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Hiding in Hedonism: Exploring Alternative Nightlife in the  
Photography of Brassäi and Wolfgang Tillmans

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## **Abstract (ENG)**

This thesis explores nightlife as a crucial element of social life and culture in the city. As modern night-time economies have emerged, nightlife has become increasingly regulated, commodified, and appropriated by 'mainstream' scenes and neoliberal forces. These processes have negatively affected 'alternative' and in particular queer nightlife spaces. Academic literature has often overlooked these lived experiences that define such areas, focusing on economic explanations instead. This research aims to improve such an understanding by examining the nightlife photography by Brassai in 1930s Paris and Wolfgang Tillmans in 1990s and 2000s Berlin. The project conducts a discourse analysis, based on two primary photographs, one by each artist, and other related sources. As such, the project seeks to ground theories on the nightlife experiences of marginalized groups, in particular the LGBTQ+ community, in two historical contexts. This investigation revealed that dominant heteronormative discourses negatively label and affect marginalized people and their nightlife scenes. Furthermore, alternative nightlife spaces exist as 'invisible' sites of resistance against these dominant discourses. This resistance expresses itself in discourses of embodied hedonism, renegotiated social rules, and subcultural exclusivity. These findings restated the exceptional importance nightlife has for stigmatized groups. This conclusion suggests future challenges on how to protect and empower marginal nightlife spaces in an increasingly mainstream landscape.

**Keywords:** nightlife; visibility; LGBTQ+; alternative; Brassai; Wolfgang Tillmans

## **Abstract (DEU)**

Diese Arbeit untersucht das Nachtleben als ein entscheidendes Element des sozialen Lebens und der Kultur in der Stadt. Mit dem Aufkommen der modernen Nachtökonomien wurde das Nachtleben zunehmend reguliert, kommerzialisiert und von "Mainstream"-Szenen und neoliberalen Kräften vereinnahmt. Diese Prozesse haben sich negativ auf "alternative" und insbesondere auf queere Nachlebensräume ausgewirkt. Die akademische Literatur hat diese gelebten Erfahrungen, die solche Bereiche definieren, oft übersehen und sich stattdessen auf ökonomische Erklärungen konzentriert. Die vorliegende Untersuchung zielt darauf ab, ein solches Verständnis zu verbessern, indem sie die Nachtleben-Fotografie von Brassai im Paris der 1930er Jahre und Wolfgang Tillmans in den 1990er und 2000er Jahren in Berlin untersucht. Das Projekt führt eine Diskursanalyse durch, die auf zwei Primärfotografien, jeweils eine von jedem Künstler, und anderen verwandten Quellen basiert. Auf diese Weise versucht das Projekt, Theorien über die Erfahrungen von marginalisierten Gruppen, insbesondere der LGBTQ+-Gemeinschaft, im Nachtleben in zwei historischen Kontexten zu begründen. Diese Untersuchung ergab, dass dominante heteronormative Diskurse marginalisierte Menschen und ihre Nachlebensszenen negativ etikettieren und beeinflussen. Darüber hinaus existieren alternative Räume des Nachtlebens als "unsichtbare" Orte des Widerstands gegen diese dominanten Diskurse. Dieser Widerstand drückt sich in Diskursen eines verkörperten Hedonismus, neu verhandelter sozialer Regeln und subkultureller Exklusivität aus. Diese Befunde belegen erneut die außerordentliche Bedeutung, die das Nachtleben für stigmatisierte Gruppen hat. Diese Schlussfolgerung legt künftige Herausforderungen für den Schutz und die Stärkung marginaler Räume des Nachtlebens in einer zunehmend Mainstream-Landschaft nahe.

**Stichworte:** Nachtleben; Sichtbarkeit; LGBTQ+; alternativ; Brassai; Wolfgang Tillmans

## **Hiding in Hedonism**

Exploring Alternative Nightlife in the Photography of Brassai  
and Wolfgang Tillmans



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## Abstract

This thesis explores nightlife as a crucial element of social life and culture in the city. As modern night-time economies have emerged, nightlife has become increasingly regulated, commodified, and appropriated by 'mainstream' scenes and neoliberal forces. These processes have negatively affected 'alternative' and in particular queer nightlife spaces. Academic literature has often overlooked these lived experiences that define such areas, focusing on economic explanations instead. This research aims to improve such an understanding by examining the nightlife photography by Brassai in 1930s Paris and Wolfgang Tillmans in 1990s and 2000s Berlin. The project conducts a discourse analysis, based on two primary photographs, one by each artist, and other related sources. As such, the project seeks to ground theories on the nightlife experiences of marginalized groups, in particular the LGBTQ+ community, in two historical contexts. This investigation revealed that dominant heteronormative discourses negatively label and affect marginalized people and their nightlife scenes. Furthermore, alternative nightlife spaces exist as 'invisible' sites of resistance against these dominant discourses. This resistance expresses itself in discourses of embodied hedonism, renegotiated social rules, and subcultural exclusivity. These findings restated the exceptional importance nightlife has for stigmatized groups. This conclusion suggests future challenges on how to protect and empower marginal nightlife spaces in an increasingly mainstream landscape.

**Keywords:** nightlife; visibility; LGBTQ+; alternative; Brassai; Wolfgang Tillmans

## Introduction

Oh, yeah, any functioning society has got to have its doctors, its teachers,  
and its nightlife photographers. (Leila Sales)

In 1938, Johan Huizinga introduced the world to the term 'homo ludens'. This concept proposes that humans, by their very nature, like to play. To this day, it remains debatable why, but cultures around the world continue to show a need for playfulness. Play is an activity we tend to associate strongly with childhood. Nonetheless, Huizinga argued that adults require it just as much. However, adult life does not offer as much opportunity for play: we live busy lives in busy cities, and this demands that we spend most of our waking hours fulfilling everyday responsibilities. So how do adults satisfy their need for play? One answer is as follows: we look past our daytime drudgeries and turn to the night instead.

This thesis situates itself in the context of urban nightlife. It explores the different ways in which the urban night has evolved as a social phenomenon throughout modernity, and how perspectives of philosophy, history, geography, sociology, economics, and cultural studies have conceptualized this. It will look at how the urban landscapes have produced elaborate night-time economies and how these have influenced the social and cultural experience of nightlife. In particular, it will approach nightlife as a site of social marginalization.

The research zooms in on these topics by questioning how, especially for marginalized groups, nightlife constitutes a crucial element of social life in the city. As will become apparent, the LGBTQ+ community, which finds important meeting sites in 'alternative' nightlife spaces, has for many decades faced challenges in adjusting to an increasingly regulated, commodified, and 'mainstreamed' nightlife landscape. While scholars of urban studies have elaborately described these processes from the viewpoint of urban economic geography, we cannot fully understand how they affect alternative nightlife spaces without studying the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

This thesis sets out to contribute to such an understanding by situating the topic in two particular historical and spatial contexts. It will analyze the nightlife captured in the work of two photographers: Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans. In the 1920s and 1930s, Brassai acquired fame with his photography of Paris at night, creating an unprecedented reportage of both public and private sceneries that defined nocturnal life in the French capital. Wolfgang Tillmans took iconic photographs of queer nightlife scenes in Berlin and other global cities during the 1990s and early 2000s. The method will be discourse analysis, focusing on two images in particular—*Inside Le Monocle* by Brassai (1932) and *Outside Snax Club* by Tillmans (2001)—which depict sceneries at two iconic queer nightlife venues of 1930s Paris and 1990s-2000s Berlin. A close visual reading of these two photographs will accompany a more extensive review of related sources in order to place the discourse analysis in a broader context.

The investigation of Brassai and Tillmans' work will add another focus to this research in the sense that it establishes a connection between nightlife and the theme of *visibility*. This question of visibility is relevant because both artists pictured physically confined spaces that—with Brassai and Tillmans' photographs being an exception—allowed marginalized people to engage in nightlife without being recorded or seen by the outside world. Moreover, considering their presence in these settings as photographers will lead to a discussion on how visual cultures and digital technologies increasingly shape nightlife.

The central objective will be to describe the discourses that shape the nightlife experiences of marginalized groups, in particular LGBTQ+ people, and to show how this is represented in the photographs by Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans that depict alternative nightlife spaces.

In terms of structure, the first chapter will be a literature review: it first delineates the night-time as an urban phenomenon; then it describes how modern nightlife has changed throughout the emergence of night-time economies and digital technologies; and lastly, it discusses how these processes connect to social marginalization. The end of the first chapter presents the problem statement and research questions. The second chapter will draw a bridge from the literature to the methodology. It gives a reflective account of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, emphasizing how the epistemological nature of photography, as described by Sontag, ties in with urban research. Chapter three covers the methodology. Here, an overview will be provided of the different practical considerations surrounding the methods, drawing mainly from Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*. Subsequently, the fourth chapter includes the results as well as the discussion. Drawing from a visual analysis of Brassai and Tillmans' photography and a diverse selection of sources surrounding their work, this chapter lists some key discursive findings. It also discusses how these findings start to respond to the research questions. Finally, the last chapter draws conclusions to the findings and proposes some further questions surrounding experiences of marginalized people in alternative nightlife spaces.

# 1. Literature Review

## 1.1 The urban night: theoretical context

This literature review starts with an introduction to the general theme of the urban night. Before zooming into the project's sub-topics, it will explain why the broader topic of nightlife in the city is a context worth studying in the first place. More specifically, it will give some initial answers to the following question: why can nightlife be seen as a unique element of social life in the city?

First, some key terms require a working definition. First and foremost, the terms 'night-time' and 'nightlife' repeatedly come up throughout this entire project. While no fixed definition exists for either of these two terms, what clarifies them is the idea that our 24-hour daily cycle represents a two-sided coin with one side relating to the daytime and its associations with daylight, being awake, high levels of human activity, noise and busyness; while the other represents opposite notions such as darkness, sleep, quietness and rest or inactivity. 'Night-time', then, encompasses the range of hours hosting these latter conditions. During these hours, humans of cultures all around the globe tend to seek out specifically organized spaces, events, activities, gatherings and lifestyles—typically full of entertainment and social vibration—which together comprise what I decide to label as 'nightlife'.

The following paragraphs will list some important observations made by academic literature regarding 'the urban night'. These observations explore the topic as follows: the urban night as an under-researched topic; the urban night as an overly-generalized concept; the urban night as a host of distinctive social activities and behaviors; and finally, the urban night as a context for changes in organizations, functions and infrastructures of the city's built environment.

First, literature has shown that—especially considering its long history—the urban night has received too little attention within urban studies and related fields. Van Liempt et al. confirm this: "[night-time] has been consistently neglected in the field of urban studies" (1). The geographic focus of this research area has mostly limited itself to the Global North, especially the United Kingdom and Australia (R. Shaw 87). Strengthening urban geographies' focus on the night-time, however, could yield valuable results. Van Liempt et al. argue that even though the daytime provides "the dominant discourse focusing on urban daily activities and geographies of everyday life" (1), studying how "nocturnal cities are produced, used, experienced and regulated" can produce crucial new knowledge (1-2).

Second, various authors from different academic fields (such as philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, economics, and urban studies) have argued that modern thought has generalized, simplified, and dichotomized the night-time as an urban experience. Carl E. Schorske (49) draws on Nietzsche's argument that many great modern thinkers have framed the evolution of cities as a struggle between

'good' and 'evil'. Schorske adds that within this distinction, the 'good' mostly refers to virtuous ideals of the Enlightenment, whereas the 'evil' manifests itself in the harsh urban conditions following industrialization processes (37). Chatterton and Hollands, building on Lovatt's work, state that the night-time attracts a great deal of "historical suspicion . . . as a site of excess, vice and crime" (106). In short, contemporary discussions in urban studies, as Van Liempt et al. say, frequently generate "simplistic dualisms of night versus day" (5).

Third, the urban night hosts distinctive activities and lifestyles that occur in informal settings of leisure and entertainment, found mostly in private venues (bars, restaurants, clubs) but also in public or parochial spaces. In nightlife, people tend to engage in activities such as dancing, playing and listening to music, conversing and acts of intimacy or sexuality. These are precisely the type of activities that the 'entertainment economy'—which depends strongly on the night-time—caters towards (Hannigan). Nightlife goes hand in hand with loosened "forms of sociality and conviviality . . . that are not normally encountered during daylight hours" (Van Liempt et al. 2). In nightlife, social mindsets or behavior patterns tend to be more expressive, permissive, informal and influenced by intoxicating substances. As a consequence, visitors of the night often experience their activities at a heightened intensity (Williams 518). This loosening also has a positive consequence in the sense that the night-time offers relaxation, permissiveness and relief from the city's everyday anonymity and tension of flows (Melbin, *Colonizing the World After Dark* 16).

In other words, nightlife stimulates elevating forces that help people experiment with expressions of their identity. David Grazian writes that these lively performances result in a "nocturnal self" (63). In his article *Nightlife as Form*, Madison Moore labels nightlife as "a space of exhibition", "a primary incubator and source of popular culture", and "one of the most crucial sites for the production of selves" (51). These nightly selves stand in contrast to our "domestic, private selves" (53). It is only when we break "away from the spotlight" and "the grind of daily life" that we can "pursue hidden desires and fantasies, all while cloaked in the deep end of anonymity" (53). For most people, escaping "the drudgeries of the day" and "the routines that define humanity in specific duties, obligations, and tasks" is merely an occasional relief (Palmer 13). However, for "cultural fugitives" (Moore 55) who are actively oppressed, disadvantaged or stigmatized by everyday society—"the deviant, the dissident, the different" (Palmer 13)—nightlife is more than just a relief. It is a necessity; an "adopted home" (55).

Fourth and last, nightlife signals changes in the built urban environment. When daytime facilities shut their doors, nocturnal places of commerce start opening up. Using electric lighting, specific spaces in the city make their presence felt towards nightly dwellers—people whose behaviors appearances also tend to change in contrast to the language, clothes, and postures of their daytime performances. Nightlife in the city also depends on changed organizations in economic and social infrastructures. For example, transport flows follow adjusted schedules and services and display

different traffic densities. Although widespread surveillance by the masses declines (Melbin, "Night as Frontier", 9), some measures of regulation, security and policing—e.g. security guards and surveillance cameras—become particularly active at night. This combination between liberating pastimes and adjusted infrastructural measures results in "calculated hedonism" and a "controlled loss of control" (Griffin et al. 461).

Buchakjian aptly brings together these last two elements of nightlife—one being the distinctive activities and behaviors of the night and the other being subsequent changes in the built environment—in his review of nightlife development in Beirut. He claims that both elements are liminal: "[n]ightlife entertainment . . . brings together liminal time (the time between work and rest) with liminal spaces" (258). We encounter a curious paradox here: while nightlife activities and their spirit of leisure, excess, and even danger form an antithesis against the rationality of modernity (Rojek 101-102), the ritualization of these activities allows us to carefully plan and design peculiar urban infrastructures (from ambulance services to event marketing) around them (Buchakjian 259). This interpretation of nightlife as a time of liminality, as "'free zones' and areas of 'choice'" (258), starts to point towards the connection between the night-time and its importance for minority groups living on the margins of the city, which I will discuss in more detail in the fourth section of this literature review. For LGBTQ+ communities, in particular, an alternative nightlife provides safe and meaningful spaces of cohesion and self-expression.

## **1.2 Transformations of the urban night in the age of modernity**

It is clear by now that the night-time makes up a peculiar feature of urban life. But how has nightlife in the city changed in modern times? To answer this shortly: forces such as commercialization and regulation have increasingly capitalized on, appropriated, and, ultimately, 'colonized' the night-time. In the next paragraphs, we will see how this has also brought about a sense of heterogenization of nightlife cultures.

