media systems, while studying electronically distributed popular culture content, and recording the entire process by using HD cameras, iPhones and computers. Therefore, understanding better how technologies are part of our social behavior, our 'culture' and 'popular culture', if you will, is essential. And while Jenkins provides solid theory around convergence culture, this study looks closely at how actual convergences happen in the real lives of the participants.

Convergence culture also relates to the idea that so-called 'transmedia complexes' (Lemke: in press) exist and are deployed by media and technology producers to engage and captivate audiences. What makes these media and technologies, which are increasingly indistinguishable from each other, 'transmedia' is that corporations deploy cross-platform strategies and products to reach consumers. For example, Harry Potter, the book, has developed into Harry Potter movies, cereals, video games, clothing, bed linens and so on. But not only corporations and their marketers are creative in finding many distribution channels: so are consumers. There are women who write homo-erotic fan fiction based on Harry and his friend, there are YouTube collages made by fans, themed Harry Potter dress-up parties, and even pornographic movies complete with lookalikes and magic wands. The transmedia complexes deployed by organizations, and used and interpreted by audiences, are in themselves a form of convergence as the use of many different media and channels to distribute and sell popular culture content and artifacts is in itself a technological innovation. In a sense, transmedia complexes are both an example of convergent culture, but also important in constructing the theory of convergence culture itself. And for the research described in this dissertation, the interdependent and complementing notions of convergence and transmedia complexes are of great value as they place the individual case studies in context of larger processes that are happening, while providing concrete examples of how these larger processes affect individuals and groups of people.

One aspect of popular culture, and popular culture studies, that should not go overlooked is the visual nature of it. This may sound trivial, as most of us are used to living in a world full of still and moving images, screens and displays, but this didn't always use to be so. Visuality (Mirzoeff: 1998, Evans & Hall: 1999) has become the prominent mode of communication in many different ways. Cultural production has 'gone visual' in the sense that television, film, web pages, video games, magazines and even news programs all heavily depend on the visual image to convey their message. There seem to be few aspects of life left that do not employ graphic power in the competition for our attention. Whether we watch a speech (note that it's common to say



'watch' a speech) by President Obama or engage in erotic activity while watching the latest BelAmi video full of frolicking guys, the visual is what informs us and engages us strongly, and the visual has been purposefully engineered to appeal to our basic emotions. Visuality is not only key to production of mass media and product, but also to individuals in this study. Most of the young men in this research project pay great attention to what they wear, what they hang on their walls, what they watch, and what they post online. What it looks like, and what that says about you, is crucial in creating your image, your identity, your brand, or whatever you want to call it. A posting on Facebook will get you very few hits if it consists of just text, but a well chosen image will get many 'likes.' And when it comes to dating and finding sexual partners, there is of course no understating the importance of visual representation.

Over the centuries, but specifically in the last few decades, the shift from mostly written and spoken communication to much more visually oriented products, content and technologies, has also affected the timescales in which we produce and absorb information, and the amount of produced and absorbed information. The amount of content on television, in movie theaters, on iTunes, YouTube, and so on, is staggering. And the speed with which many people switch content, channels, devices and software applications has increased rapidly over the last few decades, now resulting in a highly fragmented content absorption and production, at least when compared to let's say one hundred years ago. There is one area of many young people's lives where this rapid shifting, mixing and up-taking is more difficult to do, and even frowned upon: the educational system. There is a struggle going, and it is one that has only just begun, between the rapidly shifting and mixing ways in which the young people in this study engage with content and technologies, and the ways in which many formal educational environments try to promote slower, longer and narrower or more focused interaction with prescribed learning materials.

Last but not least I want to pay attention to queer studies, in particular work that David Halperin (2002, 2012) has done in developing the notion of identification and specifically gay and queer identification processes, as well as the role that eroticism

and sexuality play in gay men's lives and cultures. Gay men often select different artifacts for identification than straight men do, or use them in different ways. In this study, for example, almost all the young men are interested in visual design. Things, such as the clothes on their backs and the furniture in their rooms, must look beautiful and be interesting. Not just any old chair will do. And not just any old computer will do: Apple products are a sign of gay sophistication and provide status, position and pleasure. And the pleasure principle runs deep, I dare say deeper than among straight men, or at least differently deep. Not any old sex will do either, and sex is important and central to their lives, mostly in an open, non-taboo fashion, and so also serves as a cultural activity that sets them apart, queers them, makes them special and interesting. Plus it upsets, in their eyes, the boring, hypocritical mainstream, which is another bonus. So what is particularly fascinating about the idea of queer or gay identification, is that it seems to serve a specific set of purposes that are more important or only important to gay men. When I started out with this project, my initial set of goals or purposes that I assumed gay men have for engaging in queer identification processes included the needs for sex, for belonging, for beauty, for an interesting life, and for the queer itself. And with 'the queer itself' I mean an interest in unusual, different, provocative, and transforming views and activities compared to the more mainstream and hetero-normative aspects of society. In the case studies we encounter many examples of identifications that can be ranked under one of these goals, as well as others, and so also in this area of the literature does this study provide actual support for the theory in the form of evidence of identification processes, specifically the ones young gay men engage in.

I'd also like to emphasize again that in my opinion, a study of popular culture can not only be framed by academic, theoretical perspectives but must also be viewed in context of popular culture itself. This research and this dissertation focused on many popular culture artifacts, and even contains popular culture artifacts, so it could be argued that the work that was done, the conversations that were had, the socializing and joined interactions with pop culture, have made this dissertation part of popular culture (at least within a small group of people). It's been discussed on Facebook and

elsewhere, and been referred to frequently by the participants, often in relation to pop cultural artifacts or events precisely because they knew I was interested in it. Others would then respond to those comments, and so on. So in some sense, this work is woven into the fabrics of social networking and popular culture. Apart from that, I became friends on Facebook and on gay social networking sites with all the participants, where they then also started to run into each other. The study of social networking therefore was also an exercise in it.

The list of popular culture artifacts, events, references, networks and technologies that surfaced during the many hours of (video-) research with the participants was endless. I discuss many of them in detail, throughout the analysis. Of course there is music, where Lady Gaga is likely to be the one icon many interviewees identify with, but it's probably better to speak of a vast intertextual galaxy of chunks of meaning that continuously shift within and among the participant(s), the mediating technologies and the signifiers themselves. And some of the subjects consider themselves active producers of pop culture, or consider themselves to *be* popular culture, or a pop culture artifact. New social networking technologies now also make it necessary to pick the 'right' cultural artifacts to identify yourself with, as they are instantly visible and open to interpretation by all of your 'friends'. You are being constantly critiqued, twenty-four hours a day, offline and online. Judging by Rachel Berry's statement in the first episode of *Glee*, this might not necessarily be a bad thing. While filming her daily MySpace-upload she exclaimed: "These days being unknown is worse than being poor!"

That exclamation may be a joke or seem an exaggeration, but in fact the character of Rachel meant it very seriously. But whatever the truth is, it points at two important aspects of popular culture clearly: popular culture is an integral part of many young people's learning and life biographies, and popular culture has become aware that this is so and reflects on itself. The first point is of course one that I make in this study, but the second one shows that it's not 'just' academics who study popular culture and social networking, but that the industries engaged in cultural production have realized how all-encompassing their paradigms have become. And they know that their

consumers know, to some extent, which is why it becomes relevant for Rachel to say what she says. The producers know that the audience may find Rachel's self-branding over the top and hilarious, but they also recognize themselves in her urge to do so. They identify with her and with her particular posting activities, and with the materials (popular songs) that she shares.

This dissertation developed not only from my academic studies, but also from knowing the extent to which my own views of the world have been shaped by popular culture. The television series that probably had the most impact on me when I was in college was *Beverly Hills 90210*, followed by *Melrose Place*. I do remember telling people that when I was in doubt about something in life, I'd ask myself (or say it out loud for effect and attention) "What would Brandon do?" Brandon, played by Jason Priestly, was the original do-gooder cutie in the show, who always did the right thing. Still, this was a show about high school. The college age or early career stage *Melrose Place* series added whole new galaxies of information and values to my ways of viewing the world, not in the least because it actually had a gay character. Other popular culture that interested me enormously included TV series such as *Dynasty* (luxury, fabulousness, and a handsome gay guy), movies like *Ordinary People* (troubled boy), and music from *Madonna* (the strong woman). Stereotypical, perhaps, but interesting in comparison with today's *Glee* or *The O.C.*, *Lady Gaga*, and even movies such as the ones from *The Twilight Saga*. I knew back then that all those things influenced me, and eventually wrote this dissertation on popular culture and learning, so for me the relationship between the two is undeniably strong.

Finally, in a project such as this one, there has to be consideration for literature that deals with the challenges of using video for ethnographic research, as well as work on interview techniques. In the next chapter, on methods, I will come back to these issues.

## chapter 3

# Methods.

My research question was formulated broadly, but for the (video-) ethnographic research I purposively sampled a small group of (ex-) college students in their twenties (roughly meaning college age students, recent graduates and their age-peers). There are two sets of selection criteria, which in a sense follow the unifying and diversifying trends in life biographies and technologies that I have noted in the introduction. The unifying or shared criteria are intended to allow similarities and differences to surface within the target age group, while the diversifying ones should somewhat limit the inherent bias in a small sample such as this one. By selecting participants from different backgrounds, but with seemingly shared interests, I hoped to elicit salient data that is on topic, but affords interpretations valid across some cultural, educational and geographical boundaries.

### **Sample size**

I aimed for a sample size of approximately twelve participants. A smaller group would offer too little material for comparison, and not enough possibility to include a range of cultural, socio-economic, educational and geographical backgrounds. A larger group would make the logistics of both data collection and analysis too big and complex a job for one researcher. I have also opted not to approach a much larger population with a

survey, as I am looking for a quality and depth of richly contextualized data that cannot be obtained using questionnaires.

### **Unifying or shared criteria**

To study the role of popular culture capital and social networking strategies in the current college population I needed to select current college students. I have set the age limits between twenty and thirty, as I am interested in a new generation of students, not students who may go (back) to school later in life. The participants are expected to attend or have attended college, or some form of post-high school academic or professional education. I aimed to find participants who are currently in college or university, some who have graduated, and some who have left or switched institutions to pursue other options. I attempted to include participants with different native languages, as long as they also speak English at a level good enough for interviewing. I also had informal conversations with the participants in their native languages of Dutch, German, Spanish and French.

### **POPULAR CULTURE AND SOCIAL INTERESTS**

For the purpose of the study it would be too easy to simply require some sort of interest in popular culture and social networking from the participants. That would hardly limit the suitable population (what college student is not into those things?), nor would it allow for the type of comparative study I wanted to do. Again, I intended to study seemingly unifying, globalizing forces of popular culture capital and social networking strategies and technologies, against a variety of backgrounds. To narrow the criteria for the sample population, I deployed Halperin's notion of identification (in contrast to identity) where subgroups or subcultures within the total population seem to organize their affiliations and social connections around sets of selected popular culture artifacts (Halperin, 2000). The key question in this approach is about why certain groups of people pick certain cultural artifacts to identify with. Why those artifacts and not others? How do they re-appropriate those artifacts and perform them through their identities

and representations of their identities (online)? What does it mean when others like or dislike the same artifacts, and how does that affect social networks?

To study and answer those questions, it's convenient for the researcher to share an interest in similar areas of popular culture. Admittedly, sharing interests and selection criteria with the sample population, or even being part of it to some extent, can create bias or even cause the researcher to overlook salient data and important insights. I acknowledge this, and will attempt to counteract these risks by actively looking for unexpected angles.

In principle, most identity groups could be suitable for a study of identifications and affiliations. We could think of women, Jews, Koreans, vegetarians and lots of other groups. I chose to select male college students who showed an interest in popular culture, and expressly discuss and display such cultural artifacts on their sites and in their profiles. I also chose to select participants who self-identify as gay, specifically so that I can study how a specific subgroup of the population is organized around a specific subset of popular culture artifacts. An additional reason is the fact that my own social network included a disproportionate number of gay men and therefore networking with them was relatively easy. When most of the participants on some level identify with gay popular culture, comparisons also become easier. The cultural material may be the same, the technologies may be the same, but their personal backgrounds may allow for very different ways in which these artifacts and technologies are used and re-appropriated. My knowledge of 'gay' popular culture was crucial to understand references, interpret them, and allow for fluid communication between me and the participant(s). This was also essential to do the broad, theme-oriented discourse and multimedia analysis of the resulting data.

### **Diversifying criteria**

I attempted to include participants from different countries (see table at the end of this chapter), possibly on different continents. For comparison, it was preferable if some

participants were in college and doing well, some would have 'dropped out', some would have switched once or twice between studies, and some have would have graduated. I succeeded in having this particular mix of participants, as the table shows. I also attempted to get a mix of participants who have worked, were working, or were just studying and had career objectives for after graduation. Although I required everyone to speak English, I attempted to have a variety of first languages.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Participants came from various socio-economic backgrounds, but don't represent a full 'range' between least and most privileged. All of them had at least some college education, and all of them had decent access to food, housing, clothing, media, computers and medical care, which obviously put them in the middle class worldwide. Within that segment though, there is variation between more affluent participants who had a private apartment and got all their money from their parents, and others who had difficulty finding jobs and paying the rent for a shared space in a less desirable suburb. There were also those who were born and live in 'western', rich and developed countries, and others who lived in 'developing' countries, plus those who had migrated to more affluent countries to improve their lives, and were sometimes having a hard time succeeding. I acknowledge the limited range of economic backgrounds, but for the purpose of this study, where intensive interaction with and use of social media and popular culture was desirable, this particular group was suitable and interesting, as they shared sets of criteria, but also differed on a number of them.

### **Selecting the participants & IRB approval.**

I deployed two ways to find suitable candidates. I approached some friends that met the criteria, and had an informal conversation with them about their background, education, interests in popular culture and their on/offline social networking activities. I also looked at their online profiles. If they met the criteria, asked them to participate, and also asked them to suggest a friend who might meet the criteria and be interested.



The second method was to look at online profiles of people I don't know, in the various countries where I find myself. I contacted people who seemed to meet the criteria, exchanged information online, and met them for a conversation if possible. Also from those contacts it happened that the participant suggested someone else in their networks, which resulted in a somewhat spontaneously developed snowballing technique.

The Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan gave this study an 'exempt' status (notification received via email from the Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008; Notice of Exemption HUM00017733). All the interview and private data was recorded with consent of participants and stored in a secure area. No personal identifiers are published in the dissertation. The remaining data obtained online exists in the public domain.

## DATA COLLECTION

I did a series of non-structured interviews with each participant. These took place in different real life locations, and different online locations:

1. Interviewing in the participant's home, apartment or room. This worked very well as participants' rooms were often filled with cultural artifacts and references which motivated them to speak at length about those. They also talked about their taste in design and fashion, and how those related to who they believed they were or wanted to be.
2. Trailing in public areas. I followed participants with a video camera in stores and walking in the city, while they point at things and explain why they like what they see, or not. This is very different from filming in the home, as the city offers more of what they do and don't like than their own apartments. In other words, it's a continuous navigation not only of the streetscape, but also through the products

on offer, which resulted in continuous input on different levels of identification with that what surrounded the participant.

3. The group interview. My experience here was completely different from the one-on-one interviews, as group dynamics and histories came into play. Participants sometimes changed their behavior when others were in the room with whom they had histories separately from the on they had with me. Participants also reflect on artifacts in conversation with each other, or argue over issues, which they didn't do as much with me.

Apart from these three methods and environments for data collection, I have used several more:

1. During, before and after filming or any encounter with a participant, I made field notes.
2. I communicated with participants through the very social networking sites and technologies they employ (Facebook, Skype, Gayromeo, SMS or texting, etc.) and kept some records of those exchanges.
3. I collected data on the popular culture artifacts and events they were interested in, displayed in their online profiles, had in their homes, or mentioned to me. I also collected some of their own contributions to popular culture, such as blog entries, posted photos, fashion they would wear or video clips they made.
4. As an experiment, and to explore the differences and similarities between 'scientific' and 'artistic' approaches to the participants, I also had an artist and photographer do photo shoots with the participants. I was not only interested in how an 'artist' would approach the participants in light of the subject of popular culture and networking, but also in finding out how the session would be staged differently in relation to my own, probably more 'academic' staging. The photographer also took photos during my interviews, and in return I filmed the photographer while he photographed us. In a sense, I created a continuous loop of production and recording of data from a variety of angles, which apart from being highly valuable and interesting posed important methodological questions.

In all cases I noted a shift in pose and behavior when participants were being photographed. More when they were asked to pose, and less when they were asked to go about their business, but still a change. Physical movement and language became less fluent, less flexible, somewhat more conservative and artificial. Using the photographs afterwards, I questioned myself in so far that I became aware of my own intrusion into their lives, and my staging of the situation. I only became fully aware of my own presence in the room with a participant, and a camera, when I saw photographs made by the photographer present that showed me and the camera and the participant. The full (movie-) set, and setting, was only then revealed. In the dissertation I was not allowed to show faces of people, so I have only used photos where people are not identifiable. This is not so much detrimental to the study, but it is to the presentation of it in this dissertation, as many rich materials could not be shown.

5. In one instance, I provided a participant (Gonzalo) with a Flip camera as I was unable to finish my data set with him due conflicting travel schedules. I asked him to make videos in New York, where was staying for a few months, that somehow and in his eye relate to popular culture and social networking. He sent me 50 short clips, some of which I reflect on in the chapter about him.

In total, I estimate to have spent about five to ten days with each participant, spread over a period of roughly 3 years from 2009 to 2011. During that time, I filmed about sixty hours of conversations, interviews, city strolls, bar nights, university visits, and so on. The rough footage was then reduced to useable, on topic content, and the final source data for the research was reduced to 3-5 hours per participant (see table end of chapter). Apart from the video data, I collected posts they made on social networking sites, online conversations with me, and photographs that I and the photographer took. These non-video collections consist of approximately fifty items per person, of which I used a smaller subset for analysis in the biographical chapters.

The technological and logistical challenges of dealing with such a large and diverse data set were not small, and posed both methodological and technical challenges

(Goldman, 1998, 2004, 2007). In this study I use DV tape cameras, HD Flip cameras, still cameras and iPhone cameras, for my own recordings. The other data can come in as Word, JPEG, PDF, text message, voicemail, MP4, Facebook wall posting, Gayromeo chat, and even as physical objects. Storing different formats, and knowing how to edit and tag different formats through different software applications, was a complex enterprise, so apart from the actual research I had to also invest great amounts of time in learning technical skills.

By now it's obvious that I did not follow exactly the models of data collection that are often deployed in critical ethnography. There is no stage where the researcher is as unobtrusive as possible (Carspecken, 1996) while observing participants in social settings, except where online settings are concerned. Many online profiles, for example, and postings, can be viewed without the owner of the profile knowing about this. It's clear that in the case of intense social networking, some of the conventions of critical qualitative research may not apply. Traditional ethnographic methods, however useful, do need to be adjusted and expanded when studying online social networking. First of all, it's hard to keep participants anonymous and anonymous to each other. Second, they find out an awful lot about you as a researcher as well, simply because they can access your profiles and friends lists just as easily as you can access theirs. Third, online social networking research never stops, as I was contacted day and night through many different communication tools, about widely varying topics or just to have small talk. Fourth, by becoming part of the social network, you can become closer friends than you might have originally intended as a researcher, and therefore the boundaries between researcher and participant, and between doing ethnography and just 'hanging out' as friends, blurs. Not all participants appreciated this sometimes confused situation, and asked to know when they were 'on the record' and when I was there as a friend.

## DATA ANALYSIS & PRESENTATION

Data analysis took place along two different approaches and academic transitions that I wanted to deploy in ways in which they could complement each other. On the one hand, I present biographies of the participants. For reasons of practicality I focus most intensively on three diverse participants who provide thorough insights in the themes of the study. The materials of the other nine participants serve as additional description and support to underline specific claims in the work. The second approach for the study is more 'topical'. From the collected data I distilled a number of frequently appearing topics or themes, which I relate to the four larger foci: learning, work, strategic networking, and popular culture. This dual approach, biographical and topical/themed, was intended to allow for perspectives on the actual human experiences that 'make up' each participant, as well as a comparative study across the relevant topics.

As described above, most of the data is video, complemented by collections of other mostly digital formats that are stored and backed up on a number of hard drives. They are categorized by and tagged with the participant's code name, the date and the location of filming or collection.

The complete analytical process will consist of seven steps:

1. First viewing and topical indexing of recurrent themes.
2. Second viewing by theme, and editing out salient clips and materials.
3. Creating one video film or 'video chapter' per participant, containing key data.
4. Mapping differences and similarities across topics by participant and across participants by theme: *identity, contrast, structure, style, meaning, future, space and connection*.
5. Create biographies for three main participants, and shorter theme-based essays on remaining participants.
6. Relate themes from all biographies to four foci: work, education, popular culture, social networking.

7. Synthesize findings from both the video chapters and the written chapters.

#### STEP 1

This was the first systematic viewing done away from the participants (as far as that is possible in today's socially networked world), after all data collection was complete, and as step one of the analytical process. During this viewing I indexed the topics that are identified in the interviews or are displayed in the media/materials. Here we can think of educational background, family, interests, fashion choices, friends, and so on. While listing topics, I also marked frequency, and started developing thoughts on broader and recurring themes.

#### STEP 2

I reviewed the remaining and salient data from all participants by tentative theme to test whether or not the themes were relevant, frequent and valuable. Then I edited out the most important and rich sections for further analysis.

#### STEP 3

In step 3 I reviewed the remaining data sets, and edited them together per person so that a video chapter was created for each participant, containing the materials I wanted to focus on in the written chapters. This step took the longest, as video reviewing and editing is extremely time consuming. However, the intense reviewing and analyzing processes I went through in order to create the video chapters for the dissertation did allow for evolving insights that, in my experience, require reflection to take place on a long time scale.

#### STEP 4

In this step I wanted to study explicitly those elements in the data that concern interaction with popular culture, and re-appropriation of it. In a concrete example: where and when has a participant listened to a Lady Gaga album, and where and how does the participant bring up Lady Gaga or refer to her in a moment that is not an actual 'consumption' moment. Topics, such as music or fashion, are now channeled into themes that stretch across all or most participants. From the analysis, it became clear that there are eight valuable themes that frequently occurred: identity, contrast, structure, style, meaning, future, space and connection. I will elaborate on these later.

#### STEP 5

Along the lines of the eight themes, biographies were written about the three main characters: Fernand, Marnix and Gonzalo (chapters 4, 5, 6). Here the topics that appeared in each the videos were described in context of the themes, which made it possible to compare different biographies. The other nine participants followed in shorter, theme-based sections that support the validity of the themes and any findings that followed.

#### STEP 6

Here the focus switched to the four foci: popular culture, education, work and social networking. I brought in the biographies and themes to evaluate and describe what I found specifically in relation to each of these four areas, in chapter 8.

#### STEP 7

In step seven, I synthesized findings and evaluations of the data from the video chapters, written biographies, and explorations around the four foci to create chapter 9: Discussion and implications.

The analysis that I performed is aimed at finding differences and similarities in the ways that the participants behave themselves and present themselves online and offline, in relation to the topics and themes that I established. For this kind of broad, theme-based discourse analysis it was often necessary to take a step back, to get a helicopter-view in a sense, of the data, rather than perform a very narrow, detailed discourse analysis of single phrases or images. Sometimes, close analysis does happen as it proves a larger point, but overall I found it more productive to compare what different participants say about the theme.

The complete data collection and analysis process happened over many steps, both logistical and methodological ones. From arranging air travel and hotels to visit the participants, to locations for interviews and camera positioning, all these aspects influenced final data set. In some sense, a form of analysis happens right then and there, when decisions are made about what to film, where, and how long, and what or where not to film. Following the completion of data collection, logistical decisions had to be made on how to deal with so much video, and to what lengths the video chapters should be cut. How many themes could be covered, and how many would be too many? How many minutes can be uploaded and stored, and how many minutes is the appropriate amount of minutes to make a point, to establish a theme, to keep it informative and entertaining for a viewer?

After all the viewing and reviewing I distilled eight themes which appear frequently in all or most of the participants' data sets. And then I edited the video material into separate films: approximately 30-40 minutes for the main participants, and about 10 minutes each for the supporting participants. Each video chapter of each participant covers the themes, with the three main video chapters and biographies covering all or most themes in relation to the participant and the nine supporting biographies cover mostly just one or two of the most prominent themes for that person.



At this point, I transitioned from organizing and analyzing video data, to writing the actual biographies. I had a good overview of and insight into the most salient material of each participant, as I had just extensively reviewed and edited the videos. I chose examples that spoke to a particular theme for each participant, and so created the three main biographies. While analyzing and writing down my interpretation of each example, I kept a notebook where I collected my thoughts on how these examples relate to the themes, and how the themes in turn relate to the four major foci of the study. After I completed all the biographical chapters, I used these notes to write the chapter on the four foci, and finally the discussion chapter at the end.

Looking back, I can say that I went through three stages of analysis. First, I experienced a somewhat undirected and confused perusing of the data, without a real sense of what I was looking for or how to organize my thoughts. That became very uncomfortable at some point. Second, and after receiving valuable advice from the committee members, a much more structured plan along the lines of the steps that I described earlier in this chapter. This helped enormously in organizing my thoughts. Third, a letting go of some of the rigidity of the steps, and letting some spontaneity and evolving insights influence my analytical process. In the end, I believe a good balance was achieved between the original architecture of the study, and allowance for creative methodological angles and analysis. The complete chain of events resulted not only in a rich, original data set and findings, but also in insights into methodological challenges and opportunities that have significantly enriched my knowledge about the nature of qualitative research and video ethnography.

In short, the complete chain looked like this:

1. Filmed and interviewed 13 participants over 3 years.
2. Analyzed all video and other materials, listed topics.
3. From topics, distilled 8 themes.
4. Created 13 video chapters with examples of topics / themes.
5. Wrote 3 long and 10 shorter, theme-based biographies.

6. Related themes to four major foci of the study.
7. Discussed findings and implications of entire project.

I would like to note that I sent the completed chapters to the main three participants (Gonzalo, Marnix and Fernand) so that they could react and correct any factual errors. I have made the factual corrections they requested, and left the text otherwise intact. Their comments are published at the end of their respective chapters.

The last few pages of this chapter present tables that list all the participants and a number of key characteristics for each one, in order to provide an easy overview. If certain information was not obtained during the study, I have left the field blank.

Table 3.1. : SAMPLE OVERVIEW

	Fernand	Marnix	Gonzalo	Momo	Dacey	JM	Ron
<b>age first interview</b>	20	23	19	19	18	26	23
<b>age last interview</b>	23	26	22	22	21	29	26
<b>interview locations</b>	Berlin	Amsterdam	Buenos Aires, Bahia Blanca	Brussels	New York	Nancy	Amsterdam
<b>number of interviews</b>	6	4	4	3	3	4	2
<b>total hours of footage</b>	5	4	5	2	4	5	2
<b>native language(s)</b>	German	Dutch	Spanish	Arabic, Hebrew	English	French	Dutch
<b>citizenship</b>	German	Netherlands	Argentina	Morocco	USA	France	Netherlands
<b>grew up in</b>	big German city	Dutch provincial town	large Argentine provincial city	Rabat, Madrid	small town Florida	small town Northern France	provincial Dutch city
<b>current city</b>	Berlin	Amsterdam	Buenos Aires	Brussels, then Rabat	New York	Strasbourg	Amsterdam
<b>formal education status</b>	in law school	not enrolled, no degree	in university, communications	graduated BA business	theater school	diploma social work	art school
<b>paid employment</b>	part-time retail	cleaning homes, bartending	no	no	waiter, host	counselor high school	bar tender
<b>financial status</b>	parents + part time job	jobs	parents	parents	job	job	job
<b>current housing</b>	own apartment	rented room, then shared apt	own apartment	at parents	student room, now shared apt	shared apt	shared apt
<b>relationships</b>	not long term	not long term	on and off	no	single, then boyfriend	on and off	single, then boyfriend
<b>siblings</b>	2 brothers	2 brothers, 1 sisters, 1 step sister	sister, brother			sister	
<b>mother</b>	psychiatrist + neurologist	housewife	college professor	yes, in business		yes, works in own hotel	
<b>father</b>	surgeon	father died, stepfather retired	dentist	yes, diplomat ?		yes, works in own hotel	

	<b>Martijn</b>	<b>Marco</b>	<b>Dimi</b>	<b>Rolando</b>	<b>Will</b>	<b>Jakob</b>
<b>age first interview</b>	18	21	24	18	21	23
<b>age last interview</b>	19	25	29	19	23	24
<b>interview locations</b>	Amsterdam	New York, Amsterdam, Berlin	Oslo, Amsterdam	Amsterdam	San Diego	Berlin
<b>number of interviews</b>	2	3	3	1	2	3
<b>total hours of footage</b>	2	2	3	1	2	4
<b>native language(s)</b>	Dutch	Italian	Russian	Dutch	English	German
<b>citizenship</b>	Netherlands	Italy	Moldova	Netherlands	USA	Germany
<b>grew up in</b>	small Dutch provincial town	Italian small provincial town	large city in Moldova	small Dutch town	mid-sized city western US	provincial Germany
<b>current city</b>	Amsterdam	New York, then Italy	Oslo	large provincial Dutch city	San Diego	Berlin
<b>formal education status</b>	in law school	not enrolled, no degree	BA English Lit	theater school graduate	some college, not enrolled now	BA culture management
<b>paid employment</b>	part-time journalism	waiter, escorting, photography	receptionist youth hostel	animation team theme park	cleaning, day-trading, various	intern, then job in gallery
<b>financial status</b>	parents + part time job	jobs, parents	job	job	jobs	job
<b>current housing</b>	student housing		rents room in apt		shared apt	shared apt with boyfriend
<b>relationships</b>		had boyfriend, now unknown	married, now divorced		varies	long term boyfriend
<b>siblings</b>		yes			yes	
<b>mother</b>		yes, housewife	teacher		formerly managed business	
<b>father</b>		butcher	left family long ago		business owner	

## chapter 4

# Fernand.

Age range: 20-23 (from start to end of data collection period)

Location: Berlin, Germany

Formal education: Law student

Work: part-time sales-rep at a Vuitton and Hermès shop

### Biographical sketch

Fernand came from an upper middle class family and grew up in Frankfurt, one of Germany's larger cities. His parents were still married, with father being a surgeon, mother a psychiatrist and neurologist, and two successful brothers. He spent a year abroad in the UK during high school, and started his college years in social sciences, then switched to law in Bavaria, before moving to Berlin to continue. He had his own well-designed apartment in the immigrant neighborhood of Kreuzberg, and worked part-time in a department store as a sales person for Hermès, which fit with his strong interest in fashion. He was fluent in English, had traveled Europe, and been to the USA, Asia, Africa and Australia. He did not have a serious boyfriend during the years I interviewed him.

\*

## **"You tell me what makes me special."**

I met Fernand in the über-fashionable *Bar Tausend* in Berlin Mitte. It was full of well-heeled twenty- and thirtysomethings, anywhere between or beyond professional and artsy. Fernand was in his early twenties, very tall, slim, pale and blond, which might not be so unusual in Berlin, but he had enhanced those basics with an original fashion style, oversized black framed eye glasses, and a sophisticated British accent with which he spoke about lots of worldly matters. And about fashion. I was curious to know more about if, why and how he felt different from others. How he distinguished himself. Where he learned to do that. I wanted to know what he thought made him 'special', because I had a feeling that he thought he was. So after he agreed to speak with me on camera, we cabbied to the hotel, he nonchalantly draped himself over a designer chair in my suite and proclaimed: "I don't know. You tell me what makes me special."

Right in the first sentences there are concrete pointers that Fernand was engaged in a form of active bricolage, while simultaneously expressing a real urge to find the very buildings blocks with which he could identify and build a persona. He seemed very much aware of the act and need of crafting his own representation. With his "you tell me" statement, he explicitly asked for my input while revealing some insecurities about himself, all wrapped in a humoristic disguise.