The previous section mentioned that modern understanding of the day- and night-time leans on dualities of 'good' versus 'evil'. Building on this dialectic, various authors have described a modern tendency to move all sorts of societal processes into the night. Gwiazdzinski calls this the "colonization of the night", adding that, "[m]ore and more, human activities are unfolding during the night, constructing a new domain of work and leisure" (1). Van Liempt et al., quoting Nasaw, echo this idea: alongside countless technological developments, starting with for example street lighting, a "new landscape of modernity has been produced whereby the city is transformed 'from a dark and treacherous netherworld into a glittering multi-coloured wonderland'" (5).

Murray Melbin explains that since early-modern times, humans have treated the night as a temporal frontier much like they have approached unknown geographic areas as a physical frontier. "While the settlement of some of the world's land areas was coming to an end, there began an increase in wakeful activity over more of the 24-hour day" ("Night as Frontier" 3). Multiple centuries of practical inventions have enabled humans to design more and more activities to specifically fit the night-time, such as military strategies, religious ceremonies, hospitality services, and traffic regulations. In modern times, this "rapid expansion in after-dark activity has been taking place mostly in urban areas" (6). While the expansion of physical and temporal frontiers has brought our cities a great deal of progress, opportunities and resources, nightly lifestyles and labor were, and still are, designated mostly to disadvantaged people who have marginal jobs and identities. As "ultimate control in 24-hour organizations remains with top management in the daytime", immigrants and minority groups are displaced into what Melbin even terms "a time ghetto" (20).

Academics have described these processes primarily in terms of the emergence and expansion of the night-time economy. A rich field of literature now exists around this concept and continues to explore cities' economic expansions into the "new sorts of spaces" found at night, covering disciplines such as criminology, geography, sociology, anthropology, history and epidemiology (R. Shaw 87). Many definitions of the 'night-time economy' have since emerged. However, Van Liempt et al. adequately spell it out as follows: "originating in the UK's post-industrial cities, strategies to (re)position the urban night in terms of economic opportunity and revitalise (parts of) city centres, which are underpinned by rationalities of urban competitiveness in a globalising economy, have steadily diffused" across the globe (3-4).

For a deeper understanding of the development of night-time economies, one might turn to the work of David Harvey and in particular his theory of 'flexible accumulation' ("From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism"). Flexible accumulation concerns the "rolling-back of the 'welfarist' state both fiscally and in terms of its powers of economic intervention and style of governance" (Chatterton and Hollands 106). While this does not imply total negligence of local states towards their cultural scenes, it does indicate a growing attitude towards cities' cultural economies as, ultimately, sites for capital accumulation. Harvey describes this phenomenon as "postmodern production" ("From space to place", 8). Collaborations of public boards and private enterprises develop leisure spaces not so much for the sake of intrinsic social and cultural values. Instead, they primarily aim to target tourists, middle- and upper-class citizens, and other companies using careful 'lifestyle branding' strategies, which results in "an ever-deepening commodity culture" (K. Shaw 338).

In other words, since the rise of neoliberalism and 'the entrepreneurial city', 'culture' itself and, by extension, 'cultural diversity' have become essential labels of global consumption. Through an intense commodification of creative spaces, cities increasingly tend to brand themselves as

'cosmopolitan'. Large global cities like Tokyo, London, and New York embody this 'cosmopolitan' character the most. However, as we have now been living in the era of 'entrepreneurial cities' for several decades, second-degree world cities have to work extra hard to keep up with their larger competitors. First-degree world cities already monopolize most economic functions such as controlling international trade and providing service centers. Therefore, second-degree world cities, or "wannabe world cities", as Dereka Rushbrook (188) dubs them, tend to focus more on their cultural economies and the way they can foster consumption opportunities. A key concern here is for cities to promote "cultures and spectacles in all their forms" (188), i.e. to capitalize on cultural spaces and events regardless of whether they stand at the mainstream center of the city's cultural landscape or on the alternative margin. As a result, cities have started to take unique advantage of "their stock of "ethnic spaces," appropriately bounded neighborhoods that present an "authentic" other or others in consumable, commodified forms" (Rushbrook 188). Furthermore, nightlife probably offers the most accessible and profitable entry into queer and ethnic spaces, as it often goes hand in hand with excessive consumption, and it is where 'otherness' expresses itself most freely.

Before moving on, I must provide a working definition for 'alternative' nightlife spaces. My understanding of this term is almost entirely synonymous with Kate Shaw's description of "creative independent subcultures". As the term already suggests, it concerns social scenes that focus on leisure and creativity—activities for which nightlife provides a compatible context. These scenes often start as *local* initiatives; in other words, their meeting spaces do not borrow their concepts from large international (corporate) hierarchies. Alternative nightlife spaces are *avant-garde* and diverse in their activities: they offer "hybrids of music, theatre, art, and new and old media" (K. Shaw 333) that diverge from popular, commercial tastes. In many ways, they have a marginal character. First, they reside in the city's spatial margins, as they find themselves in peripheral locations and have "little room to move" (K. Shaw 338). These scenes begin in the 'vacuum' spaces of the city where young entrepreneurs work with low property rates, incomes and participation costs (K. Shaw 334). "They tend to cluster in areas characterised by low rents and non-residential uses such as retail and industrial areas, but as third wave gentrification reaches into the dark pockets of many cities, cheap rental properties are becoming scarce" (K. Shaw 333). Second, they are economically marginal: they often depend on locally crowd-funded resources and volunteers; they "do not make much money and they do not cost much to set-up" (K. Shaw 333). Third and last, they are marginal in a social sense. Alternative nightlife spaces typically welcome all kinds of stigmatized identities and actively advocate for their rights. These people could be minorities in terms of, for example, gender, ethnicity, economic standing, and sexual orientation.

In the world of entertainment and tourism, there is something particularly alluring about queer and ethnic spaces. This explains why the bolstering of such spaces is so compatible with urban entrepreneurialism. When cities advertise neighborhoods and communities, generally shunned by

mainstream culture, as a valuable and vibrant part of the cityscape, they become "markers of tolerance and diversity", which enhances "the city's perceived quality of life" (Rushbrook 189). What's more, "urban tourists" (188), both local and from out of town, seek out queer space as a place to display their cultural capital and enjoy their "ability to negotiate different identities, to be at ease in multiple milieus, to maneuver in exoticized surroundings" (189).

The rise of the night-time economy and the marketization of the cultural sector go hand in hand with rapid, profit-driven urban development, often resulting in gentrification. Chatterton and Hollands argue that the night-time economy has grown out of joint efforts by local states and corporate finance to construct a 'new urbanism'. This kind of urbanism refers to "voracious efforts by civic boosters to create a new city' cultural brand' which, although stressing the cosmopolitan and culturally diverse nature of cities, is largely directed towards mobile, non-local and corporate capital, property developers and high-income urban-livers and professional workers" (97).

After a while, oppressed groups tend to get pushed away from these newly developing nightlife districts. This happens in several different ways: nightlife cityscapes become more and more dominated by wealthy venue owners; neighborhoods surrounding popular nightlife spaces will at some point almost inevitably attract white, middle-class populations in search of peace and quiet; affluent actors (such as city officials or influential nightlife organizations and business owners) impose norms and trends in the form of mainstream lifestyles and music genres, and nightlife venues (re)define their audiences with expensive door-entries or drinks and selective door policies (Van Liempt et al. 8-9). In short, while developments of the night-time economy might give central cityscapes and cultural initiatives a boost of attractiveness, this only happens for the benefit of a specific class of consumers, landowners, urban areas, and nightlife organizations.

Such efforts to boost urban regeneration have all kinds of contradictory social and cultural outcomes for nightlife in the city. For example, while many strategies, policies and corporate monopolies promote niche, alternative and diverse types of nightlife, the nightlife scenes that truly and integrally represent these values either adjust to the commercial establishment or struggle to survive (Gallan 556-557). Furthermore, the hospitality sector and all its surrounding industries tend to stimulate "excessive alcohol consumption", but this requires city magistrates to develop "elaborate methods for responding to and managing alcohol-related harm" (Carah 254). Hubbard et al. argue that while financial deregulation and liberalization benefit influential stakeholders in the nightly entertainment industry, these processes push city authorities to further delineate and regulate a societal context that is already "of liminal nature" ("Away from prying eyes" 12). This labeling practice, in turn, increases distinctions as to which audiences are (and which are not) deemed appropriate within night-time leisure spaces (Hubbard et al. 12).

These paradoxes show that, besides benefitting only powerful urban actors, efforts to develop strong night-time economies also fail to address the often unequal social and cultural dimensions of urban nightlife. Part of this problem has to do with the very theory of 'night-time economies'. This concept frames theoretical discussions in a way that obscures nightlife scenes that exist on the city margins. Robert Shaw argues that many prevailing networks of nightlife venues find their largest investments and audiences in city-centers. This means that these areas (and the bars, restaurants, and clubs present there) strongly define the geographic limit of much of the public and academic discussion surrounding cities' nightly leisure districts (89).

Furthermore, 'night-time economy' is an inherently discursive term with an undertone of optimism and hope for economic prosperity (89). Shaw concludes that these spatial and discursive inaccuracies dismiss larger patterns of spatial and social inequality: "[r]esearchers who continue to use the phrase night-time economy, and who continue to centre the economic when studying the urban night, do not move beyond the dominance which came from this" (90). To move away from this, Shaw proposes to consider how "non-economic . . . based practices intersect with more visible features of the urban night" (87). Moore advocates this empirical shift as well, by writing that a significant "undertheorized aspect of the nightlife economy" is that "nightlife is a staged experience" (50).

So how has 'the colonization of the night' influenced people's actual lived experiences? First, Van Liempt et al. describe the trend of urban nights being "increasingly portrayed as space-times of transgressive and anti-social behaviour that need to be regulated" (7). 'Mainstream' nightlife venues increasingly implement "new forms of surveillance and preventative safety measures"—often embodied by objects such as security cameras—in order to, for the sake of commercial profitability, comply with dominant discourses on health and safety (Van Liempt et al. 7-8). The emergence of night-time economies has also introduced a Foucauldian 'ambience' of regulation. "Broad and heterogeneous constellations of social actors" contribute to social fragmentation, making people less familiar with their social environment and more anxious about safety issues, which subsequently manifests itself in more surveillance interventions (7).

Another change that has shaped modern nightlife in North-Western European settings—and one that will prove particularly relevant to the rest of this project—is that of social heterogenization. More specifically, "patterns of going out, nightlife venues and the subcultures and scenes oriented around night-time spaces" have grown more heterogeneous and complex over time (Van Liempt et al. 9). These transformations have developed in parallel to several significant social changes in cities. For example, "traditional linear transitions from education to work, youth to adulthood, are becoming less clear cut" (Gallan 557). In recent decades, researchers have observed an "extension of a youthful" phase amongst (post-)adolescents, resulting in more people engaging in "liminality or experimentation in youth cultural activity for an extended period" (Chatterton and Hollands 97). Another parallel is that

nightlife experiences have become more fragmented in the sense that they increasingly target specific social groups. Moore writes that "every scene, every niche market, and every musical style has a nighttime economy built around it" (58). Worded differently, cities' offer of nightlife venues and events overall has become more scattered (Anderson 919), catering to countless identities, occupational classes, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations (a category that I will explore in more depth later).

The central idea wrapping up this section is that the past decades have exhibited an intensifying pattern of mainstream nightlife culture overshadowing marginal, alternative, and residual scenes. However, these processes do not always need to bring about cultural pessimism. In her work, Kate Shaw focuses less on the negative repercussions of the night-time economy—i.e. all the systemic social-economic inequalities in nightlife developments I have illustrated so far—and provides an optimistic empirical look into marginalized nightlife scenes. From all over the city, she writes, artists and leisure-seeking folks of diverse artistic backgrounds and identity groups find a meaningful cultural and social melting pot in such spaces (333). Shaw describes these subcultures as "self-consciously" marginal when it comes to their intersectional identities, music, art, and politics (334). These preferences manifest themselves in what Young calls a common "set of practices or way of life" (186), which becomes the primary tool for their 'symbolic resistance' against mainstream cultures (Hebdige 80).

Unfortunately, in Shaw's article too, negative repercussions of the night-time economy rise to the surface. Surely, independent creative initiatives allow for "extensive inter-related networks, circuits and alliances formed both inside and outside the city", using "many resources marshalled together to support cultural activity in the city" (Stahl 54). Nevertheless, their spatial territory often becomes a target for city governments that then start to tap into the profitability of cultural diversity, employing, for example, 'cultural consultants' (K. Shaw 338). Furthermore, "corporate control in the urban environment and nightlife economies is further usurping and commercialising public space, segmenting and gentrifying markets and marginalising alternative and creative local development" (Hollands and Chatterton 361).

### **1.3 Digital technologies and visibility in contemporary nightlife**

The following section will address literature that combines the theme of nightlife with questions about digital media and technologies, such as social media networks and camera devices. It will delve into what effects these technological developments have on the experience of *visibility* in nightlife. As was already noted, a big reason why people seek out nightlife experiences is that they somehow provide a contrast to life in the city during the daytime. Quite often, this contrast relates to the way people *see* and *are seen*.

Over the last century, modern societies underwent many technological changes and moved more and more of their activities into the night-time. This has generally made nightlife more 'visible'. Tools and measures such as street-lighting, police patrols, security guards, alarm systems, and CCTV cameras broadly define today's nocturnal cityscapes. Moreover, in the last two decades, the world has been introduced to smartphones and their quickly advancing camera devices. All these visual tools have complicated the relationship between the night-time and its traditional association with invisibility, and this has dramatically reshaped nightlife as we know it. The following section will now explore some of the most critical literature that addresses how technological advancements have affected our visual cultures and what this has meant for nightly leisure activities.

The increased use of photographic devices in Western societies has changed our views on our own and other people's behaviors and responsibilities at night. Buchakjian proposes that the increased use of photography has turned the night-time into a "cultural slipzone" between traditional day-versus-night activities (258). More photography has led to an intensified circulation of pictures that document nightlife experiences. This documentation, he claims, has normalized a lot of behaviors which one century ago would still be considered 'vulgar' (257). It also means that the night-time has become a tricky context in which people act both rationally and irrationally.

On the one hand, nightlife is a context for informal behavior and altered decision making, often influenced by "hedonistic drinking" (Truong 197). However, at the same time, the heavy circulation of photographic images means that one needs to manage their (self-)portrayals more carefully than ever (Su-Jan et al. 369). These two aspects culminate in a balancing act between the playfulness of the nocturnal lifeworld and a responsible and calculated composure—a mindset traditionally linked to the daytime but more and more flowing into the night-time.

Especially in the last decade, photographic devices have become integrated with intense use of social media, and this applies to young people in particular. Ash et al. argue that, consequently, urban geographies have been going through a "digital turn" that has made our leisure activities ever more mediated (26). This turn has resulted in what Longhurst calls "synchronised spaces" (676). Interactions between people and places, both on- and offline, enable us to continually keep each other up to date with live experiences, which Truong says "can also become annoying, unsettling, and disorientating" (199). Indeed, today's nightlife involves what media scholar danah boyd (lowercase letters intended) has aptly introduced as the "always-on" lifestyle, which comprises an omnipresent "public culture" (76). While beneficial at times, such a lifestyle has unpleasant effects as well. Social media users increasingly experience a "distracted present" (Rushkoff 4), or a decrease in moments of "losing yourself" (Malbon 274). Such distractions affect the core of what typically makes nightlife so meaningful: 'living in the moment' and 'letting go' of the daytime.

## 1.4 Marginal nightlife in the city and LGBTQ+ communities

Our visual culture has made our lives at night more and more 'visible'. What effect has this had on marginalized people and alternative nightlife spaces? This question has received attention from some literature, but not enough. Some residual spaces, as we will, for example, see in the case of the nightclubs documented by Wolfgang Tillmans, keep the use of digital (camera) technologies at bay for the sake of a 'liberating' sense of anonymity and invisibility. These privacy measures relate to the writing of Tammy Anderson, who defines a distinction between the visibility of mainstream, commercial nightlife spaces versus the invisibility of smaller, alternative, independent, and more intimate ones (919). Gallan points out the asymmetry of this dichotomy: "the alternative and residual become marginalised by the mainstream" (556).

Marginal nightlife spaces have a lot in common with Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopias*. Heterotopias are "places that exist in a dynamic state of layered and changing meanings" ("Ghost In The Shell: Identity in Space"). They provide crucial spaces for urbanites to experiment with their identities. Located at places like cemeteries, prisons, or brothels, heterotopias are most definitely not utopias, but neither are they dystopias. They are "countersites" (Rushbrook 185) where dominant societal norms are "represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 24).

Heterotopias display an inherent paradox. On the one hand, they offer spaces of freedom; "marginal spaces for the voiceless to construct identities for themselves" ("Ghost In The Shell: Identity in Space"). In heterotopian spaces, people find "powerful sites of the imaginary" (Gennochio 38) where they can express fantasies that society represses during the daytime. On the other hand, heterotopias are "bounded and isolated" (Rushbrook 185), only come to life during specific "slices of time", and "have systems of opening and closing that regulate access" (Gallan 559). People who frequent heterotopian spaces tend to have an uneasy relationship with the everyday, mainstream, and regulated world. As Foucault worded it: they "are, by the very fact that [they] enter, excluded" (26).

Heterotopian spaces reveal a lot about the social-spatial landscape of a city. Their specific geographic locations are essential for understanding the spatial contexts of exclusion in said city. Rushbrook confirms this: "Imagining as heterotopic sites zones characterized as queer or ethnic in the popular imagination allows us to understand these identities as geographic" (185).

The concept of heterotopias helps us better understand peripheral nightlife spaces and the idea that their obscurity and 'hiddenness' is not always a bad thing. Marginal nightlife needs to remain secret in order to provide a sense of escapism and to conceal taboos. "Because nightlife is experienced as a kind of Bakhtinian time frame bracketed off from the typical work day, shrouded in darkness, danger, and the pursuit of exciting pleasures, it is always already an ideal site for acts of transgression" (Moore

55). Marginal nightlife scenes are "alternative spaces removed from the "appropriateness" of the mainstream" (Moore 61). Naturally, this means that an alternative scene can only provide "differential access to what it celebrates" and "often makes knowledge of its whereabouts a problem for outsiders or for those new to the city" (61).

An alternative nightlife setting that remains invisible to the outside world has the benefit that it allows marginalized participants to be extra visible towards each other. While their identities are usually frowned upon and labeled as controversial, hidden nightlife venues offer oppressed groups a sense of freedom, expression, and purpose. "Darkness is not just about secrecy or doing outrageous things on the down low; it's about testing the limits of what you can get away with creatively, socially and artistically" (56). A large enough group of insiders can establish a community of "specialized knowledge" about, for example, political agendas, but also tastes in fashion and music (61). Moore ends his piece by cleverly noting that nightlife is essentially an "art form, where creative experiments taking place in nightclubs operating as arts institutions reveal the possibilities for the production of art, fashion, music, and popular culture" (60).

Nightlife indeed stimulates creative initiatives, professions, and social networks. These opportunities bear great importance for groups who are already disadvantaged in most other social-economic contexts, such as education and housing. In Soho, London, the local queer community once established important "spaces of consumption", but were later driven away from the neighborhood after increases in the "disposable income of the general (i.e., heterosexual) population" (Rushbrook 193). Again, this goes to show that, while marginalized groups struggle in most walks of life, nightlife can offer "a promised space, maybe even the only space, to have . . . freedom" (Moore 61).

Whether it concerns ethnic minorities or homeless people, different marginal identities receive institutional oppression in mutually dependent ways, and they can all find spaces of retreat in places such as bars, cafés, and clubs. However, the group with perhaps the most thriving nightlife scene is the LGBTQ+ community. Why are sexual orientations linked so strongly to nightlife performances? How do LGBTQ+ subcultures arise at night, and what kind of visual culture does this create? What answers has academic literature given to these questions?

First, I must provide terminology for the category 'LGBTQ+'. This term offers an acronym for lesbian, gay, trans, and overall queer identities. Coined initially as 'LGBT', the term has evolved into an umbrella concept for many other categories. For example, in 'LGBTQIA+', the 'I' aims to include intersex people, the 'A' covers those who identify as asexual or aim for 'allyship', and a plus sign serves "to cover anyone else who's not included" (Gold). I have chosen, however, to stick with the term LGBTQ+. It takes the 'traditional' LGBT categories, which correspond to most sexual identities addressed in this project and adds to it the 'Q' (for 'queer') "as an overarching term describing multiple

groups of sexual dissidents and referring to the broader . . . community" (Ekenhorst and Van Aalst 201). Lastly, a plus sign feels unthinkable to leave out, since it acknowledges the extensive multiplicity and fluidity, which defines the diverse range of 'queer' identities and experiences.

Ekenhorst and Van Aalst write that "space is produced as heterosexual and constructed as heteronormative" (201). However, while heteronormativity exists in everyday life as more of a stable social background, at night, it tends to be expressed quite strongly. Jade Boyd argues that "[n]ightclubs in particular, [often] experienced as spaces of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, offer a prime example of how the union of governmentality, surveillance and private enterprise work together in the maintenance and regulation of social conformity" (169). In other words, gender and sexuality performances are a vital feature in the production of nightlife spaces. Unfortunately, however, in most nightlife industries, they are generally defined by a heteronormative binary.

In response, queer populations often mark and 'claim' specific urban spaces. The research area that aims to map these processes is also called "queer geographies" (201). In his book *When Men Meet*, which theorizes the social lives of male homosexuals in the city, sociologist Henning Bech argues that such geographies depend strongly on visual cues. In order to "seek out other sexual dissidents in 'safe places'", queer people need to make visible discrete urban locales (Valentine 96). However, in doing so, they need to avoid the quietly policing gaze of 'normal' citizens who usually wish to "maintain distance between self and other" (Binnie 224). Essentially, a marginalized sexual identity goes hand in hand with a "camouflage-demanding relation to the surrounding world" (Bech 127). However, Bech argues that the city is simultaneously an ideal stage for expression: it promotes gazing practices (108) and actively generates sexuality (118). In other words, the city is a paradoxical site where both visibility and invisibility are necessary conditions for practicing and navigating a stigmatized sexual identity.

Nevertheless, while both visibility and invisibility are valuable, the former category is increasingly taking over the latter. Rushbrook speaks of "a parallel transformation of gay culture, from an introverted, closed, private space epitomized by dark, unmarked bars to a space appropriated from the night and beckoning with neon signs and full-length windows open to the street" (193). These new publicities have started to blur the "distinction between interior and exterior" (193). As a side-effect, "gay sexuality has explicitly become an urban spectacle" (Rushbrook 193-194).

What, then, makes queer space so attractive and marketable? Rushbrook suggests that tourism is always in some way based on "a quest for a place-based exotic other" (184). Moreover, "this form of travel—of transgressing local boundaries to participate in exotic worlds—is not a new urban phenomenon" (185). She continues: starting in the late 19th century as "bourgeois voyeurism", the "tourist has long consumed the other in marginal districts and liminal spaces, visiting zones of deviance

and excess to transgress social norms" (185). The authenticity of this 'otherness' becomes even more potent when found in "an undiluted place empty of fellow tourists" (186).

However, tourist economies no longer market queer neighborhoods and nightlife venues solely based on their 'otherness' and deviance. In the 1960s and 70s, the Western world witnessed an emergence of all sorts of countercultures, including "feminist and queer liberation movements" (Ekenhorst and Van Aalst 201). These global movements formed a foundation for subsequent decades of emancipation and brought about new legislation and mainstream acceptance (Hubbard et al. 292). As such, queer spaces started to attract labels such as 'cosmopolitan', 'progressive', 'innovative', and 'trendy'. These labels then attracted economic opportunities, resulting in a spiral where commercial activity reinforces a positive 'neighborhood' image and vice versa. In essence, many queer urban spaces offered a "cosmopolitan buffet" where a high "gay index" lured in tourists in search of "cultural and lifestyle diversity" (Rushbrook 189).

An ideal tourist experience is found, then, in places where both otherness and charm make themselves optimally felt. This combination forms the foundation for the theory of the "geography of cool". This field investigates 'cool' places: locales which "strike a delicate balance between holding on to enough of the danger, the seediness and the ethnic and cultural mix that made them chic in the first place, while surrendering enough of it to make it safe for incomers to enjoy" ("The geography of cool"). The touristic joy brought by this combined sense of safety and danger depends on the preservation of traditional "hierarchical . . . relations" and "transitory nature of the visit" (Rushbrook 185). Consequently, queer spaces can only become an attractive urban spectacle under the condition that its inhabitants conform to a "nonthreatening" kind of queerness. "Gay urban spectacles attract tourists and investments; sexually deviant, dangerous rather than merely risqué, landscapes do not" (Rushbrook 195).

The mainstream adoption of LGBTQ+ nightlife also affects behaviors amongst queer people themselves. In leisure, entertainment, and nightlife industries, the "consumption of queerness depends on interaction" (Rushbrook 198). Therefore, in order to survive financially, LGBTQ+ people need to adopt behaviors and create settings that produce profits in a heteronormative, capitalist world. As a consequence, they sometimes end up behaving "tamer" and displaying themselves "less flamboyantly" (Weekes 47). In other words, the "arrival of wealthy outsiders result[s] in a new form of self-policing in queer space that is analogous to what exists in "normal" space" (Rushbrook 197).

This external puts a strain on the LGBTQ+ community. The touristification of marginalized spaces reduces the "individual histories and functions" of the queer community to an urban museum piece (Rushbrook 188). In the context of nightlife, Ekenhorst and Van Aalst write that the "growing presence of straight clubbers attracted by . . . cool, exotic and fun places [leads] to a feeling of

displacement among the LGBTI community, and also to the loss of spaces with a strong queer identity" (202). While it is a positive thing that mainstream cultures are increasingly acknowledging queer nightlife with "full-fledged promotion and participation" (Rushbrook 192), this does not mean that it improves LGBTQ+ rights in daily life. Even though 'pink' nightlife is more celebrated than ever, queer people still consistently suffer marginalization in the contexts of, for example, housing and job applications, police profiling, funding for nightlife venues, and even public safety. Wayne Myslik writes that Manchester's Gay Village, despite hosting an iconic 'safe' haven for a large gay community, still experiences much anti-gay violence (162). Indeed, as Rushbrook notes, "the freedom to be openly gay, to challenge the norming of public space as straight", does not ensure "freedom from violence" (195).

Most literature on queer nightlife focuses on 'common' or 'popular' identities—often being white, middle-class male homosexuals (Nash and Gorman-Murray 85). However, queer nightlife exists for all sorts of sexual identities—from bi- and transsexuals to people who do not identify with a single category at all. A category that encompasses so many identities and social contexts might create generalizations and overlook internal specificities. Indeed, "the queer scene, which appears to be a safe and inclusive setting at first sight, is still marked by divisions and tensions within the community itself" (Ekenhorst and Van Aalst 202-203).

Nightlife in the city as experienced by lesbians, for example, differs significantly from male homosexuals' experiences. Ekenhorst and Van Aalst write that cities all over the Global North have in recent decades endured an "invisibility of lesbians" and a "sharp decline of lesbian space" (201). In the context of nightlife developments, the rise of trendy "gay enclaves" has strengthened the "dominant position of gay men" (Ekenhorst and Van Aalst 201). Some authors even consider the emergence of a "post-lesbian era" (Forstie 55, McNaron 147-148). However, even amongst lesbians themselves, opinions about these changes vary. While some prioritize the protection of lesbian-only, "safe and inclusive spaces", others—often younger lesbians—"feel less need to be 'visible'" and instead would rather "mix within queer and heterosexual clubbing scenes" (Ekenhorst and Van Aalst 203). These varied opinions also translate into spatial patterns. Amsterdam, for example, has witnessed a recent "decline of a strong lesbian identity" (203) and the proliferation of the entrepreneurial city. As a result, "festivals and foot-loose actors" that organize non-place-bound lesbian-oriented parties have managed to survive better than some pre-existing lesbian bars, many of which have recently closed their doors (206). These tensions go to show that "[v]ulnerable groups are not just marginalized/oppressed, but can also marginalize and oppress each other" (Valentine and Skelton 863).

As another example, the TV-series *Pose*, which tells the story of the communities of ethnic and sexual minorities that gave birth to the ballroom and voguing culture in The Bronx, New York around the year 1990. The series centers around the exclusive dance parties organized by people who defy sexual norms and live together as an urban enclave after being pushed away from their original homes.

The lives of the characters in *Pose* depend on a balancing act between learning to proudly show their identities and tactically hiding their differences to avoid being disadvantaged further in everyday society. On the one hand, the many ball dances held throughout the story serve to cherish a closed, safe space—a place autonomous from the external world—that encourages members of the community to flaunt their bodies, outfits, and voguing skill. On the other hand, at various points, characters express a desire to 'be adopted' by dominant cultures. For example, some of the show's transsexuals long for a gender reassignment surgery to avoid running the risk of the 'outside' world finding out about their true sexual identity. At another point in the series, the characters celebrate the success of Madonna's hit song *Vogue*—produced by the singer after taking inspiration from the ballroom scene. Many ballroom enthusiasts referenced Madonna as a 'savior' for putting vogue "on the map". In other words, while *Pose* strongly praises empowerment and autonomy for minorities, it also shows that, sometimes, the road to emancipation involves skillfully adapting to the norms and wishes of those in more powerful positions. Quite often, this tension is place-bound, which underlines the importance of closed nightlife spaces. As dynamics between the alternative and the mainstream change, so do the spaces that define this very difference. One might wonder, as some characters in *Pose* wondered, "What happens when the scene you created as a safe space for marginalized people goes pop" (Venable)?

Another group whose identities sometimes suffer generalizations and exclusions is that of bisexuals. Maliepaard criticizes pre-existing literature on queer space for "its narrow focus on gay and lesbian identities in a heteronormative world" and a lack of attention for "other sexual identities and other kinds of exclusion which affect the life of sexual minorities too" (151). Bisexuals, in particular, he argues, make peace with having to "occupy space within existing gay (and lesbian) and straight spaces", for they "are never dominant in spaces as bisexuals are often misread as being heterosexual or homosexual and, thus, invisible" (148). Many LGBTQ+ people value specialized nightlife venues because they offer freedom "from everyday sexual identity negotiations and constraints in heterosexual life" (150). Nevertheless, for other queer people, these venues are "loose and risky spaces where social pressure renders . . . youth uncertain" (150).

Lastly, sex- and gender-based exclusions often go hand in hand with race and class discrimination. Rushbrook references multiple authors to explain that "the growth politics of the entrepreneurial city" (Rushbrook 187) puts a similar burden on all different types of marginalized groups, regardless of whether it concerns sexual, ethnic or other minorities. Accordingly, people who suffer multiple types of stigmatizations—i.e. people of color, members of the lower working class, or disabled people who are also queer—can often expect to experience more difficulty in life (Binnie 230).

If this section has shown one thing, it is that, in order to critically speak about queer nightlife, contextualization is vital. After all, many studies on "[queer] urban leisure zones" are outdated (Andersson 14). Moreover, if we wish to compromise tensions between "closed, introverted queer

space" and "a more open [queer] appropriation of public space", these themes "must be addressed by ethnographic work" (198). Every bar or nightclub can be described as "a little city within the city" (Moore 58) and opens a door into a unique world of entertainment, identity, self-expression, art and intimacy. Therefore, it is essential to analyze a few of these specific worlds and to dissect their histories and experiences closely. On that note, let us move on to a brief introduction to this project's case studies: the photography of Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans.