In retrospect, this statement foreshadowed many of the themes that popped up throughout our conversations. "I don't know" may have sounded like an insignificant opening sentence, but later I learned that Fernand spent quite some time thinking about life in general, its meaning, its challenges, and was actually actively engaged in finding answers, but was still questioning. He really didn't know, at least not yet. And he was very aware that he was searching, reflecting, and questioning. "You tell me", to me, came to signify his acknowledgement that there were outside forces and sources

that could actually tell him, inform him, and instruct him in what or how he could be. And that he was actively recruiting such information and instruction, apart from being aware that there is lots of material out there that is influencing him more subconsciously.

Allow me to discuss these initial phrases a little further, as I believe they are significant in relation to the other themes that come up in the rest of this chapter, and throughout the dissertation. When Fernand said "You tell me what makes me special", not only did he signal to actively be looking for input from elsewhere, but he was simultaneously stating that there was a "what" that could *make* him special. He didn't say 'tell me why I am special.' His statement seemed to say that there are *things* out there, that *make* him special. Things, as I will demonstrate in these chapters, that are usually popular culture artifacts, which I will also call identifiers. In some sense, he was not so much asking me what made him special, but what *could* make him special. He was asking for input, advice, counseling. And this last mentioned phenomenon of becoming a researcher-slash-counselor, is an aspect I will not go further into here, but is one that I hadn't quite counted on.



Image 4.1. : I am filming Fernand (him with back to camera) during an interview in his Berlin apartment.

Which brings me to the word 'special.' In a sense 'special' is nothing special, as the question was spoken in such a way that I think I was supposed to understand that the 'special' part was a given. It was understood. It was the default mode for his personality, as far as Fernand was concerned. The only problem is that he, or the rest of us, don't know yet what exactly *is* special about him. It's not unusual for the participants in the study to want to stand out, to be different, to be unique, but in my experience during the research nobody actually reflected on the fact that special might be rather normal if everyone is unique. Still the quest for difference, for uniqueness, for "branding yourself" as Gonzalo calls it, is a theme throughout all the interview data. In more traditional sociological terms we might speak of a quest for authenticity, or we might speak of identity, and in the 21st century media-marketing language of (self-) branding, but it comes down to the same idea: the participants all express desire, or express behavior, that seems to point at them wanting to be, and/or be perceived, as someone who is different from others.



The fact that much of this differentiating seems to happen through identification with global mass-culture brands, is another story, and I'll come back to that frequently throughout these chapters. But what's clear to me here, is that authenticity, or *identity*, or more precisely the attempt to achieve identities, is an important theme throughout the data. An interesting and important question is whether the identities that these young people are trying to achieve are made up from the same things as identities were made up from in the 1950's, to just pick a decade. I am claiming they are not. School, parents, church and work may have been big influences in the past. But as the identifiers have changed, and consumerist popular culture capital has claimed much of our attention, it can almost not be untrue that our identities have not changed either (Moje & van Helden: 2005). That they are made up of different materials and textures, of influences expressed through entirely new identifiers, which are omnipresent in the online, mediated world that many young people spend lots of time in. I'll come back to this throughout the frequently in later chapters.

\*

## **"I combine very different attitudes and worlds in my living."**

As I said, *identity* (or authenticity) is somewhat of an umbrella term that covers many other themes that appear in the data. Under that umbrella, I'll discuss a number of other themes that come up in Fernand's story, but also in the rest of the data. Consider, for example, how Fernand continued the conversation after saying "you tell me what makes me special:"

"Or is that not an option in this...probably not. I don't know. Maybe my lifestyle. Because I combine very different attitudes and worlds in my living. I come from a reasonably well off background, and I go on luxury vacation, but I also go to very very dirty underground nightclubs, only wearing a tank top and jeans. You know, there are people who when they are upper class live upper class all the time. I like contrasting things. I like wearing a suit and going to conservative nice restaurants, but I also like looking really fucked up and going to a really shabby place."

I suggested to him that it would be even more interesting to look 'fucked up' and go to a conservative restaurant or vice versa, but he had a swift response to that: "Well but you won't get in. Nobody is as tolerant as that. It's sad. (Giggle)"

In his opening statement, Fernand lays out the presumed realities and desires he has for a *contrastive* lifestyle, but is acutely aware of limitations imposed by society on how far you can take your personal freedoms. He is very conscious of the limitations, borders, and structures that somehow conflict with, curb or at least give strong direction to who you want to be, can be, should be, or can get away with being. It is this navigation between limits or pre-defined structures on the one hand, and desires on the other, that seems to be especially sensitive to the influence of all sorts of popular cultural expression.

He is not alone in this. Among the dozen young men or so that I interviewed, filmed, hung out with, got to know, there were some who actively engaged with pop culture, but distanced it from their ideas around education and work. As in 'that's entertainment, and this is real life.' Others, of which Fernand seems to be a prime example, took popular culture (and modern art as a subdomain of that) as something that was part of them, central to them, and a serious playground to find connections that are educational and work-related. Jakob in Berlin, for example, had followed his interest in modern art and gotten himself an internship at a gallery, and then a job. Marnix in Amsterdam had dropped all institutionalized schooling and managed to get work as a reporter for a magazine and website that published on his favorite topic: cars. But others, such as Italian photographer Marco, who rejected popular culture as commercial but spent his time photographing people in the streets of New York, had a more complicated, 'contrastive' relationship with the popular culture domain in which they lived. They rejected it, it seems, but still used it. They liked it, despised it, and critiqued it, all at the same time. In fact, if you want to be perceived as a hip and clever queer guy, then you have no choice and must have contrasting elements in your lifestyle, at least in your expressions to and therefore perceptions by others. Here, an

emerging theme of *contrast* connects with the earlier theme of *identity* and *authenticity*: employing contrast in your life differentiates you from others. At least that's the idea. And it's fun.

The theme and notion of *contrast* does not only apply to the data. It also works methodologically in creating tools that can help to position people in relation to the contrasts they create, and to each other. How do we 'place' these characters, these players, these early twentysomethings who are so enthusiastically engaged with and entrenched in popular culture? Listening to Fernand, I'm imagining that the participants in my study operate on a number of invisible axes. When it comes to popular culture (and I am using this term in its broad, raw, undefined state purposefully while knowing that can be deemed problematic) some of them care more, and some of them care less. Some of them accept it's part of their lives and the world, some of them resist that notion. Some of them use it more (as in 'learn' from it and or deploy it to develop work and career options), and some of them don't and keep it separately as mere entertainment. Fernand, for example, seemed to relish being part of the fashion industry in all its facets, and was interested in turning his fascination for it into a career. The occasional critical note is heard on its superficiality or 'phoney-ness', but that didn't stop him. Dimi in Oslo, on the other hand, seemed taken by the idea of being a dedicated literary scholar and rejected the popular cultural world by constantly posting what he called 'minimal music' to Facebook. This interest in everything 'minimal', and the attempt to lead a 'minimalistic life' is a complaint against all the nonsense and overwhelming presence of (commercial) pop culture, and the corporate interests it represents.

But wherever any of them, or us for that matter, may be on any of these axes, one thing stands as a central notion through which we orient ourselves: popular culture itself. In this sense, I am just one player in the game, investigating other players who may not be on the same team, but definitely in the same arena. I will come back to the notion of these contrastive axes in the conclusions chapter.

\*

## **"All 20 year old gay boys feel like they are 40."**

Based on my experiences in casual conversational interviewing in this project, I can say that almost nobody liked talking about their educational experiences. It seems to be the opposite of talking about popular culture, which almost everybody loved doing, both spontaneously and when asked. When specifically asked about college, the guys will say something. Not much. Gonzalo, in Buenos Aires, may be the exception, but generally speaking conversations about educational backgrounds are short and factual, or, as in the case of Marco, fiercely anti-education. Others, such as Brussels-based Moroccan student Momo, expressed the socially desirable importance of the role of education in general, but can't quite point at what they learned or why it would be useful in the future.

Fernand's case is not so different in that he didn't speak about his education much, but on the other hand it took up a lot of time in his life and it was part of a bigger problem that seemed to preoccupy him more and more as he got closer to graduating law school: did he want to become a lawyer? Here, his institutionalized education choices and experiences came in direct contact, or conflict, with work and career choices. With real life, as in what comes after student life. With expectations of parents, and with two "very successful" brothers. With fun, and pop culture. And with his own thoughts on what mattered in life, although it's ironic that it's his very education that sometimes prevented him from thinking too much about what he really wanted.

I also interviewed Fernand in his apartment, decorated in a "strict" minimalist style. After a chat about the British comedy series *Absolutely Fabulous*, which he owns on DVD, and its two shallow, drunken 'fabulous' fashionistas I asked:

---

**Me:** So you still have the belief that there's more in life than AbFab, although we don't have any actual evidence?

**F:** Well there's Beautiful People, girlfriend!

**Me:** Girlfriend!

**F:** Well I don't know, eh, I've tried to maybe stop thinking about it that much and take it day by day.

**Me:** I guess reading Foucault doesn't help.

**F:** (laughs) Doesn't make you very happy, no. Uhm, yeah I don't know. It's just... you know once I read this saying (leans back on his Barcelona sofa and adopts more serious facial expression) that all twenty year old gay boys feel like they are forty. Have you ever heard that?

**Me:** No I've never heard that. What's that supposed to mean?

**F:** That like...we (makes air quotes and giggles)...generalizing here...are supposedly very over-reflective, like think about so many things that you don't actually have to worry about...and...it's just things like that. And I'm normally like that, but at the moment, it's actually -- now that's one thing exams are really good for because that's all I am focusing on right now. I don't do anything else. I just study. But then when the exam is over I'm obviously going to be like...okay...summer holidays...I want fun! And then of course you want the guy, you want fabulous weather, fabulous destinations.

---

This conversation is not just symbolic of the place that education, or at least the exams, took in his life almost as a 'necessary evil' or at least a chore, but also of the complete mix of social, popular cultural, educational and professional aspects that concerned him. While the conversation starts and ends with 'fabulous', the rest of it points at struggles of finding out how to give direction to life, or how to avoid thinking about such things too much. Exams, which Fernand otherwise only referred to in a negative way, are here presented as an advantage, although they might not be the kind of advantage

educators hope for. His formal education came up spontaneously, which is unusual when considering all twelve participants of this study, but not in a particularly constructive fashion where it would have been part of Fernand's ideas around his future.

The conversation starts in the context of *Absolutely Fabulous*. A show in which two middle aged women, who lead lives that consist of partying and shopping, keep trying to convince themselves that they are still absolutely fabulous.

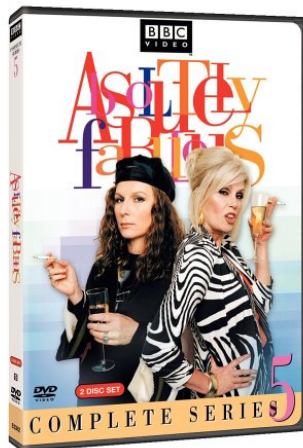


Image 4.2. : Eddie and Patsy. Gay icons from *Absolutely Fabulous*. (BBC)



Image 4.3. : Simon and Kylie. Always hunting for the fabulous in *Beautiful People*. (BBC)

---

When I asked Fernand if there's anything more in life than *AbFab*, he responded with naming yet another TV comedy: *Beautiful People* (which I, during a weekend in Amsterdam, had actually introduced him to). In other words, there is indeed more in life, and it comes in the form of more pop culture representing the quest for fabulousness. Naturally, he was well enough tuned into the context of a semi-academic research situation, so this was said tongue in cheek. But it was said, and was said as a first reaction (much in line with the fast and witty reply format of both shows). *Beautiful People*'s Kylie and Simon, the two über-camp teenage boys in the show who are growing up in dull and working class Reading (U.K.), do nothing but dream of their exciting, fabulous futures when they can move to London and live with "the beautiful people." In both shows, as in most media representation of institutionalized learning in the popular domain, education does not quite enjoy a glamorous reputation or role. Even in shows that entirely play in high school or college, such as *90210* and *Glee*, actual learning in the traditional sense is not often referred to, except to provide context for a non-learning event usually referring to yet another popular culture artifact. And I mean 'learning' here much in the same spirit as Fernand did when I asked him if he had learned anything from television shows. His answer, as the video shows, was a clear, double "No, no." He claimed to see learning as the gathering of knowledge, to which an ability of some kind is usually added. Television shows do not rank as learning, apparently because he didn't see them as knowledge, or at least not useful knowledge, they do not teach you any kind of skill, and they only show "how shitty people can do things." This statement hints at a double bind for Fernand. There is serious, practical, prestigious, straight, moneymaking knowledge on the side of studying law, and there is frivolous, useless, gay, careerless non-knowledge in popular culture. But the first option is not very fun, and the second offers a rather dubious career path.

In *AbFab* the world of seriousness and education, or if you will the non-fun of learning is represented by Edwina's daughter Saffron. Saffy, as her mother calls her usually, is preferably avoided and if that's not possible, ridiculed for her efforts to get an education. "Watch out: entering a no-fun zone!" is what mother often shouts out when

walking into the room where Saffy is studying. Saffy also looks sad and/or serious most of the time, wears hideously unfashionable and unsexy clothes, doesn't drink or date, and believes in a fair and democratic society. At one point, her mother loudly cheers, hugs and congratulates her when she mistakenly believes Saffy is a lesbian: "Finally there is at least ONE interesting thing about you!"



Image 4.4 : Daughter Saffy in *Abfab*: serious learner ridiculed by fabulous mother (note the Apple).

In *Beautiful People*, the boys Simon and Kylie (real name Kyle, but he has renamed himself after his icon, pop singer Kylie Minogue) do attend high school, and generally hang out on the school benches uninterested and dreaming of better days and places. The only times their eyes light up is when a teacher speaks of the *Eurovision Song Contest* (a long-time gay favorite in Europe), or of her exciting romantic conquests in Paris (where beautiful people allegedly live).

These two shows do not stand alone in their depiction of formal education as a necessary evil, a chore, and something absolutely not fun. But they still promote the idea that even though 'an education' might not be fun, it's still the sensible and inescapable path to follow, whether you like it or not. This last notion though, seems to be changing, in a society where education and career paths are no longer pre-cooked, reliable trajectories. Jobs no longer automatically follow on getting a degree, and degrees do often not line up with the job market's realities or the graduates interests.



And popular culture, it seems, is not helping the education system's reputation. Within the group of participants in this study, about two thirds could be qualified as deviating from traditional and intended educational pathways, in so far that they drop formal schooling, or change direction completely.

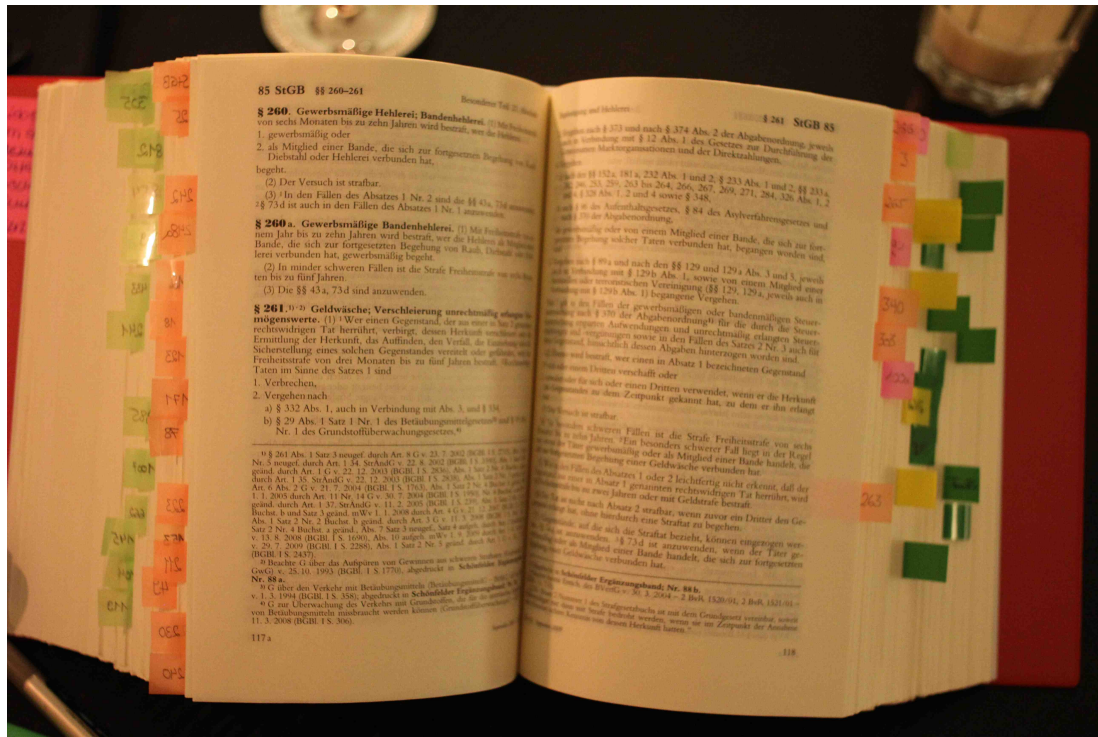


Image 4.5. : Law book open on Fernand's desk. "This is where I pretend to study."

And the choice of law against fabulousness is not the only one that has to be made. Within the popular culture world itself, these two shows offer projections of the future that are either hopeful (with or without good reason) or desperate (probably with good reason). The educational experience that Fernand had is somehow positioned in a no-man's land between the teenage characters of *Beautiful People*, where dreaming of the future is natural, and *AbFab*, where two over-the-hill alcoholics try to hang onto what they think they remember was their wonderfully wild youth. The first two characters are young and dream of the future, the second two older and long for the past. Between

these two stages in life, you go to college, figure out what to do with yourself, and do it. At least that may be the cliché expectation, and seems to describe the position Fernand was in. It can be argued, though, that the characters in both shows pretend to be or become fabulous while they actually, in neither case, are. And even if there is hope for a better life, as the young boys in Reading desperately want to believe, there are the over-the-hill boozies in Holland Park who do demonstrate that wanting to be fabulous can easily turn into being pathetic. So the choices on offer are not easy ones. And in sharp contrast to referencing the frivolity and outrageous fun and fantasies of these shows, Fernand switched to a serious tone and statement: "I've tried to maybe stop thinking about it that much and take it day by day." I can only assume that "it" refers to my question about whether there is more in life than AbFab, but it does clearly reveal that he used to think about this question a lot more than he did when I asked him, or than he would like to.

What I've sketched here is yet another theme that surfaces frequently throughout the data: the *future*. Thinking about the future is not easy, as we've seen, and involves considering your current place in the world, your desires to contrast your life, and also the many options that popular culture artifacts lay out for you. And this complexity, and all these options, seem to have a somewhat contrastive effect to the apparent desire for a contrastive lifestyle: the need for *structure*.

\*

**"I really want to work. I don't want to study anymore. I'm fed up. I want structure."**

Fernand's practical side did recognize that there may be an advantage to studying, as many law students eventually end up in a wide range of fields and professions. He was

not 'stuck' with being a lawyer in a law firm. This, it seems, made being a law student slightly more bearable. He also said he liked the logical aspects of law, where the following of steps lead to a conclusion, "just like in mathematics." In other words, despite the uncertainty and overwhelming choice that may have occupied his mind, he could still find refuge in an activity that offered *structure*, which is a word heard more often when some of the guys spoke about the way their lives were or weren't organized, as we will see in Marnix' chapter and elsewhere.

\*

## **"I'm a good fag."**

As a researcher, how do you interpret a DVD on a shelf full of other DVD's, in a 'strictly' designed Bauhaus-esque apartment, in an immigrant neighborhood in Berlin? Or when can you claim to be able to identify connections and contradictions between the 'stuff' in a room, and the persona, the behavior, the representations of a person? And how do you know what popular culture is, or whether it even exists by itself? Just a few questions that went through my head during every interview, every sighting of a magazine, every click on an iPhone, every 'like' on Facebook, and every 'footprint' on Gayromeo. What did it all mean, if anything? Fernand's initial position on much of this popular stuff, this media pulp and marketing barrage that we're constantly surrounded with, sounded simple. According to him, it carried no meaning, but it was entertaining and something to talk about with your friends. This may be perfectly legitimate standpoint for a young person in today's society, or is it?

A critical, and frankly quite shocking question comes to mind: How did we get to a point where the official, supposedly reputable and accredited meaning systems that we have, as presented in formal education, are largely marginalized by the participants, while popular culture, which the guys often referred to as 'meaningless pulp', seemed to occupy them day and night? How has it happened that our educational systems,

supposedly charged with preparing people for the world they are growing up in, have not critically engaged these young people to look more closely at the significant forces that surround them and influence them every minute of the day?



Image 4.6. : Macbook, iPod, Samsung, *AbFab*, *Queer as Folk*, *Butt Book*, Proust.

One of my reasons for writing this dissertation was to find some answers to these very questions. We still don't know enough about how popular culture capital plays a role in the construction of learning biographies, and attitudes towards education and learning. So I approached the shelves of DVD's with this in mind, describing the different elements that take up space in the arena, and see what possible meanings are made or can be made between them, around them and among them. That's how we, hopefully, get a step closer.

Fernand described urban culture as the "consensus of liking well designed places." He craved well-designed hotel bars, luxurious lounges and exotic cocktails, and claimed to contrast those with "very very dirty underground clubs", as we've heard, although he always preferred a fancy hotel bar when I met him. He saw himself as an urbanite, but not a very 'Berlin' urbanite. Where Berlin, according to him, stands for messy, wild and anarchic, he pointed out he liked structure and his clothes on hangers, rather than a big pile on the floor as real Berliners would have it. He also didn't like "trying every sexual option there is", just because you're in Berlin and that's what you do. He believed in order, in design that is very well planned and structured, and in detail. Not many people would describe a range of similar t-shirts (on hangers) in their closet as "different shades of beige."

Out of doors Fernand was always impeccably dressed, and pre-occupied with being in all the right establishments, and that style certainly was reflected in the way he had organized his apartment. The things he chose to surround himself with, and for lack of better term, 'identified' with. The style was minimalist Bauhaus, the colors absent (he kept the door of his closets open so that the clothes could give the much needed hint of color to the room, although there was only one purple and one pink shirt, and several shades of beige), meaning there is a lot of white and black. A moody black and white photograph of a surreal horizon was on the wall in his living room, and an identical second one in his bedroom, a third one was his Macbook desktop photo and a fourth one his cell phone home screen. All the same photo, all the time. All black and white, meditative, tranquil, and not particularly cheerful.

When I took a closer look I realized the artifacts in Fernand's apartment do reflect the topics we've covered in our conversation. There were some textbooks and index cards on a desk ("This is where I pretend to study."). There were gadgets in several places: an iPod, a Macbook, a Blackberry (later replaced by an iPhone), a Samsung flat screen. On the shelve under the TV, which got its signal from the internet via the Apple and not via cable, there were books and DVD's. And last but by no means least, there was an open closet with 'pieces' from various designers, accidentally flanked by

shopping bags with famous luxury brands on them, such as Hermès. And as the perfect cherry on a cake of strictly designed nonchalance, there was a Louis Vuitton laundry bag crumpled in the corner, but accidentally showing its logo. Or maybe it wasn't so accidental?

So what kind of landscape was this space full of brand names and white walls, magazines and DVD's, gadgets and clothes, designer furniture and law books? Did Fernand pick these things, or did they pick him? The fact probably is that we don't know, and that we'll never know, but it's clear that a stage had been created in this room to 'perform Fernand'. And that's cool, and I could fit in perfectly because I speak many of the same languages about the same things. But since I was there as a researcher, as well as a friend, filmmaker, and gay man, I inquired loosely and as unobtrusively as possible (while holding a Flip cam) after his motivations to own these things, to like these things.

With the Mac, that was easy. You have to have one, or more, and owning anything Windows or Blackberry signals that you either have no taste or no money, or both. Fernand knew this, and confirmed this when I mentioned his Apple computer while he was finding music on iTunes: "Of course, I'm a good fag." This, along with a liking of *Lady Gaga*, seemed to be the most important, or at least most mentioned, identifier among all the guys that I filmed. In the few cases where any of them had a Blackberry, or a laptop running Windows (nobody had a desktop computer), they expressed desires to switch to Apple and in all cases did so during the years I filmed them. "I must be the last homo without an iPhone", was a frequently heard expression.





Image 4.7. : Fashion: browsing magazines, watching shows online, reading designer biographies.

Fashion was big in Fernand's life. It was a hobby, a lifestyle, an interest, a workplace, a career, a source of fabulousness and difference. He saved for special pieces, and went to great lengths to obtain special items, such as a bright green vintage Vuitton bag that he found and ordered online in Japan and made him look "four times as gay." He read fashion magazines and watched fashion shows online. And on Saturdays he worked at Hermès in KDW (the fanciest department store in Germany) as a sales person, or more likely, a 'brand representative.' This is where work and interest matched up, although he didn't quite see himself working in a store in the future, of course. But then again he didn't see himself in a law firm either, and in fact, during an internship with a Frankfurt law firm it was actually suggested to him by a fellow intern that he might be a little too flamboyant for lawyering. A remark that lingered and caused him to ask me whether I could imagine him as a lawyer, or if in my opinion he might be too 'different' for that. I exercised diplomacy.

Fernand's style was different from others, and purposefully so. In the interviews he made it more than clear that the objective was "not to dress like everybody else." When I asked him whether or not that was the main point of his expression through fashion, he claimed "it's more of an attitude." He didn't explain what that meant, but it is a term he used more frequently when referring to very expensive luxury brands. There seemed to be elements of quality, of strict design and style, of structure and careful planning in this concept. Elements he identified with. It was also a statement against a wasteful, consumerist society, in his opinion, as you "buy one beautiful, handmade Hermès belt and have it for life, instead of buying crappy Chinese ones at H&M and keep on trashing them." I had certainly never thought of luxury brands as pro-sustainability, anti-consumerist lifestyle statements, but I guess he might have had a point. At this stage, I noticed that I felt to start to get more attracted to this over-designed regime, as it not only came with superior esthetics, but apparently also with a politics that made it justifiable and possibly preferable. It remained to be seen. But it's important that I noticed my increasing interest in the persona, the character, or maybe even the person, which seemed to be mutual. It is certainly not unthinkable, that the increasing level of friendship and trust had an impact on both Fernand's and my own interaction, communication and behavior. But, as I've noticed with other participants whom I've come to know well over the years, stronger ties do not necessarily lead to more or better data on the topics of this research. They did sometimes lead, however, to more data on more personal topics that fall outside the scope of this project.





Image 4.8. : Vuitton bag and Barcelona chair in Fernand's apartment.

So here again we find a theme where Fernand expressed himself, by picking and choosing cultural artifacts, and receiving very different signals from different directions that directly feed into the career choice he felt he had to make. Just think back to the statement he made about not getting into the right clubs or restaurants, if you dress the wrong way. "Nobody is as tolerant as that." Again, some in the law-firm environment responded to his demeanor and presentation, just like his friends on Facebook did. But where a photograph of him with a bright green Vuitton bag may have resulted in a dozen 'likes' from friends, they may have resulted in a dozen 'frowns' from the lawyers. And this posed yet another problem. What if some of your friends are lawyers, or some of your lawyer-colleagues become friends?

The split personas, or different personas, or hybrid-personas that the interviewees partly have to be and partly wish to pursue, are real. So real that Facebook, for many of them the most used technology for communication, has changed its software so that users can create different groups of contacts who can see different postings. In effect: different 'sides' of you. So real, that you can get into serious trouble by posting the

wrong thing to the wrong people. All the guys I have spoken with dealt with this phenomenon differently. Some posted little or nearly nothing. Some created different audience groups and posted differently to different groups. Some believed there should be no separation between the public and the private and claimed to be fully transparent.

Fernand did not split his audience into groups, but did pursue yet another strategy in which he was not alone: he went artistic. Posting artistic, even abstract or obscure photos, videos or music of artists with which you can identify does say something about you, by proxy. It's somehow deeper, stronger, cleverer, more interesting, than just writing how you feel about something, and it simultaneously offers you deniability. You, yourself, didn't say it. The artist did. And there could be tons of reasons for you to like the artist or the work, which remain unclear (at least to those who know you less well, or know less about why you're posting it). Whatever it says cannot be pinned on you, but it does say something about you. It adds cachet to you and your profile, but offers distance and nearly complete denial when necessary. This is an interesting 'game' of self-expression, which social media learners learn quickly.

Fernand's Facebook postings balanced out quite evenly between photos of himself, postings of funny news facts or events, seemingly random texts and exchanges with friends, and photos or videos about music or fashion. This mix was rather common among all the participants in this study, at least those who frequently posted on Facebook. A couple of things stood out if you consider the overall 'posting' behavior: work related or college related posts were rare with most of the guys (just like in their speech during interviews), and most posts expressed a high level of desirability (whether positive or negative). And the level of desirability, again whether positive or negative, may be a good predictor of two aspects that are, in my opinion, likely to be related. First, how high the level of emotional involvement with regard to this identifier is, and second, how high the chance is that this identifier ends up on a Facebook wall. In other words, most interviewees tended to post things that they cared about, had feelings for, as something very good, or something very bad. They posted things with a

high degree of evaluation (Lemke: 1998b). If this is true, and we would extend this line of thinking further, it would leave education and work as two fields they care less about. I mean this in the sense that there is simply not a high level of evaluation of any kind, good or bad. These areas seem to simply not rank at all on the scale, are not on the radar, when it comes to reflecting on them socially and incorporating them in online self-representation. Why that is, would be a really big question to ask, but my thoughts are that emotional involvement plays a significant role, and that emotion is expressed by deploying evaluative categories in the communication, of which desirability is the most used.

Fernand liked, and I think we have plenty of evidence of that now, to "*contrast* things" in his life, as he put it himself. Some things can be very cheerful and "pointless", such as *AbFab*. He dismissed the shallow champagne guzzling fashion-worshipping attentionistas as something he "obviously doesn't strive for in life", but told me seconds later that he just returned from sneaking into the *Berlin Fashion Week* pavilion by acting totally camp, then had champagne and ridiculed the audience and the show which was "crap." I was never sure if he was aware of the apparent contradiction between the official, possibly genuine but socially desirable statement he made, and his actual behavior. But on the other hand it was not uncommon, in my experience, for the young men in the study to engage in behavior or adore popular culture artifacts that they simultaneously ridicule and critique. And most were very much aware that this is a post-modern mechanism that they almost had to deploy and transmit socially if they wanted to be thought of as smart, gay and hip. Being boring, after all, will get you unfriended quickly.

The theme that emerges here, and which may be a central one in young gay men's lives, is *style*. Style is how you differentiate, how you distinguish yourself, how you get pleasure out of life, how you have and express queer pleasure, and how you fit in with other gay men.

\*

**"I think most people don't think about what makes them happy, and they just buy. They shop to not be bored, to show off, to get laid, to follow their instincts. I don't think it's about happiness."**

From hanging out with him you wouldn't always get this, as Fernand was generally very chatty and cheerful, but from his expressions online and through the decoration and artifacts in his apartment you did get insights from a different perspective. Earlier on, during the conversation on whether or not there was more in life than *AbFab*, he asked if I had ever heard that twenty-year olds often feel like they're forty. This hints, along with numerous times where he mentioned the word 'reflective', at his tendency to think a lot. Maybe about his personal situation of being single and maybe about the conflicting ideas he had about a career. Maybe about other things. This is not necessarily unusual or worrying, but what's interesting is how he translated these moods, these pensive tendencies, to self-expression online. As a profile photo on Facebook, in the beginning when I met him, he had British transgender singer and artist Antony Hegarty shot by Dutch photographer Inez van Lamsweerde. He didn't post a photo of himself, showing his face, which would be the expected thing to do and is what almost everyone else does. To 'represent' him, he chose the face of an artist he likes, photographed by another artist he likes, which could say a range of things: I am different, I like art, I have taste, I am in a meditative or pensive mood, I know modern art, I want to share something I love, I am not afraid to replace 'me' with a transgender person, and possibly numerous other things. Maybe we can only guess, and never arrive at a scientifically viable conclusion, but in combination with his interview texts, we could see a pattern.



Image 4.9. : Antony Hegarty photographed by Inez van Lamsweerde.