### 1.5 Cases: Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans

Brassai (born Gyula Halász), an artist of Hungarian birth, moved to Paris in 1924. After having been active as a writer for several years, he took up photography in the late 1920s. Brassai found one of his most considerable ambitions in documenting nightlife. He was fascinated by countless facets of the French capital; its "night workers, cafés, brothels, theatres, streets, and buildings" (Cooper).

He acquired the nickname "flâneur nocturne" (Bajac and Aubenas): instead of working in an atelier, which made him feel claustrophobic, he preferred roaming the streets at night (Stone, "The City of Light"). An exhibition on Brassai in photography museum FOAM Amsterdam, held in the Fall of 2019, showcases his interest in both Paris' high- and low society. Both of these contexts confronted him with challenges of accessibility. Indeed, he acknowledged them as "exotic environment[s] seldom observed by outsiders", which he believed safeguarded a certain authenticity. He found that in contrast to "literature and the traditional visual arts", the "visceral and immediate" medium of photography helped to reinforce this sense of authenticity ("Brassai").

Brassai deemed it essential and "natural" to make his presence as a photographer felt towards his subjects ("Brassai"). His work can be seen as highly artificial, as he composed his scenes with great care and even had an actor assistant. In this sense, he was "both an actor and a voyeur in a scene of his own construction" (Wood). Still, the familiarity Brassai had with his subjects made him a type of "anthropological ventriloquist" (Wood). Even though his photographs were highly constructed snapshots, his subjects could—indirectly, yet authentically—express themselves through this medium, thanks to his efforts of getting to know them and their surroundings (Wood).

All of these themes make themselves felt in several photographs that Brassai took in Le Monocle, "one of the earliest and most famous lesbian nightclubs in Paris" (Messynessy). This place will receive special attention in this thesis as the photographs later selected for analysis will present scenes inside Le Monocle. This venue functioned as "a haven for struggling artists, bohemians, burlesque dancers, straying husbands" and most importantly "a vibrant gay & lesbian community" (Messynessy). As such, we can recognize the same pattern of marginalized social groups 'retreating'

from everyday places reject their lifestyles into a shared space where they could practice their identities freely.

The German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, born in 1968, grew concerned with queer nightclubs in mainly but not exclusively Berlin and the UK in the 1990s. He started photographing these spaces from what he saw as an innovative "participant perspective" (Abel-Hirsch). Tillmans provides a specific interpretation as to what authenticity means in his photography. He once explained: "my photographs should be taken as authentic because they convey my authentic experiences", but unlike a documentary photographer, his work is only secondary to a more significant objective: the unification and empowerment of a community (qtd. in Sayej).

Tillmans expressed how this concern consists of a sense of responsibility, too: "For me, photographing queer spaces isn't voyeurism, . . . I feel I have a duty to preserve it" ("Wolfgang Tillmans & Luz Diaz"). In an elaborate piece that mirrors Tillmans' diverse career, Emily Witt describes how, while having made fame off his photographs of queer club scenes, he nonetheless adheres to a strict set of rules:

He never retouches or alters photos. He does not search for examples of particular phenomena in the world; when an idea interests him, he believes, the moment will present itself. He does not photograph people who don't want their photograph taken and will delete a photo if someone indicates a lack of consent. He does not publish photographs of underground spaces or parties until they have closed down.

She goes on to say that Tillmans experienced the music events he participated in "not just as hedonistic gatherings but as a political achievement". Whereas Brassai departed from a purely individual fascination with a marginalized nightlife, Tillmans specifically sought to vocalize the activism of his community. "In himself and his contemporaries, Tillmans saw a singular spirit that eschewed the hierarchies of the past and seriously considered hedonism — the right to party, take up space, and control one's body and identity — to be a political issue" (Duong).

Tillmans claims that the importance of concealed spaces where people can manifest their identities freely has only grown over the past decades. His photographs, Hernández Adrián argues, remind us of the "individual and communal need for instants of contemplation that can exist as islands in the midst of neoliberal cynicism" (386). Furthermore, Tillmans expressed specific concerns with the "complete atmosphere of control" that has emerged in mainstream clubbing contexts, partly as a result of new camera technologies (qtd. in Collin). Today, more and more alternative clubs anticipate this surveillance culture by imposing 'anti-camera' policies. The owners of the Berlin club Berghain have been pioneers in this trend by refraining from engaging in media interviews and blocking visitors' phone

cameras with stickers. These steps serve to keep intact the "Berliner Luft"—the "exciting, inspiring, relaxing, toxic, endlessly quivering, resistant and reluctant, defiant and rebellious atmosphere" found on the city's dancefloors (Biel and Vom Lehn).

The nightclub Ghetto hosted a regular gay club-night called 'The Cock' which sets the stage for Tillmans' photograph *The Cock (Kiss)* (figure 6). This photograph is of particular importance as it advocated gay rights and self-expression while heavily circulating on the internet following the shootings in a gay night-club in Orlando, Florida in June 2016. In Tillmans' case, then, we encounter an interesting, paradoxical play with the element of invisibility: he stressed the integrity and confidentiality of the experiences inside Snax Club by precisely photographing merely a glimpse of the venue's outside, while with *The Cock (Kiss)*, he straightforwardly visualizes the microscopy of this single, closed-up, fleeting moment, and by doing so created a work that came to represent the entire LGBTQ+ community.

In her book *Roaring Nineties*, Jannah Loontjens draws a similarity between the two periods in which Brassai and Tillmans solidified their careers as photographers. She writes that in Western cities of the 1990s, many people filled their lifestyles with festivity and intoxication. The same trend, she argues, unfolded during the roaring twenties (162). Neither of these two eras accompanied any widespread political conflict or economic depression, stimulating a sense of freedom, which people expressed through music, art, fashion, and excessive partying (Loontjens 163).

At the end of both periods, however, Western societies took an economic direction that burst the bubble of euphoria and optimism. Brassai's *Inside Le Monocle* (1932) and Tillmans' *Outside Snax Club* (2001) originate from these exact times. The early 1930s marked the Great Depression, while in the early 2000s, hopes for social diversity took a hit during nine-eleven, and the rise of global capital started appropriating many "underground and artistic expressions" (Loontjens 163). One might wonder, however, if this increased the need for people to escape from the burdens of everyday life and find solace and illusion in the transitory pleasures of nightlife. Looking more closely at Brassai and Tillmans' photographs might provide an answer to this question.

## 1.6 Problem statement

So far, literature has pointed out that for more than a century, Western cities have been creating elaborate night-time economies. Nightlife has become a crucial element of social life and culture in the city.

In an ideal world, cities would offer a sufficient stock of thriving nightlife spaces that satisfies marginalized people's need for community, release, and self-expression. However, in reality, nightlife

has become increasingly regulated, commodified, and appropriated by 'mainstream' scenes. Alongside the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and the far-reaching development of digital camera technologies, these processes have built an elaborate visual culture around nightlife.

In recent decades, queer and alternative nightlife spaces have struggled to adjust to this increasingly mainstream landscape. While they have become an essential staple for tourism, city branding, and urban development, these processes often threaten the economic prosperity of queer nightlife spaces and negatively affect the lived experiences that make nightlife so crucial for marginalized groups in the first place. Meanwhile, academic literature has often overlooked these lived experiences, rather approaching alternative nightlife in economic terms instead.

Advocating for the importance of alternative nightlife starts with creating a widespread understanding of what constitutes a meaningful nightlife experience for marginalized people. Such an understanding is currently lacking—at least in academia—and requires historical contextualization. This problem is significant because for many marginalized groups—and LGBTQ+ people in particular—nightlife spaces often play a different and arguably more valuable role than for most other members of society. For them, nightlife provides a sense of community, release, and self-expression that they cannot always find in daytime settings.

In order to best address this problem, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

What discourses shape the nightlife experiences of marginalized groups, in particular LGBTQ+ people? Furthermore, how is this represented in photographs by Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans' depicting alternative nightlife spaces?

## 2.

***On Photography*****2.1 Why photography?**

This section will discuss the project's principal methodology: photography analysis. However, before specifying this method's different procedures, traditions, strengths and weaknesses, it is worth discussing why I chose photography as empiric material in the first place. What makes photography a useful source for answering the research questions? Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*—a text that has gained pivotal status in photography theory—responds to this question in great detail. The following chapter first takes a brief look at the history of photography and Sontag's account of it and then connects it to concepts of nightlife, visibility, and marginalization.

**2.2 Photography, truth, and power**

*On Photography* was first published in 1977. Ever since, decades of developments in photography, technology and culture have taken place, which could translate into many present-day revisions to Sontag's text. Nonetheless, her text continues to speak powerfully to a lot of current realities. Especially in the context of this thesis—nightlife in the city—photography has more relevance and social repercussions than ever. Photographic devices have long outgrown their function of simply *documenting* nightlife; they now actively alter nightlife experiences, as the literature review has already suggested.

Susan Sontag examines this idea in great detail: taking photographs is not just about capturing realities; it is an activity that *creates* realities. The main message she drives home in *On Photography* is that photography has introduced an entirely new way of interpreting the external world. She calls this 'photographic seeing'. Photographic seeing occurs when, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, we start judging every situation and object around us by its potential of being turned into a 'good' photograph.

What makes a photograph so valuable and interesting? One reason is that photographs make us more aware of the 'transitoriness' of things. Knowing that we can eternalize a person or an object in a photograph underlines the "mortality, vulnerability, [and] mutability" of things (Sontag 11). Perhaps more importantly, photographs have the ability to "furnish evidence" (3). Once a camera has captured something, people tend to believe more quickly that it is *real*. A photograph, Sontag writes, "seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects" (3). This power—using photography as a tool for making outstanding *claims to truth*—has become indispensable for modern urban societies and their "institutions of control" (Sontag 16). Indeed, many objects of legitimacy—such as criminal records or identity cards—do not acquire real validity

until they include photographic evidence. Under this belief, photographs have slowly become absorbed "into rational—that is, bureaucratic—ways of running society" (Sontag 16).

However, despite all this, a photograph remains a subjective framing; an interpretation of the world. Unfortunately, this notion is often forgotten as photography has become more and more of a banal activity. In current times, "when the taking of photographs is [seen as] relatively indiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing" (Sontag 4), it is easier than ever to use photography in subtle yet manipulative and dangerous ways. While "the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing" (Sontag 8-9). Sontag continues: "[t]o take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a "good" picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune" (9).

As such, photography holds some aggressive and even predatory connotations. Like many other practical everyday tools, a camera symbolizes a phallus: "it is named without subtlety whenever we talk about "loading" and "aiming" a camera, about "shooting" a film" (Sontag 10). This predatory aspect, moreover, resides in the notion that a photographer can violate someone "by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have" themselves (10).

### **2.3 Photography in urban research**

As a method, analyzing photographic images fits well with urban research. It is therefore also compatible with investigations of 'the urban night'. Photographs (as objects) and photography (as practice) offer countless small windows into the ways humans behave when living together in a city. For example, it is no coincidence that photography has developed "in tandem with one of the most characteristic of modern [urban] activities: tourism" (Sontag 6). Considering the motives and intensity with which people take photos in a city helps us better understand the social life in said city, including activities like tourism.

Photography has also played an essential role in the histories of urban planning. Urban expansion is often a speedy process. When settlers in North America encountered "the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited" as rapidly as possible (Sontag 50). We encountered a similar process in the "colonization" of the "night frontier"—a phenomenon described by Murray Melbin and mentioned in my literature review. Being able to capture an unknown environment in photos—especially when it concerns nocturnal (i.e. visually obscure or formerly invisible) cityscapes—enhances the process of implanting it with new urban infrastructures. However, photography does not lose its relevance once it has helped to erect urban infrastructures; it remains an omnipresent guide to human behavior in the city.

Let us consider the early days of Kodak, the photography company that during the late nineteenth century "put signs at the entrances of many [American] towns listing what to photograph" (Sontag 50).

Sontag's photographic seeing and urban seeing have another critical common feature. Many influential photographers mentioned by Sontag showed an interest in the strange 'other'; and of course, cities offer an "endless supply of oddities—if one has the eye to see them" (Sontag 27). A city amounts to a massive world that hosts countless smaller worlds—from hotels to carnivals, hospitals, and of course, nightlife. Moreover, the camera offers two crucial abilities for appropriating these worlds. On the one hand, it is a medium of immediacy which can capture strange moments at a fast pace. On the other hand, it "has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal" and to create instances of otherness within everyday reality.

In other words, photography encourages us to observe and acknowledge the 'strange' parts of the city. Giuseppe Scandurra makes a similar claim: photography lends itself particularly well for investigating "urban marginalities" (272). However, what does this mean for the people inhabiting these strange places; the marginalized people claiming that unfortunate role of 'the other'? The literature review has already explained how pull factors in cities' entertainment industries are often found in places home to the marginal, such as ethnic and gay districts. Sontag makes a similar claim about how photography tends to popularize itself. She writes that "public imagery" has come to prioritize "the freakish" rather than "the safe" (36). At the same time, she argues that taking photographs of 'strangers' in the city is a way of "apprehending" an alien social reality, similar to how a police officer might apprehend criminals in the streets (43). Sontag concludes that this urban attitude—to see "reality as an exotic prize to be tracked down and captured by the diligent hunter-with-a-camera"—has led to "middle-class social adventurism" (42). As she worded it herself:

The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes . . . The flâneur is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations - an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life (43)

Like a modern version of the flâneur, the contemporary urban dweller turns the threat of the other into an interest, yet not a celebration. Instead, they see the strange as an object to first possess visually and then use for their own purposes, such as marketing and commerce.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Introducing Rose's guide to visual methodologies

Having acknowledged the usefulness of photography as a looking glass through which to read urban concepts, it is now time to make some functional methodological considerations. Much literature already exists concerning visual methodologies in cultural and geographical research (works by, for example, Gunilla Holm, Patricia Leavy, Sarah Pink and Terence Wright). This section, however, takes one specific book as its primary source of guidance: *Visual Methodologies* by Gillian Rose. This book is particularly useful thanks to its instructions of the practical steps necessary for doing a visual analysis, but also because of its nuanced comparisons of different traditions of visual-based research.

#### 3.2 Visuality and power

In the first chapter, Rose introduces a central premise that one should not lose sight of when conducting a visual analysis. Namely, visual culture is never objective and always represents power relations. Much like Sontag, she comments that "the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies" (6). Rather than offering "transparent windows on to the world", visual objects regulate ideologies: they "render the world in visual terms" (6).

This 'supremacy' of the visual in the Western world is both a modern and a postmodern thing. During the rise of modernity, visibility helped solidify a widespread trust in empiricism and the idea that 'seeing equals knowing'. From the start of the twentieth century, the heavily progressive and technology-based societies of the Global North under modernism brought forth unprecedented tourist industries, surveillance mechanisms, and urban exhibitions and spectacles—mechanisms that all rely strongly on the production of images. During postmodern times, too, we based many of our ideologies on visual experiences. Paradoxically, yet quite logically, as our post-World-War-II societies started to believe less in fixed truths and meanings, we also began to experience intensified production, circulation and consumption of images.

Throughout modernism and postmodernism, however, this emphasis on the visual—often dubbed 'ocularcentrism'—has been controlled primarily by "only a few people and institutions, in particular those that are part of the 'history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy'" (Rose 8). In methodological terms, then, a crucial objective is to expose such power relations by breaking down all how an image can bring new meanings into society. This implies following an image from the moment of its production to the moment it is consumed, across different media that can portray it and all the different audiences that exposed to it.

### 3.3 Combining subjective interpretation with critical rigor

All types of visual methodologies, Rose writes, have in common that they rely on a researcher's *response* to a visual object. So, quite ironically, at the core of what is ultimately a legitimate social-scientific methodology stands the researcher's subjective interpretation of a visual image. However, this interpretation can be made academically rigorous by justifying it with the research's theoretical groundwork. Hall describes the discussion of such interpretations as follows:

a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contesting, meanings and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing. (9)

Of course, this photography analysis also starts with a personal interpretation. However, as it will ground itself in academic scholarship and the formal visual elements of the photographic sources, this personal interpretation will become valuable as an analytical tool. The point of analyzing photographic material is not to let one's interpretation become the primary evidence, but to situate this interpretation in a larger story, derived from different sources ranging from cultural objects to academic texts, that sheds informative light on urban theories. In other words, this research's particular look at the photographs will need to create a critical conversation that either affirms, enhances or challenges pre-existing literature.