Recently, he had been going through some tough times. There were attempts at a having boyfriend that didn't work out, and there was the pressure of a range of examinations that were coming his way at the end of law school, among other things. Then, the 'cover photo' as Facebook calls it (realizing they have become a major stage for self-marketing) changed and was replaced by another black and white image, of an arm tattooed with the phrase "and miles to go before I sleep" from Frost's poem. Now I may be wrong, but since I possibly knew more about what was happening in his life than some other 'friends', this image took on a whole range of different possible meanings for me (like 'I need to study more', 'I am worried and therefore can't sleep', etc.). But it is artistic, not cheerful, and deniable in so far that again an expression created by a third party had been chosen to transmit something to the world (and/or possibly to himself), which was somewhat mystifying and deniable, as it constitutes emotion by proxy.



Image 4.10. : Cover photo on Fernand's Facebook page.

On top of these images and the mentioned bits of interview, there were a number of artifacts in his already starkly black and white apartment that strengthen the 'pensive persona': all of Proust's novels ("I think he's saying that you live your life only in your memories"), Foucault ("doesn't make you very happy"), and James Cameron's novel about a man looking back at a life he hadn't want to live. Here again, though, there were playful aspects and more moody ones, which come out in social networking and media in serious ways (see photo's above) and more tongue-in-cheek. On dating website Gayromeo, for example, Fernand has used Proust's name to create a profile name, and when I asked him why, he half-jokingly said: "because I want people to view me as an intellectual, obviously."

My point here is not to show that Fernand may have been going through difficult and moody times. At least not just that. The point is more that in his performance online, he combined a range of aspects from all four foci that I am interested in in this work. He showed an interest in modern art as a sign of sophistication and urbanism, but he was also looking for work in an art gallery or auction house. He engaged in social activity by

posting artifacts that meant something to him and opened himself up to social interaction through them. He was 'learning', if you will, that performing your interests and/or 'personality' in the public domain, may result in conflict of interest. And while they took up much of his time, he was rather silent about his educational experiences, which I would argue said an awful lot.

The need for a deeper explanation of the world, or for feeling that there is *meaning* in things, in others, in yourself, is another theme in the data.

\*

### **"You can't connect with boring people."**

The last theme I'd like to introduce in this first biographical chapter, is *connection*: the desire to fit in, to have friends, to experience love and romance, to not be alone.

Fernand seemed to have a reasonable group of friends in Berlin that he saw regularly. It wasn't easy to tell how large, as he didn't refer to them often nor did he disclose them on Facebook. From what I can tell, quite a large percentage of them were female, and some of them went to the same university and/or studied the same subject. From this group, there were a few that he referred to as "close friends." On Facebook, however, the group was much larger and more international, partly as a result of his spending time at schools elsewhere in Germany, and in the United Kingdom. But I could only deduce that from occasional comments of his friends, as he does not disclose his Facebook-friends list to his Facebook friends.

He was aware that he came from a privileged background, but emphasized that his social circle is diverse. There were even people with "working class" backgrounds, which he defined as people with "little education and little intellectual ability", but he said even those have worked hard to get into university and want to get somewhere. There was nobody around him who came from such a background and wanted to "stay there", he said. The overall theme that tied all his friends together, according to him,

was that they were smart and interesting. And the fact that they came from very different backgrounds added to Fernand's desired notion of a *contrastive* lifestyle.

He had a reasonably good relationship with his family, it seemed. Mother was usually mentioned in relation to style, or not having enough of it. She only dressed well when he picked her clothes, and he was surprised she had a subscription to *Architectural Digest* even though "she's not the most stylish person in the world." Father was not mentioned at all, except when it came to work or career. Fernand made it clear that he knew very well that all he had to do was call his dad if he wants to work in a law firm, while some of his friends from different backgrounds could not. "It's harder for them, I know that." And he had two brothers, who were "successful and make a lot of money." So we're getting the picture of an existing somewhat traditional family structure, but I am mentioning this because in Fernand's case, as well as a number of others, there were some conflicts between the participant's lifestyle and their social backgrounds.

Case in point was Fernand's story about trying to bring home his "best girlfriend" to a family party. He was out to his parents as gay, and that didn't seem to be much of an issue, but the parents had decided that this party was not for people to bring 'just' friends. Only girlfriends, boyfriends, partners, husbands, wives, were supposed to be invited by Fernand and his brothers. Even though Fernand claimed he knew the girl in question longer than his brothers knew their girlfriends, and he knew her better, he couldn't bring her to the 'no-friends' party because she doesn't qualify as 'the girlfriend.' And the only distinction then, he said, was that his brothers supposedly had sex with their girlfriends, and he didn't with his. So you had to have an "exclusive, monogamous, penetrational relationship" with this person in order for them to qualify as your partner, and only then could they attend. Of course we joked about the obvious solution to this problem, but we decided that having sex with someone just so you can bring them to your parents' conservative summer party is too much trouble. He left it at a humble protest, but went alone.



In itself possibly a trivial or maybe slightly exaggerated story, but it signifies something I saw elsewhere. Other participants have told me they didn't like the idea of being with one person all the time, having one relationship that's supposed to fulfill your every need. Just like you don't want one place of learning, one job, or one clothing style. This post-modern bricolage was seeping through in every participant's lifestyle, and the friction we can identify between more traditional and more avant-garde approaches to life are exactly where the popular culture media technologies thrive to create new arenas.

Young people have experimented, rebelled and fought with their parents forever. That's not new. But what's interesting here is that the young men not only came in conflict with parents over how they organized their lives, but that the specific type of organization was one seen in all aspects of their lives. In other words, mixing and matching relationships of various kinds and lengths in your life somehow might relate to mixing and matching educational experiences, jobs, fashion outfits or political allegiances. It's not rebellion for the sake of rebellion, but a set of traversal (Lemke: 1995) tendencies that can be seen in all aspects of life. What many participants in the study seemed to be doing was not select or reject things just to be different, but mainly to genuinely create new trajectories, traversals if you will, that suited them better. Not to spite their parents or society, but to serve their own happiness. Unfortunately, what looks to others like mere fragmentation of traditionally coherent elements (read: immoral or at least unconventional behavior) doesn't always go down well in more traditional social environments. Not in the family, and not in the law firm.

Traditional sociological notions of 'escapism' or 'alienation' simply do not suffice here to explain the serious investment that these young people make in popular cultures of all kinds. These are not actions and interests out of mere rebellion, or a rejection of the status quo in a society at large (although the choice for a different path can of course be seen as a rejection of a path not taken). These are active searches for information, for aspects of lifestyles that appeal, and may be adopted, re-appropriated and integrated into their lives, simply because more traditional options do not satisfy them

or don't even exist. And apart from conventional options being unsatisfactory or absent, they are also inundated by popular culture as the dominant source and force of information in our mediated and networked consumer world.

\*

So Fernand was not an unhappy camper, it seemed, but one with questions that were both delivered by and played out in the popular domain, while also under the influence of existing power structures. He was aware he was different, both because he was gay and because he was upper middle class. The gay aspect didn't bother him too much, and he felt that even if he were straight, he would have been different from others. "But face it, I'm part of a minority. On paper, I would have been king of the world." An interesting reference to standing on the bow of the Titanic, which is meant to mean that without being gay he would have all the privileged qualities one could have as a wealthy, white, educated male. But of course he might also drown if the mighty unsinkable capitalist machine goes under against all expectations. Living in Germany, which he set off frequently against an increasingly religious and bigoted USA and a messy Southern Europe, didn't hurt though. He knew he was part of a still successful consumerist system, and claimed to not blindly buy into that, but did appreciate wealth.

What he eventually posted on Facebook, displayed on the walls of his apartment, or wore to a party, was, at least for him, emotionally charged. Sometimes excited, sometimes critical, and often in a pensive, almost moody middle, but never free of emotion. So the first working hypotheses coming from this case study are:

1. Expressive identifiers carry a higher degree of evaluation than other elements in the world.
2. The evaluative category most used, expressed, deployed, felt, etc., is desirability, whether positive or negative.

3. Most expressive identifiers come from popular culture.
4. References to education, and in a lesser degree to work, are rare and do not carry strong feelings (or evaluation). Some exceptions.
5. There is a relationship between the rare mentioning and low evaluative load of education, and the fact that education rarely appears in the popular cultural domain.

And in the process I have so far identified seven themes: identity, contrast, structure, style, meaning, future and connection.

\*

### **" I'm going down in Dior. "** (postscript)

With those thoughts, I planned to close this chapter. I realize I could probably fill several books pointing out things in Fernand's life that might signify big and interesting things going on in some way, somewhere, but let's see what differences and similarities pop up by looking at the next candidate: Marnix, in Amsterdam. Someone from a different social class, without a finished formal education, but equally interested in a colorful lifestyle, and in structure, as we shall see.

However, while I write these final words, my Facebook beeped. It was Fernand to let me know he got a job at prestigious and unorthodox publishing house Taschen in Berlin. Turns out the person in the auctioning house where he went for an interview didn't hire him, but did tell his friend at Taschen about it. And the Taschen people, famous for their avant-garde and provocative coffee table books on art, movie stars, and sex (they just released the 'Big 3D Penis Book') apparently did appreciate someone who does not want to fit in, has a strict style, is a tad too flamboyant for a law firm, knows his popular culture, and comes with a law degree. During our discussions

on what he wanted to do after law school, he often said he wanted to work, not continue studying. He wanted 'structure', in his life. A word we'll also hear Marnix say a lot in the next chapter. Well, Fernand found a structure, or it found him. It shows that good old-fashioned networking pays off, even when it's in the good old-fashioned face-to-face manner.

After all the data was collected, I asked each of the three main characters to write down who think they are now, and who they think they will be when they are seventy years old. Here is Fernand's answer:

Who am I now?

Obviously I am still in the making. Though one probably always is in the making, so that first sentence becomes pretty much obsolete. Well, i feel now that I have started working for TASCHEN, I am closer to following my vocation which probably lies in producing, spreading and foremost appreciating beauty and perfection in style; a visual aesthete. So that's probably a big part of me right now. But then there is private me; someone who - probably like most other people - wants to feel connections to people around him; give and receive love, support and understanding. And grow up/evolve to be a better human being.

Who will I' be when I'm 70?

Many scenarios come to mind...i guess/hope i will be living with a partner, looking back to having leading a rich and colourful life, where i met a lot of interesting people from all over the world, have lived and travelled all over the world and still has some years ahead of him. i have a positive outlook when it comes to circumstantial stuff such as money, etc. however, fears of solitude will probably still remain, so i guess life with me won't be uncomplicated. ups and downs will come - but my overall attitude, that there is a lot of good in this world and between me and the people in my life will preside.

\*

Comments from Fernand on this chapter:

After asking Fernand to review this chapter, he did correct a few factual mistakes and asked for this sentence to be added to his "Who am I now?" statement (above):

"However, I also concern myself with other matters such as politics, art, music and to a certain degree science and technology."

## chapter 5

# Marnix.

Age range: 23-26

Location: Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Formal education: quit three different college programs

Work: bar tender

### Biographical sketch

Marnix grew up in a relatively small town in a southern province in The Netherlands, with his parents, older brother, twin brother and sister. His father died when he was 13, and mother remarried later, which added a stepsister to the family. Marnix frequently had money problems, and didn't seem to receive financial support from home (anymore), mostly because he didn't like asking. After starting and quitting three different college programs (engineering, car technology and sales, marketing) he moved to Amsterdam, where he lived in a small rented room while occasionally cleaning people's houses to make ends meet. He had no serious longer-term boyfriend during the time of the interviews, but had a large and intimate group of friends with whom he spent a lot of time with, both online and offline. Marnix spoke English quite well, and had done some traveling, mostly in Europe.

\*

## **"You cannot put me in a box."**

In the first few minutes of the very first conversation with him, Marnix mentioned the special nature of his "negative" humor, the death of his father, money problems, bareback sex with submissive boys, a love for cars, his lack of ambition or focus in learning and work, and how that complicates finding a boyfriend. "You cannot put me in a box", he claimed, and followed it up with his first pop-culture reference by imitating Forrest Gump: "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get". He then leaned back comfortably on the sofa, glass of rosé in hand, a vague smirk on his face, awaiting my first question or hint for direction.

I met Marnix online on Gayromeo, a social networking and dating site for gay men, while chatting with some friends. His profile flowed by, and came with a special advert, where he drew attention to the fact that he was looking for people who needed their houses cleaned. As I happened to need a new cleaner, I was instantly interested, but his profile had other features aimed at attracting the attention of the potential PlanetRomeo audience: his stats (physical measurements), a text explaining what kind of guys he's into sexually, and some photographs where he could be seen alone (in various states of undress) and with friends at parties (dressed). I was most intrigued, however, by the blend of things on offer here: friendship, sex, and cleaning. The juxtaposition of these activities somehow seemed peculiarly factual and practical. There was no judgment, no preference, no shame and somehow not even exhibitionism, at least not for the sake of exhibitionism. Just an almost simplistic ambition to fulfill a number of apparent desires and needs, smacked onto a screen as if it were a MacDonald's menu. Choose, order, swallow, next.

Marnix never mentioned the word 'contrast' or the idea of a 'contrastive lifestyle', as Fernand did frequently. It didn't seem to be something that was important for him, at

least not in the sense that he was consciously aware that a contrastive lifestyle supposedly was and made one more interesting, more avant-garde, more different. His expression of difference, his way of distinguishing himself, was characterized by two notions: he claimed he could not be categorized at all in existing categories, and his self-created difference from all else really was a group phenomenon of him and his friends, who had formed a small sub-culture within the Amsterdam gay scene. Or so he claimed, and presented himself. It was a contrastive lifestyle adopted by a circle of close friends, probably around ten of them, who marked themselves as different from more established streams within gay subcultures.

Evidence for this came when I showed Marnix an academic paper that I wrote years ago when I was studying at UC Berkeley, in the Rhetoric Department. The title of the paper is: *I'm a non-pierced, non-tattooed, non-bodybuilder, non-mod, non-leather, non-bear, non-skinhead, non-gogo, non-guppy, non-biker, non-cowboy, no-body in the Castro. Is there life for me in this city's gay life?*

After reading the title, Marnix exclaimed: "It's like me!" I asked him if he felt there was no room in Amsterdam's gay scene for him, or if maybe he thought there wasn't much of a gay scene to begin with? His answer was resolute: "We *are* the gay scene." What I am sketching here is Marnix's way of differentiating himself from stereotypical effeminate gays ("I hate those guys who go 'hey girl'"), from 'hipsters' whom he finds phony, and actually from all other groups and styles. He and his friends are not any of those things and don't dress like any of those groups, or so he said.

But there was a wild and surprising other side to him that I only discovered after befriending him on Facebook. Marnix was, generally speaking, a rather quiet, somewhat introverted and soft-spoken young man who wore very unglamorous outfits. He also preferred to spend his days biking through the pastoral meadows around Amsterdam, and prettifying his apartment. But sometimes, about twice a month, he and his friends had 'dressing up parties' and went into the city in completely over the top, glamorous, Moulin-Rouge-like women's frocks, complete with enormous hair-do's and



layers of bright slutty make-up. This was certainly an extremely contrastive side to his otherwise calm nature, and one he shrugged off with "it's just fun" when I asked him why he did that. Again, I got no categorization, no expression of a desire to be different, just the behavior itself. And this is something that comes back later, when he repeatedly said that he was simply 'himself' always, as a 'mere' physical presence of flesh and blood, and that his different moods, friends, jobs and so on may made him seem or resemble something or someone else temporarily. But underneath there is apparently always just 'him', not as an 'identity' but as an entity that without active engagement with certain identifiers is just a body.



Image 5.1. : Marnix and friends performing at a party (left), and in a photo shoot (right).

Here Marnix, probably unintentionally unless it's somewhat subconscious, did actually strongly distinguish himself from other participants who claimed to have many identities (and loved them). Marnix claimed to have none, or at least didn't see identity as something that was part of him, but instead was part of the action taking place between him and something else. In his 'Who am I?' statement (see end of chapter) he writes:

"You know... 'who are you' sounds kinda weird. I'm always and ever just me, but then with a different mood, job, friends etc."

It might be a different way to express the same notion as for example Gonzalo, which is the desire to not have just *one* identity, but it's worth noting. What's also worth noting is that Marnix and friends, as well as some of the other participants, were quite crazy about *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, a TV show where the mother of all drag queens teaches wanna-be-drag-princesses how to become drag queens, and has them 'battle' each other until there's a winner. One cannot avoid thinking about connections between this extremely flamboyant show full of dressing-up and camp when seeing the photographs above. Marnix even adopted a nickname, which is listed on his Facebook profile behind his real name, as some kind of alter ego. For privacy reasons I won't disclose it here, but it's something like *Pussy Peut-etre*. *Pussy* made appearances in Amsterdam nightclubs on the occasional nights that Marnix and his jeans and t-shirt are unavailable.

\*

**"I am at my happiest when I am on my bike and going to villages and beautiful nature and such."**

In the previous chapter I discussed the recurring theme of 'contrast', and above I mentioned that Marnix regularly took biking trips away from Amsterdam and into the Dutch countryside of green fields, lakes, canals, cows and windmills. This landscape, and his love for it, were a theme in Marnix's conversations, Facebook status updates, and posted photographs. It's a much stronger theme than popular culture for him (assuming Unesco World Heritage sites are not part of popular culture), judging by the frequency that landscapes popped up in comparison to any other identifier. Of course you must have time to make such frequent all day biking trips, and that he had. Marnix

didn't have a regular or even irregular day job at the time I met him, and made a little money here and there by cleaning people's houses. He also didn't go to college or any kind of organized training or learning, and has actually dropped out of all three study programs he attempted to complete in the past. This was somewhat troubling to him, it seemed. Not only mentally, but also in physical reality as he was behind on payments for health insurance and two months on the rent of his small, less than luxurious quarters in the suburbs. "I am in trouble", he told me, with somewhat of a smirk, but it was not a joke.

The many postings of farmhouses, windmills and ever so quaint Dutch villages that look like it's still the 1700's started to interest me insofar that they seemed an odd contrast to the fast and fleeting online worlds these guys live in a lot. And from the dashing lights, music and screaming fabulousness of outrageous drag queens on Ru Paul's show. And from the thumping music and action at happening gay bars and circuit parties named, such as the 'Hoerenbal' (whores ball). Marnix was quite the party animal. And then, all of a sudden, in between all the wildness and craziness there was the new cover photo of Marnix' Facebook profile:



Image 5.2. : Cover photo (main large photo) on Marnix' Facebook profile.

He was definitely not alone in posting photographs of locations, of spaces he visits. Most participants did this frequently when they were moving or traveling, to show others where they were, what an exciting life they lived, or just to say to the world, or to themselves, 'hey, look at me!' Gonzalo posted quite a few when he spent a few months in New York, and so did Marco the photographer, as do others including myself. In Marnix's case there was a difference. All his images were of the countryside and small towns just outside Amsterdam, and he provided many of them with captions that somewhat humorously admitted that he knew it was rather 'kneuterig' (a self-critical Dutch term meaning small scaled, narrow-minded, old-fashioned and silly) to be 'into' the countryside. But at the same time he genuinely loved it, despite or maybe because it was the exact opposite of wild clubbing and cross-dressing, which hints at an interest in *contrast*.

Location, or *space*, as I'd like to name this theme, matters. It matters because it contextualizes our actions, because it affords our actions, and somehow also because it grounds virtual living when between all the online sharing of Gaga images and random funny videos there is suddenly a representation of a 'real' space. A space where the person has been, wants to be, has feelings for, was impressed by. Most of the time, posted 'spaces' are places where the participant has been, as is the case with Marnix. Granted, all of his photos were of spaces just outside the city where he lived, and all of those were visited during bike trips. This had a practical reason, as Marnix didn't have money to travel further afield, but also a more spiritual one. It is as if these meadows grounded him, somehow compensated for the wild times he often had, or possibly for the unhappy times of the past. It was peaceful. It was a window onto possibly simpler, historical times when things were organized, real and devoid of metropolitan chaos and dirt. It was also what took up most of Marnix's online space, in contrast to other participants who post and repost pop music, witty news items, hot guys, political jokes, and so on.

Marnix, in his strive for *structure* and organization, of which we will see more later in this chapter, had the hundreds of photographs on his Facebook album neatly organized

in five folders titled: Random (these mostly countryside photos and a few cars, his other hobby), Me & Friends, Me & Family, Dressing Up, and Home. Apart from these there was a Facebook-generated 'cover photos' folder, which stores all images that Marnix used over time to be his main, extra large and therefore most prominent expression on his profile: they are all rural landscapes. Marnix, much neater than any other participant, organized his online spaces carefully. His self-expressed urge for neatness, for things to be "perfect", was clearly visible in the way he presented himself online. The content may make some people smile or frown (such as posting photos of the boy you were dating which you take secretly in the morning when he's still asleep in your bed), but the organization of the materials was impeccable. Which relates to his frequently expressed urge to have *structure* in his life. This need for structure and interest in traditional landscapes, however, should not be confused with a need for conservative values. This should be obvious from the many postings of himself in drag, of hot guys he secretly photographed on the train, or as I just mentioned of boys that end up in bed. And his community of friends shared the near complete absence of taboos in this area. Postings of 'conquests' are not met with frowns by them (well, maybe jealous frowns), but with immediate online comments asking for details and a review of what transpired. Sexual experiences and expressions, for Marnix and friends, seemed to be on a par with Dutch landscapes, Ru Paul's Drag Race, and home improvement, at least in frequency and the frankness with which they are discussed online.

Not only do experiences and identifications now show up in an online organization of spaces that tell us something about their importance, their desirability, but these expressions are now also linked to physical spaces by social networking systems. Photos are marked on every Facebook user's geographical map, and shows where they were taken, when, and who was there. Dating and social networking site Gayromeo, as well as apps such as Grindr, even show the location of the user, real-time, in relation to other users. Spaces become visible, and link expressive identifiers to maps, tracking and placing physical movements of the users, like penguins with a GPS tags.

Consider Marnix's map. The image (below, right) shows a partial map of The Netherlands on his Facebook profile. The system automatically generates this map on the basis of information taken from the photographs in Marnix's albums (below, left). In one brief moment we can assess where most of his photos were taken, and/or where he has checked into Facebook the most. The map shows that Marnix, as I mentioned earlier, spent most of his time in Amsterdam and its immediate environment. The larger the circle, the more frequent the visit to that location has been. There are dozens of 'hits' around Amsterdam in the top left of the map, and very few markers elsewhere are a few visits to his mother, and a friend or two who don't live in Amsterdam.

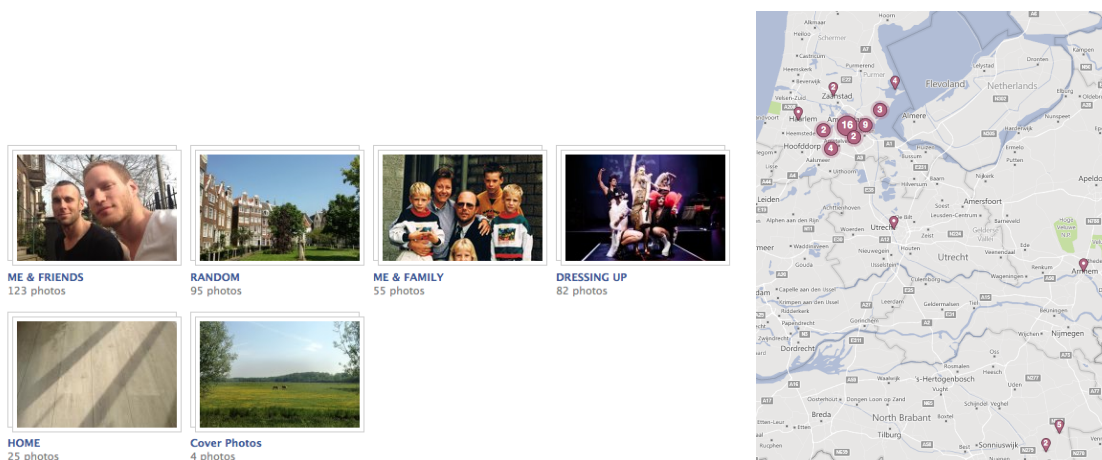


Image 5.3. : Neatly organized photo albums (left). Geographical representation of identifiers (right).

There is one more aspect of 'space' that I would like to touch on before moving onto the, at least in Marnix's case, space-related notion of structure. For Marnix, the countryside spaces were in a sense a popular culture phenomenon, and we've seen so far in both his and Fernand's biographies, that there many linkages between the popular culture artifacts that they selected, the expressive identifiers they discussed and posted to the world, and behaviors that were enacted. Just think about AbFab and the fashion show visit by Fernand, or the drag performances and love for Ru Paul's television show. But in both cases, the spaces that were inhabited and created,



whether they were cocktail parties or a theater stage, also became learning environments. And in both cases, as well as most cases in this dissertation, these actions, experiences, and environments became more than somewhat 'accidental' learning circumstances. The participants went beyond that, and actively started to look for knowledge in the selected area, beyond a 'mere' picking up of things. In Fernand's case, this was the reading and viewing of fashion materials, and in Marnix's case, this was the active research into the histories of the locations he loves visiting. And that research, in turn, ended up on Facebook where conversations with friends grew around the historical events in a certain village. Dutch country life of the 16th century now ended up as a topic of conversation between young gay men on a social networking site.



Image 5.6. : Marnix's favorite spaces to visit, post and study: Nieuwendam and Durgerdam (in photo).

Marnix did mention his interest in history to me before, and even his questionable intention to start studying history at university. But there were several problems. He said he could only study something when he wanted to, not when he had to (as for an

exam or a paper). He also didn't have the nominal fee required to submit the application form (and mother was on vacation so he couldn't borrow it), plus the prospect of finishing a history degree when you're thirty and then struggling to find a job as a teacher didn't quite appeal. But despite all this, he did make an effort to study Dutch history, his favorite, by himself, and shared it. And this informal study project related to the role that space took up in his life, both real and virtual, and to his sense and urge for structure. Marnix expressed many times to me his desire to organize, *structure*, and beautify things for others, and those things can be historical facts, automotive data or flowerbeds.

\*

**"I need structure and more money, and if I have that then I am happy."**

When we were sitting in Marnix's small bedroom on the top floor of an old house in the suburbs, I asked him if he was content, or if he felt there was something missing in his life. I hadn't arrived at that question accidentally. I knew he had money problems, and figured his favorite job in the world couldn't be cleaning other people's houses, no matter how much he liked organizing and beautifying. Looking around his small digs, I couldn't find much comfort or pleasure (other than plenty of lubricant and condoms, prominently placed on the radiator next to the bed). Underwear was hanging to dry across the room, there was a half-broken laptop, a few DVD's that I gave him, and five pairs of black sneakers. He sat on the bed, rosé in hand, barefoot and in his usual black track pants and a white tank top. From the window I could see the tall towers of Dutch electronics giant Philips, as a beacon of capitalism and wealth. Marnix answered that he needed *structure* and money, and then he would be happy.

Our first conversation on *structure* was contextualized by at least two other themes, apart from the possibly more obvious contrast to the theme of *contrast: connection*, and



*future*. I bring up the theme of *connection*, an umbrella term for everything that has to do with finding human companionship, romance, love, partnership, sexuality, friendship, and not wanting to be or feel alone, because Marnix wanted these things. During one of our very first conversations, he disclosed to me that he had been involved with a seventeen year old boy a few years before. Marnix was 26 or thereabouts, but the seventeen year old boy or guy (he can often not decide which word to use) "looked much older and more mature." In any case, the guy was an ambitious dancer already and worked hard to achieve his professional goals. And Marnix, by comparison, found himself 'failing' on all fronts. He had no real job, no money, no idea what he wanted to do, and dropped out of three different colleges. To make a long story short: the affair never turned into a more long-term relationship, because the boy didn't find Marnix ambitious enough. Too 'flakey', I guess the term is these days. Except that in gay teen boy terminology, that is usually a description for teenagers, not twentysomethings. So this was yet another reason why Marnix felt he needed *structure*. Apparently, you can be juicy hookup material without *structure*, but not good boyfriend material.

Clearly, the other theme connected with his urge to achieve, gain, create, or obtain *structure*, is *future*. And here also the dilemma presents itself. Because how do you achieve, gain, create or obtain structure? And which of those is it? What is structure exactly, and where can you find it? Marnix and others find themselves in a tricky situation: do you create or find *structure* first, so that you have the stability and focus to get a job and an apartment and a boyfriend (and Marnix made it clear he did really want a boyfriend)? Or, do you first get the job and the apartment, which will provide *structure*, which will make you husband material? This is not specifically a topic that is central to my investigation, but I want to mention this dilemma, this ongoing search for structure, or balance, in many of the participants. And while aiming for balance, you of course need to retain your contrastive lifestyle. It's not easy.

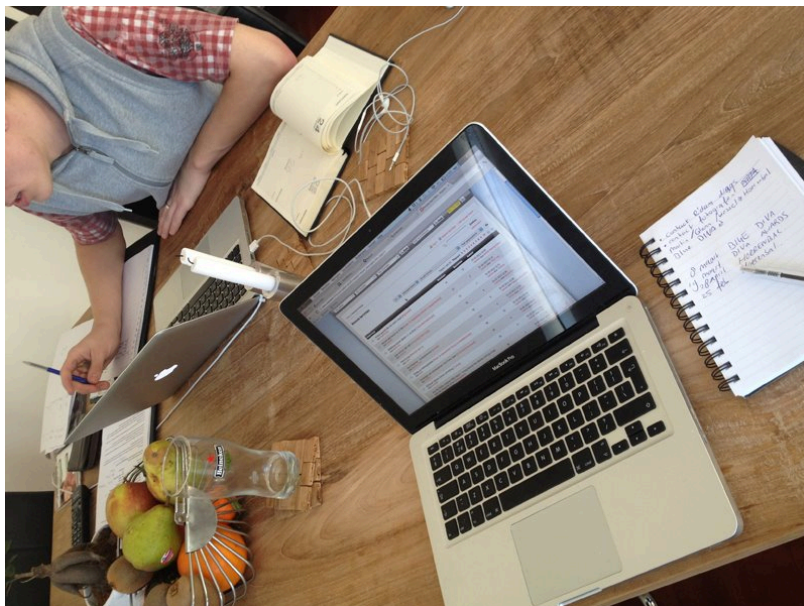


Image 5.7. : Structuring the party month with roommates and friends at Marnix's dining table.

Despite the seemingly uphill struggle for *structure*, major changes arrived in Marnix's life. After a few periods of illness and a few hospitalizations (yes, there are those challenges as well) he resolutely decided he needed a new place to live and a new job. He put both of his intentions on Facebook, and within the week he found a nice new house in an upscale neighborhood, which he could just afford by sharing it with two (Facebook-) friends. Through a friend of a friend he also was hired as what he called an 'office manager', which in this case meant he cleaned and made lunch and coffee for a group of programmers in a small gay software firm. Things were looking up, and Marnix became a lot more cheerful, while I interviewed him and flatmate Ron together in their new place, which still needed decorating. Another buddy of his moved in downstairs, and slowly the Marnix-nest as he starts to call it turned into something of a social hub for the entire group of friends. But Marnix also deployed his regime of *structure*, organization, style and neatness. Take, for example, the image of the dining table above, which he proudly posted on Facebook, as an example of the perfect gay household where perfect party planning is done on perfectly organized Macbooks. And there are kiwis and oranges to guarantee everyone's daily vitamin intake.

\*

## **"It disturbs me that it isn't all good looking"**

No, he was not talking about the sneaker and track-suit crowd at 'Ladz', one of his favorite dance parties where everyone dresses up in their favorite sports-fetish wear. He was sitting on my sofa for an interview, staring out the window and speaking about the flowerbeds in the municipal gardens outside my building. "I just want everything to be perfect and beautiful", he added. I had a hard time repressing a smile, as this came out of his mouth. He was dressed in sloppy, near-grungy pants and dirty sneakers, had a very masculine looking crew cut, and his whole demeanor is very far away from the effeminate, queeny stereotype that one might think of when hearing such a line from a guy's mouth. But he meant it, and it was no joking matter. *Style*, in other words, is a serious business, and not only to Marnix but to all the participants in the study, whether they admitted it or not. The crafting and expression of one's style is probably the most important and visible feature of queer identity, regardless of sexual orientation. But in this case, *style* is mixed with *structure*, of course. The flowers shouldn't just be pretty, they should be planted in an orderly fashion as well.