The literature review described a comprehensive history of urban nightlife throughout (at least) the past century. Simultaneously, it focused on relatively recent developments: e.g. the rise of urban entrepreneurialism, digital technologies, and smartphone cameras—changes that have radically altered nightlife experiences in Western cities, but only significantly in recent decades. At the time of Brassai and Tillmans' photography, a lot of these conditions were still coming into fruition or did not yet exist altogether. Therefore, the method will take relatively *contemporary* understandings of urban nightlife and alternative scenes and mirror them to earlier empiric material—Brassai and Tillmans' photography—and the *zeitgeists* in which these two artists operated. In other words, the point is to have these different eras of nightlife inform each other. More specifically, the aim is to more critically describe the different *discourses* that dictate the tensions between mainstream and alternative nightlife today, by investigating to what extent these discourses show themselves in Brassai and Tillmans' historic photographs. However, what is discourse exactly, and how does one analyze it?

### 3.4 Three 'sites' and three 'modalities'

The broader category of qualitative, visual-material-based research consists of many sub-methods that each follow different procedures as to how to conduct a photography analysis. Choosing the most effective method depends on deciding what kind of knowledge one wants to produce with their research. Then, it is merely about knowing how to approach a photograph in order to comment on this knowledge adequately. To guide one in this approach, Rose introduces her framework of 'sites and modalities'. Every image, she writes, can be looked at in terms of three sites and three modalities. These sites and modalities together constitute the entire process of meaning-making done by a visual object.

First, let us look at the "three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" (16). In other words, the three sites are production, image, and audiencing. Respectively, they refer to "how an image is made, what it looks like, and how it is seen"—and through these three contexts, "a visual image becomes culturally meaningful" (Rose 188).

On top of these three sites, we can also interpret visual images in terms of the following three modalities: the technological, the compositional, and the social. "The technological concerns the tools and equipment used to make, structure and display an image; the compositional concerns the visual [formal] construction, qualities and reception of an image; and the social concerns the social, economic, political and institutional practices and relations that produce, saturate and interpret an image" (Rose 188).

One can describe each of the three sites differently in relation to each of the three modalities, and vice versa. Together, these six categories offer a vast range of focal points for discussing, analyzing, and interpreting visual images—and in this case, of course, photographs. One should not approach these sites and modalities as entirely separate elements. Each site and modality sheds a different light on a visual image; but ultimately, they still discuss the same image. They are always mutually dependent, together contributing to a complex world of meaning that can surround, or be created by, a visual image. That being said, this project takes the distinctions in sites and modalities seriously, as they help the analysis stay within the lines of discussion that fit most appropriately with its research topic.

### 3.5 Moving towards discourse analysis

Rose's book provides a chapter-by-chapter discussion of what she sees as the main methods in visual analysis. Each of these methods expresses a different epistemological view on visual images. How does a photograph represent reality? What aspect of a photograph creates the most substantial meanings? Each method would answer these questions differently by prioritizing, again, the three sites and the

three modalities. Dependent on these considerations—what one finds most expressive, influential, and meaningful in a photograph—every researcher will find themselves leaning towards one methodology or another. Similarly, each methodology borrows ideas from specific academic fields. Summarizing different methodologies' compatibility with focuses on different sites and modalities, Rose provides the following graph:

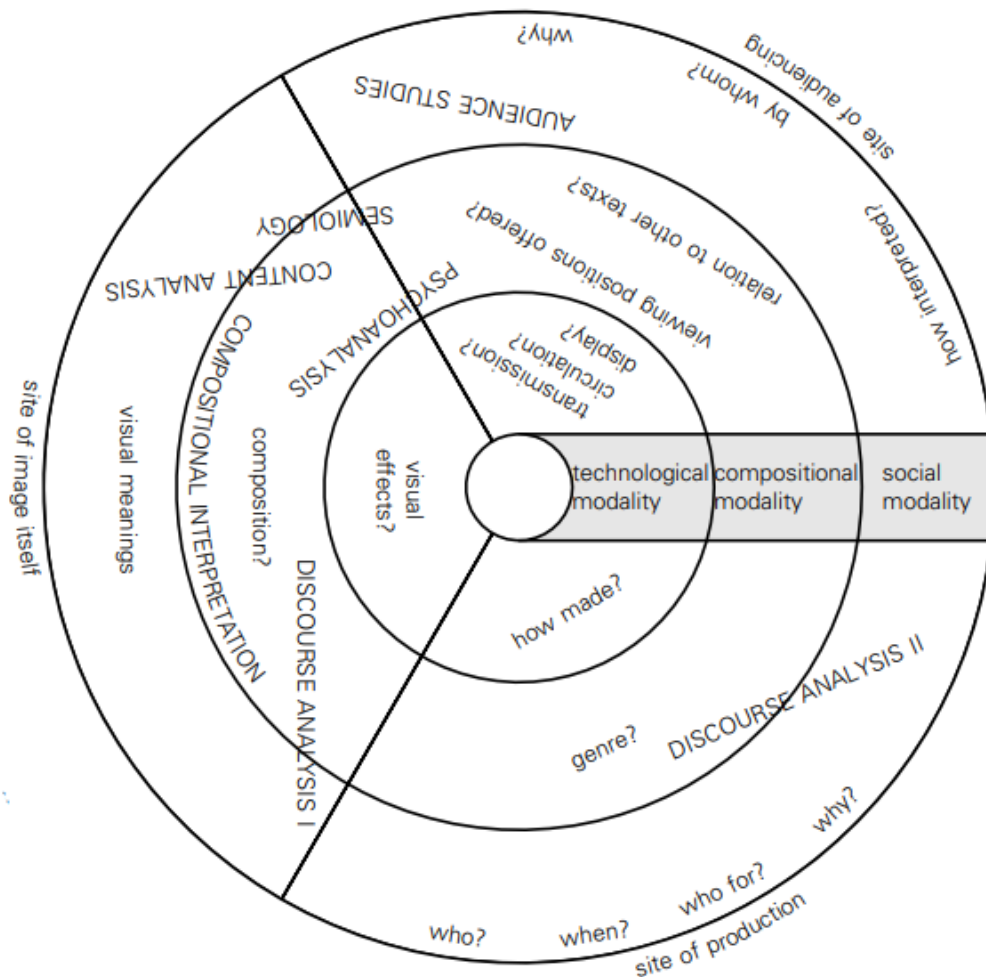


Fig. 1: "Sites, modalities, and methods for interpreting visual materials" by Gillian Rose (30).

This research will focus mainly on the image site—and to a lesser extent, the site of production—and on the social modality.

The site of the image itself will receive the most attention because the value of addressing Brassai and Tillmans' photographs lies precisely in the fact that these photographs add an aesthetic of a particular time, place, and set of lived experiences to a background of urban theory. The very things shown (and not shown) in the image itself will function as 'objects' onto which to project the literature and theories I have addressed so far. This approach serves not just to strengthen the theories but also to

rephrase or even contest them. The site of production will be of some relevance too. After all, this thesis also seeks to understand better not just Brassai and Tillmans' approaches to their subject settings as photographers, but also the social phenomenon of cameras (both their use and their overall presence) as an essential aspect of changes in urban nightlife. Brassai and Tillmans' creative and technological efforts leading up to the snapshots say perhaps just as much about these nightlife experiences as the images themselves.

With regards to the modalities, the reading of Brassai and Tillmans' photography will focus mostly on the social modality. This thesis explores nightlife in the city as a *social practice* and how urban geographic processes have impacted the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ communities. It considers how nightlife functions as an institution in itself and how it is inserted with power relations. The project also investigates how nightlife is affected by external institutions, such as city councils or large companies. In essence, the images themselves will be interpreted as puzzle pieces fitting into this bigger picture; as distinctive images illustrating a much larger social reality. In other words, the social modality surrounding the selected photographs will answer the research questions most directly.

### 3.6 Discourse analysis

Following these preferences regarding site and modality, this project takes the approach of discourse analysis. Rose divides this category into two types: discourse analysis I and discourse analysis II. The following section will briefly outline what discourse means precisely, what the differences are between type I and II, and which questions they will each put forth in the photography analysis.

First, it is necessary to provide some terminology for the term 'discourse'. Discourse—as the 'father' of this concept, Michel Foucault, has explained—frames our use of language and communication in social contexts, determining what kinds of expressions are valuable, meaningful, consequential, or relevant at a particular time and place, and which are not. When someone makes a particular statement, this statement by its very nature originates from specific assumptions, beliefs, common senses and background knowledges which are all socially constructed. However, these statements, in turn, affect that very background context from which they originate: they either reinforce this background knowledge, or they challenge it ("Introduction to Discourse Analysis"). Discourse, then, encompasses the flow of knowledge and communication through different social and temporal contexts.

Visual images play a vital role in the construction of discourse. As the earlier paragraphs on Susan Sontag highlighted, photographs possess the potential to make powerful claims to truthfulness. Rose even argues that visuality is a discourse in itself: "A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and

act within that field of vision" (137). The kind of visibility investigated by the case studies also proves to be very discursive: we have already seen that experiences of visibility in nightlife venues result from political and economic urban processes and questions of power and inequality. Since both the case studies' visual aspects as their surrounding contexts express discursive statements, discourse analysis I and II will each offer a few critical questions that inform the photography analysis.

Discourse analysis I builds on the idea that every visual object is discursive. Put differently, images are "socially produced rather than created by individuals" (Rose 140). Discourse analysis I aims to scrutinize the apparent 'realism' of photographs—a realism that is often misleading, which only goes to show photographs' discursive power. Rose writes that most images generate the "discursive production of some kind of authoritative account—and perhaps too about how that account was or is contested" (142). Exercising the first type of discourse analysis, therefore, demands that one carefully traces these 'authoritative accounts'—while sticking closely to the graphic elements of a particular image.

Discourse analysis II moves away a bit from the site of the image itself and instead looks at the site of production. More specifically, it investigates what institutions lie behind the creation of specific images and how visual media offer as a tool for more and less powerful actors in society to reinforce constructed ideas of truth. In other words, what *landscape of institutions* has allowed a photograph to come into existence? What actors were involved in this, and what were the power relations between them?

Both discourse analysis I and II posit that discourses are not exclusively managed by the powerful. Of course, "a statement coming from a source endowed with authority . . . is likely to be more productive than one coming from a marginalized social position" (Rose 158). Nevertheless, as Foucault said, "where there is power, there is resistance" (95). This question of resistance is yet another reason why discourse analysis will yield valuable results as a method for analyzing Brassai and Tillmans' photography: both were concerned with nocturnal sites of resistance.

### 3.7 Selecting and mixing sources

One element of this thesis' methodology is a close reading of two 'main' photographs—one by Brassai and the other by Wolfgang Tillmans. It will consider specific questions in order to trace in the representations of the photographs a sense of discourse that relates to the research's broader theoretical arguments. Two photographs—*Inside Le Monocle* (figure 2) and *Outside Snax Club* (figure 3)—have been selected as primary sources, for they both visualize 'exclusive' nightlife settings specifically organized for LGBTQ+ people. In other words, they adequately reflect the urban context which this thesis aims to describe and critique.

Besides these two primary empirical sources, the discourse analysis will extract insights from other additional 'data'. These data include several secondary photographs by Brassai and Tillmans. Both artists have created an extensive oeuvre of photographs and provide many works to analyze (even within the narrower category of urban nightlife). A few of these—all closely related to the two primary photographs (either in terms of content matter or aesthetics)—will be analyzed less closely, but serve to provide the discussion that arises from the two leading photographs with more analytical thrust. Also, the analysis will include interviews with four respondents concerning the two primary photographs. Finally, carefully cited academic accounts and real-life examples of and anecdotes about alternative nightlife venues will be considered in order to provide context.

Combining different types of sources is a crucial part of conducting a discourse analysis. Nicholas Green comments that discourse manifests itself as "a coherent pattern of statements across a range of archives and sites" (3). Building on this, Rosalind Gill argues that "the analysis of discourse and rhetoric requires the careful reading and interpretation of texts, rigorous scholarship rather than adherence to formal procedures" (144). Indeed, the study of discourse intends to lay bare complex constructions of taken-for-granted 'truths', which, quite logically, are rarely "accessible to superficial reading or viewing" (Rose 158). In this line of reasoning, I regard this research's diverse set of sources—originating from different media and historical periods—as a value rather than a limitation.

### **3.8 Interview-based photography analysis**

As a way of looking at the visual material with 'fresh' eyes, the photography analysis will also include some interviews. Some aspects of a visual image concern mostly factual information, such as date of creation, materials used, or places of display. These aspects can be analyzed in a relatively unbiased, descriptive way. However, other information can only be evaluated in an interpretive way. Such questions are difficult to answer without discerning personal biases. In order to scrutinize such interpretive information as 'objectively' as possible, I decided to conduct interviews, asking participants a set of questions about the two case photographs. The objective of the interviews, then, has been to scrutinize the image's interpretive information as 'objectively' as possible, and to compliment my observations with those of others, thereby creating a more unbiased and diversified reading of Brassai and Tillmans' photography.

The questions came from Rose's list of questions (188-190) that lay out the different elements of a photograph that one can focus on in order to complete a formal analysis. These questions primarily concern the 'image site', not just because discourse analysis encourages us to do so, but also because questions regarding the visual components of the image itself are often tricky to 'objectively' interpret individually. Out of all the questions that Rose encourages us to ask about the 'image-site', I have

selected the ones most in need of a variety of interpretations and most relevant to my research questions. They are as follows:

- 1) What is being shown? What are the components of the image? How are they arranged?
- 2) Where is the viewer's eye drawn to in the image, and why?
- 3) What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?
- 4) What do the different components of the image signify?
- 5) What knowledges are being deployed?
- 6) Whose knowledges are excluded from this representation?
- 7) Does this image's particular look at its subject (dis)empower its subject?

Before being asked these questions, the interviewees were handed an A4-sized, color-printed version of *Inside Le Monocle*; then this process was repeated with a print of *Outside Snax Club*. In order to ensure that the participants focused on the images' visual and compositional components with a 'fresh' look, no prior information was provided regarding the photographers, the photographs' background context.

The interviewees were selected according to several defining factors. Together, they made up a variety of genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. On the other hand, they were all selected based on the common characteristic that, at some point in their lives, they considered themselves a regular visitor at nightclub De School in Amsterdam. This nightclub opened its doors in 2016 in the West of Amsterdam. It was a much-anticipated successor to the well-known Trouw (the electronic music venue that had recently closed its establishment in the East of the city). Ashwant Nandram writes that, as a concept, De School has been all but 'hidden': it rose to fame as it quickly climbed international lists of best nightclubs in the world. Simultaneously, the club held up a status of being "inclusive", a "safe space", and "the most progressive club in The Netherlands" (Nandram). The inside spaces were mostly dark, and door policies supposedly aimed to ensure that all visitors would respect a free and open social environment. In other words, De School found itself at a peculiar crossroads of mainstream, popular and alternative, residual nightlife for several years. As such, it provides an accurate example of the phenomenon examined in this thesis: confined spaces that allow marginalized groups to indulge in liberating forms of nightlife but and need to define themselves against an increasingly mainstreamed and capital-infused urban background.

This methodology assumes that, as regular visitors to De School, the interviewees are familiar with and appreciative of the different aspects that provide marginalized people with a meaningful nightlife experience. To have these people voice their opinions about these values can bear relevance to the research questions. As a way of tracing discursive themes connecting their impressions and readings of

the two photographs with their experiences of a 'contemporary' alternative nightlife setting, the following final questions were also asked:

- 8) How many times do you estimate to have visited De School?
- 9) How do you evaluate your overall experiences visiting De School?
- 10) How do your impressions looking at *Inside Le Monocle* and *Outside Snax Club* compare to your experiences visiting De School?