After Marnix moved to the new apartment, and had some income thanks to his new job at the office, he embarked on a major decorating project. Bit by bit, pieces of evidence emerged on Facebook after plants had been added to the deck, walls painted, or the bedroom redone, often in slick looking sets of before and after pictures.



Image 5.8. : The caption with this set read: "It will always be Spring in my room."



Image 5.9. : The bedroom, before and after, posted on Facebook.

Compared to these near-Ikea-catalogue images, his style of dressing was quite a different story and possibly as far from Fernand as possible. He wore black sneakers and skater shoes in very worn condition, either cotton track pants or dark jeans, topped with t-shirts that had probably seen better days and always had a print of some kind. But this was not an accident, or laziness. It was part of the groups image, as I explained before, not to be pushed into any existing style or subculture. Especially hated by them were the 'hipsters' (skinny pants, big shoes, nerdy glasses, goatees), and anything that looked too gay, or as Marnix calls it, queer. Queer, according to him, meant phony and fake. Queer meant displaying effeminate, girlie, queenie behavior

that is, according to him, not natural. "I don't even see girls behave like that", he says when speaking of the boys and men in the supposedly fashionable bars in the city. On the other hand, he did need some help creating his own all-natural look, and had an artistic friend of his give him advice on which things to wear, and which to combine with each other. "I put on what my friends like", he said at one point, before he quickly backtracked with "well well, not always of course."

\*

**"I'm not really into the society. Like, 'you have to work'. I'm like, why? So you can complain that you have to work again?"**

The *future* is an important theme in the lives of all participants, but especially so for those who had less of a safety net, financial and otherwise. Marnix was one of those guys who, despite living in one of the world's richest countries, found himself in a difficult situation. There were others in the sample in similar circumstances, such as Will in San Diego, or Dimi in Oslo, who lived in relatively prosperous places, but struggled to make ends meet. And in all these cases, going back to home for parental support was not an option. Marnix had not completed any course of formal study, but had a good intelligence as far as I could tell. However, despite his social and organizational skills, he had not been able to choose and pursue an interest to the point where he found a job, and kept it. He had one interest though, which he did develop and briefly opened doors for him: cars.

Indeed, with a brief nod to the notion of *contrastive* lifestyles, Marnix found absolutely nothing odd about being gay and liking cars, despite the jokes that his friends made on Facebook when he posted yet another new Mazda model, which was his brand of choice. On the contrary, coming from his unspoken design of authenticity, he felt that car technology, drag shows, landscapes, and gay fetish parties fit perfectly when you

don't want to fit in. But cars, and Mazda cars in particular, have been one of the few long term interests and hobbies that Marnix pursued from childhood. He had always collected information, studied many different websites, and shared some of this hobby with his twin brother, as well as a group of car lovers he met online and sometimes in person. These are not the same people as his current group of gay friends in Amsterdam, obviously.

At some point a few years ago he decided to combine his knowledge of Mazda cars and the brand in general, with his urge to organize and structure things. He created a website about Mazda, which he claimed was much better than Mazda's own website because he "understands what the brand Mazda means to Europeans better than Mazda does itself." And this self-study and expression actually led to a job for him. After the gay software firm let him go for reasons he isn't really motivated to address, he found, again through his online social network, that a Dutch car magazine was looking for reporters. They give him a shot, and Marnix actually wrote several news reports for the magazine's online and paper publications. But then he lost his job when the company replaced him with a cheaper intern. "The [2008 financial] crisis strikes everywhere", was his explanation.



Image 5.10. : Article by Marnix about the Mazda Kuga.



Generally speaking, Marnix was not all that excited about the concept of a full time job. As we've seen already, he felt happiest when he was on his bike visiting pretty towns and riding through nature, but that's difficult to combine with a full time job. Which is the reason he didn't want one. When I asked him how he felt being in the office, which was part-time and mornings only, and what this experience meant to him in relation to future work choices, he said: "I don't mind working but I was really happy when I was finished at one o'clock and I could go into the park with my friends. I rather enjoy life than working all day." He was convinced that the fun things, the good things in life are free, but that the more *structural* aspects such as having a house and a bankcard to buy food, required this unfortunate thing called work. And he has found out that the world puts a premium on longer timescales, at least when it comes to job experience. Having a track record of dropped college programs, very different ones at that, combined with a lack of employment and sense of direction, made it nearly impossible to find an interesting job at this stage. Marnix described it like this in his response to my request to write a brief paragraph about who he thought he was now, and who he will be when he is seventy years old:

NOW

I'm currently working at Club \*\*\*\*\* at the wardrobe and sometimes helping behind the bar. I love working there, talking and flirting with guys and make sure the image of Amsterdam isn't true (rude people in clubs, stores etc).. a person is not really made for working at nights i guess, so I'm not planning to do this very long. But I had a good job with a vert nice salary at \*\*\*\*\* (car magazine) but I got replaced by an intern.. the cirsis strikes everywhere.. So I had to do something and I was going to Club \*\*\*\*\* a lot anyways, also to perform and help out with collecting money for the Homomonument. I also organized some parties and a awardshow where I performed at Paradiso (in drag).

When I'm 70

I have absolutely no idea and I rather don't think about that...

I could philosophize about his statement about the future, which he obviously didn't want to write at that stage. Did he not have an idea about what he wanted to do because he would rather not think about it, or the other way around? Maybe it's a

pointless question, but the problem did live in Marnix's head, and he did feel a fair amount of stress and frustration because of it, not to mention real worries that things wouldn't 'turn out' well. He claimed to still have many ambitions, such as learning more languages, starting his own hotel, or helping people to make things better, more beautiful, more organized. In the end, his 'plans' for the *future* came back to that very point over and over: "I just want to improve the world and make it a beautiful place where everything is perfect." But, he added, it's a very difficult thing to do when you have many interests, and not just one, as is the norm. He said he would settle for a "structural job", which meant something reliable and presumably dull, and then would enjoy life, be with his friends and pursue his real interests in his own time. But how this was going to work out, was completely uncertain at this stage, as was the ongoing quest to find a boyfriend, which he felt is again connected with him being organized and structured enough to be able to keep one for longer than one night. Which brings us to the theme of *connection*.

\*

## **"I felt that I had future plans with him."**

Marnix was an online networker and communicator, as well as an offline socialite. He had profiles on a range of social networking sites, and he listed them for me:

- Facebook: for all daily communications and expressions between friends.
- Gayromeo: for 'dates', as he calls them, which means just random sex.
- Gay.nl: for chat and 'dates', when he was younger, and for younger guys.
- Manhunt: for 'dates', with more mature guys.
- Gaydar: for 'dates', now went out of fashion because it's not free.
- Dudesnude: to post anonymous erotic pictures of yourself which you can link to.

He emphasized though that "meeting people" was still his preferred way to get to know someone. This phrase was used in contrast with "dating someone". When you go out to



"meet people" it means you go to a bar or club, always with friends in his case, and run the chance of meeting someone there that you might like and start a conversation with. What then unfolds, Marnix explained, is a kind of seduction, which if all works out well ends with the two of you going to the same bedroom. "It doesn't have to go that way, because I also like just hanging out with my friends. But it's nice if something happens." He preferred it over just having a "date", which meant getting together with someone you've just met online. "Then you just skip all that stuff", he said, referring back to conversation and seduction that happen when one meets someone in real life.

But whichever way it happens, the important thing for Marnix was that he felt something "special." Something that you normally don't feel. "Something more than just sex and fun", as he put it. He told me about occasions when he had had really great conversations online, and then when he and the guy finally met he simply didn't "feel that connection." When I asked him to describe how he knew when he was feeling a 'special connection', he said it's like feeling that you have future plans with the person. I was somewhat surprised about how you can know you have future plans with someone that you have only just met. "It's what I felt", was his whole response to my questioning facial expression.

Marnix felt a strong desire to be partnered, it seemed. When I posted a video on Facebook produced by an Australian group that fights against 'marriage discrimination', showing a guy meeting a guy and the process of dating and falling in love and ending in a marriage proposal, he was moved to tears. And, speaking of connection, this ended up in a strong argument over gay marriage with another participant in the study, on my Facebook page. Dimi, a young Moldovan who emigrated to Oslo, where he married and divorced a Norwegian man within the year, posted a message saying marriage should be abolished altogether, for any gender. This conversation then developed:

Marnix: I cried the first 6 times when I watched it. It's so lovely. If YOU don't care about marriage then that's fine, but let other people decide for themselves.

Dimi: Let me express my opinion openly, and my opinion is that gay marriage is building a doll's house for gay people, which is equal to enslavement to the heterosexual pattern of life...

Marnix: True, but that is what people can decide for themselves. They know what they are up to then they get into marriage.

Dimi: Often people do not know what they are up to when they get into marriage, first of all, and then, it is especially dangerous for young people who are ignorant and romantically oriented...I personally thought I knew what marriage was until I got into it and realized it was not what I expected.

Marnix: Still it's a decision they make...that a relationship doesn't work out has nothing to do with the discussion we have and maybe you should have done something about your expectations...marriage doesn't come with rules....

The many viewings by Marnix, and crying over the first six of those, obviously showed an extremely strong interest in the idea of having a long-term boyfriend, partner and eventually a husband. All things he hasn't had yet, and felt were very difficult to achieve. On the other side we have Dimi, who also had what he calls a very 'romantic' notion of relationships and marriage. But his marriage to someone he had met online whilst still being in Moldova, didn't work out. In fact, he found it to be a terribly constraining and even enslaving experience. Later on, he felt that his romantic notions were installed in him by a society and a (popular) culture that portray something as a (heterosexual) ideal, which is misleading even for straight people, and we should do everything we can to fight it and abolish it. That argument I understand, but what I find particularly interesting are Marnix's final comments: "maybe you should have done something about your expectations" and "marriage doesn't come with rules."

From what I've seen from Marnix, including the six crying sessions over the marriage video, it's hard to believe that he had lower, or more realistic expectations about what a long term relationship or a marriage really would be. He thought, in this sense, similarly to some other participants who believed a one-on-one relationship (with extracurricular options of course) was the thing for them. But there was also another, smaller group, who were a touch more avant-garde, if you will, and didn't 'buy into' the whole 'heterosexual' model, as Dimi would call it.



Image 5.11. : The simulated family: Marnix and Ron doing the dishes.

And then there was the notion that marriage has no rules. It might not have been thought through properly by Marnix, but it looked like he was under the impression that a one-on-one relationship somehow is part of the natural order of things, while the 'rules' that people deploy when they are in such a relationship are man-made and therefore artificial. And can therefore be ignored as invalid and irrelevant. This, while he had already found out that the 'rule' that you have to be a reliable and stable husband with ambitions and an income, may be artificial but can still prevent you from scoring a long-term boyfriend. And he seemed to have accepted that particular reality.

Apart from the boyfriend issue and the random dating activities, Marnix was close with his brother and sister, and visited his mother regularly. He had a family photo album, just as he had an album with friends on his profile. Both these groups seemed to play an important role in his life, and he kept in touch with all of them through Facebook, except for his mother.



Image 5.12. : Marnix dancing on one of the boats during the gay pride Canal Parade in Amsterdam.

But despite all his online activities, his group of friends and the activities they undertook seemed to be to the central feature, focus and interest in Marnix's life. They formed his family, his safety net, his reference frame and his popular cultural world, more than anything else. He lived with them in his shared apartment, and worked among them when he was in the club, and communicated with them online when was elsewhere. And how that fun and comfort zone developed into a different *structure* is something that he didn't quite feel like thinking about then, nor did he have to. Where his story goes from here will be interesting to see, especially where contact or integration takes place between existing cultural models and the new connections that may come to the surface for Marnix on his educational and professional trajectory.

\*

Comments from Marnix on this chapter:

"It's nice but also weird to read something like that about yourself. What surprises me the most how quickly things can change. Yes, I'm still working at club church but I'm also in charge of the agenda's now and soon will be busy with promotions for club church. The structure I have is something one of my bosses saw and so I get more work there on other levels which I love.

I lost two friends cause we didn't match anymore. I feel like I've grown as a person and got more serious. I also met two new guys last year and they become one of my best friends. I still don't like shopping but now I do have good looking shoes, underwear, t-shirts etc and my house gets more prettier. I kicked out one of my roommate who was one of my best friends cause he wasn't a good roommate. Now I live together with my best friend upstairs while renting downstairs to a dancer which is all fine. Although I prefer to live upstairs alone like we did when I worked at the car magazine. I notice that I'm enjoying nature even more lately. I look to the sky very often and love to make pictures of it. The drag stuff got more serious although I still see it as a bit of fun."

## chapter 6

# Gonzalo.

Age range: 19-22

Location: Buenos Aires, Argentina

Formal education: studies for a BA in communications

Work: Not usually, sometimes a summer job

### Biographical sketch

Gonzalo grew up in the large port city of Bahia Blanca, 650 kilometers south of the capital city of Buenos Aires, and has a brother and a sister. His parents divorced when he was young, but both still live there, with his father being a dentist and mother is a researcher in art history. Gonzalo went to a local high school in Bahia Blanca before moving to his own apartment in a quiet middle class residential neighborhood in Buenos Aires, paid for by his parents. He is pursuing a BA in Communications at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, which is the large, liberal, main public university of Buenos Aires and Argentina. He has traveled in South America, been to Europe and the USA, and speaks good English. He is mostly single during the period of the interviews, but well connected with a large group of friends in the city, as well as internationally.

\*

## "My life is not chronological."

Starting from Bahia Blanca there are 650 kilometers of grass to the north until you reach Buenos Aires, and about 2000 kilometers of empty space to the south, from where you can swim to Antarctica. Despite its colorful name, the rather gray port city of Bahia Blanca seems somewhat stuck in a frontier-like haze, where everything is focused on 'getting by' rather than 'getting ahead.' It might be the last place on earth you would expect to hear a 19 year-old boy use Baudrillard to describe his own life. But that's exactly what happened when I met Gonzalo in person after a long period of online chat. I come to Argentina frequently, and always visit my family in Bahia Blanca, but since there's little else to do I resorted to social networking site Gaydar, not expecting to find many guys I could have an interesting conversation with. However, I met Gonzalo on there, who was in town visiting his parents after having just moved to start his studies in Buenos Aires.

In our online chat he told me that he studied communications, just like I used to, and we discussed all sorts of pop culture phenomena both because they made good small talk topics and because we shared a more academic interest in media in general. I told him I had just flown in from Spain and was very disappointed that I missed seeing *High School Musical on Ice* in Spanish, which was playing there. Then he told me how someone in his class just wrote a paper titled "Bop to the Top: an Analysis of *High School Musical*" and that did it for me: I had to meet this attractive looking young man with an intellectual edge on pop culture, because he seemed a perfect candidate for my project: he loved pop culture, he was aware of that, and he enjoyed reflecting on both pop culture and his awareness of it.

Gonzalo was a tall, slender guy with half-long black hair, and a face that was a successful Spanish-Italian-Argentinean blend that is not unusual in this part of the

world, plus he had particularly expressive eyes. He arrived at the hotel dressed in simple jeans, Converse sneakers and a sweater, and started telling me about the autobiography he just wrote for a writing class:

"You know, my life is not chronological, in a way. I can't tell my life by saying I was born this year, I was born in this place, now I live in this place. I think life is not chronological. And that's why I start with the present and go back to the past and switch to other moments of my life. The structure of the text shows how I am. We are not one solid union. We don't have to be just one thing. We are many things. We are all mixes of different spaces and different times. That's fine. That's contemporary life. And that's a positive thing."

I was pleasantly surprised by these advanced post-modern thoughts, especially for a 19 year old, and deep in the Patagonian pampas at that. Or maybe I was prejudiced against the countryside, against South America, against anything that didn't live up to my Eurocentric superiority complex. Possibly. Gonzalo told me about his high school philosophy teacher and how this person's love for Baudrillard influenced him, and how it made sense to him. "Baudrillard describes exactly how I feel about my life."

Thinking back to Fernand and Marnix, it is as if Gonzalo's take on authenticity, on identity, presents us with yet another approach. Fernand, despite displaying reflective, pensive moods, thoughts, music and visuals, never brought up the notion of identity. The connection between popular cultural capital and other phenomena on one hand, and on the other the idea that these could form or shape something called an identity, let alone identities, didn't seem to register with him. Or, when I explicitly asked him about this possible link, he denied that it existed, as in the case where he points out that watching a daily soap has absolutely nothing to do with learning. This is partly due to his narrow definition of what learning is, but the fact that he had a narrow definition of what learning is further proves my point, which is that he didn't see, or didn't want to see the connection. Fernand thought a lot about how to give his life structure, content, even meaning, and said he was "still in the making", signifying that the actions he took, the experiences he had, somehow would mold him into something different and



something more than he was then. Into a bigger, stronger, better, more defined identity, that may have different sides to it, but it's still one identity.

Marnix's approach, if that isn't too strong a word for his level of intent, was similar and different to Fernand's. Marnix also engaged with pop culture phenomena, and also selected expressive identifiers to build his persona, his Facebook profile, his identity if you will. We saw home styling, drag shows, Ru Paul, Mazda and Dutch countryside history all flowing by as a parade of identifications. But Marnix didn't seem to be concerned with having or creating an identity in the sense that Fernand did. Neither one mentioned the notion of identity, as we've seen. But in Marnix's case there wasn't much that points at him intentionally, consciously engaging with the idea that the things he selected to do, identified with, and expressed, actually might somehow make up what and who he was as a person, then and in the future. In fact, Marnix claimed to be always "himself", but the self apparently had no strong disposition of any kind. Instead, the self acted differently, felt differently, was perceived differently depending on which activity he was engaged in at that moment, but that didn't change the self's nearly neutral way of 'just' being. At least that's how he seemed to look at it.

And then there's Gonzalo, who started out with his preferred concept of a plurality of liquid identities from the get-go. He didn't seem to feel Fernand's burden of a world that imprints on him, that constituted him, and that therefore his choices weighed heavily as they might or might not have made him into the human he wanted to be. He also did not disconnect from that idea in Marnix's fashion, where he would 'merely' have been an agent, engaged in activities and involved with identifiers, which eventually vaporize and make room for others, as if the self and the body function like an iPad that runs one app after another, but without affecting the operating system. No, Gonzalo felt that he already *was* many identities. Yes, there was a love for Starbucks, Baudrillard and Harry Potter, and in a video clip he sent me he is seen kissing a bottle of Hugo Boss perfume and shouted "it's mine", which might as well have been 'it's me!' But none of these things, in his philosophy, changed his identity. They couldn't, because he was a galaxy of fluid identities that was never not changing, and was never anything, or

anything definable. And exactly that was his identity, in a way, or so he wanted to believe, and wanted me to think he believed it.



Image 6.1. : T-shirt he bought for an anthropology class: Que es Normal? (What is Normal?)

He went on to explain how his high school experience had been wonderful. That it expanded his horizons, despite the fact that education was obviously "political." "And everyone who claims otherwise is a liar." That people who claim the we don't need organized education anymore, because we live in a post-modern era where we have internet and so on, were wrong. Gonzalo spoke a lot about how his high school and, until now, limited college experience had benefited him. He was, among all the participants in the study, alone in this strong, positive view of his formal education. He was not only alone in his enthusiasm for formal education, but also in talking about what he learned. In some other cases, such as Momo the Moroccan who studied business in Brussels, participants resorted to telling me about the content of *what* they learned. Business practices, or photography, or culture management. But Gonzalo spoke about his exposure to ideas that discussed *how* you can think about things in the world, including yourself. And he loved it. For his anthropology class he even bought a t-shirt which came with a set of letters which you could attach to the front in any order, and he spelled out "Que es Normal?" (What is normal?) because the professor kept

hammering on that question throughout the course. It seems the point was made well, especially since it was re-appropriated into Gonzalo's fashion style.

Gonzalo's view of identities and identifications cover the themes of *authenticity*, *contrast* and *structure* all in one go. *Authenticity*, as he described what identity was and wasn't to him. *Contrast*, I believe, is implicit in his notion of identity, or it is absent, and these notions are not mutually exclusive. Everything about his life, and about living in general, was contrastive, and therefore nothing was. It's like everything that happened in life was part of the fluid inside a set of communicating vessels, which blended all contrasting components into one, forming one perfect substance. And when I think of communicating vessels, I think of the brain.

Gonzalo never spoke of a *contrastive* lifestyle, and never of *structure* either. He wouldn't, because, again, they were holistically integrated in a post-modern galaxy of identities, where modern concepts like *structure* and *contrast* no longer have validity.

\*

## **"Being a brand is part of being in a big city."**

Gonzalo's ideas about identity didn't end with philosophizing about theoretical concepts. He had grown up in an identity market, which was also what he literally calls it, that had modeled itself on the consumer market. In other words, if you're not a brand, and a strong one at that, you won't survive in today's capitalist metropolis. And that's true for margarine and gay guys just the same.

"Being a brand is part of being in a big city. For example I saw that you uploaded a image of one of my friends, who was on a poster for a brand in the shopping mall, and to you he was just a brand, a cute boy, but to me he is a friend, so I mean it's the only way to exist in a big city, making yourself a brand, even if you are an intellectual. In my university there are many intellectuals but I don't even listen to what they say. They could say I am Roland Barthes, and I would be

wow he is Roland Barthes and everything he says is going to be intelligent, even if he says some stupid things that everyone thinks. He's a brand and it doesn't matter what he says, the only thing that matters is that he is Roland Barthes, and that's the only way to exist in this society. Even if in a way making yourself a brand is selling your identity, and in my mind identity doesn't exist, we are not identities we are identifications, we identify with a cause but we are not identity."

About a week before the interview in which he makes this statement, I had taken a photo of an ad in a clothing store window in a mall in Buenos Aires. The chain store was called *Ay Not Dead*, and the ad showed a cute guy with the text *Viva Mama!* This, because it was just before mother's day in the Southern Hemisphere. I snapped it with my iPhone, and immediately uploaded it to Facebook with the caption 'I am pleased with the way the chicos in Buenos Aires celebrate mother's day.' The poster, in my mind, would make mothers and admirers of cute guys happy, so what's wrong with that? So I thought it was cute, especially with the oddly juxtaposed *Ay Not Dead* as a mother's day message, but thought nothing further of it.

Then Gonzalo saw my post on Facebook and brings up the photo with the "cute boy", as he referred to him, and explained that this model was a friend of his. To Gonzalo, this was an example of two things. One, that apart from being the formerly discussed galaxy of fluid identities, you also have to be a brand. In other words, you must mold your innate fluidity, ambiguity, and chaos into a comprehensible brand that people can understand. And that people are attracted to, including your self.



Image 6.2. : Photo I took of Mother's Day advertisement in *Ay Not Dead* shop window in BA.

And two, that public life was private life and vice versa. To me, the boy was just a random sexy model (public) but to Gonzalo he was (also) a personal friend (private). With this he meant to say that all of us, in all situations are both public and private agents, and that trying to separate those was old-fashioned and undesirable. He explained this to me when we're at an opening at some gallery in Buenos Aires, where I also met a friend of his, and Gonzalo let me know that he is particularly fond of this guy. After a few glasses of Malbec, Gonzalo told me he wanted to say something on camera:

"I just want to say that private life is also public. As feminists said all private things are also public, so why do we have to make a separation between private life and public life. Stop with those bourgeoisie values. We have to have a mixed experience and everything is both private and public. For example I am here with a private friend, a really close friend, but he's also public because I am in the same exhibition with him, and I like him which is a private feeling, but it's also public, because I am saying it to you. So, we cannot think in dichotomies, they

are part of the modernity logic of the world, and it doesn't work in post-modernity, because we are liquid, like wine."

We raised our glasses and I said 'Amen'. Gonzalo added: "Amen. And I like blond guys." This last phrase, I think, was in reference to his blond friend, but also a wonderful nod to the playfulness that his post-modernity allowed, while destroying those nasty bourgeois values in the process. Or so I imagined Gonzalo's interpretation to be, had he given one.

To me, the discussion and notion of the need to brand yourself when you live in a large city has to do with the theme of *meaning*. It's the other side of the coin, or the reverse philosophy, if you will, of the way for example Fernand approached meaning. It's not searching for meaning, as Fernand did, by reflecting on what was what in the world, and how it was relevant to you and could change you. No, Gonzalo's ideas about *meaning* are about creating it, shaping it, branding it and marketing it. Even to yourself, as he explains in the *style* section in this chapter. You don't sit around pensively on the sofa, play sad existential music and wonder where it's all going. In a large city, if you do that, you'll be swallowed up and never heard of again. People are rushed, have no time to figure you out, and there are plenty of tastier bite-sized experiences if you're going to be slow or difficult. You have to stand out among the 200 types of margarine, the 500 friends on Facebook, or the 3000 guys in a dance club. And you can only do that when you've thought about your own brand, your own marketing strategy. You *create* your own meaning.

\*

## "Harry Potter is hot."

If you would take a quick look at the way that Gonzalo was usually dressed, you probably wouldn't say he looked eccentric, or even much different from most other students his age in Buenos Aires. Most of the time, at least when I met him or when I saw him online, he displayed a fairly common jeans, t-shirt and sneaker routine. But don't be fooled. When I stood in front of his clothing closet he did describe favorite T-shirts (which had personal stories or funny images of some kind) and shoes (black Converse *All Stars*, all the time). It was a stark contrast to Fernand, and more along the lines of Marnix, as also Gonzalo had few brand items and apparently few or no designer labels.

That was not true for a few other brands, which he enthusiastically presented and explicitly claimed as identifiers: perfumes by Kenzo ("I met him.") and Boss (kissing the bottle), and coffee by Starbucks. When I posted a photo of the new Starbucks concept store in Amsterdam, which is designed with a number of playful references to Dutch history, Gonzalo commented under it with "That's why I love Starbucks!" I took that comment to be further evidence that he was only not into promoting the end of identity and privacy, but also nationalism. Globalized hybridic brands were what was hot. Splashing on German Boss in New York, drinking American beans in Amsterdam, and wearing Japanese designers in Buenos Aires. The fluid international affiliations of global brands somehow appealed to Gonzalo's nature, and corresponded to his philosophies of life, of being, of fitting in as a brand yourself.

So Gonzalo may not have been a fashion slave, but he did see clothing as an essential component of personal branding:

"I'm not really thinking about fashion all the time, but it's something important. With my friends we're always talking about intellectuals and how they are really smart and all that, but they are also really ugly and don't know what they are wearing. So I think you have to mix those things. You have to develop yourself intellectually but your image is really important. For other people but also for

yourself when you look into a mirror, it's important to look nice and to attract other people. I think that's very important, to attract other people. It's part of life."

In some sense we might see a bit of a theme of *contrast* by now, but again in the sense of a fluid blend. You can be an intellectual, but you should be fashionable also. You can be a wild mix of things, but you should be a comprehensible brand too. You can be local, but only if you're also global. You can be private, but you must live your life publicly. In other words, you must be a walking billboard for post-modernism, or there's something wrong with you.

It's also interesting to note how *identity*, *contrast*, and *style* came together here in a discussion of academia and intellectuals. The future Barthes and Baudrillards won't be able to get away with last season's cardigan, it seemed.

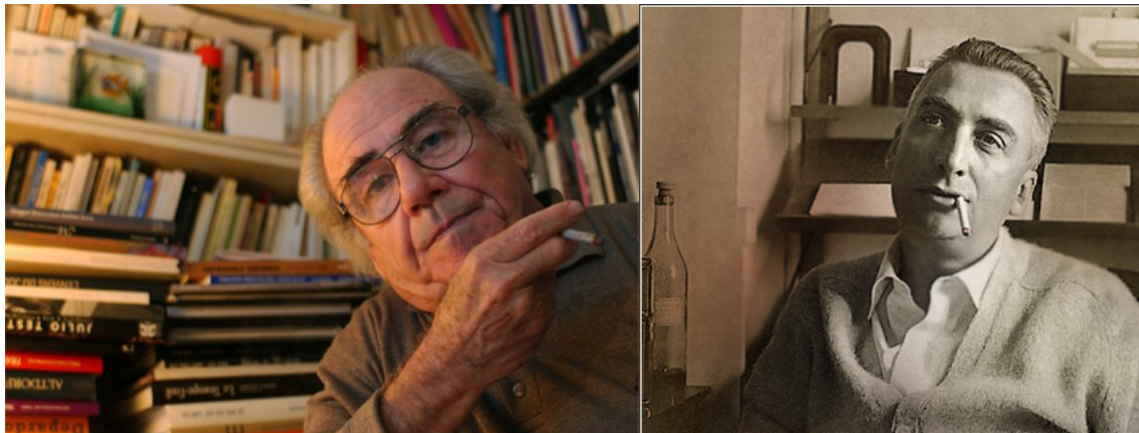


Image 6.3. : "Intellectuals are really ugly and don't know what they are wearing." (Baudrillard and Barthes)

But there were also sexy nerds, luckily, that did not only stimulate your brain but also provided you with popular cultural capital to share with your friends while forming perfectly deniable eye candy. When I asked Gonzalo about his favorite popular culture icon, the answer was resolute: "Harry Potter is hot!"





Image 6.4. : Daniel Radcliffe as a nerdy *Harry Potter* and a sexy Alan Strang in *Equus*.

“I think that Harry Potter marked my generation. Every person of my age read Harry Potter. Even in my autobiography I say something about Harry Potter. Because it's part of my childhood, of every childhood of my age, that's the good and the bad thing about pop culture. We share this common background but at the same time it's a massive background and not a personal background. But in another way we all have different approaches and meanings of every Potter. My meaning is not the same as his or her meaning.”

Maybe it was not strange that specifically Gonzalo was into Harry Potter, played by Daniel Radcliffe, who is about as famous and admired as Potter himself. Granted, during his childhood there was no way around it, but now, Harry Potter could be the poster boy for Gonzalo's 'branded intellectual.' Harry is smart and cute, intelligent and sexy. It might be the uncomfortable combination of childhood memories and twenty-something same sex attraction, but when I asked Gonzalo why Harry Potter was hot, I did get a not so resolute, a-typical and almost mumbled and shy answer:

"Eeh...because he has nice eyes... I don't know....he's just hot." He giggled, and that was the end of that explanation.

But Potter, Radcliffe, Baudrillard, Kenzo and Barthes have certainly taught Gonzalo something about *style*, *identity*, and branding. Take as an example a screenshot from a video clip that Gonzalo uploaded for me on YouTube. He did this because instead of me going to New York to interview him (he was on a long vacation and internship in the US), I decided to send him a small digital camera. I asked him to shoot some videos about his life there, and he uploaded over 40 short clips, mostly of himself and a visiting girlfriend, doing various New York things: museums, Starbucks, the subway, and so on. He also went to Miami Beach, where he filmed himself reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* in Spanish. The 27-second video consisted only of this image, with some beach sounds in the back. Gonzalo also uploaded a still with this same image to his Facebook profile. I think an argument can be made that we were supposed to see this as a presentation of a sexy, hot, mysterious man in swimwear, who is trying to signal that he is fashionable (Miami, sunglasses) and a creative, rebellious, intellectual nerd (Vonnegut). In other words: serious branding was going on here, and the influences of the Barthes and Baudrillard were dripping off the screen. Or so I would claim.



Image 6.5 : Gonzalo filming and presenting himself on the beach.

As we've seen, *style* comes in many different forms and is an important tool in showing others, and yourself, who you are and want to be, and what you're like and want to be like. Choices in consumer goods, which share the branding economy with you, are equally important. You wear the right Ray Bans on the right beach, you drink the right Starbucks in the right store, and you go out to the right parties, where you drink the right Vodka. In today's consumer world, most brands create 'experiences' around their core product, and these experiences have to take place in the right spaces, which is where *style* and *space* start to blend. And with a simple 'check in' on Facebook where location and images are uploaded to all your friends simultaneously, the physical *space* becomes an expressive identifier and part of strategic social networking, which Gonzalo would claim is part of you as a brand.

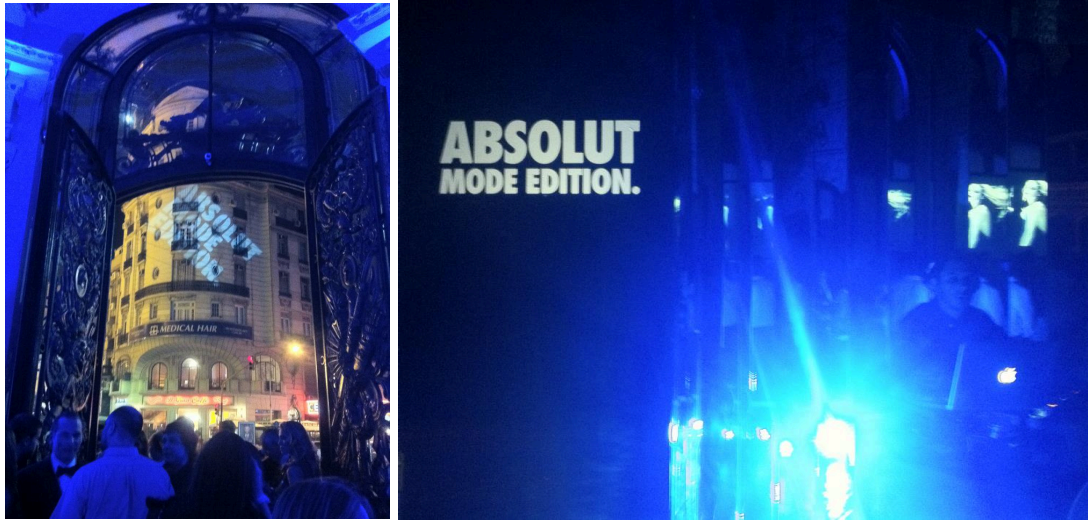


Image 6.6. : Gonzalo's Facebook uploads of him attending an Absolut Vodka party in BA.

\*

## **"I like my place to be mine. I prefer to keep my place for me."**

Gonzalo's apartment in the quiet, middle class residential neighborhood of Caballito, was extremely neat and organized. Especially for a student. I did suspect he had been doing some organizing before I showed up, but judging by the fact that the books were ordered by genre and size, it was probably a pretty structured place at any time. It was a nice apartment on a quiet, tree-lined street, in a low-rise building. Not your typical student neighborhood, or happening downtown location. No, Gonzalo liked peace and quiet, and took the bus to university in about 30 minutes. As he put it: "I appreciate petit bourgeois things, like fresh vegetables, quiet streets, no poor people." There was a main room with a dining table, on which only a rather old Olivetti laptop sat ("I wanted to save my money for a trip to Machu Picchu so I didn't get a new laptop yet."), and a bedroom with one single bed. I joked that it would be rather tight if he ever has someone over, which prompted him to show me that a second single mattress was hidden under his bed and could be used for a guest. But he explained that he preferred

not to take people home, so when it's 'your place or my place', it's usually the other guy's place. "I like my place to be mine. I prefer to keep my place for me." When I reminded him that he just let in a strange foreign guy with a video camera, he said "Yeah but you're a researcher. You're not the guy I met last week in the disco. It's different, I think."

So there's a difference between conversations about Gonzalo's ideology of post-modernity, where bourgeois values such as privacy have been done away with, and the rules that apply to this physical *space*. His own physical *space*. You might call this difference an inconsistency between theory and practice, or even hypocritical. Or, which would be the friendlier explanation, simply expressions of different identities, which have not blended so perfectly.

The space was also inhabited by books that represented other *spaces* where Gonzalo had spent time, both physically and mentally. His earliest children's books from elementary school ("I love them. They are part of my identity...well not my identity....my past."), Freud, Nietzsche, and Hesse's *Demian*, which he referred to as the typical teenager book ("You know, when you first start with all those existential questions.").



Image 6.7. : Self-made book shelves with elementary school books, Freud, Nietzsche, Marques and Hesse.

The T-shirts in his closet were mostly white and gray or black, very much like Fernand's, and were displayed neatly on hangers. Pants were folded and stacked in one pile, shoes were parked in sets underneath. Magazines and board games were perfectly stacked on the shelf. The desk and table surfaces were clear and clean. The refrigerator was clean and organized and had a modest sampling of healthy local foods. The laptop, on which he did research into social games such as *Pet Society*, had the most organized folder structure I have ever seen. In other words: there was a place, and *space*, for *structure* in Gonzalo's life. A private *space*, almost a refuge from both the chaos of the roaring city of Buenos Aires, and the messiness of the human mind and its identity struggles.

In Fernand's chapter, I brought up the notion of the axes on which we can position people, or participants in the study in this case, so that we can create a visual presentation of the similarities and differences between participants. But in Gonzalo's case this might prove difficult. Where do you position someone who advocated the end of the separation between private and public life, while he protected his own private living space? Or who claimed to be extremely fond of the chaos of human life, but structured his own environment maximally? Maybe the axes must allow for two positions per participant: one representing what someone said or claimed, and one for what they actually did? Mapping representation versus behavior would make an interesting exercise. Although this issue is not central to my own research question, right here and now, it is certainly something to take into account and come back to in the future.

The dichotomies continued when I looked at Gonzalo's Facebook postings. The inner truths of private *space*, of which I had seen something during my camera interview in his apartment, did not ever make it to Facebook. No postings showed the apartment, or anything that happened there or might be displayed there. A rather strong contrast with Marnix and a few others, who proudly displayed their interior decorations regularly. On the other hand, spaces that did get lots of visibility in Gonzalo's case were either locations where a party is being held, and there were lots of friends around, or more



artistic panoramas of iconic places in Argentina or other visited countries. I'm using the word 'iconic' because they were often typical of the image we might have of such a place. For Argentina, it was the endless space of the pampa, for example, or for New York the skyline of Manhattan. And in almost all cases Gonzalo positioned himself in the landscape, usually gazing at it or over it, in a pensive pose. He's part of the *space*, as he's in it, but he's also not. The images seemed to portray him in a state of wondering alienation, a reflective mood and mode. Sort of the opposite of a holiday snap shot, or 'hey look at me I'm having a blast in.....', fill in the blank.



Image 6.8. : Gonzalo gazing at the Manhattan skyline (Facebook).



Image 6.9. : Gonzalo posing in the vast space of Argentina.

Argentina is a *space* Gonzalo mentioned a lot. In fact, when I think of it, he mentioned his country more than any other participant mentioned theirs. Not always did Argentina receive positive commentary from him ("Argentiniens are racists. I prefer to think of myself as South American.") but the overall balance was in Argentina's favor. He spoke well of his schooling experiences there, both in high school and university, and he was particularly proud of the progressive position that Argentina has taken on gay marriage, which was to him a signal that this was a more advanced society, at least socially, than many other so-called Western ones.

"Argentiniens used to be more conservative. It's changing. We have gay marriage, USA does not, most European countries do not. I am proud of my country. Even all the straight students are fighting for gay marriage. It's part of the ideology. Even the president of the university said some universities should not be called universities because some of those are against gay marriage without any scientific evidence. That makes me so proud of my university."

I had never heard anyone use the word 'proud' and 'university' in the same sentence. Not in my life, and not in this study, where many participants have either a negative view of formal education, or ignore the experience altogether. To be proud of your university, and also your country, is also part of the 'bourgeois' system Gonzalo



claimed to despise so much. Pride works well in modernity, but doesn't work in post-modernity. And his pride for university and country also extended to popular culture created in Argentina (although it's produced by Dutch global media giant Endemol, to name just another country). In recent years, the Argentinian television soap *Botineras* had two prominent gay characters. And not just any characters, but football players, and if you know something about football (soccer, in US English) then you know that it's a cathedral of masculinity and central to Argentina's national identity (although we might wonder what that means). In the show, two football players start a love affair, and are shown in steamy sexual activities on public television, prime time. And when Argentina legalized gay marriage, the show actually aired a hastily shot episode where TV crews interview the football team about their position on gay marriage, and their feelings about having gay players on the team. Now that's something I hadn't seen anywhere else in the world.



Image 6.10. : Scenes from Argentinian TV soap *Botineras* (Endemol).

So Argentina was not just a physical *space* for Gonzalo, in which he loved to move and show himself, but also a paradigm of progressive social policy and thinking. And the two spaces together, made it into a place he liked, was even proud of being part of. At least that's what he told me in our conversations. It was not necessarily what his public persona expressed on Facebook and elsewhere, which is yet another example of the difference between his theoretical, ideological takes on things, and his behavior. Most other participants regularly posted photos, clips or other items on Facebook which were

related to gay issues, were gay cultural artifacts, or it could simply be a photo of your new abdominals, or lacking those then simply someone else's. Not Gonzalo.

Despite all the radical changes in Argentina, the liberal university, the intimate relationship with friends, I don't think I have ever heard him say the word 'gay' other than in the context of the political debate around marriage. He doesn't post anything on Facebook that I would call gay, or gay related, or even queer. He told me he didn't want to discuss his homosexuality with his father, at least not until he had a boyfriend. "My sister doesn't tell him that she is straight, so why would I have to tell him that I am ... you know I like men?" Also in this instance, the word *gay*, although it almost came out, was repressed. So there were situations where bourgeois values were not so easy to overcome, and there were spaces where private was not public, including for him. This became all the more clear to me when he sent me the 40 or so video clips that I had asked him to shoot with a small digital camera, as I mentioned before. Most of them were very innocent and mildly funny clips about being a tourist in New York, but there were two or three where he actually mentioned a cute guy, or spoke in such a way where it became obvious that he liked men, not women. There was even one, which intrigued me, where he spoke to the camera while waiting on a street corner next to a bar in Manhattan, waiting to meet a guy he didn't know yet and had met online. He spoke about how oddly exciting it was, and the video interested me because I, as probably many other guys, understood what he was describing, but I had never actually seen or heard someone describe it in this way. But when I went to review the video, which he had posted for me on YouTube, a month later, he had removed it, together with the only other two where his gay preferences were obvious.

YouTube, therefore, is yet another *space*, along with Facebook, where private and public spaces mix, and that mix is contested and has to be negotiated every day. Trying to be post-modern about it works sometimes, doesn't at other times, and makes you contradict yourself sometimes, as is clear in this last example from one of his own videos, shot at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York:

"I see Egyptian art in the Met. It shouldn't be there, it should be in Egypt. I don't like museums like this because the things are not contextualized. I like the MOMA better, well there is also art there that shouldn't be there."

So much for his post-modernism: now, all of a sudden, things need to be labeled and kept in their places and boxes. No more globalized blending, branding and mixing, as he was promoting earlier in the case of Starbucks.

\*

## **"I'll be alone."**

Gonzalo did not speak much of his friends. Not in general terms, and not specifically about any particular one. Except for Laura, probably his best friend, others remained nameless and unmentioned. In the gallery, when we spoke about private and public life, he did introduce to me one friend, but he didn't tell me anything about him other than that he was attracted to him. Gonzalo did speak about friendship and intimacy, covering the theme of *connection*, in more general terms though:

"One good thing about high school is that we had a lot of intimacy in a way. A lot of hugging and kissing. Not in university. Everyone is colder there, even students, because you're in a formal place. The University of Buenos Aires is not very formal and very liberal in a way, you can do what you want, but it's more formal than high school. In high school we were always singing and dancing and playing the guitar and talking about many things and I was touching friends and that's nice to have. Interpersonal communication is important to have and it's the most advanced kind of communication. Nobody is going to replace that."

Maybe in typical Gonzalo style, there was an evaluation and analysis of the events he described. But the conversation quickly moved to Facebook where he then had about 480 'friends':

"I love Facebook. But people my age use it differently than people of other generations. My generation adds everyone. My mother for example adds only

real close friends. It's different for me. I have almost everybody who wants to have me."

So whereas interpersonal communications may be the most advanced way of communicating according to Gonzalo, having lots of people, personally known or not, in your larger virtual audience is also important. If you are a brand, after all, your success depends on and can only be measured by the number of consumers (in Facebook terms 'friends' or 'subscribers') that like you brand and that use your particular personal brand as an expressive identifier, to enhance their own brand. The more cool people you know, who are cool because their branding is cool (their postings, for example), the cooler your own brand becomes.

But not all communication online can go via Facebook. There are times when you need to communicate with existing friends, and there are times when you feel the need for new ones:

"Facebook is more for friends, and Gaydar is more for meeting people. Sometimes you get confused. For example my first boyfriend I met through Facebook, so it's not completely like Facebook is for friends and Gaydar for meeting people. You can mix that."

In my experience, and for example in Marnix's, Gaydar and other dating sites, such as Gayromeo, are primarily used to organize meetings (Marnix would call them 'dates') for sexual reasons. Fernand disagreed with me, and feels you can also just set up a date for a drink and leave it at that, and he has a point. After all, that's what he and I did. But in most cases, there are other motives. Using both systems (one for friends and one to meet gay guys) also allowed Gonzalo and everyone else to separate dating activities from other communications, which we can see in context of private and public. On a dating site, you are fairly anonymous, while on Facebook, you are out in the open.

Speaking of out in the open: I asked Gonzalo if he was 'out', openly gay, to his parents. He said he was to his mother, but not his father, so I asked him why he hadn't told his father (again, in the spirit of having no separation between private and public):

"I would prefer to have a couple, and then tell him. It would be easier to tell him that way. Because in a way I don't want to talk about, I mean we don't have to talk about our sexuality. My sister and brother never told him they were straight, so who do I have to tell him that I am ... you know I like men? And I don't know if I only like men. Sexuality is not as easy as I am straight or gay. It's very dichotomical in a way. The greatest part of my friends are straight, but they are not completely straight in a way. They also like people of their own sex. My best girl friend has a boyfriend, but she's always talking how she is in love with Penelope Cruz and wants to kiss her."

Traditional, bourgeois values, if you will, apparently do still play a role, whether they fit in Gonzalo's post-modern, metropolitan lifestyle or not. What I also found interesting is that he believed that it was easier to tell his father once he has a boyfriend, signifying that the old-fashioned model of a one-on-one relationship is still solidly on the table, apparently. And then, the intellectual argument comes in, as we've seen earlier on, in this case deconstructing the notion that sexuality has to be talked about at all, and that a black and white approach to sexual orientation is incomplete. I agree with that, but it's interesting that the point is made here almost in defense of not having been out to his father yet.

Facebook seemed to play a significant role in his communications and networking. He gave me the example of having seen an exhibition in Centro Cultural Borges in Buenos Aires, which he liked and he wanted to know more about the artist. So he looked him up on Facebook, wrote him, and within days they actually met. That would have been much more difficult, or impossible, before Facebook and the internet.

"I had one week when I moved without internet. I could not find out which movies were playing, not contact my friends. Normally you would write 'let's meet at four at my place' and now I couldn't. I had to call them, and that was strange. It was not common. For me internet is wonderful and it also expanded my educational horizons. Like when you don't know something and you're reading a text at university and there are some words you don't understand then for example you have to look up phenomenology you will not find it in a common dictionary but when you go online you will find a lot of information about it in Wikipedia."

Gonzalo also used his laptop and the internet to conduct research for a university project about social games. He admits that he used to think they were for bored housewives, but he has become addicted to them since he started researching them, and research is always done in combination with a multitude of other online activities:

"I'm doing research on social games like *Pet Society*. At the same time I am chatting with friends, surfing the web, reading the news. You can play games, meet new people, share things. That's why these games are so popular."

Sharing things with people, connecting with people, is actually not a theme we talk about a lot, but it's there. In his 'Who am I when I am 70?' statement (see also end of this chapter) one of his remarks is "I'll be alone." I don't think Gonzalo really wanted to be alone, except possibly somewhere in one of his more intellectual or saucy identities ("I'd like to end up like Berlusconi."). There are very few occasions where he speaks about a boyfriend. Once about a former one, when we discuss Facebook. Once when we discuss coming out to his father, but only in theory. And once about a potential but still abstract future one, in another video clip he made during his stay in the United States. This is the only video where he spoke of a relationship with someone, but he never said the word boy, or guy, or man, to signal that he was talking about a gay relationship there. No, in the clip he told the camera, while sitting on a bench on the Harvard campus, that he wanted to date a Harvard student, no gender. He tells his audience his name, that he's hot and a good cook, and that he would like to date a Harvard student, but it has to be a business school student, because he doesn't want a poor one. Of course this gender free statement only works in English, not in Spanish, so I've always wondered what he would have said in his own language.

\*

**"Although I'll have lived a lot I think I'll have the same questions I have now."**

Gonzalo liked it in Argentina, in his *space*, and had no strong urges to move away. He would be interested to do a Ph.D. in the US or in Europe, and possibly work outside Argentina for some time, but the ties with his home country were strong. He was not one of those students who want to emigrate after graduation and never come back. We've seen evidence of him liking his country in several ways. He liked the landscape, he liked the progressive social policies such as gay marriage, he liked his formal schooling and university. In fact, the physical and intellectual *space* of the university played an important role in his daily life, both real and virtual. He showed me around university pointing out the good things about it, telling me he was proud of it, and obviously felt at home there. Especially the political engagement of his fellow students impressed him, and fighting for a better society seemed to be something that meant something to him, then and in the future.



Image 6.11. : University of Buenos Aires student center: left wing political posters, e.g. for legalizing abortion.

All these things spoke for a future in Buenos Aires, in Argentina, or at least a partial one. He was interested in communications, journalism possibly, and told me he would probably move away from academia for a while after the Ph.D., but might return to it later on.

Near the end of our last conversation, when we walked through the university courtyard where students were engaged in debates over social and political issues, I notice an ad for the Argentinean movie *Plan B*. It's about two rather grungy, straight and sloppy looking male students in Buenos Aires, who, against all odds and expectations, find out that they might not be as straight as they thought. And despite their upbringing and the still overwhelmingly hetero-normative society they live in, they attempt to carve out a niche for themselves. But on the outside, they retain their macho looks and their behavior as if they were soccer players. It made me think of the 'private versus public discussion', and Gonzalo's seemingly ambivalent or inconsistent handling of it, and of the fact that this Argentinean movie showed that he is not the only one caught between ideals and realities. In a changing societal environment, navigation becomes trickier.

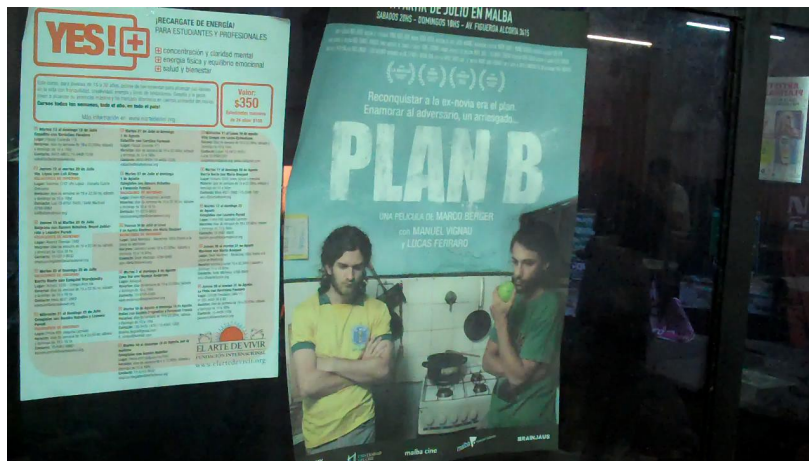


Image 6.12. : Movie poster of *Plan B*: being gay between era's in Argentina.

\*



## Who am I?

Now I am: a sexy smartass, reflective, superficial, controversial. I am Buenos Aires, Plaza Serrano, my home in Bahía Blanca, Bryant Park, Lago di Como, Toledo, Iruya. I am Laura. I am my mom. I am Cortázar, Auster, Couchsurfing, The Bahamas, UBA, Vonnegut and my profile pic. A marxiste du café. An ambitious capitalist. A wannabe communist.

At 70 I think I'll be less optimistic, less sexy but smarter. I'll probably be quite nostalgic -I'm a porteño\* after all. I'll be homesick. I will probably talk about capitalism and heterodox Marxism at Harvard or la Sorbonne. I'll be alone. I'll travel a lot. I'd like to end up being like Berlusconi but I know I'll be more Vattimo\*\*. Although I'll have lived a lot I think I'll have the same questions I have now.

Notes:

\*Porteño = inhabitant of Buenos Aires

\*\*Vattimo = Italian philosopher / author

\*

**Gonzalo's comments about this chapter:**

## **I is another**

Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.

*Michel Foucault*

I believe the most interesting concepts in this chapter deal with identity as the dialectics of contradictions. I say I am really attached to Argentina, but I imagine myself as a researcher at Harvard or la Sorbonne. I defend the abolition of traditional values, but I love my bourgeois neighborhood. I use Marxist authors, not for planning a revolution, but as a way of branding my intelligence in a market society.

I particularly like the passages that recognize this study is how a European researcher defines an Argentinian student, not how I view myself. Ethnography always says more about the ethnographer than about the subject. The other parts of this chapter, which attempt to fit myself in a box, renounce the unique qualities of the subject. The arguments that try to find a teleological principle in me ("is he what he claims or what he does?") are more distant from my identity. It's time for social sciences to abandon the pretention of finding nouns. At most, we can try to conjugate verbs.

For me, identity is evading what others want me to be. If my classmates think that I am a nerd, I will upload some pictures of me drinking vodka at an exclusive event in Buenos Aires. If a European wants to find in my discourse the deficiencies of the education system of a third-world country, I will instantly quote Baudrillard. If a researcher of popular culture and LGBT studies asks me who I am, I'd never use the word *gay*. My aim is to deconstruct interpellation, in terms of Althusser. I believe the worst thing a human being can do is be obvious. As a Spanish pop song says: "Better dead than simple"<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> In Spanish: "Antes muerta que sencilla".

## chapter 7

# The others.

\*

## Momo (Brussels)

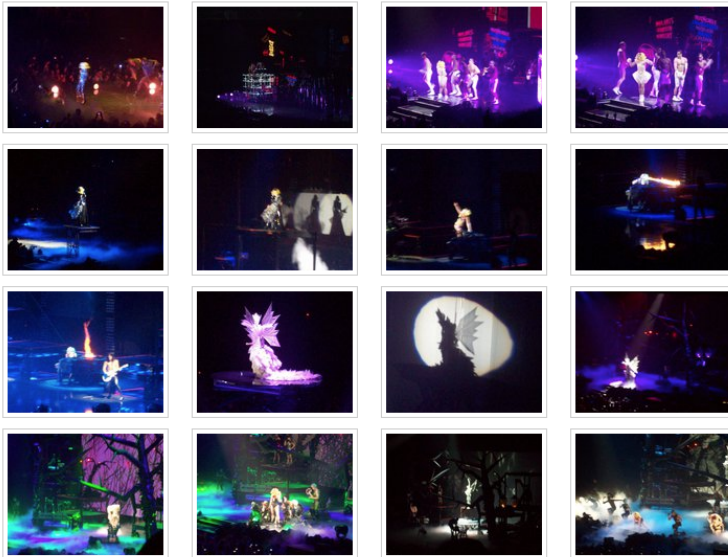
**"I could never be myself there."**

Momo was 19 years old when I met him in Brussels, through a social networking site. We chatted for quite a while, mostly about music and other pop culture, as well as our respective backgrounds. I learned that he spoke fluent English, Arabic, Hebrew and French, as well as some Spanish. His parents lived in Morocco, his grand parents in Israel, and he spent significant amounts of time in both of those places plus Spain, before he started a BA program in international business, at a private college in Brussels. There were cousins in Brussels, who were supposed to keep an eye on him, but I got the impression he partied anyway and the cousins didn't care very much, nor did they don't know very much about his activities, just like they didn't know Momo was gay. Momo moved regularly within Brussels, as rooms were hard to find and difficult to keep. He hated Brussels, and called it 'Africa' (which is ironic since he was from Africa,

although that's not the part of Africa was referring to). It was a chaotic, dangerous and nasty city, according to him.

Our initial chats, as well as the interviews later on, always had a strong popular culture component. Music was playing (through his Macbook), or the TV was on, or we discussed who was hot and who was not on the latest MTV shows. His Facebook profile had only two photo albums: one with his profile pictures, and one with photos he shot himself at a Lady Gaga concert. Interestingly enough, he claimed to like Madonna better because Gaga was a "fake", a "phony character." He explained to me that she claimed to have been this artistic and outrageous all her life, but that he saw photos of her when she was in high school and then she looked ordinary like everyone else. "Even her hair color was not the same then", which obviously meant she was a liar, in Momo's eyes. This shows how carefully a personal brand has to be developed and manicured, as any level of 'authenticity' can be destroyed in seconds by an overzealous hairdresser.

When I tried to discuss with Momo the notion that all this pop culture might have an impact on him, he laughed and denied it. He said he believed school was where you learn useful things, and pop culture wouldn't teach you things that prepare you for a job. "In school you learn something every day." When I asked him what he learned today, he said he learned what globalization was, and I asked him to explain it to me: "it's growth on a global scale." Then his attention immediately went back to MTV's Jersey Shore which was playing, dubbed in French, on TV.



Like · Share

Image 7.1. : Screenshot of Momo's Facebook album with Gaga photos he took himself.

So on education I didn't get much out of him, other than a standard but unsupported claim that school was useful. And on pop culture I got lots of comments, analysis, and emotion. But despite all this fun talk about pop stars and boys, and all the effort Momo made to be pleasant and entertaining when we spent time together, he couldn't really hide the fact that serious challenges were ahead of him. They seeped through in occasional comments, in a sudden reflective mood, and especially when I asked him explicitly about his future, and about being gay.

Momo was a short, skinny boy who looks North African, and he looked younger than he was. When we walked the streets of Brussels going to a restaurant or bar, he often moved very close to me when the streets were dark, or the neighborhood unsavory. He felt unsafe, ironically especially in the immigrant neighborhood ("Africa") where he lived for a while when I visited him. He was a sort of immigrant, but a relatively educated one from a well-to-do family, and on top of that a stylishly dressed one. He didn't quite fit in. Not in the neighborhood, because he was not like the other immigrants, and not in Brussels because he was not European. The dilemma unfolded itself to me slowly, as we talked more and time progressed. He wanted to stay in Europe, but it was going to be extremely hard to get a resident permit after his student visa would expire. He

wanted to stay in Europe for two reasons: first, because he was not 'out' in Morocco and if he would come out his friends and family wouldn't talk to him anymore, "or worse", he said. Second, the 'European' lifestyle he wanted to live, with a job and a boyfriend and money, was not easily achievable in Morocco. "I could never be myself there."

I have seen or heard the dynamics of the dilemma first hand. When he went back to Morocco on vacation, his mother read his Facebook chat with me, where we were discussing something she interpreted as gay (I don't know what it was). As a result, she committed Momo to a military clinic for weeks to be 'cured' of his homosexuality. When he came out, and promised to be straight, they let him go back to Brussels to finish his studies. But in Brussels his time was almost up, and without a job he would have no chance of receiving another permit to stay in Europe. Little by little, he started asking me if he couldn't work for my company, which was not feasible. He claimed to have sent out many applications for internships with companies in Belgium, but no luck. "You know how racist people are. When they see a name like mine on the letter, they throw it away." And I'm afraid there is quite some truth in that.

On the other hand, I didn't have the feeling that he worked very hard to be able to stay. His life in Brussels had been financed by his parents all these years, and he never had a job. He wore Prada underwear, had a Blackberry, and Ray-Ban shades. He had also had years to network and prepare himself for the transition to a job, but I didn't see much evidence of that having happened. And when I asked him, repeatedly, what he was actually studying and what he wanted to do with it, I never got much of an answer. He said his parents wanted him to start his own business, but he had no idea in what. What he was very clear about though, was that working a regular job for some other guy was not an option: "Work is fucking depressing. I think it's slavery. Slavery in a modern way. We don't really see it, but we feel it."

For me his story is about *space* and *future*. Momo lived in two physical spaces: Belgium and Morocco, each with their own challenges. But he also lived in two virtual

spaces. A Moroccan, anti-gay, religious and economically challenged one, and a 'Western' one made up of Prada, MTV and Ray-Ban. The glitzy world of capitalist pop culture had, of course, also penetrated the living rooms of Rabat and Marrakesh, but presented a *space* that not many young Moroccans got to play in. The *space* he lived in would directly determine or at least influence the futures he might have, and he knew it.

I genuinely felt involved and somehow even guilty for my position in all this, holding a passport from one of the richest nations on earth, but not being able to help him. In the end, he went back to Morocco as his parents were "the only ones I can depend on in this world and I am willing to please them for good this time." It didn't sound like a recipe for happiness to me.

\*

## Dacey (New York)

**"I just want to be famous for being me."**

My first interview with Dacey took place in his small bedroom in a shared apartment in a backstreet of Astoria, Queens, New York. He responded to an ad I had put on Craig's List, looking for young gay guys who love pop culture and want to talk about it and their lives. Dacey had only just arrived in New York from a small city in Florida, where he went to acting school, but in New York he waited tables. The auditions and pressures of having to make it in the theater world had been hard on him, and expressed discontent with that lifestyle, with actors, with the notion that you had to be special and wonderful and different. And with acting school where you were never allowed to be yourself, and you were told over and over that "you were not good enough." But the hardest reality was that acting didn't pay the bills, which is why he started working in a

restaurant, and he liked it. He supported himself completely, and he said he got recognition in the hospitality industry, and wanted to learn more about it. And indeed, throughout the years I followed him he did move on to being a host, a party planner, and to better restaurants. He learned about food, service, restaurant management, all on the job, and thrived. He also, eventually, moved away from the cheap room in Queens, got a boyfriend, and moved to Manhattan. But when I first met him, his most important place in the world, and voice in the world, was Facebook.

"I would like to say that I am ashamed to say that my Facebook is always on, but I'm not." Dacey loved communicating for the sake of communicating. He wrote a blog, which was always open, so "I can immediately get a new thought out." He tried to be funny, online, and sometimes fell back to clichés, he said, "but always with a little quirkiness." He followed other "young, ambitious, artistic gays" online, and felt part of that 'community' of guys "who just want to talk to the world." He wrote a lot about gay popular culture, and gave Britney Spears as an example, as all the gays he knew talked about her and because she was about the same age. He was also very open about sex online, he told me, because "the more it gets mystified the harder it gets to have it."

For Dacey, operating a blog and posting on Facebook was part of "promoting" himself. "I want be for famous for being me." We can see this as 'branding yourself', as Gonzalo would have called it, but the emphasis for Dacey was on *authenticity*, on being yourself, not on creating an image of yourself which could then be admired by others merely for being your image, not for being you. But whichever path you choose, and whether you choose to believe in 'yourself' or your 'brand', you have apparently only one type of capital to get there: popular culture. Britney or Baudrillard, they serve the same purpose. But the main issue and theme for Dacey was not identity or authenticity, it was *connection*. Facebook and the blog gave him a way to position himself in the world, and made him feel he was not alone. After all, he came from a more protected home environment, with familiar faces and a support structure, and was now in the big unfamiliar city, alone, and with nobody to rely on. Connecting to other young ambitious



artistic gays, as he put it, made him feel included in a community of guys just like him. "And when they are doing well, I am doing well", he said. It was a virtual support group, which might not know you exist, but still served its purpose.

Dacey claimed to have a hard time making friends, although that was difficult to believe considering how chatty he was. "I love Facebook, because it just makes it so easy to know people. It penetrates walls", he said. It relieved him of the pressure he felt in real life, where going up to somebody was difficult, or even impossible. "It humanizes everyone. I don't need to schmooze myself through a door. We're all the same. We all have drunk pictures online. You may be an executive at this company and I may be fresh out of college, but you can't hide behind your title anymore. We're going to talk human to human."

But there was a downside to all this online exposure and openness to people you hardly knew. I brought up the concerns around private versus public, that other participants have spoken about. I had seen Dacey's videos online where he was quite toasted on white wine and babbled away about things he might not discuss when sober. Would it not be possible for that to hurt him later on?

"Sure. You look at people who get kicked off *American Idol* because they once did lingerie modeling. I am like who the fuck cares? If you have a hot body and you wanna make money showing of your hot body, who cares? It comes back to hurt people. I've made a point to open and honest with everything. But when I go get a career I hope it's on my own terms. And if anyone finds something bad about me, it's not because they're gonna have to dig for it. I'm going to show it to them right of the bat. I'm going to be honest about myself. I'll be like yeah I used to smoke a lot of pot in college, or I partied a lot in college, or I had sex with such and such. I'm not going hide that. Because the internet comes back to hurt you when you are living a lie. When you're being miss teen princess but really you got gang-banged when you were in the seventh grade. Just be up front and honest about who you are, and become famous for who you are. For your personality, not as an image. If you can...haha."