In total, four people were interviewed, on the 13th and 16th of July, 2020. All interviews were conducted in English. All of the interviewees were living in Amsterdam at the time of meeting—either working or studying. For the sake of privacy, all of their names have been changed to arbitrary pseudonyms. The first respondent, Jay, is Dutch, 24 years old, and identifies as male and heterosexual. The second respondent, Levi, is from the Philippines, 26 years old, and identifies as male and homosexual. The third respondent, Zelda, is from England, 25 years old, and identifies as female and heterosexual. The fourth respondent, Ines, is Dutch-Moroccan, 25 years old, and identifies as female and preferred not to categorize her sexual orientation.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section will draw up the visual analysis of two photographs, *Inside Le Monocle* by Brassai and *Outside Snax Club* by Wolfgang Tillmans. Since this visual investigation is part of a broader discourse analysis, the concepts and ideas recognized in the photographs' visual cues will spread out over a more extensive discussion of discursive formations that shape the worlds of nightlife that Brassai and Tillmans managed to capture. Reading into the histories of the specific nightclubs Le Monocle and Snax Club, the analysis will reveal four key characteristics of 'hidden' alternative nightlife. First, being able to indulge in nightlife 'in private' can be experienced as necessary and liberating, as it allows for free expression. Second, it can be experienced as restraining, and disempowering, as it reinforces risks of inappropriate behavior. Third, a photographer can have a profound influence on the kind of discourse that is articulated by an alternative nightlife setting. Finally, discourses of nightlife are shaped not just by nightclubs, photographs, and artists, but various other media channels.

### 4.1 Two primary photographs: background facts



Fig. 2: *Inside Le Monocle* by Brassai (1932).

Although it is not certain, Brassai most likely created the photograph *Inside Le Monocle* (figure 2) in 1932. He took several other photos at Le Monocle in 1932, and in the same year "befriended a regular attendee of the club named Claude and accompanied her there one night" ("Young Lesbian at Monocle"). Claude bears a strong resemblance to the person at the bottom-middle of the photograph, wearing a black jacket while squatting down and embracing a woman in a white shirt. Le Monocle had one peculiar feature: "all the women were dressed as men" (Woods). At the time, lesbians would sometimes wear a monocle as a symbol to their sexual identity, which explains the club's name ("Lesbian couple at Le Monocle"). In other words, we can assume that at Le Monocle, a discourse of tolerance and normalization towards non-heterosexuality proliferated and expressed itself in fashion styles.



Fig. 3: *Outside Snax Club* by Wolfgang Tillmans (2001).

*Outside Snax Club*, as seen in figure 3, has become known as one of Wolfgang Tillmans' most iconic photographs. In 2001, he shot the photo, as the title suggests, just outside Snax Club, a sex club for male homosexuals in East Berlin. The venue has since closed its doors, but the "people behind Snax went on to create Berghain, now internationally renowned for its impeccable soundsystem and days-long parties" (Stone, "The City of Light"), where Snax still exists as a bi-annual male-only party. In this photograph, Tillmans captured a setting still typical to the Berlin clubbing scene: long queues and ever-present anticipation for long nights of hedonism. All four interviewees recognized the queue as a prominent part of the photograph and presumed that it points towards a place or experience that is *worth the wait*. Jay mentioned that it made him curious to know what was behind the door. Likewise, Zelda indicated that it generates a sense of adrenaline.

## 4.2 Societal context

In order to skillfully read into the photographs' discursive assumptions, it is necessary also to understand the wider societal context from which they stemmed. So before further concentrating on the images' visual details, I will provide a brief historical backdrop for each photograph.

Brassaï created most of his nightlife photography just after the *roaring twenties*, during an iconic "period between the two world wars, when artists and writers flocked to Paris, drawn by its atmosphere of creativity and freedom" (Hagen). In the early 1930s—at which point Brassaï had become an established photographer—Paris was often praised "for its free and easy attitude toward life in general" ("Lesbian couple at Le Monocle"). This era introduced many modern developments in terms of, for example, urban infrastructure and information industries. The energy source of street lanterns changed from gas to electricity, inserting the "romance of the nocturnal city" with a new sense of place ("Brassaï"). Meanwhile, photography started "rapidly supplanting traditional illustrations in newspapers and magazines" ("Brassaï"), further strengthening this new experience of 'visibility' on the streets.

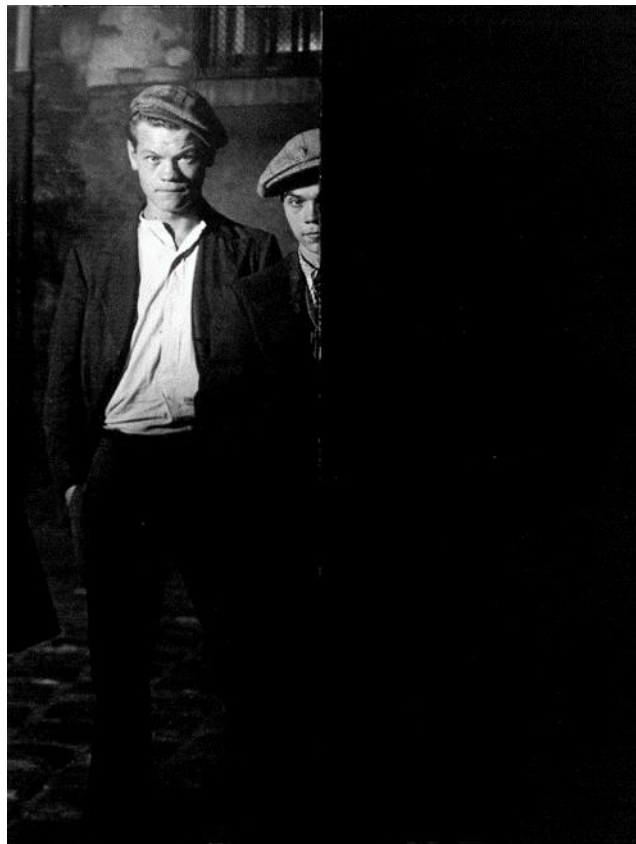


Fig. 4: *Two Thugs* by Brassai (1932).

Interbellum Paris had many faces, but not all of them exhibited progress and development. A considerable part of the population existed of "marginalised inhabitants alienated from established

conventions" ("From Surrealism to the Informal"). This part of society usually turned to the nighttime, in pursuit of "joyful elation, as well as the things that daylight could not fathom, such as petty crime and love for sale" (Postma, translation mine).

This context became a central interest in Brassai's work: environments consisting of "cafés, bars, and dance halls; prostitution in the street and in brothels; pimps and thugs; and annual celebrations designed to upend bourgeois propriety" ("Brassai"). Figure 4 shows the malevolent gazes encountered on the streets at night, while figure 5 demonstrates the domain of prostitution and the desire of those involved to remain anonymous. As a photographer, Brassai encountered nocturnal Paris at the time of an ideal crossroads: the seeds of modern public culture had been planted, but post-World War I cities still offered little "cultural outlets for photography" (Silverman). Consequently, the novelty of his photography received substantial attention from various media outlets, enabling Brassai to "improvise a one-man photo agency" ("Brassai").



Fig. 5: *Chez Suzy* by Brassai (1931-32).

Another 'alternative' nightlife culture emerged in Berlin during the 1990s. In this turbulent period, Wolfgang Tillmans began his career as a professional photographer. "The nascent days of the Berlin club scene reflect the collision between political, social and cultural forces abound at the time",

writes Clancy. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened up a spatial and cultural vacuum in the German capital—especially in the East of the city—allowing emerging subcultures to migrate into industrial establishments that had just collapsed. In this new urban landscape, the progressive art scene started exploring some unique circumstances: "new music (and the technology to make and deliver it), available spaces and emerging drugs like Ecstasy".

These cultural and geographic conditions cultivated an opportunistic zeitgeist. In all these new cultural institutions, young artists found plenty of means to satisfy their wish to blur the lines between arts and media ("Een geschiedenis van de Berlijnse clubcultuur"). A prevailing mindset in Western cities in the 1990s was one of both optimism and nihilism. Loontjens writes that during this iconic period "after the fall of the Wall, but before nine-eleven" (11, translation mine), people no longer took for granted essential 'truths' and "celebrated the emancipation and the multiplicity of the self" (18, translation mine). These forces made themselves felt significantly in Berlin, perhaps more than in any other global city at the time.

"The anarchic energies set free by [the collapse of the Wall] have defined the city for a generation, despite recent tendencies toward the international clichés of gentrification" (Pareles). Since September 2016, the city's techno scene is officially "considered high culture after a court decided that the legendary nightclub Berghain produces work of cultural significance and should therefore be allowed to pay a lower tax rate" (Oltermann). For at least two decades, artists found an additional benefit in Berlin's "comparatively low" rents (Pareles). These conditions, Di Liscia writes, have inspired many activists and other stakeholders to fight for the preservation of alternative culture in Berlin. One nightclub advocacy group described "Berlin's nightclubs as "the pulse of the city," arguing that they are integral to the German capital's cultural fabric and help shape the city's urban development".

Berlin's identity as a place where alternative subcultures proliferate has taken on a global status. As stated by the "female, trans and nonbinary" DJ collective *No Shade*, "[t]he creation of . . . spaces for marginalized communities [found in Berlin] is the foundation of global club culture" (Thaddeus-Johns). This milieu, nightclub promoter Simon Kaiser says, has become an essential staple for Berlin's city branding: it is "what Berlin prides itself on" (Thaddeus-Johns). Nightlife in Berlin provides "safe spaces for marginalised groups" from all over the world; they have become more easily accessible thanks to the increase of cheap travel across Europe (Kay).

This breeding place for alternative nightlife still lives on today, but in a changing way. Clubbing scenes have had to start adjusting to a more developed, regulated, and competitive urban landscape. "Through the years, illicit, ephemeral clubs have given way to places with permits, safety checks and public schedules", Pareles comments. On top of that, many nightlife venues still receive little or negative acknowledgement. For example, the national "government currently classifies [most] clubs as

"entertainment venues," along with brothels and casinos" (Di Liscia). Furthermore, the strict no-camera policy that many alternative venues in Berlin have heralded for decades has become less of a second-nature in today's "age of over exposure, personal reportage as a substitute for real connection, and . . . Instagram" (Clancy).

### 4.3 Looking for discourse

In order to successfully provide meaningful leisure experiences for marginalized groups, alternative nightlife spaces in 1930s Paris and late 1990s to early 2000s Berlin often needed to remain somewhat 'hidden'. The reasons for this inextricably tie in with discourse. Nightlife offered ideal spaces for marginalized groups to escape and counteract dominant discourses that dictated all sorts of social norms regarding, for example, physical expressions (such as dancing), substance use, music preferences, fashion styles, or dynamics in gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. However, despite the positive experiences that these sceneries brought to specific marginalized, they sometimes still got caught up in complicated internal exclusions. The following section aims to explain these premises, drawing directly from the two photographs—*Inside Le Monocle* and *Outside Snax Club*—and providing context from secondary, both scholarly and non-scholarly, texts.

### 4.4 Hiddenness and privateness

Brassaï and Tillmans both photographed social groups for whom spaces with a certain degree of hiddenness and secrecy were a cultural *necessity*. To this day, in alternative nightlife all around the world tend to represent artistic expressions and 'excessive' displays of hedonism. For such experiences to fully manifest themselves, a confined space is necessary, free of the panoptic surveillance that makes itself felt in everyday public spaces. At first glance, such a necessity brought about a negative and restrictive atmosphere, but it gave rise to positive experiences too. On the one hand, people partying in secrecy did not always voluntarily decide to do so: having to venture into closed-off spaces in order to find freedom and joy implies that, in 'normal' spaces, these virtues are available only to a limited degree. However, paradoxically, being secluded from everyday publics was also a liberating condition for these groups. It allowed them to connect to likeminded people, openly express shared identities, and engage in leisure practices. As Rushbrook writes: "the creation of explicitly gay places has been an important part of the evolution of the gay community in the West". "[L]esbian and gay bars played a crucial role in creating a social community by providing a public space in which political consciousness and movements for public recognition could incubate" (190)."

The liberal and artistic landscape of interwar Paris offered non-heterosexual people of both high and low standing a haven of freedom and expression. However, while "a vibrant lesbian subculture" started displaying itself more and more in public spaces, many of the most exalting spots were still

limited to private spaces; "more often than not . . . the swanky apartments belonging to the Left Bank intelligentsia" (McQueen). *Le Monocle*, therefore, stood out as a 'public' bar. Still, the unwritten rule prevailed that if one did not in some way belong to the local lesbian subculture, it would have come across as strange to enter the bar. The very name 'Le Monocle' originated from the tradition, practiced among local lesbians, of carrying a monocle out in public as a way of silently exhibiting a shared identity (Colette 65). One might say that they were 'hiding in plain sight'. Some interviewees perceived a corresponding sense of 'privateness' when examining *Inside Le Monocle*. When asked about the different components making up the photograph, Jay immediately noticed that the space looks like a sort of 'living room'. Similarly, Ines felt like she was looking at "the private, back area" of a "bar or hotel lobby".

Snax Club, the discotheque pictured in Tillmans' famous photograph, also had the name Ostgut Club. Its location was a now-demolished railway warehouse in Friedrichshain, East Berlin (Braun). The organizers' decision to host club nights at such a run-down, industrial site suggests that they did not aim to attract maximum 'costumer' attention, in contrast to the clubs in the touristic, commercial districts in the city center. As Tillmans' photograph shows, the place where one enters the club was quite dark, in a literal sense. In the interviews, respondents reiterated this sense of obscurity and privateness. They labeled the formal visual elements with terms like "dark" and "obscure" and specified the social atmosphere as "underground" and "niche". Zelda found the site to look "dingy", whereas Ines pointed to the venue's peripheral setting by saying it looks like "a pretty industrial looking place".

The long queue shows that not anyone could find or enter this venue with ease. Levi's response indicated the same: "you can't just barge in the door here". The absence of any signs or other material cues indicating the club's presence implies that the visitors waiting in line must have gotten to know about the club through other channels. Other sources confirm this by telling us that Snax was indeed an exclusive concept; male-only and made popular within homosexuals' inner circles ("10 Tracks That Defined Ostgut"). In the 1990s, such inner circles benefited greatly from having a confidential meeting spot. In contrast, today, online spaces enable LGBTQ+ people to effortlessly meet fellow members of their community without relying on physical spots (Loontjens 157). Jay echoed this idea in his reading of *Outside Snax Club*: "you probably would have needed either a specific interest or insider-information to know about this place".

People attempting to enter Snax Club without knowing about the party's targeted audience and sex-oriented nature could likely expect to be refused entry by the bouncers. This organized sense of hiddenness has long characterized club culture in Berlin, and being able to party in an exclusive and dark setting speaks powerfully to local subcultures' values. Clubs have peripheral locations—though these have become increasingly gentrified—and policies such as covering cameras with stickers. All

these various aspects reinforce the 'hiddenness' of Berlin clubs and "enable clubbers to feel both free from surveillance and safe from the judgments of the outside world" (Stone, "Vorsprung durch techno").

#### 4.5 Alternative nightlife: negative connotations and immoral behaviors

Unfortunately, 'hidden clubbing' also has quite a few disadvantages. Engaging in it is, in a way, a response to a lack of acceptance and empowerment. Despite many decades of 'illuminating' and 'colonizing' the urban night, modern societies have continued to insert the nighttime with connotations of immorality. In 1930s Paris, many places at night transformed—both symbolically and officially—into eerie, forbidden terrains, marking any person setting foot there as 'improper'. Brassai himself directly experienced this. In her recension of the Foam exhibition, Rianne van Dijck writes that one night in 1933, Brassai ascended the tower of the Notre Dame in order to photograph the cityscapes from a high altitude, but could not do so without having to bribe the church's concierge. She then set the condition that he could not light any flashes, to avoid being noticed by the *gendarmes* and risking to lose her job ("Met zijn foto's bepaalde Brassai het beeld van Parijs"). In another piece, she even comments that the police arrested Brassai several times, suspecting that his activities in the dark must have had some kind of criminal purpose ("Ik was bekend met het obscure leven").

Even in recent decades, when roaming Western city streets at night has become a much safer experience, and nightlife has become more regulated, hidden spaces still conjure up illegitimate, inappropriate, or unwanted behavior. While alternative nightclubs like Snax Club often receive praise for providing an 'invisible' night out, such places also provide easy sceneries for abusive behavior to go unnoticed. For example, a party in 2019 organized as part of the C/O exhibition *No Photos on the Dancefloor!* in Berlin—meant to celebrate and discuss unrecorded clubbing experiences—escalated due to reported violent behavior by the security staff towards two visitors. As Thaddeus-Johns described it, "[t]he incident revealed an ugly mismatch between the relaxed and tolerant atmosphere portrayed in the exhibition, and the heavy-handed security around it. Berlin's clubs thrive on a permissive, D.I.Y. vibe that lets guests feel safe — but some partygoers and activists say overzealous security staff are ruining the tolerant vibe".

In a similar vein, nightclub De School in Amsterdam—famous for its seemingly Berlin-like, diverse and LGBTQ+-oriented climate—got entangled in controversy in the summer of 2020 after receiving multiple types of accusations from visitors. Some people expressed that they had been sexually harassed both by security guards and other club-goers (De Vrieze). Other regulars articulated criticisms in many aspects, such as its door-policy, board composition, or artist selections, the club did not offer the diverse and inclusive atmosphere it claimed to protect (Miedema). These anecdotes reveal an uneasy contradiction that has likely confronted many alternative nightclubs that claim to prioritize an 'unrecorded' clubbing experience. Creating obscure spaces and robust security backups have a two-

sided effect. They are necessary for ensuring a permissive, safe and like-minded clubbing atmosphere. However, they allow guards with ill intentions to exploit their position of power and offensive club-goers to harass others without immediately being seen.

#### 4.6 A space for free expression and hedonism

Despite these negative anecdotes, Brassai and Tillmans' photographs also demonstrate that hidden nightlife spaces supply experiences of happiness, freedom, and expression. As Brassai once said, "[the night] liberates forces within us which are dominated by our reason during the daytime" (qtd. in Stone). Le Monocle was such a place where oppressed people could let go of things. During its most popular years, the nightclub came to embody Paris' "climate of relative tolerance", "variety of . . . nighttime pleasures" ("Lesbian couple at Le Monocle"). Once they had entered, "every woman was free to sip champagne and dance with whomever she pleased" (McQueen). The answers given by the interviewees echoed these ideas. After being asked what they feel the photograph *Inside Le Monocle* 'symbolizes', they agreeingly responded with terms varying from "belonging", "friendship", "freedom", "happiness", "fun" to "intimacy" and "sex". Levi added that, to him, the scene signifies the feeling of "not being held back" and "not giving a shit". Zelda added that, according to her impression, the photo's subjects "aren't afraid to be themselves".

Snax Club was a place where people renegotiated social norms and found freedom from society's expectations. Gregor and Irvine note that the club created an endless stream of "liminal moment[s], in which social rules were at once suspended and reinscribed" (7). They continue: "At Snax, passion, euphoria, pleasure, abandon, conviviality, and friendly familiarity all course through the throng of bodies that move through" the night (89). Not surprisingly, Snax received "growing visibility in queer communities abroad" and "has become a yearly (or twice-yearly) pilgrimage for queer fetish enthusiasts from across Europe and beyond" (90).



Fig. 6: *The Cock (Kiss)* by Wolfgang Tillmans (2002).

The interviewees recognized little signs of such joy and hedonism in *Outside Snax Club* and instead associated the image with feelings of obedience, impatience and order. Nonetheless, Zelda commented that this representation of people waiting outside a club anticipates a sense of release and excitement that would compromise an accumulation of boredom and restraint. Several other photographs by Tillmans confirm this. Figure 6 and 7 show the contrast of the *inside* experiences at progressive parties, where, as the photographs suggest, people indulged in euphoria and emotional relief. Tillmans took *The Cock (kiss)* "at the gay club night, The Cock, which ran every night at the Ghetto nightclub" in London. He "was a regular visitor to the venue and sometimes even DJed there", which proves his familiarity and active role in producing the joy and intimacy captured in this photograph (Phaidon). The scenes in the photographs articulate these clubs' ideology that humans are equal and should be treated as such. Jay remarked that there is "no authority" to be seen amongst the club-goers in *Outside Snax Club*, implying that they are all equal and united in their acceptance that

waiting in a queue is simply part of the experience. With this in mind, we can read the hedonism seen in Tillmans' photographs as a political expression.



Fig. 7: *Love (Hands in Air)* by Wolfgang Tillmans (1989).

However, these political expressions are synonymous with *physical* experiences. Feeling of freedoms during a night of escapist hedonism are strengthened when people can turn to sensory experiences and get 'lost in the moment'. For example, progressive nightlife venues often place a strong focus on music. This focus was central for Snax Club, Garcia writes, which has long been valued not just for its sexual character, but also for its offer of "musical satisfaction". It is yet another aspect that makes up the broader alternative nightlife culture that symbolizes Berlin as a city: "Berliners pay attention to music", and the "pounding techno" played at "Snax still keeps its Berliner character" (Garcia 79). The interviewees affirmed that in their experience of alternative nightlife, music—in particular, a shared *interest* among club-goers in various types of dance music—provides a source for an embodied sense of escape. For example, Jay explained that his appreciation for De School has a lot to do with the fact that "everyone there wants to focus on the music". Zelda also found that during her first years of visiting De School, it "was all about the music", which in her opinion helped people feel less social

awareness and "let loose". "You can dance as silly as you like without anyone judging you", she concludes.



Fig. 8: *Untitled* by Brassai (date unknown).



Fig. 9: *Madame Bijou* by Brassai (1932)

Alcohol and drugs also influenced the embodied pleasures in Brassai and Tillmans' subject settings. Many of Brassai's photos—especially those taken at *Le Monocle*—picture alcoholic drinks (see figure 8 and 9), and a closer reading of *Inside Le Monocle* suggests that visitors consumed it as part of a cheerful social ritual. Alcohol consumption led to displays of "shameless yearning and excitement" (Postma, translation mine). The presence of substances did not go unnoticed in the interviews, either. When describing the social setting in *Inside Le Monocle*, Jay noted that "it looks like there is some alcohol at play". In her commentary on *Outside Snax Club*, Zelda mentioned that a more empowering look at the subjects could be created if they were also pictured on the inside of the club, acting freely and "maybe taking drugs". This quote relates to her memories at *De School*, which reminded her of bonding with her friends, which at times took place due to the fact that "you might be taking something [read: drugs]".

Both Tillmans' work and personal experiences of the Berlin dance scene point towards normalcy of synthetic drug use. His photographs seen in figure 6 and 7 hint to the ecstatic trance and intimacy that substances such as MDMA are known to produce. Drugs are a well-bespoken part of the alternative clubbing scene. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Tillmans points to the nonchalance with which he has observed people in the dance scene "happily taking Ecstasy together or partying in a

park" (Witt). This quote exhibits the optimism with which his social circles dealt with their generation's difficulties and uncertainty, caused by, for example, HIV outbreaks and social marginalization.

Music, alcohol, and drugs are just some of many other factors that contribute to an escapist, embodied experience at progressive nightclubs. Loontjens echoes this when writing about her experiences at RoXY, a nightclub that existed in Amsterdam from 1987 to 1999 and acquired fame as an eccentric haven for all kinds of stigmatized people. The club offered a space for free expression and many creative outlets: "at RoXY, as much attention was paid to the DJ selection as to the acts, costumes and decors" (Loontjens 157, translation mine). In this sense, a nightclub is a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk* that mobilizes various artistic expressions which all contribute to a 'transcendental' experience. Indeed, at Le Monocle, all kinds of identity performances, such as fashion and dance (see figure 10), together defined the comprehensive image of a nightclub. Luis-Manuel Garcia has attached the very same term 'gesamtkunstwerk' to Snax Club, referring to the organizers' "holistic, multisensory approach and their attention to detail" (75). He writes that "sexual playspaces are meticulously decorated according to yearly erotic themes; a carefully curated roster of world-class DJs is booked; and event-planning logistics are thoughtfully adjusted to the practicalities of having dance and sexual play share the same venue" (76).

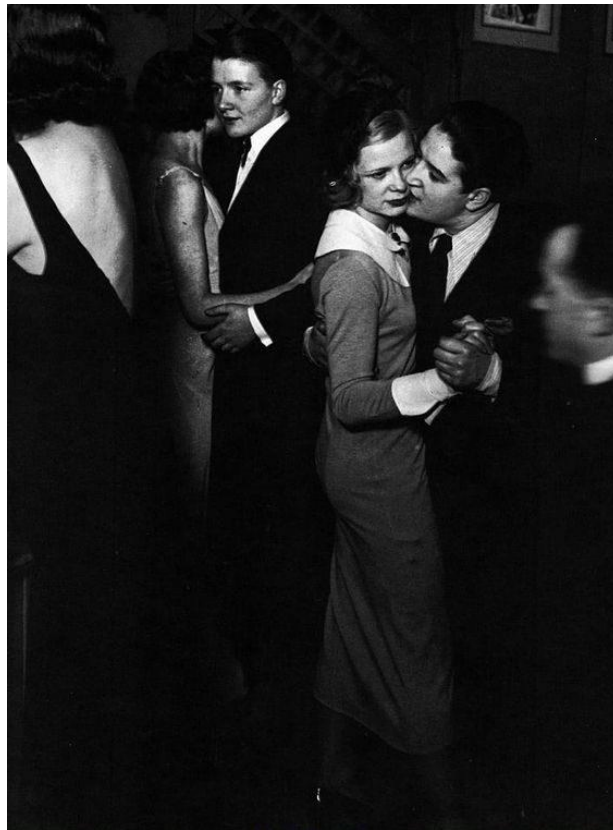


Fig. 10: *Dancing couples at Le Monocle* by Brassäi (1932).



Fig. 11: *Lesbian couple at Le Monocle* by Brassai (1932).

#### 4.7 The photographer as discourse writer

As photographers, both Brassai and Tillmans applied a particular agency with regards to how alternative nightlife settings articulate specific discourse. On the one hand, their 'authority' as famous artists helped to amplify the worldviews held by the people depicted in their photographs, especially considering the power that Western cultures have given to photographs as 'objects of truth'. On the other hand, a photographer can represent social reality in such a twisted, artificial way that it alters the 'regimes of truth' that initially defined the setting of their photograph.

Brassai was somewhat of a paradoxical photographer: his philosophy did not always match up with his aesthetic preferences. He had a precise attitude toward his technical set-up. As written on a wall text in the Foam exhibition: "While much of the adventurous European photography of the 1920s and 1930s celebrated mobility and speed, spontaneity was alien to Brassai's sensibility. He favored images that are sharp, deliberate, and stable" ("Brassai"). The fragility of early photography technology also demanded that he went about the process carefully. "Brassai shot with a large, fixed lens, 6.5x9 cm Voigtländer Berheil" ("Brassai – The Eye of Paris"). He managed to bring together complicated processes—shots with long shutter-times, magnesium-powdered flashes, and heavy, wooden tripods—in a peculiar way of dealing with dark conditions (Cowell). One might argue that he must have been

motivated to produce optimal results with every shot, as he could only take roughly 24 photographs during each of his nightly walks. Any higher number of glass photo plates would have been too heavy a burden to carry ("Paris de Nuit").

Some sources claim that Brassai was the kind of photographer who succeeded in replicating the discourses that his subjects held to be true. Under that assumption, his careful technique was an asset to what has been described as his motivation to capture things as they existed 'naturally'. For example, Henry Miller once said: "Brassai is a living eye . . . his gaze pierces straight to the heart of truths in everything" (Meltzner). Brassai's fascination with photography with how the medium could "arrest" movement (Durrell). During his visits to "the bars and cafés of Paris in the 1930s, Brassai deftly managed these scenes without robbing them of their vitality" ("Brassai"). In other words, while many of Brassai's photographs are theatrical and carefully constructed, and therefore do not show us "the moment as coincidence", we can still see "the human character that transcends that moment" (Postma, translation mine).

Brassai's aim to show the human side of things also manifested itself in the way he socialized with his subjects. He "was not exploring unknown territory, and his great body of work was not reportage" ("Brassai"). Much like that of his friends on the fringes of society, Brassai's "economic situation was dire", which might have helped inspire his solidarity with the lower-class. "A true bohemian, and something of a chameleon and diplomat as well, Brassai was accepted everywhere. He was so comfortable with his subjects and they with him that they would willingly assume natural poses for his camera" ("Fat Claude and her Girlfriend").

Other authors, however, argue that Brassai came across as xenophobic and contributed to symbolic marginalization. At Le Monocle, Brassai had more difficulty taking photographs than in most other places. As a male heterosexual, his interactions with other visitors were riddled with "an uncharacteristic distance" ("Young Lesbian at Monocle"). Francis E. Hutchins has called Brassai's interactions with marginalized spaces a "masquerade". He writes that "in some cases, [it] would have been more believable, but at the Monocle, there is no chance that [he would] be mistaken for 'une amie'", as the club's regulars were often dubbed (192). Hutchins believed that Brassai did not work hard enough to compromise this sense of distance and therefore "perpetrated the trope of queer exoticism" (191). Another source notes that "Brassai titled [one of his photographs] "Lesbian Couple at The Monocle" [see figure 11], suggesting, despite the comfortable comportment, that he also considered the women exotic anthropological material" ("Fat Claude and her Girlfriend").

Wolfgang Tillmans built relations with the people in his photographs in a way not altogether different from Brassai's. Like Brassai, he knew most people he captured in his work and was familiar with the venues that functioned as these groups' social hubs. However, Tillmans has stated—more

explicitly than Brassai ever did—that he seeks to visualize and celebrate authentic human experiences, instead of 'coldly' documenting them for his own interest (Sayej). Tillmans explored photography as a medium that does not necessarily invade its subjects' worlds. The creator of *Loveparade Ku'Damm* (figure 12), Ben de Biel, is an artist who was strongly influenced by Tillmans' work ethic. He stated that the people in this photograph "are who they are and do not try to hide that, even if there is a camera pointed at them" (Kay, translation mine). Tillmans adds that "a club is a big abstraction machine that constantly produces pictures" (Di Liscia). In other words, he believes that visual experiences make up an innate quality of nightlife, and that, if employed correctly, photographs can celebrate this quality, thereby empowering the people who depend on it.



Fig. 12: *Loveparade Ku'Damm* by Ben de Biel (1992).

Besides their techniques and ways of interacting with their subjects, there is another common factor that seems to determine whether or not a photographer casts an empowering look. This factor concerns *explicitness*: to what degree does a photograph directly personify its subjects and nightlife pleasures?

All of the interviewees found Brassai's *Inside Le Monocle* to cast a rather empowering look onto the people visible in it. On the one hand, this had to do with the fact that the photograph visualizes various expressions of pleasure, such as physical touch and laughter. Another empowering element, repeatedly mentioned in interviewees, was the person in the middle of the photograph that is staring directly at the camera. Levi mentioned that "she shows a lot of command", while Zelda said that "she looks sophisticated" and "in control of her own situation", "no matter how long the night has gone on".

In other words, a photograph like this empowers its subjects not just by showing unadulterated expressions of pleasure, but also a sense of control and agency, suggesting that these people can take proud ownership of their experience and behavior.