The most telling part for me was the final phrase: "if you can...haha", acknowledging that not all of this process you have in your own hands. You're a player in this larger arena of pop culture and social networking, and you can post what you want, but ultimately you deal with forces and limits beyond your control. Here again we see that *identity* is very much linked with *connection*, and that doing a lot of connecting requires a lot of thinking about what you want to show, to say, to be, both online and off. For Dacey, the internet was a lifeline during the first year or so that he was getting his act together in New York. And then, through networking both online and offline, and through hard work waiting tables and learning the business, he moved up in the world.



Image 7.2. : Facebook post of a toast between Dacey and boyfriend after they move in together.

The last time we met for this project he looked back at the time we first met. He explained what a 'mess' he was, how poor he was, what a "tourist" he was, and how his clothes didn't even fit him. A lot had changed. He got a better job in the restaurant, fitted clothes, a boyfriend, and an apartment in a nicer neighborhood.

"I started to solidify myself. The blog back then was therapeutic. It made me feel I have a voice in the world. It gave me a voice for a really long time when I needed a voice. Now I moved to the city and I have a job and money and people who respect me, now I

am not just sitting in my room needing a voice. I have more of a voice than I have had before and I feel real."

\*

## Jakob (Berlin)

**"What I like is working with interesting people and interesting things."**

Jakob moved to Berlin after studying cultural administration in Bavaria, and he was a friend, Facebook and otherwise, of Fernand's. I went to meet Jakob at the prominent Berlin modern art gallery where he was an intern, and took Marco the Italian photographer with me to shoot Jakob while we talked. As usual, I also filmed the entire interview with my Flip camera. While Jakob walked me through the gallery, he explained how he got here. He didn't know what to do after high school, lived in Brazil for a year, and when he returned started studying Portuguese and law ("I hated it."), and then switched to cultural administration. When I asked him why, his motto became apparent: "What I like is working with interesting people and interesting things, and art is obviously of interesting things." Cultural administration consisted of geography, sociology, art history and business administration. "Business administration was the boring and shitty part, but it makes it easier to get a job, or well...that's what they say." I heard in here a little more evidence of the status that formal education sometimes still enjoys, but that is often based in belief in tradition or hearsay, rather than personal experience. I'm thinking about Momo, who had a similar attitude.



Image 7.3. : Me filming Jakob during our interview in the gallery in Berlin.

Jakob seemed genuinely interested in the art scene, and was, despite the rather dull daily routine of sitting behind a desk in a gallery space with seemingly little to do, set on getting a job there. He had the right look going for it, hip but not hipster, and had an American boyfriend whom he lived with, and who also worked for a gallery. Being so interested in art and style, I wondered if he had never actually wanted to *be* an artist himself? He said he didn't think he had the background for that. That one needed training, skills, and most of all a really big important issue or topic to work with, and apparently he didn't think he had any of those things, or aspired to having them.

But that didn't mean he didn't take photos on the street of random buildings, artifacts, or just lines, shades or shapes that he found beautiful and wanted to share. In fact, his Facebook profile was full of photos that showed part of an empty room, a corner of a building. I asked him why he posted them: "Because I wanted people to see them. Do you want to know why I think it's nice? Because it's just lines, and it almost looks two-dimensional." So somehow there was a love of form, for the sake of form. And somehow, I am guessing, for the kinds of meaning that are invoked by something that we normally don't interpret or analyze, and that posting these images Jakob would stand out. Different and even artistic, if you will.



Image 7.4. : Jakob showing his Facebook photos: "It's almost Mondrian, just lines and shapes."  
(Screenshot from my video.)

So for Jakob, *style* was crucial. It was part of his work, his social network, his social networking, his pop culture. It was his future, identity, structure, and also very much his *space*. Where Marnix may have found a comfortable physical and virtual spatial context in landscapes (and drag), Jakob had found it in art. And both of them integrated it intensively into their daily lives, as well as their online presentation and communication. Of course Jakob had actually made a living out of it, especially after his internship turned into a real job, so his *space* was not aspirational or escapist, which Marnix's was in some sense.

When he wanted to show me some photos and we went to the desk where he worked to use his computer, he asked "this is probably a thing that connects all your boys as well right? Facebook and probably Macbooks?" I was pleasantly surprised by this question, as he was one of the very few, or maybe the only one, who has explicitly referred to the notion of popular culture artifacts as common identifiers for gay guys. And pop culture he loved. He confessed to going home to his boyfriend many evenings and cuddling up for episodes of *The real housewives of LA, of New York, of Atlanta,*

and a few others, but also Ru Paul got high marks. And Gaga? "Well, I have a lot of respect for her. She's the common denominator for all the gays in the Western world in a certain age group." But later that evening, after obviously thinking about this some more, he came back to that subject. "You can't really take her as a common denominator, because she's too common. She's like water. The same thing with Macbooks and Facebook. I mean, all boys have eyes as well. You know what I mean?" Which is true, possibly, but my point is that Macbooks and Facebook and Gaga are common among gay guys, not straight ones. I might be wrong, but I haven't ever seen any of my straight friends post a song by La Gaga....or any song at all for that matter.

\*

## Ron (Amsterdam)

**"I never stopped being a child like that, and I still love it."**

Ron went to art school in The Netherlands, and was one of Marnix's two roommates (well, apartment mates) in his new place. He worked as a bartender in a gay club in Amsterdam, and loved doing two things when he was not working: letting his artistic side flourish and watch *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. When I walked in, that was exactly what Ron and Marnix were doing. "It's a mix between *Project Runway*, *America's Next Top Model*, and gays", says Marnix. Ron agreed.



Image 7.5. : Ron and Marnix watch illegal downloads of *Ru Paul* on Ron's iMac.

(Photo by Marco)

Ron tried to work as an artist for about a year after finishing art school, and making a living out of it. But that didn't work for him, he said. "Yes, I tried to make money with living as an artist, but I don't like to call it that. Being an artist means 'I make art' and what's that supposed to mean?" Art, in Ron's view and experience, was something that came out of you spontaneously, that's created because creative forces manifest themselves. Not because you sit down at your desk at nine in the morning and get to work. So he liked to build *contrast* into his life between work and art. Between what you have to do to stay alive, and what you really want to do. This is a kind of *contrast* we've heard Marnix speak of as well, and it's a contrast that forms a dilemma for most of the participants. You can't learn or study what you want in the way you want it, and you can't do the work you want because it doesn't support you. Now what?

Ron had found an answer to deal with this contrast, this reality, and the future: "I don't want to have many expectations. I love to do it without pressure. If I am going to see it as work then it's a totally different angle, a different view." In other words, he was trying to avoid frustration about not becoming a full time, moneymaking artist by lowering his expectations. The notion of 'work', to him, meant something you have to do, and



something that's not fun. If it's not 'work', then you might have a chance at creating something worthwhile, something interesting and beautiful.



Image 7.6. : Styling by Ron. Photos from his Facebook.

Ron was mostly a performance artist, and created wildly original creatures which sometimes leaned towards drag (the link to Ru Paul is obvious) and sometimes to scary fantasy and horror. He was hired by event and party organizers to come liven up the scene, the crowd, and create contrast for dull middle class professionals who need their office parties pimped. That was a source of money. But he was also involved in organizing parties on the more fringy, hip, artsy side of the Amsterdam scene, for example when he was involved in *Antifesto*: a party for people who are against people who are against things. In this case, it was a protest against people who whine about the credit crisis. Real, or formerly real pop culture icons such as Amy Winehouse were 'revived' by him for such occasions. When I asked him why he chose to dress up as her, he said "I didn't dress up as her, I *was* Amy Winehouse. Dressing up is a like a child's dream. I started doing it as a child and I never stopped. It's like *Ru Paul's Drag Race* and it's just a way of expressing yourself. I never stopped being a child like that, and I still love it."



\*

## Martijn (Amsterdam)

**"I want to have my own box of knowledge."**

*The interviews with Martijn and Rolando were the first two I ever did in the context of this project, and they were good learning moments for me as to what works better and what doesn't when you want to gather the kind of data that I was looking for. I'll come back to this issue in the following sections, and have also discussed it in the chapter on methods.*

Martijn came from a middle to upper middle class family in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Growing up next to the sea had "formed him", he said, by which he meant a *connection* to nature, and probably a bit of typical Zeeland 'nuchterheid', which means more or less a sober, no-nonsense, practical approach to life. Martijn, along with Rolando (below) were my first two candidates in this project, as I mentioned above. Both were in college, and both were working for me as interns at a publishing and production company for youth media, at which I was the editor in chief. Both were looking for work experience, and ways to get ahead in the competitive landscape of television production. Martijn had only just moved to Amsterdam to start his law studies, but was very oriented towards having as many different experiences and types of knowledge in what he referred to as his "box of knowledge."

Martijn was very concerned with his *future*. "I wanted to be a lawyer since I was twelve. Talking is my thing, you see. Public speaking. So I wanted to choose a job where I could do that the most." Martijn believed in mixing and matching learning and experiences, with focus. He didn't feel quite well served by the university, as he felt they were very much organized around teaching you one particular thing, or at least just things from one field. To counteract that, he explained he wanted to do many

internships in many different fields, so that he could build his own set of tools, with which he could then do whatever he wanted. Not what the university thought he should be doing, or anyone else. "I believe colleges and universities should show you connections between things."

Martijn also spoke a little about pop culture, internet, and Facebook, where he, contrary to Gonzalo's statement about his generation, only added people he had actually met in real life. But overall, this interview didn't work well. I asked specific questions about pop culture, school and work, and got specific, factual answers. But what was lacking, was how those different topics were connected to one another. The good outcome from this experience though, was that I learned that a structured interview didn't work well, especially in a cold office, and while I was the boss and they worked for me. That's when I started trying getting to know people, and having informal conversations with them in their own environments, as we've seen elsewhere in this study.

\*

## **Rolando (Amsterdam)**

**"You can't work for fifty years as an actor."**

Rolando was a new intern at my publishing house. He was 18 years old, not terribly fluent in English, and studied theater management. He came from a small town in The Netherlands, and started out at a medium level vocational school after high school, in order to become a social worker. But that was not for him. When I asked him why he left he said "it was too social." By which he meant to say that the overall attitude and atmosphere of the school and the students was too 'soft' for him, too touchy feely. He was a strong basketball playing athlete, and a very fanatic one at that, who lead a

highly *structured* life between school, interning, basketball practice, social networking and traveling between all these locations. His current school was in Rotterdam, where he lived now, but basketball is back where he came from, and my office was in Amsterdam. So he spent many hours on trains, texting.

When we talked about pop culture he revealed that he watched *Will and Grace* every day ("very funny but not very realistic") and had an unlimited pass to the cinema where he saw 3 or 4 movies a week ("I love dance movies and thrillers"). So apparently, there was some time left for pop culture and social networking, as he also spent about 2 hours a day on MSN (social network for online chat), but not with his 5 to 10 closest friends. "Close friends are cell phone friends", he said, to explain the hierarchy he employed where the closest people got him on the phone, and the rest on MSN, and they didn't mix. He was on a social networking site with a profile, but was uncomfortable naming it on camera even though I already knew what it was: "Do I have to say that on here...?", he stumbled, while switching from English to Dutch. He seemed to be a little embarrassed about saying the specific name of the gay dating site he was on, on camera.

The interview with Rolando was difficult, both because of his English, maybe his young age, and he is was the only person in the entire sample who did not attend what the Dutch call college or university. He studied at MBO-level, which is a medium level vocational college, more focused on learning practical skills than on academia. Again, I asked factual direct questions, and again I got somewhat dry, disconnected answers. When I write this, it's a few years after those original interviews, and in the mean time I've seen Rolando on X-Factor with a group of girls doing some show choir performances. He seems to have gotten over his embarrassment to be categorized as gay, and told the jury in the TV show that he now worked as an entertainer in a theme park. That is interesting, because he had originally suppressed his desires to go into acting, and chosen the management side of the theater business because "you can't work for fifty years as an actor." So it seems that his practical ideas about the *future* had been overtaken by his desires to perform in the end.

\*

## JM (Nancy/Strasbourg)

**"I hope they don't speak on Facebook about me."**

JM, as he liked to be called, grew up in a small town in Northern France, where his parents had a small country hotel. He and his sister used to help out a lot, until JM moved away to the much larger, but provincial city of Nancy, in Lorraine, eastern France. Here, JM had his own small apartment, a car, a computer and a cell phone, and was supposed to get a degree in social work in four years. He didn't work, apart from the occasional helping out at the hotel, and his parents financed his studies. It took him a few years longer than planned, as his motivation shifted from studying to boys, which he slowly transitioned to after going through a bisexual phase.

I got to know JM fairly well, as I spent a lot of time in Nancy and Metz myself, and met him many times. Over the years, JM spoke to me a lot about two things, in fact I think not one conversation has gone without them: *structure* and boys. And they are connected. In a nutshell, you could say that JM always expressed a somewhat theoretical urge to get his life on track, while feeling guilty that he was not doing that very efficiently, while he was involved with several guys, some couples and lots of random dating via the internet. And he had an important second hobby: smoking pot (marijuana).

It was no surprise to me that JM and I knew lots of the same guys in Nancy. After all, when you hang out online a lot on gay networking sites in a provincial city, you will eventually have talked to lots of people. In fact, JM claimed to have spoken to just about everyone (gay) who had a profile online. And some of the sites that were more

local, more French, also organized parties in local clubs where all the guys went that had a profile on the site. Profiles come to life there and then, in Nancy's only gay dance club, where people walked around with their profile name on their chest, instead of a nametag.

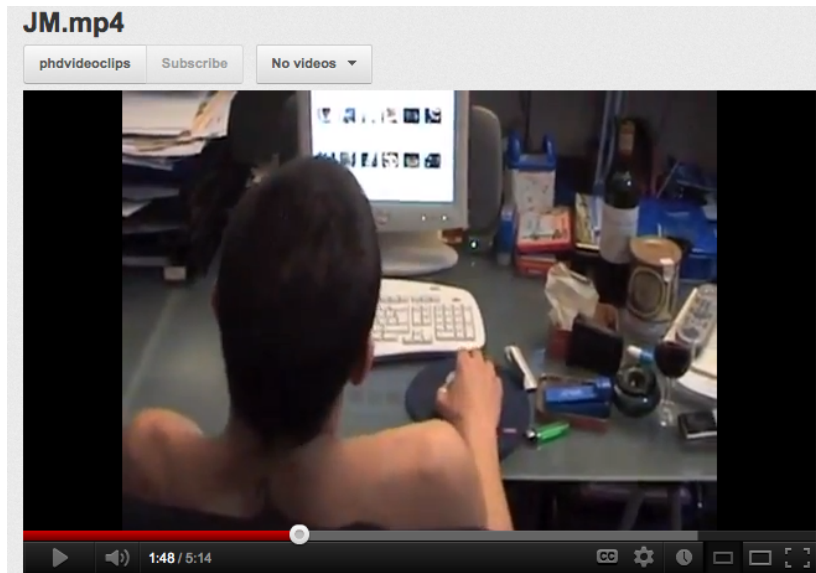


Image 7.7. : JM's favorite pastime: surfing a dating website and marijuana within reach.  
(Screenshot from my video.)

For JM, who came from a small town and now lived in a bigger provincial city, the internet opened a world of social connections. In Paris, there might be lots of places to meet other guys, but in Nancy there were few and the city was probably more conservative than the big metropolis. But when you had a profile on Gaypax, Gaydar, Gayromeo and Dudesnude, you could be pretty sure to have the full local spectrum at your disposal, and with 50,000 students in the city, there would be quite a few who would be interested in meeting up. Somehow it became a hobby for him, and he became quite hooked on spending evenings behind his computer, smoking pot and shopping around the net for the next hot guy.

He was very open about that to me and spoke about it spontaneously, but also about the fact that it took up a lot time, and complicated his life. Dates often led to him being boyfriends with someone, but they were always very short term. Sometimes, usually

older, couples would 'adopt' him as a third partner, also short term. All this took up time and energy, and college was still not finished. His parents started to pressure him to get his degree, so he could get a job as a social worker or youth counselor, and eventually he did.

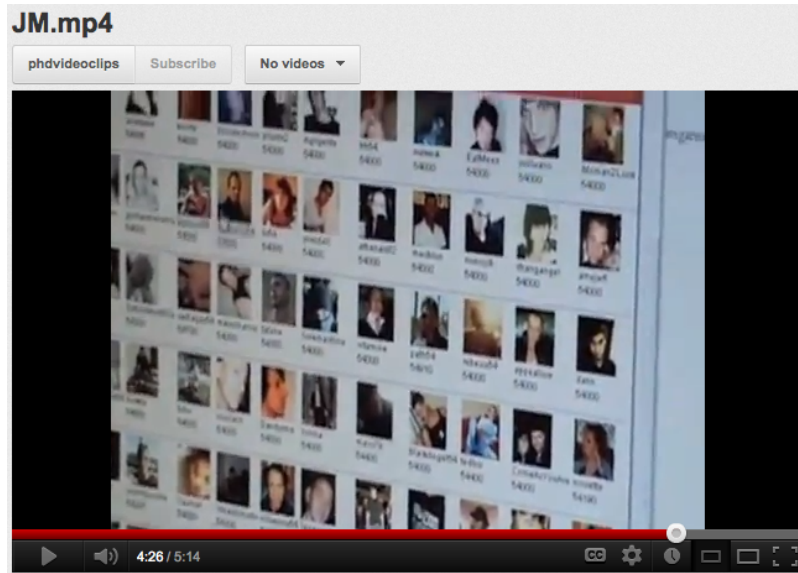


Image 7.8. : Gay networking site Gaydar's slogan is: What You Want, When You Want It. (Screenshot from my video.)

He found a job being a counselor for students in several high schools in Strasbourg, and moved there as well. The dating continued though, as did the pot smoking, and three years later was is still unhappy about not finding the structure he thought he needed. By which I think he meant a permanent long-term boyfriend, or set of boyfriends. He also moved from apartment to apartment frequently, sometimes living alone and sometimes sharing.

Social networking also presented its challenges. When you communicate online on Gaydar and similar sites you are relatively anonymous, although in a smaller city it becomes easy to be recognized after a while. But when you then start dating some of these guys, or become boyfriends, and you end up on Facebook together, things become visible to others. And when you break up frequently and do it all over again,

then several ex-boyfriends end up on Facebook with you. So JM didn't use his real name on Facebook either, in an attempt to maintain some kind of privacy.

"I don't want that my new friends on Facebook can discover the relationships I have with..I don't know... I don't want...I have several ex-boyfriends on Facebook maybe two or three, I hope they don't speak on Facebook about me."

When he said "new friends" he actually made air quotes, and pulled a face which meant these people are not real friends, just online acquaintances. But there was another 'danger' he identified, which was posting things or talking about smoking pot on Facebook. He said that he was afraid to do that, and hoped others would not write on his wall about it, because if a friend of his knew a parent of one of the students he was counseling, he might get in trouble. Parents might not want a pothead counselor for their teenager.

So JM kept bouncing between his attempts to work a job, party, meet boys, and find a solid relationship, while he kept telling me that he needed *structure* continuously. It seemed though as if his past and later patterns actually were just that: his version of *structure*. JM's last communication to me on Facebook before I closed this chapter was: "I'm not ready to have a boyfriend. But I have many sex friends! Sometimes I'm in love with them...." It seemed like he had figured out his *structure*, of sorts.

\*

## Marco (New York / Italy)

**"I think you're doing something really beautiful."**

Marco's life evolved around his personal aesthetic, or *style*. A view, a feeling, a vision, a philosophy about how beautiful the world should be, boys should be, art should be, and he should be, that really never was explicitly articulated by him. Not in words, at least, but all the more in images. Or maybe I shouldn't say 'should be', as Marco took the world pretty much as it came at him. Marco grew up in a small town in the very South of Italy, gave university a quick stab after hating elementary and high school, but then decided to leave Italy and his father's butcher shop and try his luck as a photographer in New York. That's where I met him, through my Italian roommate, and she had run into him at some gallery. Marco lived a volatile lifestyle, switching rooms and couches, boys and waiter jobs, but sucking up every second it seemed with his camera. He published a lot of his work online, and it was an intriguing mix of urban experiences, lots of near-naked self-portraits, and handsome male models on Brooklyn rooftops.



Image 7.9. : Self-portrait. He's been kicked off Facebook once or twice for showing too much skin. (From Marco's Facebook)



Marco was a great admirer of a number of photographers and artists, studied their work, visited their exhibitions, their cities, even their graves. Pier Paolo Pasolini was his great hero. *Authenticity* of a person, for him, seemed to be very much connected to *style*. Your inner beauty, your pure raw self, had to show on the outside in some unspoiled fashion. Marco was somewhat allergic to people who put on a show, exaggerated, pretended, advertised themselves. Although as an artist, he was prone to do the same thing, of course. He went through a period of escorting (providing sexual favors for money) in New York, and posted the photos he took during those experiences on his public website: they showed hotel room doors, text messages he received asking him to perform certain acts, and beds with used condoms and dollar bills on them. He showed himself often and nearly naked or completely naked on his public website. So there was a fine line between art, it seems, and kitschy consumerist marketing, for him.



Image 7.10. : Marco's hand over Pasolini's grave (from Marco's public website).

I asked Marco to come to Amsterdam and Berlin with me to make photo shoots of Fernand, Jakob, Ron and Marnix. Some of those shots are included in this dissertation. Especially Marnix and Marco clicked very well, and Marco did not return to my

apartment till the next morning, when we left for Berlin. (Marnix Facebooked me that morning joking it wasn't "very professional of a photographer to sleep with his subjects." On the plane to Berlin, Marco edited the hundreds of photographs of Marnix and Ron, weeding out unfocused ones and ones he just didn't like. He also opened the journal he wrote on his Macbook, to reflect on the experiences of the previous night.

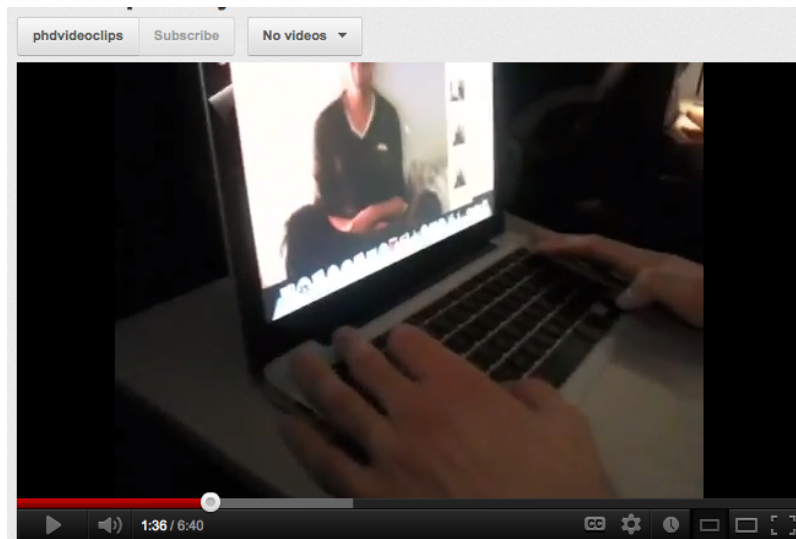


Image 7.11. : On KLM from Amsterdam to Berlin: Marco edits Marnix on Macbook.  
(Screenshot from my video)

The next day, while relaxing at the Westin Grand Berlin after shooting photos Fernand the law student, we talked about why people study law. Unexpectedly, Marco started a monologue about his terrible experience with formal learning:

"In Italy also a lot of people study law or economy when they don't know what to do. [I ask him if he wants to study again in the future] Me? Madonna. Mamma mia. I hate to study. You know all the people who say oh I would like to go back to school. I am not. I would prefer to die. It was a nightmare for 16 years. School. Teachers. Showing that you are better than the other one. Oh my god. I feel bad (puts hand on his heart). It was cruel. It was 16 years of my life that I had to show I am better than the other one. Better than my friend. I hate school, really. If you think about school and the system it's kind of sick. They teach you how to better than another one, even if they don't want to, but the *sistema* is like this. I tried university and it was too much. Even university. You have to go there. You have to say I am 27. You know you are a number. Mamma mia. It was terrible."

I was somewhat shocked that I had never thought about our educational system in this way, as a system that brainwashes children to think they have to compete with their fellow human beings. If you draw out the argument to consider the state the world is in, you could see Marco's logic about why this was a bad idea, and why it was "sick", in his eyes. His outburst was also highly unusual and uncharacteristic, as he hated speaking and being on camera. But I somewhat forced him to talk to me, with the excuse that me filming him was pretty much the same thing as him photographing me. And as it turned out, he was also the only participant in my project who actually reflected on the project itself. But it was because he linked me to another artist he admired, that I actually got away with it:

"I think you're doing something really beautiful, very interesting. I read a biography of Andy Warhol. They say he was always with a camera, recording everything. That's why I am letting you. You know even if you don't know what you're doing, it's something nice."

\*

## Dimi (Oslo)

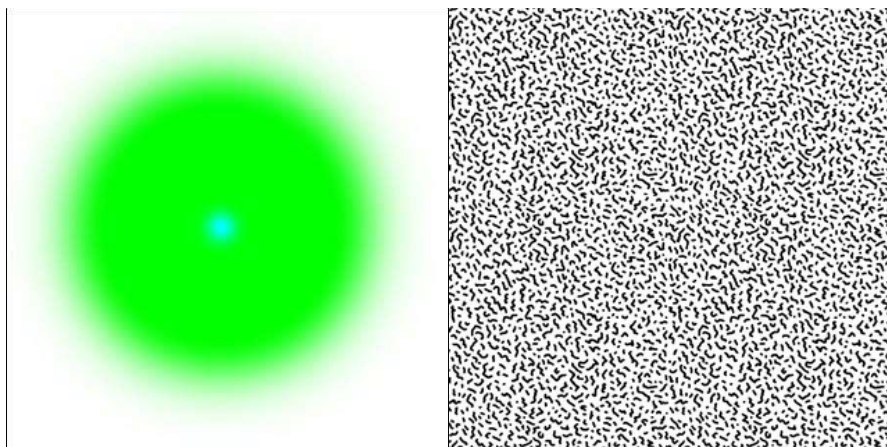


Image 7.12. : Dimi's Facebook profile pictures.

The images above take the place of a quotation because that's the way Dimi would have liked it. And because he felt that these images represented best who he was then, how he felt, what he wanted to be. Or rather, what he didn't. Dimi had gone through a tough time, tougher than usual, as was in the process of divorcing his Norwegian husband of one year. With the divorce, notions of romance, love, and especially marriage (as we have seen in the online discussion with Marnix earlier) went out the window. The two images above, and others like them, had been his profile pictures on Facebook for some time, instead of the customary face which most people display. Minimalism was his current mood and mode.

Dimi grew up in Chisinau, capital of Moldova, an Eastern European republic that became independent after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. His father left his mother when he was young, but he remained with her, an administrative assistant, throughout high school and college. For much of that time there was no internet in Moldova, so he corresponded via a mailbox system of the newspaper, writing paper letters to other gay guys. He never met them, although they lived in the same city for years, but they did get to exchange information about how they felt, about what they thought of their lives, he said. And then, the internet arrived:

"Technology saved my life. Thanks God to the internet that I found my access to the group of people I wanted to get in contact with. And all sorts of information. I'm gay, so... first I used the newspaper. I only wrote letters, for a couple of years, but we never met, while living in the same city. We wrote what we feel, what we think of our lives. I was also orthodox religious then, again under the influence of my mother. I understood my nature of homosexuality at 14, 15. And I thought I had to purify myself and pray and all those things. But I took it as an experiment, to see how it works out. It was sort of an experiment. I didn't know that then, I look back at it as an experiment now, when I look back at my life."

Dimi spent many nights in internet cafes in Moldova ("it was cheaper at night") and found Gayromeo and other dating sites, as well as lots of information on music and literature. "I was fascinated." He studied English in college, but learned about literature that he really cared about online, on his own. And he made contact with guys in Western Europe, and eventually made his first trip to The Netherlands and Belgium, meeting people he had spoken with for years online. He also arranged to become an au pair in The Netherlands, and had his first tastes of life away from Moldova, as Eastern Europe didn't have great appeal for him at that time.

The au pair period ended, and he went back to Moldova, and back to the internet, where he befriended a Norwegian guy. After a few visits to Oslo, they decided to move in together and got married. That didn't work out for Dimi, who wanted to feel free to befriend whomever he liked, and be sexually active. But he was met with jealousy, and the relationship crashed. Dimi divorced a year after separation (the mandatory Norwegian waiting time for divorce) and days after he got his residence permit. He kept his job as a receptionist at an Oslo youth hostel, but that's all he kept. His extremely romantic, sensuous nature changed rapidly into one where every hint of emotion was evil to him. Where all the 'bullshit', as he would call it, of culturally constructed hetero-normative hypocritical lifestyle re-enforcement was categorically rejected by him. Including so-called 'gay marriage', which went from a heavenly solution to man's darkest invention. Any elaboration, any enhancement, any enrichment, any decoration over the absolute bare minimum became a sickening and bigoted show for him. I remember vividly meeting in Salzburg, where he got upset with the overly decorated buildings. Only the modern art museum, a starkly concrete gray box, could win his approval. I tried to explain to him that just as much design effort went into the gray box as into the romantic church, but he wouldn't hear of it.



Image 7.13. : Later on, Dimi changed his Facebook profile picture to this.

Dimi dived deeply into a search for *meaning*, in my opinion, and in doing so actually attempted to deny that there is such a thing at all. I recommended Eckhart Tolle to him, and his abstract profile picture then was replaced by a different one which still doesn't show him, but did show some sort of human-angelic hybrid. He also spoke of studying again, and was particularly interested in feminist and queer studies and literature. Anything that would fight the status quo.

"I want to feel more relaxed. I don't want to rush with things, not plan too many things, because in the relationship I planned too much. Now I want to use my time not for planning but for living spontaneously. I don't want to reserve myself for some career someplace. I certainly don't want to sit behind a computer all of my life even though I would get more money for that. I want a more communicative job. From that perspective I like my job now, and I could maybe work in a hotel. I also have other plans: in the summer I want to make several trips, to discover what it is to be alone, because to be alone is also difficult, not so easy and I know that. And to face the side effects of being alone, although I am already facing it as there is no person when you come home to comfort you and there is no person who will always understand you. It's normal and it's real and I have to face it."

So despite his declared intention to want to feel more relaxed and not rushed, he came up with a long list of things that he didn't want to do in the future. Not the hallmark of a relaxed person just yet, his rather quick and anxious speech still betrayed a searching discomfort. And the spontaneous living part didn't really show in the future options he then laid out:

"My study plan and career plan: I am thinking about a doctor degree, perhaps in the US more than in Europe. I actually was thinking about a program in The Netherlands, in Amsterdam University there is a program called *Gender, Society and Sexuality*, it's a Masters in one year that's very good, a short time, and it's exactly what I am interested in. I am also interested in sociology and anthropology. I am also interested in sexology, but perhaps it's too professional, so perhaps I want a bachelor in sexology studies because it would be great to be a sexologist. Also there is another path I could take, I could be a teacher and it's very well paid in Norway."



Image 7.14. : Dimi's latest Facebook cover photo: bourgeois heteros and passionate homos.

\*



# Will (San Diego)

"I hate youth."