During Brassai's visits to Chez Suzy, a famous brothel in Paris in the early 1930s, he took several photographs of the establishment's assistant madam. In figure 13, we see her with her body mostly exposed, not only hiding from the camera, but also from herself in the mirror. While, in truth, she was trying to protect her eyes from Brassai's bright camera flash ("Brassai"), the photograph suggests that she internalizes a social position that does not celebrate her identity nor her occupation, even within her own familiar environment. In figure 14, by contrast, she "poses frankly for her portrait", representing herself and her workplace in a proud and self-reliant stance ("Brassai"). This pose might have challenged views held at the time (and even today) towards brothels as 'shameful' places.

Tillmans' nightlife photographs, on the other hand, show very different degrees of 'empowerment': some show explicit expressions of queer intimacy (see figure 6), while others, like *Outside Snax Club*, represent alternative club-goers as a faceless, subordinate herd. All four interviewees noted this diminishing sense of anonymity and felt that *Outside Snax Club* casts a somewhat disempowering look upon his subjects. Ines mentioned that having to wait in a long queue "is not necessarily 'doing something positive'". Because of the lack of faces, Zelda felt that the people in the photograph blended in some sort of "societal park where they are expected to be a certain person". These thoughts indicate a restriction that marginalized people suffer continuously: only finding true expressive freedom in a few private spaces means that in all other spaces, one has to conform to dominant norms.

Having to hide one's identity is also tied up with having to hide one's body. *Outside Snax Club* reinforces this notion, as Zelda already mentioned the lack of bodily representation in the photograph. Some of Tillmans' other works—such as *Nakt* (2004), displaying "a naked woman spreading her legs"; *Philip, close-up III* (2009), a "shot of a naked man, bent over"; and another one showing the inside of someone's throat (Fletcher)—are much more explicit. It is no coincidence that these do not circulate much in common media channels, yet have been selected by Berghain as wall decoration on the 'invisible' club's inside.



Fig. 13: *La soumaîtresse d'un bordel Chez Suzy* by Brassai (1932).



Fig. 14: *Chez Suzy* by Brassai (1932).

#### 4.8 A photograph's journey through other media channels

The example of Tillmans' works exhibited at Berghain shows that a photographer can cast a particular look onto their subjects that either empowers or disempowers them, but *where* and *how* their photographs are then displayed also has a significant effect on questions of empowerment. Discourse is constructed in many moments and places that reach beyond the dancefloor and its representations in photographs. Brassai and Tillmans might have aimed to tell a specific societal story with their work. Nevertheless, they have always had to deal with complicated media landscapes in which countless external channels can appropriate their photographs and twist around their discursive formations.

In order to survive financially, Brassai formalized agreements with many different third parties—from publishers to galleries, advertisers and designers (Silverman). It is vital to question what political agendas such stakeholders follow, and which story they seek to tell about alternative nightlife. One might assume that in an era like the 1930s—when, compared to the present day, notions of social equality were relatively unrefined—a newspaper might have showcased Brassai's photographs with an othering, anthropological eye and the aim to 'report' rather than to empower. At the same time, discourses surrounding nightlife in 1930s Paris can still be reframed in present times. Foam's exhibition in Brassai, shows an ideal example of how museums can shed critical light on social norms and how visual images reflect, reinforce, or contest them.

Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs have also been used by different institutions, all seeking to share different societal critiques. For example, the earlier mentioned C/O Exhibition *No Photos on the Dancefloor!* showcased *Outside Snax Club* in a collection that invited visitors to reflect on the influence of camera devices and social media use on clubbing culture. As such, Tillmans' work was given a new role in a more contemporary discussion that did not exist at the time of the photograph's creation. This exhibition sought to propagate alternative nightlife scenes not only by picturing them in photographs; at night, the gallery became "host to DJs, and audiovisual artists from Berlin's club scene" (Abel-Hirsch). One of the curators, Felix, claimed that it was "very important for the gallery to become a club during the night", as it encouraged people to "to dance, rather than being frozen in front of the work", thereby prompting them "to engage with the work in new ways" (Abel-Hirsch). This goes to show that the discourse that advocates for and empowers marginal nightlife experiences does not only exist in nightlife venues but is instead managed by a diverse array of 'gatekeepers', from bouncers to advertisers, to representatives, from DJs to gallery curators. All of these parties have the means to articulate different 'truths' about what constitutes a meaningful alternative nightlife experience. What helps is that Tillmans himself is still alive and active in the art scene, carrying some control over which institutions exhibit his work, how they exhibit it, and the discussions instigated by it.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to contribute to studies of the urban night, which is still an under-researched and generalized phenomenon. It started with the assumption that urban life more than ever takes place at night, as became clear from studies on the night-time economy. This development has had myriad social consequences: for example, increased regulations have inserted nightlife spaces with a Foucauldian sense of control; and nightlife is more and more catered towards specific identities and framed by distinctive scenes.

In the age of urban entrepreneurialism, cities have found in their nightlife cultures an exceptional 'product' for tourism and city branding. On top of that, digital technologies have intensified the visual culture embedded in nightlife spaces, which has hampered the emotional release and social permissiveness that traditionally defined 'unseen' lifestyles at night.

Alternative spaces have had difficulties adapting to this increasingly mediated and mainstreamed nightlife landscape. In neoliberal times, queer nightlife, in particular, has attracted labels of cosmopolitanism, safety, and trendiness. As tourist destinations, queer spaces need to fulfill expectations of being safe yet risky; close yet distant; authentic yet theatrical. LGBTQ+ people inhabiting these spaces must self-police their behavior in order to sustain their nightlife's attractiveness as touristic sites, survive financially, and live in peaceful co-existence with a surrounding heteronormative world.

Ideally, cities should protect the *heterotopias* that marginalized people find in alternative nightlife spaces; and in order to do so, the academic world must cooperate as well. As an essential first measure, theories of the urban night must step away from merely economic readings of nightlife cultures and instead craft a more detailed understanding of stigmatized groups' lived experiences at night. Such an understanding would help spread awareness amongst countless urban actors regarding the unique value that nightlife has for marginalized groups and LGBTQ+ people in particular. By analyzing photographs by Brassai and Wolfgang Tillmans, this thesis has attempted to contribute to this awareness by contextualizing it in two particular historical settings.

The motivation to do a photography analysis started with a reading of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. This influential book not only explored photography as a particularly urban phenomenon but also elucidated how Western societies have appropriated photographs as 'objects of truth'. Her text therefore also underlined the vital role photography has played in nightlife—both as a looking glass into relatively undocumented spaces, and as a tool that regulates social behaviors.

Out of the many specific visual methods available, I chose to conduct a discourse analysis, following Gillian Rose's methodology guide. Looking for signs of discourse and claims to truth from

different authoritative accounts, two primary photographs, *Inside Le Monocle* by Brassai and *Outside Snax Club* by Wolfgang Tillmans, and various secondary sources were analyzed.

After analyzing these images and context-providing sources, the first key finding was that alternative nightlife spaces exist as sites of resistance against dominant everyday discourses. These dominant discourses repress progressive, non-heteronormative expressions of leisure and disproportionately label marginalized spaces with the negative connotations that the night-time has traditionally attracted. In their response to Brassai and Tillmans' photographs, various sources—the interviewees' responses, cultural scholars, other artists, authors of magazine pieces, and museum commentaries—made a common remark. Namely, the spaces depicted in Brassai and Tillmans' photographs suggest environments where people can be who they want to be and behave as they want to behave. The very fact that multiple sources found this such a mention-worthy observation implies that it is not a default, everyday truth.

The dominant discourse, then, is one of heteronormativity. This ideology negatively affects people's lived experiences in alternative nightlife spaces in different ways. We have seen, for example, that dark spaces of progressive nightclubs and queer nightlife districts cannot always guarantee their regular visitors freedom from abusive behavior (which ranges from inappropriate intimacy to full-on anti-queer violence). Furthermore, nightly spaces and people who spend many of their waking hours at night attract a great deal of moral suspicion. Such suspicions became apparent, for instance, in Brassai's feuds with local authorities or the interviewees' readings of *Outside Snax Club* as a "dingy" and "eerie" environment of seemingly "illegal" nature. The night-time's inhabitants themselves also internalize these discursive assumptions. These internalizations follow, for example, from Brassai's photographs of prostitutes and their customers, in which he depicted them shying away from the camera. Similarly, Tillmans rarely publicly exhibited his most explicit photographs of bodily intimacy, and if he did, needed to adhere to a careful consensual ethic.

The second key finding was that alternative nightlife spaces exist as sites of resistance against these dominant discourses. Inside such spaces, marginalized groups find meaningful experiences in the shape of emotional release, liberated identity performances, and intimate social interactions. The analysis of Brassai and Tillmans' photographs has revealed three discursive assumptions or 'commonly held beliefs' that underlie the production of these spaces.

First, the hedonism that so strongly defines progressive nightlife scenes is an *embodied* experience. Moreover, this experience cannot come into fruition without specific agreed-upon subcultural interests, physical arrangements, and external stimulations that all come together in the inside of a nightclub or bar functioning as *gesamtkunstwerk*. When commenting on *Inside Le Monocle* and *Outside Snax Club* and relating these photographs to their individual experiences of alternative

nightlife, both the interviewees and external sources pointed to the importance of bodily features. From a club or bar's décor to DJs playing electronic music played by specialized DJs, dark dancefloors (only interrupted by stroboscopic lighting), physical contact, dance movements, alcohol- and drug-induced intoxication; all these aspects contribute to a sense of bodily pleasure.

Second, alternative nightlife spaces allow visitors to supersede specific social rules and indulge in an experience of 'letting go'. The interviewees' readings of *Inside Le Monocle* and *Outside Snax Club*, as well as their own experiences at De School, echoed this thought. They explained the excitement of entering a space in which one can express themselves—through, for example, laughter, dancing, or conversation—without being held back by feelings of social awareness. However, their erasure of everyday rules also means that such spaces imposed new rules themselves. For example, the release found in progressive nightclubs in 1990s Berlin went hand in hand with the acceptance that one had to obediently wait in line and submit to the authority of door guards. Similarly, *Inside Le Monocle* and *Outside Snax Club* painted a picture of LGBTQ+ scenes that made their participants adhere to certain fashion expectations.

Third, the value of alternative nightlife spaces depends on subcultural exclusivity and communal familiarity. Whether formalized or unwritten, both Le Monocle and Snax Club strongly defined their target audiences. They mostly based this on sexual orientation but also depended on musical interests or fashion styles. Various texts and interviewee responses concerning the two primary photographs articulated that one could not simply participate in these nightlife scenes without sharing these different identity markers.

In short, the two key findings were that dominant discourses negatively label and affect marginalized people and their nightlife scenes. The second was that alternative nightlife spaces resist this dominance with discourses of embodied hedonism, renegotiated social rules, and subcultural exclusivity. From this, a few significant conclusions follow.

The first conclusion is that, internally, alternative nightlife spaces reinforce inclusivity and exclusivity at the same time. We have seen that the environments captured by Brassai and Tillmans in many ways offer safe and liberating havens that embrace oppressed queer identities. However, at the same time, neither environments welcomed a broad spectrum of identities and instead provided particularly performative spaces for just two specific groups: respectively, homosexual women and men. By extension, any marginalized identities that fell outside these two categories had no invitation to the nightly joys of Le Monocle and Snax Club. Also, there was no guarantee that *every* lesbian felt comfortable at Le Monocle or that *every* gay man felt comfortable at Snax Club. In other words, every nightlife space designed for a particular performance of a particular social identity will inextricably find

itself entangled with exclusions, both with regards to other social groups and within the community itself.

This 'inevitability of exclusion' points to a yet unresolved debate: how can we design alternative nightlife spaces for a broader range of social groups without hampering the 'private' and 'safe' feeling people need to express their identities fully? We have seen that, in today's increasingly visible and commercial nightlife landscape, many alternative spaces are fully absorbed and obliterated by mainstream settings. However, there are also examples of nightlife venues, like De School, that have rather seen mainstream and alternative scenes come together. De School suggests a question for future research: does such a mix infuse progressive, alternative spaces with a mainstream, heteronormative, and Foucauldian sense of policing? Or does taking part in alternative nightlife 'educate' non-marginalized people on the social norms and lived experiences of oppressed people, perhaps enabling them to contribute to queer celebration and empowerment?

Furthermore, if a socially just mix between mainstream and alternative nightlife can exist, a follow-up question arises with regards to the implications of its success. In an economy that tends to turn 'diversity' into a trendy product, it would be tricky for a multi-encompassing, alternative space that gives all sorts of social identities a happy nightlife experience not to grow popular and 'mainstream'. When this happens, would it inevitably mark the loss of such a space's residual atmosphere? Would it destroy the intimacy and confidentiality that is so important for marginalized people's nightlife escapades in the first place? And if this is the case, how could a 'mixed' nightlife space avoid this?

As we have seen, De School, which had to close its doors in July 2020, suffered greatly from this very paradox. Its status as "the most progressive club in The Netherlands" undoubtedly popularized it to a much wider public than just the LGBTQ+ community. As a result, those in search of an LGBTQ+ friendly environment sometimes did no longer feel as safe and free in the club as they did during its early days. This change likely caused the complaints that so dramatically damaged the club's reputation. One could say, ultimately, that the club market its message of freedom, tolerance, and progressiveness so well, that it succumbed under its very publicity and success.

This story ties into the thesis' second conclusion: that hiddenness and invisibility are the original conditions from which meaningful alternative nightlife spaces arise. Marginalized people's retreat into peripheral spaces is a response to the heteronormative taboos imposed on their stigmatized identities. This retreat is never a voluntary decision: as minorities are discriminated against by everyday society, they have no choice but to recede to enclosed settings in order to express themselves freely.

However, paradoxically, marginalized spaces are also being robbed of these conditions. Since the 1970s, the 'creative city' has included marginalized cultures in the core of its idea of successful urban

development. While this new urbanism has made these cultures more and more visible to the outside world, it has done so in a superficial and appropriative way. Hiddenness and invisibility are becoming increasingly fundamental for marginalized groups and their nightlife spaces' prosperity, but these same conditions are simultaneously getting harder to sustain.

This problem poses some interesting questions. First, what can different urban actors do to support and protect hidden, alternative nightlife spaces? Is this condition always a response from subcultures at the 'bottom' against today's increasingly visual nightlife landscape? Would any involvement with organizations at the 'top', whether private corporations or city authorities, overexpose such spaces to a mainstream landscape? Or could larger organizations and city authorities actively contribute to the creation and preservation of niche, obscure and avant-gardist spaces? And if so, how?

Another question is: if, in order to be culturally meaningful, alternative nightlife spaces need to remain unseen, how can these spaces advocate their importance to other parties? Can private, secluded celebration and hedonism ever be synonymous with empowerment in a broader urban context? How can such hidden scenes send a compelling political message into the outside world without compromising their 'secrecy'? Furthermore, should this even be an objective for small nightlife venues to pursue?

Wolfgang Tillmans was undoubtedly optimistic about such questions. Using his authority as a photographer and political activist, he showed that photography offers a unique tool for exposing 'inside' experiences to the outside world as a way of redefining everyday norms in a way that empowers marginalized people. In a way, he tapped into an extraordinary character of photographs that was already theorized by Sontag: they are untouchable objects and confront the world with realities more confidently and powerfully than when these realities have to expose themselves *directly*. "From being "out there," the world comes to be "inside" photographs", Sontag wrote (63). A photograph propagates a particular time and place in a way that makes it "aesthetically indestructible" (62). Despite the passage of time, they will always be "taken to be pieces of reality" and will always have the "authority of a document" and "the raw record" (58). When captured in a photograph—and exhibited in the right setting with the right commentary—marginalized behaviors cannot be made vulnerable, diminished, altered, or repressed: the viewer simply has to deal with it.

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