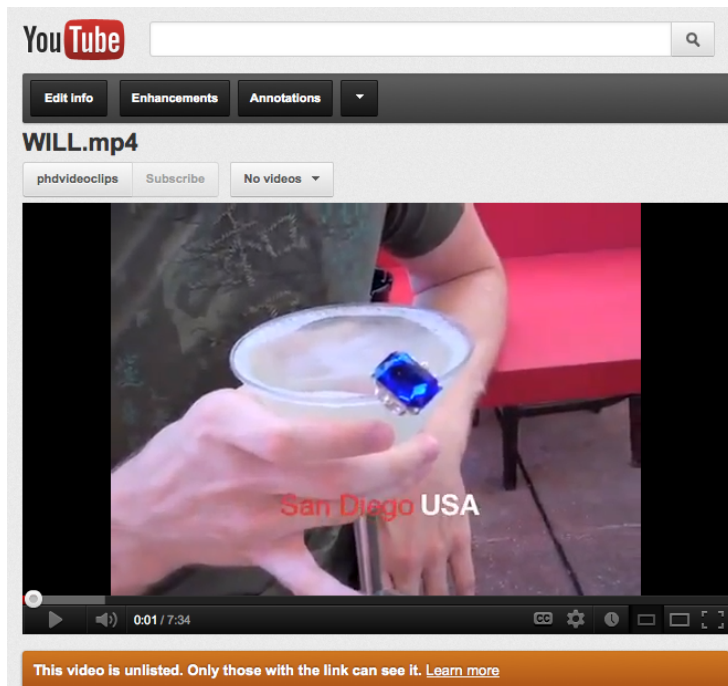


Image 7.15. : Will's Bling Martini ritual. (Screenshot from my video.)

"Are you filming me? Bitch!" were the opening words of this particular interview with Will on the terrace of a well known gay bar in the rather gay neighborhood of Hillcrest, San Diego, California. I had just put a Bling Martini in his hand, pinkie out. The Bling Martini had a big hideous plastic Papal ring on the rim, which one is supposed to drop into the glass, then drink it to the bottom, retrieve the ring, and wear the ring and plenty of subsequent ones to keep track of one's total martini consumption. After a few of them had been downed, we took a walk around Hillcrest during which Will talked about



everything under the sun without pausing. I tried to give it all some direction by saying I am interested in popular culture, gay culture, youth culture....

"I hate youth! Well, what I hate is a youth obsessed culture which has evolved in the world. Everybody's like oh my god the only thing that has value is youth but I'm like: that's a fading thing that everybody loses so why is it the only thing that has value?"

I didn't get the opportunity to answer that question.

Will came from a medium sized city in the Rockies and religious fundamentalist family with plenty of resources, but he hadn't profited all that much from that. They kicked him out of the house during his teenage years. He had been in college, and taken a stab at day trading (online trading of stock), but not been able to develop either one of these activities very far. He ended up in San Diego, where his life progressed or at least proceeded in an often unstructured, somewhat undirected manner. He lived here and there with friends, or sometimes with roommates he didn't like. He tried to make ends meet in between a gig there, a job here, and a few rave parties to spice things up.

We continued our walk.



Image 7.16. : "The barista at Starbucks is the cutest ever and she's just like me, totally sarcastic and into witty repartee."

But Starbucks, and especially going out, was expensive.

"The places I go to in Hillcrest are places where either people pay for me, or are free - luckily I can get in bars for free a lot even if they have a cover because I'll be like hey I'm cute and I'll dance without a shirt and they'll be like okay - I'm really glad that my crazy drunk antics work on people otherwise I don't know how I'd survive. Actually I do I just flirt with somebody in line until they pay for me. Also works."

Will was both into heavily expressing his own desired conviction that he was different and *authentic*, compared to his friends, while he simultaneously expressed the extreme desire to be just that: *authentic* and different.

"None of my friends are pretty enough to be in any of these shows that they love so much, yet they are constantly like oh my god that's what life is about. These Zack Efron films and all this ridiculous bullshit which I don't buy into - like I like Buffy for example - that's the kind of thing I think that culture should be based on is you know being individual, being adorable, having a brain, all those random little things that I like - and my friends...not so much...they are more Gossip Girl....well I was gonna say The O.C. but I actually like The O.C. so that's a bad example...cause let's face it they ultimately had Seth....he was so adorable and he and Ryan so had to have gotten together. I was a Seth person."



Image 7.17. : Tough Ryan, intellectual Seth, fierce Buffy. Adorable, individual characters with brains.

Will often posted on Facebook, and often in these two general genres, if you will: expressions about his position in the world or struggle to make it, and funny pop culture jokes, often on the general silliness and nastiness of religious people. Some examples:

"I am just freakin' amazed at how quickly my life has changed now that I've fixed my circumstances. I strongly believe all depression is more or less situational and we ourselves have the power to correct it. Don't settle for less than you deserve!"

"Swam until my legs gave up. Met up with a new business partner. Did other things. My life is a composite of all the little things I have done for years, and it constantly amazes me to realize other people noticed my tiny gestures."

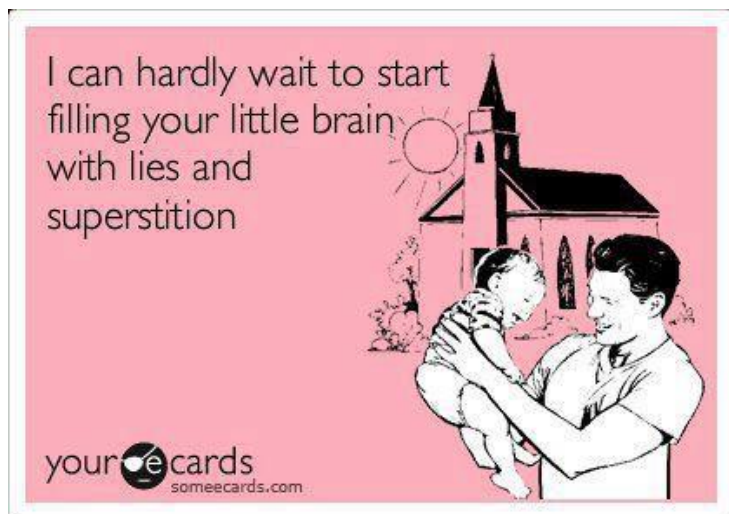


Image 7.18. : One of Will's many anti-religion posts.

And as if economic problems weren't enough to deal with, it wasn't easy to find a good old-fashioned reliable boyfriend who would kiss you properly either. We end this chat with him explaining how his last date went down. Or not. It's symbolic for the drive or urge that Will obviously feels and has to find an *authentic connection* with someone for the longer term:

"I thought the guy was being all cute by giving me this little closed mouth kiss on the lips as we left each other, right, and I was like how adorable, he's very traditional and whatever, and he clearly wants a second date, and this crap, and then on the second date, after he was eating my ass and all this other stuff I wanted to kiss him like you do and it turns out no he doesn't kiss with tongue because he think's that's weird unless you're committed and I'm like dude your tongue was just in my ....."

\*

## chapter 8

# The Four Foci.

This study had four main foci: education, work, social networking and popular culture. In the introduction and methods chapters I explained how the foci fit in the overall methodological structure of the research, but let me briefly recap to sketch how this chapter fits into the larger picture. First, I identified topics in the data and edited together video chapters per participant that contained the most salient examples of those topics. During the analysis of the topical materials, video and otherwise, I created eight themes that established linkages between the various topics, between the thirteen participants, and between the topics and the participants. The themes (*identity, future, style, space, connection, contrast, meaning and structure*) are now used to inform and elaborate on the original four main foci of the research. I will go over the foci one by one in this chapter and describe findings and insights by using some of the themes, before moving on to a final discussion and implications of the entire study in the next chapter.

## Focus on education

I did the research and wrote this dissertation while being enrolled in a 'school of education', which has always been a somewhat puzzling concept to me. Puzzling, because a 'school of education' seems to be about learning and teaching something that has to do with learning and teaching. In other words, it's an institution involved in studying itself, in learning about itself, in teaching about how to teach itself. That can be problematic in the sense that the word 'school' can also mean 'a group of people sharing the same ideas, methods or style.' And when that happens, when people start focusing inward and creating their own paradigms and tools to study their own paradigms, they sometimes start paying less attention to what happens in the rest of the world. My argument in this dissertation, in relation to formal education, is that this has to some extent happened in education as a field, and as a system of organized instruction. The attention has been heavily on learning about learning within the education field's ideas about what learning is. But for many young people, the world changed dramatically outside the school's walls, without the school noticing sufficiently, or at least reacting sufficiently.

I base this argument on what I saw in the data, which shows a small group of young men who talked to me, and showed me and others what they wanted to talk about and show. I didn't ask them many explicit questions about their educational experiences, just as I didn't ask them many explicit questions about popular culture or social networking. I was, among other things, interested in which aspects of their lives they would spontaneously foreground, and which not. As a result of this unstructured, more casual technique of interviewing, they had a significant level of control over which things they discussed with me, or showed me, and which they didn't. Sometimes I provided some direction, but I was careful because some participants immediately became overly 'aware' that they were being 'studied' and started giving socially desirable answers: "Education is very important in your life." Or, "of course, you learn

something everyday in school." Or, "if you get a degree you have a better chance at a job, well that's what people say." These answers to my more explicit questions about their educational experiences were interesting as a reflection on mainstream traditional notions of what education was and how important it was supposed to be, but less interesting as insights into what these young people actually thought or believed themselves. And into what they found most important, if we can measure that by what they discussed, and how often they brought something up.

What they *did* bring up spontaneously, mostly, were popular culture artifacts and social (networking) instances and issues, always in relation to their own lives. Conversations and expressions, whether they were online, or in an apartment, covered music, fashion, art, design, cities, parties, brands, boyfriends, friends, sex, money, food, vacations, television shows and much more. But rarely did conversations spontaneously include learning, classrooms, schools, college, and so on. Also infrequently, but more so than education, did work and careers come up, as I discuss later in this chapter. Only in Gonzalo's case did we speak regularly about universities and academia, as in his case being an academic, being a critical thinker, and using these aspects of himself to define and differentiate himself, had become central to his *identity*, and the ways he *structured, contrasted, and styled* his life. Fernand also brought up his educational background and his struggle to distance himself from it, as did Marnix who emphasized the problems of not having a successful educational background in the first place. But to Fernand and Marnix, these seemed to be practical problems forced onto them, not voluntarily chosen identifiers, as in the case of Gonzalo.

There is an interesting parallel between studying education while being part of the educational system, and studying popular culture and social networking while being part of, or at least surrounded by, popular culture and social networking environments. Both could be deemed problematic, in the sense I explained earlier, but what I tried to do in this study is mix the two. I explored the participants' expressions on pop culture and social networking through an academic, theoretical framework largely consisting of research on education and work, and looked at education and work through the lenses

of popular culture. This mixing and cross-referencing did show concrete relationships between work and education on the one hand, and social networking and popular culture on the other. Participants' choices for educational pathways, formal or otherwise, were influenced by their involvement or contact with cultural artifacts and with other people, and vice versa. Think of Fernand's move away from law and towards fashion. Think of Dimi's desire to quit his uninteresting job and wish to start studying queer literature. Think of Jakob's choice for culture management studies because he was intrigued by modern art. All these cases point at relationships between what these young people saw, heard and experienced in their lives, and their educational choices. That in itself was nothing new, but what was remarkable was that most of these influences, these things they saw, heard and experienced, were popular culture references that existed within socially networked environments.

This was a small sample of a group of young men with specific socio-economic backgrounds that were certainly not representative of most young people in the world, even the so-called 'western' world. However, I learned a lot, much more than I could ever mention or use in a dissertation, from spending so much time talking with this small group of young people over three years or more. But it does pose the question of how, as a researcher, you can generalize findings from a small sample, if at all. My view on this is that these in-depth exploratory interviews and the associated ethnographic fieldwork produced potentially important generalizations and form the basis for future research that can help determine how general they are. The potential generalizations here are not just about facts, such as the lack of emotional engagement or personal identification with formal education in this generation, but also more broadly about the range and diversity of attitudes and approaches (e.g. to formal education) and the patterns and connections among the various themes and ways the participants position themselves within each focus area of the study and with respect to a set of proposed 'axes' that define the arena of their identifications and biographies (see Discussion and Implications).



The sample showed an interesting distribution between very few extremely positive, very few extremely negative, and mostly undetermined, moderate or absent views on education. Gonzalo was certainly the most outspoken and most positive speaker on formal education, while Marco showed even physical signs of the horrors he associated with his own educational experiences in high school and university. It literally made him feel physically distressed. And then, in the middle, was a whole group of people who had moderate views on how important or relevant education was to them, or not much of a view at all simply because they didn't seem to care much. So whereas a very small part of the group had selected formal education as an identifier, either positive or negative, most didn't. And only the negative evaluation came with strong emotional expression. The result of these mostly moderate (which often meant socially desirable), absent or negative positions was that formal education was not a topic that came up a lot spontaneously, either in conversation or in other expressions.

The theme of *identity* relates most strongly to those participants, Gonzalo and Marco, who related most strongly to their educational experiences. But to most participants, education had more to do with *structure* and *future*. And in relation to both *structure* and *future*, education was still seen as directly connected with the arena of work. The linkages between certain traditional notions of 'getting an education' and 'getting a job' are not completely lost on this group of young people, but they do not see job prospects as automatically following on their institutionalized education. Only 2 out of the 13 actually had a paid job that was related to the formal education they engaged in: Jakob worked in a gallery after his studies in cultural management, and JM was a counselor for students after having studied social work. That's a very small percentage, but of course this doesn't say anything about the larger student population. It does say more about young, internationally oriented, pop culture engaged, gay men who are digitally networked. They had mostly wandered away from the 'opportunities' or 'limitations' of schooling and informed themselves elsewhere on what they wanted to do with their lives, plus they surrounded themselves with the artifacts that they picked and chose, rather than ones prescribed by an educational system.

What is most remarkable is that there was enormous enthusiasm for popular culture, and simultaneously, a mix between disinterest and a plain ignoring of traditional institutionalized learning. And this coincided with two other findings I mentioned earlier:

1. If formal education was mentioned, it didn't usually come with any strong emotions. This in contrast to most other communications in the social networking area, where evaluative loads, positive or negative, were usually quite strong.

2. Formal education has in some sense not become part of the popular culture domain, or hasn't become popular culture itself, while most other areas of life have. An argument could be made that food has, politics has, art and media have, cars have, the financial sector has, terrorism has, but not education, at least not in a similar way.

Let's look a little closer at these two findings, and how they relate to each other. The question that needs answering in relation to point 1 is why most of the participants' expressions, either directly to me or within their larger socially networks, come with strong emotional evaluations, while those related to their educational experiences usually do not. One way to approach this question is to consider that most topics that are part of academic curricula are probably not designed to stimulate emotional involvement in students, and are in fact designed to do the opposite: appeal to the students' rational side. Popular culture expression, in general, is designed to do exactly the opposite: it gets you 'hooked' by addressing your feelings and emotions, such as desire or fear. If we can agree that these are the overall angles that educational systems use on the one hand, and popular culture capital (and commercial marketing) deploy on the other, then this might tell us that: a) these young men preferred content with strong emotional appeal and therefore leaned strongly towards popular culture, and b) that this might be an important reason for not engaging, or identifying as strongly with traditional educational content and formats. Emotions seem to play an important role in *connecting* content to *identity*. And if you attempt to remove emotion, you remove the connection, and you lose their attention.

Which brings me to point 2, about the role education plays in the popular culture domain. Granted, schools and students and references to education pop up all the time in television shows, movies, casual conversations, Facebook posts and so on. Teachers, professors and students make intensive use of the internet for research, and sometimes even of social networking systems to connect with their class or research group. But there is a difference between using these tools to accomplish tasks assigned to you by a professor, and expressing aspects of your life that you identify with through engagement with popular culture artifacts. Of course, discussing a math problem on Facebook with your classmate, who might also be a friend, is part of social networking. But the conversation, even though it might quickly turn from math to *Lady Gaga*, is supposed to be on topic. The transcript of an online conversation about an academic problem that includes a discussion of the latest pop videos or last night's romantic date would raise the eye brows of the professor, as these genres are not supposed to mix (just like Fernand's fashion style was not supposed to mix with the genre of the law office).

So when you're in the official, educational arena, you're not supposed to 'socialize' and go off topic. And when you're in the pop culture arena, you'll see little content that addresses serious academia. Both fields seem to stay away from each other. There are many television shows that are set in high school or college: just think of *90210*, *Degrassi* or *Glee*. But these almost never show classroom situations as they actually would happen. They show relationships between students, personal problems and references to other popular cultural artifacts. And when they finally do show an actual classroom, or someone studying a book, that scene will be interrupted within seconds by either a pop culture reference, an unrealistic teaching moment (Gwyneth Paltrow climbing on the desk and singing as a substitute Spanish teacher in *Glee*, for example) or non-academic social interaction between students. It seems fair to say that although educational environments serve as the backdrop for many identifiers that students choose, they are usually not the actual identifier themselves.

So we arrive at somewhat of a chicken and the egg question in this focus area: does education not play a role in the lives of these participants because it's not part of the popular culture domain, or is it not part of the popular culture domain because it plays an insignificant role in the lives of these young men?

And similarly, we could ask whether these young men have a strong interest in pop culture, or at least in something else than formal education, and therefore we see such a booming pop culture industry, or is it the other way around, and did they 'lose interest' in education because there are so many distractions out there? Think 150 years back, for example, to a young student in a remote village in the German Black Forest, a typical character in a Hermann Hesse novel, where all there was to do after school was lie on your back in the grass and stare at the clouds. Or, you could open your textbook, and study some more. The offerings for information and entertainment today are mindboggling compared to that situation. It's not surprising that young students find their attention going elsewhere, or start seeing the relative value of what is 'taught' in the classroom, compared to other sources and learning opportunities. And from there, a vicious circle of decreasing attention and decreasing value is not hard to imagine.

Think of Fernand, who found an interest in fashion early on in his teens, and has been feeding that interest outside the school system. Or Marnix, whose interest in cars led him to design a website and become a reporter for a car magazine. But in other cases, an interest in pop culture had not led to a specific career choice (although we know that the notion of career is not highly ranked in their priorities), and actually resulted in a life in a gray area between a profession and survival. Often, it seemed, not finishing 'an education', or picking the 'wrong one', could lead to a not altogether cheerful existence where participants had to do a less than interesting job just to pay the bills. And that job then led to there being even less time to change life in a direction where they might have wanted it to go. Or to *structure*, which seemed to be in high demand. The traditional structure of an education to employment trajectory has become less solid, less dependable, less interesting and less relevant for these young men, than it probably was for earlier generations. That may be a reason why many of them seemed

to crave *structure* in their lives. It's somewhat ironic, but understandable, that some of them went back to look for *structure* in the very system that I would claim partly caused their destabilization in the first place. But it's an uncertain world, and some diplomas still open doors.

\*

## Focus on work

In many societies, the traditional transition where young people move on from an educational system to work and careers has been an established notion for centuries, although we might question how successful it's been. For many young people, there was either little or no education available, an education that didn't properly prepare them for the job, or it prepared them for jobs that were not there when they entered the labor market. A significant percentage of young people drop out of high school in the 'west', and fail to find an educational trajectory that suits them, that they are interested in, or that helps them lead a fulfilling life.

But what happens when the educational system is simply replaced or overshadowed by something new and different? We cannot establish a one-to-one relationship between the growing presence and influence of mostly commercial popular culture in our societies, and the difficulty that many students have in finding an interesting career path. But the numbers, even in a small sample, show an interesting picture. The listing below shows each participant, their formal education, if any, current job, if any, and then finally I have marked whether or not they actually desired their job (des) and whether or not it was a job for which their formal education was meant to prepare them (edu).

Table 7.1: education and jobs listing.

Name	Formal education	Job	des	edu
Fernand	law	publishing assistant	yes	no
Jakob	culture mngment.	gallery assistant	yes	yes
JM	social work	counselor	yes	yes
Dacey	acting	waiter	yes	no
Dimi	literature	receptionist	no	no
Marco	none finished	waiter / photographer	no	no
Ron	artist	bartender	no	no
Marnix	none finished	cleaning / bar back	no	no
Martijn	law	not looking yet	n/a	-
Rolando	management	entertainer	no	no
Will	none finished	unemployed	no	no
Gonzalo	communications	not looking yet	n/a	-
Momo	business	no job	n/a	-

Out of the sample, 2 participants didn't have a job yet because they had not finished studying and were not looking for one yet, and one participant finished his business studies but couldn't find a job (Momo, but he didn't express much interest in having a job in this field either). From the remaining 10, 6 had a job but didn't like it, 4 had jobs they did like, but from those 4 only 2 were actually trained formally to do that particular job. Again, we can't draw conclusions from such a small sample, but it is remarkable that so many of them either hadn't finished any formal education at the college level, or were not working any jobs connected to what they studied.

So what is going on then? Naturally, we have to take into account other factors in the economy, the labor market, and the world at large. Especially over the last few years it's been hard finding a job in many countries, whether you were 'educated' or not. The financial crisis made things worse, and there are plenty of places where you wouldn't

find a job that you studied for, whether you had 3 masters degrees in it and spoke 6 languages, or not. That's one problem.

But the other 'problem' is that the interest that these young men have in a job seems to have changed from what it was decades ago. For example: throughout the three years or so that I interviewed the participants, nobody ever said the word 'career'. This is an indication of the diminishing importance, for the participants, of the notion of having a 'career'. The idea that you choose an education that prepares you for an entry level position, and then you work your way up until you retire, does not seem to appeal to many of them. In this sense, the standard notion of 'work' as something that could be interesting, stimulating, or do some good in the world, is not developed among all the participants. Some, such as Marnix claimed that the good things in life are free and abundant: friends, parks, sex, love and illegal movie downloads, for example. It's just the more mundane aspects of life, such as food and a house, for which he said he might need a mundane job. But many guys mentioned not wanting to sit behind a desk for the rest of their lives, and Momo even called it "slavery." And some are more constructive and less negative, such as Jakob, and actually thought about a job that would bring them the most pleasure, most interesting activities, and pursued that. But the notion that you start a job and keep it your whole life, or even for a decade, seems to have lost ground, both on the side of the participants who had little desire for it, or in the labor market, which seems to provide less of it.

I also have the impression that many of the participants wanted their work to be 'fun', and wanted to be able to socially network with all their friends all the time, in real time, while they were working. I am wondering how many employers are happy about that, although attitudes on that side are also changing as retiring older employers and managers are replaced by younger Facebooking pop culture enthusiasts.

Work is still something that many of the participants did because they had to, and was therefore also a result of their economic realities. For those who struggled more to pay the bills, or find a position for themselves in the labor market, work, just like education,

seemed to be mostly about *structure* and *future*. But for those had been successful at finding activities they liked, that they identified with rather than just paid the bills with, the other themes became much more prominent. Marco's photography was not about *structure*, but about *style*. Dimi's move from receptionist to queer studies scholar was not so much about *future*, but about *meaning*. So it would seem that in a sense the themes of *structure*, *future* and possibly *identity* relate more to basic needs, in the sense of money and housing, for some participants, than do other themes, which become more important or get more attention ones those basic needs are fulfilled.

\*

## Focus on social networking

For many young gay men, social networking basically falls into two categories: meeting new guys for dates, or sharing and communicating around popular culture with friends. The participants, for the most part, used different sites for these different activities. For socializing and sharing with friends, and to display your favorite self, Facebook was the number one choice. Twitter was hardly ever mentioned by anyone. For dating and 'hookups' (dates with people you don't know for the sole purpose of having sex) there were a number of sites in use, and almost all participants in the study had profiles on 3 to 6 of those, in order to have the most exposure and chance of meeting someone. On Facebook, almost everyone used their real name (except JM) and communicated with people they had met in real life, or have had online chat with which resulted in them becoming Facebook 'friends.' On gay dating sites most guys were anonymous to some extent, but would use a real face picture in most cases, sometimes somewhat disguised. And most participants knew many people on both networks, as well as had contacts exclusive to one site, and one purpose.



Facebook, for most, had become the social and information hub for almost everything they needed during the day: chatting with friends, knowing which party or movie or gallery to go to, finding out about new music or trends, reading newspapers and even to calibrate their political views on the financial sector or Angela Merkel, to name just a few. When an appointment needed to be made with a friend, Facebook came first, and after that SMS text messages were used to follow up. Calling someone on the cell phone was unusual, unless serious conversations needed to be held, but for that Skype or Facebook video chat also worked. Many guys told me that they felt disconnected from the world, and entered a state of confusion, when the internet was down or when they moved and didn't have a signal yet. Finding out, for example, which movies were playing became impossible, which was an example mentioned several times. The idea of having lost a crucial lifeline to the materials they intensively engaged with, and seriously identified with, ranked anywhere from annoying to terrifying. When the net was down, both their friends and their frames of reference seemed to have vanished. All that was left were remnants of the 'old world': apartment walls, streets, subway stations and a television without a signal: in other words, the physical setting in which they existed. But it was lifeless, without socially networked, cultural *spaces* to play in.

The social networks have also become an integral part of popular culture, and are as such, in a 'medium is the message' kind of way, now nearly indistinguishable from each other in the traditional sense. Facebook has become a constant broadcast where popular culture artifacts are so intertwined or blurred with human contact that the technology, the content and the contact almost have become one. On the one hand, Facebook and other sites are now so filled with popular culture references and artifacts, and have become the prime medium to distribute, share and comment on those references, that it's hard to imagine how popular culture ever got along without them. On the other hand, these social networking sites have become popular culture artifacts themselves. The participants, at least most of them, are online on these sites many times a day, and this activity and connectivity between them and others has become a part of their daily lives, of what they *identify* with. Pop culture by itself is not enough: it

has to be shared. It's the link between the *meaning* of the content, and the *connection* to others, that makes it valuable. And not only did they repost cultural artifacts found elsewhere, but they also created their own, sometimes modestly sized, pop cultures within their own social circle. Think of Marnix creating his own groups around dressing up, or around his interest in historical villages.

It's not easy to describe specific patterns of social networking when it comes to attitudes and behavior with regard to education and work. Yes, some participants found work or made contact with people who helped them find other people who helped them along, but it's hard to say if those kinds of connections wouldn't have been made without Facebook. I think what's more significant here is the more subtle effects of the not at all subtle way in which social networks allow for a more effective distribution of popular culture, which is largely commercial. The social network *space*, in which many participants spend a lot of time, is a hybrid between you, your friends, popular culture, and advertising. And it has become more and more difficult to know which is which. Friends chat about movies, movie ads with your friends' endorsement are seeping into your news stream, the products from the movies show up in stores, the network tells others when you are in the store, and so on. A cycle is being created in which information, marketing, friendships, commerce and human socialization blur into a dynamic where everything is part of everything, everything depends on everything, and one thing is hardly possible anymore without the other. When you send a message to your friend about your cat, you will be exposed to cat food advertising. There is no way around it. And in this dynamic, there is curiously little space for work or education. Referring to either apparently doesn't get people excited, or involved, in a way that sells cat food, or anything else.

So whereas specific relationships between educational or work decisions and (commercial) social-cultural networks are hard to prove, even though there are cases in the data, the near complete recruitment of participants into a popular-social consumer network is probably having a significant effect on attitudes towards work and learning. It

is affecting attitudes to work in a way that re-categorizes it as something that should be fun and entertaining, while overshadowing the idea of education as something interesting or useful. And while the second part does not seem to bother many people particularly, the part about finding a fun and interesting job does pose a real problem for many participants. And that job is needed to stay alive, but also to afford being part of the popular-social arena.

\*

## Focus on popular culture

If this dissertation was a popular culture artifact itself, then I could try to claim that pretty much everything in the world is. But this dissertation isn't, which means I must qualify, disclaim, support and critique everything I write. Popular culture doesn't have to do that. It can be fun, outrageous, untrue, invented, deceiving and destructive anytime it wants, and it will be believed, bought, identified with, posted, hated, learned, liked and loved with a hunger for more, and an attention to detail, that educators can only dream of experiencing in the classroom. But, academically speaking, I will say that looking back at the data and my experiences over the last three years, the conclusion has to be that the popular culture arena has become so much larger, and the role popular culture plays in many people's lives has increased dramatically, compared to previous generations. That's what I can conclude from the data, and it's a generalization that I believe applies to much larger populations.

So, if popular culture is big, but it's not everything, then what is it? For Marnix it was Mazda and landscapes, for Fernand it was Vuitton, for Jakob modern art, for Gonzalo it was critical thinking and Starbucks, for Dimi it was minimalist music, and for Will it might have been raver parties with bro's, for Dacey it was Facebook itself. All these activities, interests and products are mixed with other activities, interests and products,

and presented in one integrated social networking dynamic which is itself part of popular culture. The boundaries between what is and what isn't popular culture, and between popular culture and other aspects of life, are blurring. But that doesn't mean everything is popular culture. For the purpose of this research I have employed the term loosely and allowed it leeway to prevent parts of the story from disappearing off the radar, but I have thought of popular culture as popular, and as culture. And what I mean by that is that whatever came up in the data qualified, as long as it was something that at least a small group of people engaged with or identified with (so it's popular) and shared or communicated about (so it's culture).

Naturally there are other qualifications to make in relation to the notion of culture, or the notion of what is popular, but for the purpose of this study I didn't feel that was necessary. 'Youth culture' is a widely used term as well, in scholarly work at least, but I'm not sure if it helps in the context of this work to attempt to define what that is. What does help, and what is necessary, is to place popular culture, and commercial culture, and youth culture in context of other dominant discourses in our societies, both historically speaking and at present. We've seen the significant role that popular culture and social networking play in the participants' lives, and we've seen how dependent both those spheres are on each other, and how intertwined they are. That wasn't always so. Before pop culture, mass communications and social networking came around, other discourses dominated what was commonly known and believed about youth and what youth was, how it should be handled, taught, controlled, and so on. Medical, legal, biological, pedagogical, and psychological discourses nearly had a monopoly on how we thought about young people, and what policies should be implemented in relation to them. But with the rise of mass communication technologies, marketing, consumerism and media, that started to shift. Now, youth and what it means to be young are notions that are much more framed by popular culture, largely commercial popular culture, than they used to be. Popular culture, and all of the media and consumerist industries that come with it, have become a much more dominant force, or even ideology if you will, overshadowing not only traditional discourses on youth, but even political ideologies that used to be much more influential on how our

societies were organized. Commerce seems to be winning terrain in all aspects of society, from education to health care, from the military to food production, and commercial thinking is also integral to the communication systems and popular culture media that the participants, and most of us, engage with intensely.

All that said, what is there to say about popular culture as a socially networked, trans-mediated, commercially driven 'system' in relation to the other three foci? In the section on education in this chapter, I already touched on my findings that education, as institutionalized learning, somehow relates differently to popular culture than many other areas of life seem to. It is part of popular culture in the sense that it is referred to in popular media and often provides the setting for cultural productions such as movies and television shows. But it's not part of popular culture in the sense that the young people I interviewed generally didn't identify, or identify strongly, with education as a system or their educational backgrounds in general, and as a result didn't express their weak or absent identifications within the social networks that they have.

Most participants understood that, at most, the role of formal education in their lives, as something that might help them achieve independence and fulfill needs and desires, was one that was part of a mix of tools. The time when a diploma would almost automatically land you a job is over. Now, you need a mix networking skills, academic qualifications, experiences, and an overall 'knowledge of the world', which largely exists in and is mediated through popular culture domains. Without knowing what's happening, what's hot, what sells, what to look like, what's frowned upon, which communication technologies are out there, what local and global affairs are 'trending', you can't function in most (middle class) jobs. And all of that information comes to us through increasingly socially networked communication tools, intertwined with popular culture materials that are often hybrids of information, news, social messaging, entertainment and advertising.

The relationship between popular culture and work is in some ways similar to the relationships between popular culture and education. Work is another area that used to be part of a more linear school-to-job-trajectory that has become less automatic, less linear and less followed, at least by the participants in the study. And of those who did complete a level of formal education, very few actually went on to a job that was related to their course of study. Again, we have to take into account the specific characteristics of this sample group, which consisted of mostly middle class, networked, white, gay, western young men, with an eye for *style* and an interest in *meaningful spaces* and exciting, 'fabulous' *futures*. That may sound somewhat 'over the top', but I would argue it's not. These young men were, almost without exception, horrified with the idea of a 'normal' job. A place where they needed to sit behind a desk, where they would be bored, where nothing creative, interesting, fun and beautiful would be produced. It's hard not to imagine that this has something to do with a form of gay sensibility, even though some might find this too much of a cliché or stereotype.

Still, from personal experience, and as a gay researcher, I think I can claim that I have never heard any of my straight friends say their office wasn't designed properly, their co-workers were badly dressed, or their company's products weren't fabulous enough. Among many of the participants, the standards were high, the expectations high and for most of them the opportunities were there because of who they were and where they were. That is certainly not the case for many young people in the world who face economic, educational and other challenges. But, the sample shows that among those who have the opportunity, who have a choice, traditional education and traditional jobs are not so much favored. If your 'role models' are the 'draggalicious' *Ru Paul*, glamorous Broadway wannabe *Rachel Berry*, or magically sexy *Harry Potter*, then why would you want to sit behind a gray desk and a screen pushing emails around all day, just to barely be able to afford buying their DVD's?

The hybrid machinery that makes up the dynamic of popular culture and strategic social networking has been mentioned several times now. It's getting harder to distinguish

between the two, and one needs the other to live and grow, but in a slightly oversimplified fashion we could say that popular culture provides content, whereas social networking tools provide the channels. To some extent, online social networking may have replaced some of the 'sharing' that went on in real life, like going to a movie with friends and discussing it afterwards, but for the most part it seemed that social networking rather expanded the conversation to other timescales and *spaces*. Expressing something about an identifier, which is almost always part of the popular culture domain as I have loosely defined it, allows participants to expose an identification they've made with which they are saying to others 'this is part of me, this is part of who I am.' And the fact that they create these expressions, that they choose to be part of the networked world where public and private are blurring, is an identification in itself and is in itself also an expression that tells friends and others that they accept and are part of this socially networked, popular world. Identity, identification, communication and consumerism are now integrating further.

As far as themes go, *identity*, as a conceptual notion, with *identification* alongside as its active process, seems to overarch all foci, and all themes, in the sense that there are always linkages to either. But in the other seven themes, distinctions can be made between those that are more associated with education and work, such as *structure* and *future*, and those that carry the heaviest load when it comes to expressions related to popular culture artifacts. Only *connection* has stronger ties with the social networking focus, but not only. *Connection* issues may happen through, may be experienced through, or just expressed through social networking tools, but they often employ popular culture artifacts in doing so. Just think of someone posting an image of a famous actor and writing a caption that says: "I found my husband." But the remaining four themes of *contrast*, *meaning*, *space* and above all *style* seem to 'cover' the bulk of the identifications and expressions that relate to popular culture, where *style* forms an umbrella, almost a prerequisite one, over the others. Without *style*, you have nothing, and trying to create *meaning* or *contrast* or a particular *space* won't work, and even if it does it won't get (the right kind of) attention in your social world.

Which brings us to the frequently heard idea that you have to *brand* yourself, if you want to be a successful networker, or even a visible, integral part of modern, urban society in the way some of the participants see it. Places where people want to work are places that create services or goods that people like, and market them well. The brand is central to a successful position within the popular culture economy, and that goes for both goods and services on one side, and people as personal brands on the other. At least, within the participant sample and probably people like them. Whether this applies to a young farm hand in a poor remote Ukrainian province who has no laptop or wifi, is doubtful. But popular culture is commerce-driven, and commerce only drives there where money is to be made. And if you or your institution either don't appeal on a popular level, or have no viable commercial infrastructure, then you won't be included in the party. The education system, by and large, fails on both counts, with few exceptions. Harvard does well, because it's a brand, just like Roland Barthes, but I would claim those are the exceptions to the rule.

Which brings me to discussion points and implications for educational systems, and research in the fields of popular culture and identification in particular.



## Chapter 9

# Discussion and implications.

After designing the study, finding subjects, filming interviews, editing them into video chapters, analyzing them, writing theme-based biographies, and relating the themes to the four main foci, I now want to make several points that I believe deserve special emphasis and discussion. As I said in the beginning of this dissertation and have touched on throughout: this was a small sample, and an intense, qualitative research project. This brings particular affordances and limitations. The data and findings in this kind of exploratory study are probably richer and deeper than any quantitative study could find or describe, but one has to be careful with generalizations, for which larger studies would be needed that can test whether the found phenomena do exist in other populations. On the other hand, large samples also have significant limitations, insofar that they often provide statistics on more superficial questions, without deeply going into the reasons that people might have for answering one way or another.

So, ideally, there should be a combination between qualitative and quantitative data in a study on popular culture media and new learning biographies that would guarantee both breadth and depth. This study does not offer both, and doesn't pretend to, but if I were to attempt another project in this subject area I would bring in more statistical data

on the one hand, and do a much closer analysis of some of roles that *expressive identifiers* play in the participants lives. Logistically, however, that's a much larger project, and would have to be a collaborative study for a team of researchers consisting of ethnographers, quantitative experts and discourse analysts, among others.

Below, I'll discuss a number of issues in the form of questions. The project I have done has provided a range of insights, but I am not claiming to have found definitive answers on any of these questions. They are all very interesting topics, on which I intend to do further research, and on which I hope others will also contribute in the future.

### **How do we make the most use of the identity vs. identification debate?**

In the chapter describing the theoretical framework, I mentioned how the notion of *identity as position* that Moje and Luke (2002a) discussed would be productive in thinking about young people positioning themselves in time and space. And, in this case, in an interactive, networked, popular culture world, where they constantly negotiate the next interaction, the next artifact to engage with, the next expressive identifier to share with friends. We've seen a shift in thinking about identity, both inside the academic world where the concept has gained fluidity, and in my data, where most participants dislike or even deny the traditional idea that they even have 'an identity.' They take a much more critical and playful stance towards it, where *identity*, almost like *style's* big brother, becomes a tool to brand yourself into a myriad of possible positions within urban and virtual arenas.

So when *we*, as researchers, and *they*, as subjects, start chipping away at *identity* as we know it, then we're seeing movement on both sides signifying something else is going on. And that something else consists of at least two shifts: one in thinking about identity less as a solidified set of characteristics that people are made up of, or attempt to achieve, but more are as a fluid, changing range of positions adhered to in different ways, at different times, and in relation to different things. And the other shift is visible

in the behavior of young people such as the ones in the sample, who increasingly and consciously deploy expressive identifiers to *style* themselves, to brand themselves, and to position themselves in the world in relation to their notions of others, of themselves, and of the networked, popular cultural domains they are embedded in.

What David Halperin proposes in *How to be Gay* (2012) and earlier work is to deploy the notion of identification, rather than just identity, to explore how people make connections with cultural artifacts, with each other, with anything in the world. Identification, as I have mentioned earlier, is seen as more of a process, and identity seen more as the fluid, (un-)desired or (un-)intended 'result' of that process. What I think is fascinating about this idea, and the shift in thinking about identity itself, is that according to my data, it seems to coincide with a shift in the position that some young people have towards the notion of identity. Of course, we might be seeing processes happening in the data exactly because we have found a different angle, one that emphasizes identification processes, but I would argue that despite the fact that both these shifts are happening simultaneously, they are both new developments and happening independently of each other.

In describing identification processes, we could make a more or less artificial distinction between how people identify with things, and which things they actually pick to identify with. Naturally, these two issues are related, and in my study I have tried to describe both, which means I didn't put particular emphasis on one or the other. In a future study, however, it would be interesting to look closer at possible relationships between the artifacts that are selected by a particular group of people, and the ways in which identification processes with these artifacts take place, so that we might identify patterns. Such studies might also tell us more about how subcultures are formed in relation to the selection of and identification with particular artifacts. And last but not least, it will probably give us new insights into how learning takes place in these new contexts, and how new learning biographies are formed. It is my initial, tentative view after doing this research that the conceptual crossover area where identification 'becomes' identity, where incidental acts in the process of identifying reach a more

frequent and stable pattern, is the time and *space* where learning takes place. In my opinion, that's also precisely the time and the *space* that research should be focused on to find out more about why and when these times and spaces occur in the students' development and learning processes, and why it is that popular culture is particularly successful at positioning itself right there and then.

### **Why is there tension between popular culture and education?**

Somehow nearly every activity, every domain, every interest group and every organization out there seems to have become or made itself part of popular culture. The US Army makes video games, KLM lets you 'Stewardress Yourself' on Facebook, Obama sings songs on YouTube, Jamie Oliver produces healthy school food shows, Oxfam tweets together water wells for Africa, and with the dancing boy-boat in the last Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade, *Boys4u.nl* even pushed gay escorting into the public, popular domain. Most corporations, organizations and even governments have found ways to identify identifiers that people get interested in and talk to their friends about. But somehow, the world of formal education takes a different position, voluntarily or not, judging by the data and analysis presented in this dissertation.

Nearly all conversations and all artifacts in the data concern popular culture capital, ranging from *Gaga* to Obama and from Bieber to Ban Ki-moon. One subject that almost never comes up spontaneously, and is discussed without enthusiasm when brought up, is learning and schooling. It's also the only domain under-represented in popular media or cultural production, except where it serves as a setting for other events that are distanced from academia.

As I mentioned several times throughout the dissertation, this raises the question of whether education is not so much part of popular culture because many young people don't select it as an identifier, or whether many young people don't select it to identify

with because it's not part of popular culture? Historically speaking, education got to the attention market first. Or, more accurately, young people were forced to pay attention on the one hand, and had little alternative on the other. Both of those conditions are changing rapidly. This research, as well as other projects which I cited in the theoretical framework, show that more and more people choose new paths to learn what they feel they should learn, and don't always include a formal education in their selection. On the other hand, the offerings in the popular cultural domain have increased dramatically, and the channels through which they can be accessed are now literally everywhere, all the time. That is a huge change from, let's say, the image I sketched of the Hermann Hesse character in rural Germany 150 years ago.

Educational systems simply don't seem to be able to compete with the popular culture world when it comes to getting and keeping the attention of young people. But that doesn't explain why there is a gap between the pop culture world, and the educational world, when it comes to choosing identifiers or representation of educational aspects in social networking. My view is, based on the research I did, that emotions or feelings play a much larger part in causing the disconnect than many of us think. As I explained earlier in this work, all expressive identifiers carry heavy evaluative loads, mostly centered around desirability. This means that anything that the young men in the study identify with, and express, comes with very positive or very negative emotions. They love something, or hate something, but rarely in between. Education seems to sit in the gray area in between for many of them, and without emotional attachment things simply don't make it into the identification pool. It might be a good idea to research better how education systems specifically can learn to address emotional aspects as seriously as they do rational ones, precisely by looking at how this happens in interaction with popular culture. I'd like to do more research on this, but if it works this way, then this could be a significant notion to pay attention to for educational systems, if they are interested in positioning themselves better and involving students more intensively.

## **Who will win the clash of the discourses?**

Which brings us to the question of how this gap between educational systems on the one side, and networked popular culture domains on the other, develops from here? Traditionally, the discourse around education and educational systems has been one that has emphasized its own importance in relation to the success and survival of the individual, and our societies as a whole. That inherent (self-) importance is still visible everywhere: in our laws, our tax systems, political rhetoric, education budgets, and so on. But somehow, this discourse, and its presumed importance are suspiciously absent from the participants' conversations and expressions. Does this signal a battle between the two? A struggle for attention, for money, for importance?

Contrary to the institutionalized importance of institutionalized education, popular culture still enjoys a reputation of being bad for you, for being morally questionable, and being pointless. That reputation is also visible everywhere: schools try to ban it, politicians regulate it, and parents childproof it. But somehow this discourse, and its presumed uselessness, occupies the minds, bedrooms and Macbooks of this study's participants most of the time. And despite its bad reputation and the lack of respect it might get from some (especially from educators, I would argue) it is absolutely central and crucial to the one aspect of our societies that runs all others: our consumer-based economies.

However, the attitudes towards education seem to become less naive, and more cynical. Interviewees will say education is important when asked, as it's still the socially desirable answer for an 'educated' middle class person. But those polite statements don't seem to match the amount of time and energy they spend talking about and engaging with popular culture. The guys in my study have caught on to the notion that much official discourse is political, and therefore self-serving. Education, just like anything else is only 'important' when a politician can score points with it, or when a diploma gets you a job you want. It isn't actually important because of itself and by itself, some seem to think. Popular culture, on the other hand, makes you feel good

immediately. You can watch it, eat it, wear it, feel it, choose it, talk about it, change it, make it, and distinguish yourself with it.

So how will the clash between these discourses play out? Will educational systems learn from the success of popular culture, or not? Or will the popular domains transform the ways in which people learn, communicate, and entertain themselves even further, and make traditional educational systems less relevant?

### **Which games can be played in the arena?**

In the shorter term, and to me as a researcher right now, the more pressing and more interesting question is not so much what educational systems end up looking like 20 years from now, but how we can design better research methodologies and projects to find out how and why people design new learning trajectories and biographies using popular culture and social networking. This study was part of that effort, as an initial exploration of possible angles, tools, theories and methods, with the hope that we would learn more about what works better, and what does not.

One notion that I have mentioned several times so far, is that of the *arena*. It evolved from my progressive understanding that there is no single explanation, understanding or position to be had or held in the overwhelmingly rich, volatile meaning-markets of socially networked popular cultural *spaces*.

*Spaces*, that are presumably filled with identifiers, among, between and around which people can position themselves for pleasure, for friendship, for money, for status, for distance, for style, for contrast, and so on. The possibilities are endless, but the games in the arena are influenced by a whole range of powers: legal, physical, economical, spatial, cultural, sexual, technological, historical, and so on. To make these forces, and their restrictions and opportunities in relation to the positioning of research participants more understandable from an academic perspective, I propose to introduce a number of axes along which players can move, can position themselves, inside the imagined

arena. These axes are admittedly theoretical and two-dimensional in nature, but I propose to imagine a 3D-arena in which these can be lifted, twirled, spun, bend, connected and dissected without limit of time or space. I want to emphasize that this is an academic exercise for the benefit of research, and that it might bear little resemblance or proven connection to what many people may think of as the 'real world.' But what it can do, is show patterns, similarities and differences between positions that people hold on different axes, and the kinds of identifiers they select. And between the positions they hold, and their personal socio-economic backgrounds, or educational histories, or geographical locations, and so forth. And from there, we might start to discuss which types of content appeal to whom, when, why, and what we can learn from that information to possibly improve the quality and appeal of more formal education, if we decide that's desirable.

Here is a list of possible axes that are suggested in the data, where the left and the right column are 'opposites' with an imaginary sliding scale in between. These are by no means the only possible axes, but they are examples of the ones that came up in the research. These represent the significant kinds of variation among the young men I followed in the study, and they could plausibly be generalized to others. Participants in the study could be positioned somewhere on each relevant sliding scale.

lots of identifiers	<.....>	few identifiers
likes pop cult	<.....>	dislikes/disidentifies/rejects
engaged with self (individual)	<.....>	engaged with others (social)
beliefs in private vs. public	<.....>	private/public = same domain
certain about life direction	<.....>	uncertain about life/career
likes similarity with surroundings	<.....>	likes to distinguish/be different
conformity with edu/career paths	<.....>	nonconformity/rejection
positive about education	<.....>	negative about education
photos of self on facebook	<.....>	postings about other(s)
emotional expressions high	<.....>	emotional expressions low



One additional complication, or a further enrichment of this exercise, lies in the realization that there are sometimes perceived discrepancies between what an interviewee will say on any given topic, and the behavior they might actually engage in. I have experienced several of such moment throughout the data collection stage. My solution for this, in relation to an axial mapping of the data, would be to mark both the spot on each scale that reflects what was said, and the spot that reflects what behavior actually was displayed.

Another feature of this kind of mapping would be the possible patterns that show up between participants who are socially networked with each other, and those who aren't. Similar expressions and behaviors can tell us which artifacts, attitudes and behaviors particular groups share, and which not, so giving us information on what materials are chosen by subgroups or subcultures to create communities around. In online social networking, not only the popular culture material you express yourself though and with counts, but in a sense also your fellow Facebookers, friends and fans, are part of your image, your brand, as others see you online always in context of others. Cool friends, make you cooler, and uncool ones don't.

In a future project, I hope to design the software for this kind of axial mapping tool.

### **What about the researcher?**

There is no denying that in ethnographic research the role of the researcher is significant. When you sit in a room with another person, also when you're not a researcher, your presence has an effect on the other person's speech, body language, feelings, position, and so on. But when you are a researcher, and the other person knows it, the effect can be even stronger as subjects can become conscious of the fact that they are being observed, especially when a recording device is in the room. During my first few interviews, where I asked more specific questions in a more structured format, this certainly happened, and I collected mostly polite, rational, socially desirable

answers while it seemed that the interviewees tried to keep their emotional communication to a minimum.

So I changed my game, or more accurately, I dropped the game, as I was not after socially desirable answers. I moved from going from a more official invitation and introduction to the project, and a semi-structured interview with a range of established questions, to a more casual befriending of potential candidates, without telling them anything about the research project. Only after a few meetings, or a number of online conversations, when some familiarity and trust had been established and I had a feeling the person would be a suitable candidate, did I tell them about my interests. And depending on the reaction, I asked them if I could record the interviews, and if they were interested in hanging out with me occasionally over the period of a year or longer. That worked much better, probably as the level of friendship that had been achieved allowed the candidates to show me things, and tell me things, that they would probably not have revealed to someone they knew less well, researcher or not. The fact that I shared their interest in popular culture, gay popular culture, and the fact that I was gay too, helped tremendously.

Becoming 'friends', Facebook-wise or otherwise, with participants in your own study obviously can deliver higher quality, in-depth research data, but it can simultaneously increase the impact you have, or the friendship has, on the nature of the data. Data is never elicited by one entity from another, but always produced or created in interaction between all the agents in the room, their environment, histories, and so on. I am not sure the effects of a closer relationship with participants can ever be neutralized for the sake of more 'objective' data or analysis, but I was certainly aware of my own presence. In the interviews, or in the casual conversations and recording sessions, I have mostly let the participant raise issues, pick items, or decide what happens next, in an effort to reduce the chance that I was forcing my ideas and topics too much. This worked well, and had the added effect that participants became more comfortable with me around, as they could do and say what they wanted, and be 'themselves' and be comfortable.

I am raising this issue, because it is becoming even more important to pay attention to the role of the researcher in relation to the participants, in a world where we are all networked 24 hours a day. So on top of becoming friends with the subjects in an ethnographic research project, you now also become socially networked, online, through various technologies. This means you learn a lot more about your newly befriended friends than they tell you in interviews, and they do also about you, as they can see your expressive identifiers online continuously. You can also tell who their friends are, and vice versa, and this makes it increasingly difficult or even impossible to keep participants anonymous to your wider networks, and to each other. It happened in my own project that participants found each other online via my Facebook page, and starting having discussions, with or without knowing that they were both participating in the same research project, while positioning me as a third party observing the communication between them. And then, of course, there is the question of whether or not these spontaneously erupting conversations are or should be part of the data, or not?

So the newly networked world also poses new challenges to methodologies and to ethics, and we need to think about which envelopes we want to push and which boundaries we think we can cross, and which not. In my case, I have been open with all of them on what I might include, and what not, and when I was collecting data, and when it was done, and they appreciated that very much. I have also, to provide participants with a feeling and a confirmation of closure, sent them the biographies and asked for factual corrections and comments, and published these comments in the main three biographical chapters.

Another aspect of becoming friends is that my role as a researcher and friend started to include giving and advice and counseling on several levels. More and more frequently did I start to get Facebook messages or Skype calls when someone had broken up with a boyfriend, someone needed career counseling, or someone had family or health problems. I appreciated the trust they displayed, and was glad to help if I could, but it

did strengthen the belief I discussed above even further, that we need to realize that the traditional notion of a more disconnected, objective researcher is obsolete and that the researcher now is as much part of the data-producing community as the participants are.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The interesting apparent paradox that we seem to be confronted with is the simultaneous diversification, fragmentation and individualization of life trajectories, alongside the unification of popular culture media marketing and communication technologies. The educational infrastructure does not seem to be able to compete, resist or engage very well with either of these forces. Officially, the educational system is committed to accommodating and promoting cultural diversity, but the question is whether the 'cultures' that the system has been orienting itself around are still relevant in the same form. Traditional cultural organization might be giving way to new, more individually focused connections between people, organized around commercially driven popular culture capital. These myriads of connections may of course reveal patterns, for example through axial mapping as I've proposed above, and reveal new 'cultures' or groups that connect by sharing identifiers, but possibly less on traditional notions such as age, race, gender, sexual orientation, language or class. Or, both 'types' of cultural organization may be relevant, either in different places, for different people, at different times, or a combination of all of the above.

I think that if our educational systems want to make an effort to increase their relevance and effectiveness again in assisting young people to develop fulfilling lives, these systems would benefit from more extensive research into what interests young people emotionally and intellectually, how interests are selected for identification and expression, and finally how those identifications become part of their ever-changing identities. That would mean a much more individual approach to learning. And focusing on individuals is something that large, bureaucratic systems are usually not very good at.

# Bibliography.

- Alvermann, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World*. New York : Peter Lang.
- Alvermann, D., Moon, J. S., & Hagood, M. C. (1999). *Popular Culture in the Classroom: Teaching and Researching Critical Media Literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association and National Reading Conference.
- Baldry, A. (Ed.), (2000), *Multimodality and Multimediality in the Distance Learning Age*, Campobasso: Palladino.
- Baldry, A. & Thibault, P. (2005), *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis: A Multimedia Toolkit and Coursebook*, London: Equinox Publishing.
- Baldry, A. (in press) Transmedia Traversals: Marketing Meaning and Identity. In Baldry, Anthony & Montagna, Elena (Eds.) *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Multimodality: Theory and Practice*. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Multimodality. Campobasso: Palladino.
- Bakhtin, M.M., (1981) *Discourse in the Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Holquist, M., editor), Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Bednarek, M., (2006), *Evaluation in Media Discourse*, New York: Continuum.
- Bogart, L. (1994). *Commercial Culture: The Media System and the Public Interest*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- du Bois-Reymond, M., & Chisholm, L. (Eds.). (in press). *Modernizing Youth Transitions in Europe*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- du Bois-Reymond, M., & Moerch, S. (2006). *Learning in times of modernization*. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 113, 23-35. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- du Bois-Reymond, M., Sünker, H., & Krüger, H. H. (Eds.). (2001). *Childhood in Europe. Approaches, Trends, Findings*. New York: Peter Lang.
- du Bois-Reymond, M., & Walther, A. (1999). Learning between want and must: contradictions of the learning society. In A. Walther & B. Stauber (Eds.), *Lifelong learning in Europe: Differences and divisions*. Volume 2. Strategies of social integration and individual learning biographies. Tübingen: Neuling Verlag.
- Burke, L., Crowley, T & Girvin, A., (Eds), (2000), *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Burston, P. & Richardson, C., (1995), *A Queer Romance 'Lesbians, gay men and popular culture'*, London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997) *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Caldas-Coulthard, C. & Iedema, R. (Eds.) (2008) *Identity Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contestations of Identification*. London: Macmillan/Palgrave.
- Cameron, D., (2001), *Working With Spoken Discourse*, London : Sage.
- Campbell-Kibler, K, Podesva, R.J., Roberts, S.J. & Wong, A., (Eds), (2002), *Language and Sexuality*, Stanford, California, CSLI Publications.
- Carspecken, P.F., (1996), *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research*, New York: Routledge.
- Castells, M., (1996), *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Castells, M., (1997), *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Castells, M., (1998), *The End of the Millennium*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cobley, P., (Ed), (1996), *The Communication Theory Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Collier, M. (2001). Approaches to analysis in visual anthropology. In T. van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (pp. 35 -60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Corner, J., (1999), *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), (1998), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.
- Diepstraten, I. (2006). *De Nieuwe Leerder: Trendsettende Leerbiografieën in een Kennissamenleving*. Amsterdam: F&N Boekservice.
- Diepstraten, I., du Bois-Reymond, M., & Vinken, H. (2006). *Trendsetting learning biographies: Concepts of navigating through late modern life*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(2), 175-193.
- During, S., (Ed), (1993), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Erickson, F. (2006). Definition and Analysis of Data from Videotape: Some Research Procedures and their Rationales. In J. Green, G. Camilli & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. Mahwah, NJ: LEA.
- European Commission (1995), *Teaching and learning: towards the learning society*. White paper. European Commission, Brussels.
- European Commission (2000), *A memorandum on lifelong learning*, European Commission, Brussels.
- Evans, J. & Hall, S. (Eds), (1999), *Visual Culture: The Reader*, London: Sage.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, United Kingdom: Longman Group.
- Gans, H.J., (1999), *Popular Culture & High Culture*, New York: Basic Books.
- Gee, J.P., (1999), *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, London: Routledge.
- Gee, J.P. (2001), Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. In W. Secada (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 25, pp. 99-125). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Gee, J.P. (2003) *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goldman-Segall, R., Crosby, M., Swan, K., & Shea, P. (2004). Qualitative and Quisitive Research Methods for Describing Online Learning. In R. Starr Hiltz & R. Goldman-Segall (Eds.), *Learning together online: Research on Asynchronous Learning Networks* (pp. 103 - 121). Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

- Goldman-Segall, R. (2004). *Video perspectivity meets wild and crazy teens: A design ethnography*. Cambridge Journal of Education, 2(3-4), 147-168.
- Goldman, R., Pea, R., Barron, B. & Derry, S.J. (Eds). (2007), *Video Research in the Learning Sciences*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Goldman, R., (1998), *Points of Viewing Children's Thinking*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Goodfellow, R. & Lamy, M., (2009), *Learning Cultures in Online Education*, London: Continuum Books.
- Greenberg, D.F., (1988), *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. & Treichler, P., (Eds), (1992), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge.
- Halliday, M.A.K., (1985) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, London, Arnold.
- Halperin, D. (2002) *How to do the history of homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Halperin, D. (2012) *How to be gay*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Helden, van, C. (2002), *Critical Discourse Studies of Youth Lifestyle Media: Sexuality and Polyvalent Meaning*, University of Amsterdam, unpublished masters thesis online at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~cvanhel/projectp/index.html>
- Helden, van, C. & Moje, E. (2005). Doing popular culture: Troubling discourses about adolescence. In J. Vadeboncoeur & L. Stevens (Eds.), *Re/Constructing 'the adolescent'*: Sign, symbol and body. New York: Peter Lang.
- Helden, van, C. & Lemke, J. (2009). New Learning Cultures: Identities, Media and Networks. In M.N. Lamy & R. Goodfellow (Eds.), *Learning Cultures in Online Education*. London: Continuum.
- Ito, Mizuko. 2006. "Engineering Play: Children's Software and the Cultural Politics of Edutainment." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 27(2):139-60.
- Ito, Mizuko. 2008. "Mobilizing the Imagination in Everyday Play: The Case of Japanese Media Mixes." Pp. 397-412 in *International Handbook of Children, Media, and Culture*, edited by S. Livingstone and K. Drotner. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jaworksi, A. & Coupland, N. (Eds). (1999), *The Discourse Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H., (2006), *Convergence Culture*, New York: NYU Press.
- Jewitt, C. & van Leeuwen, T., (Eds.), (2001), *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*, London: Sage.
- Katz, J.N., (1995), *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, New York: Penguin.
- Klein, N., (1999), *No Logo*, New York: Picador.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T., (1996), *Reading Images 'The Grammar of Visual Design'*, New York: Routledge.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T., (2001), *Multimodal Discourse*, London: Arnold.

- Kreutzer, D., (1999), Kauf Mich '*Manner in der Werbung*' (Buy Me – Men in Advertising), Berlin: Verlag fur Bauwesen.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2006). *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning*. New York/London: McGraw-Hill / Open University Press.
- Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1992). *Situated learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Leander, K.M., Philips, N.C. & Headrick Taylor, K. (2010), The Changing Social Spaces of Learning: Mapping New Mobilities, *Review of Research in Education 2010*; 34; 329; Sage.
- Leander, K. (2003). Writing travelers' tales on new literacyscapes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(3), 392-397.
- Leander, K., & McKim, K. K. (2003). Tracing the everyday 'sitings' of adolescents on the internet: a strategic adaptation of ethnography across online and offline spaces. *Education, Communication & Information*, 3(2).
- Leeuwen, van, T., (1999), *Speech Music Sound*, London: Macmillan Press.
- Lemke, J.L., (1995), *Textual Politics*, London: Taylor & Francis.
- Lemke, J.L., "Interpersonal Meaning in Discourse: Value Orientations." In M. Davies and L. Ravelli, Eds. *Advances in Systemic Linguistics: Recent Theory and Practice*. [pp.82-104]. London: Pinter. 1992.
- Lemke, J. (1997a) "*Resources for Evaluative Meaning: Verbal semantics and Visual Semiotics in Political Cartoons and Editorials*", paper presented at the University of Vienna, Faculty of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics
- Lemke, J.L. (2005) "Critical Analysis across Media: Games, Franchises, and the New Cultural Order." In Labarta Postigo, M. (Ed.) *Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis*. Valencia: University of Valencia. (CDROM edition).
- Lemke, J., (2007), "Video Epistemology In-and-Outside the Box: Traversing Attentional Spaces." In Goldman, R., Pea, R., Barron, B. & Derry, S.J. (Eds.), *Video Research in the Learning Sciences*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. pp. 39-52. 2007.
- Lemke, J.L., "Analysing Verbal Data: Principles, Methods, and Problems" in K. Tobin & B. Fraser, (Eds). *International Handbook of Science Education*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers. pp. 1175-1189. 1998a.
- Lemke, J.L. "Resources for Attitudinal Meaning: Evaluative Orientations in Text Semantics." *Functions of Language* 5(1): 33-56, 1998b.
- Lemke, J. (in press) "Transmedia Traversals: Marketing Meaning and Identity." In Baldry, Anthony & Montagna, Elena, (Eds.) *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Multimodality: Theory and Practice*. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Multimodality. Campobasso: Palladino.
- Lesko, N. (2001). *Act your age! A cultural construction of adolescence*. New York: Routledge Falmer.



- Lewis, C., Enciso, P., & Moje, E. B. (Eds.) (2007). *Reframing Sociocultural research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lin, A.M.Y. (Ed.) (2008) *Problematizing Identity*. New York: Erlbaum Publishing 2008
- Martin, J.R. & White, P.R.R. (2005) *The Language of Evaluation: appraisal in English*. London: Palgrave.
- McGonigal, J., (2011) *Reality is Broken*, Jonathan Cape, London
- Mirzoeff, N., (Ed), (1998), *The Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Moje, E. B. (2002a). Re-framing adolescent literacy research for new times: Studying youth as a resource. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 41 (3), 211- 228.
- Moje, E.B. (2002b). But where are the youth: Integrating youth culture into literacy theory. *Educational Theory*, 52, 97-120
- Moje, E.B. (2007) *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: identity, agency, and power*. Cynthia Lewis, Patricia Enciso, Elizabeth B. Moje (Eds). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Moje, E.B. (2004) Powerful spaces: Tracing the out-of-school literacy spaces of Latino/a youth. In K. Leander & M. Sheehy (Eds.), *Spatializing literacy research and practice* (pp. 15-38). New York: Peter Lang.
- Moje, E. B. (2008). The Complex World of Adolescent Literacy: Myths, Motivations, and Mysteries. *Harvard Educational Review*, Spring 2008, 107-154.
- Moje, E.B. (2008) Youth Cultures, Literacies, and Identities in and out of school. In: *Research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts*, 2008, Taylor Francis, New York (eds. Flood, J., Brice Heath, S., Lapp, D.)
- Morton, D., (1996), *The Material Queer*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Norris, S., (2004), *Analyzing Multimodal Interaction*, New York: Routledge.
- Silverstone, R., (1999), *Why Study the Media?*, London: Sage.
- Skelton, S. & Valentine, G., (Eds), (1998), *Cool Places ' Geographies of Youth Cultures'*, London: Routledge.
- Storey, J., (1996), *Cultural Studies & The Study of Popular Culture*, Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press.
- Strinati, D., (1995), *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Sutherland, L. M, Botzakis, S., Moje, E. B., Alvermann, D. E. (2007) Drawing on Youth Cultures in Content Learning and Literacy. In Lapp, D., Flood, J., Farnan, N. (Eds.), *Content Area Reading and Learning Intructional Strategies 3rd Edition*. (pp.133-156). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Vadeboncoeur, J.A. & Patel Stevens, L. (Eds), (2005), *Re/Constructing 'the Adolescent'*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Walther, Andreas, du Bois-Reymond, Manuela, Biggart, Andy (Eds) (2006): *Participation in Transition. Motivation of Young Adults in Europe for Learning and Working*. Frankfurt a.M. etc: Peter Lang. Europaischer Verlag in der Wissenschaften.
- Waugh, T., (1983), *Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wodak R. & Meyer, M., (2001), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, London : Sage.