Love Making Homosexual Bodies? 20th Century Perspectives

Benno Gammerl
Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, gammerl@mpib-berlin.mpg.de
22nd Congress of the ICHS at Jinan
Session „Emotions in Bodies and Spaces“, theme day „Historicizing Emotions“

„und, und da ich mit mir selber nicht, äh, im reinen war, war das, war der kuss das letzte, was ich
also dann (.) zur, zur, (.) zur anpassung noch gema-, oder zur, dass ich mich akzeptiert habe.“

„and, and as i hadn’t come, er, to terms with myself, was, the kiss was the final thing that i then
did as well in order (.) to, to, (.) adapt, or to, that i accepted myself. “

This passage is from my interview with Mr. Kuhn who was born in a small South German Town
in 1938 and lived as a self-identified gay man in a large North German city during the time of our
conversation in February 2009. His narrative focuses very much on the long and winding road
that led him to the establishment of a fully-fledged, as it were, gay identity in spite of the adverse
circumstances that he encountered when coming of age in a very heteronormative environment
in the 1950s. Interestingly bodily practices play a major role in this story. Important steps on his
way to „accepting“ his homosexuality are marked by his performing certain forms of physical
intimacy with other men. Somewhat surprisingly, he describes kissing as the apogee of this
lengthy process. He had for quite some time been engaged in different same-sex practices when
he became 30 in the late 1960s, but he had not yet dared to kiss another man. He considered
kissing as the ultimate step, as the moment of no return, as the unmistakable sign of being gay.
Due to his upbringing, the expectations of his parents and his homophobic surroundings, Mr.
Kuhn was not willing, so his reasoning goes, to admit to himself and to others that he was really
gay. Thus he only performed what were in his opinion minor forms of same-sex intercourse that
allowed him to maintain a heterosexual identity. Simultaneously he was convinced that kissing
was appropriate for heterosexual and married couples only. This mindset explains the utter

1 Mr. Kuhn, int. 1, seq. 266. This is from a series of 32 oral history interviews that I did for my research project on
homosexuality and emotional life in rural West Germany between 1960 and 1990 with men loving men and women
loving women born between 1935 and 1970. This research is primarily interested in the change of emotional patterns
and practices accompanying the gradual emancipation of lesbians and gays or the normalization of homosexualities
since the 1970s. I conducted two interviews with every respondent, a biographic-narrative (int. 1) and a semi-
structured (int. 2) one of about three hours each. The continuous numbering of sequences (seq.) marks the specific
location of each passage in the transcript. In the following I quote my own translations from the German original.
astonishment that befell him, when a friend of his whom he met in front of the Amsterdam opera house in the late 1960s, kissed him “passionately“ on his lips.\(^2\) Such a public kiss, Mr. Kuhn says, would not have been possible in Germany at that time, but things were obviously different in the Netherlands.

This example is interesting for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it shows that certain intimate practices, sometimes very specific ones, can turn a body into a homosexual one. Love is in this sense indeed making homosexual bodies, as my title claims. The fact that according to Mr. Kuhn’s account the kiss is the ultimate gesture that constitutes a gay identity, while one can practice other forms of intercourse without having to consider oneself as gay, is also reminiscent of the formula MSM for men having sex with men. This shorthand was introduced in the context of global HIV prevention policies in order to ease the communication with men who were engaging in same-sex practices without describing themselves as gay. This hints at a wide variety of patterns of intimacy – especially, yet obviously not only outside the so-called Western countries – that do not quite fit the Eurocentric demand that one’s sexual orientation either has to be homo- or heterosexual.\(^3\) It also further supports the claim that only certain gestures of love actually make homosexual bodies.

Secondly, what meanings different actresses and actors ascribe to particular gestures or practices of intimacy and what moral norms they thereby employ is historically and culturally specific. Mr. Kuhn, for example, thought that kissing was only for heterosexual couples. That was the emotional standard or the feeling rule he was taught from early on and that he grew up with in Southern Germany in the 1940s and 1950s. Of course this rule is everything, but universal.\(^4\) Just think of the brotherly kiss between priests or socialists, the kiss between male friends within romanticism or the kiss between close kin in ancient Rome that enabled male relatives to ascertain whether their sisters, daughters or nieces had been drinking alcohol. Yet as crucial and interesting these socio-cultural patterns may be – especially from a history of emotions perspective –, they alone do not suffice to grasp the intricate phenomenon of feeling in its multi-faceted complexity. Therefore I want to direct your attention to yet another point.

The narrative of Mr. Kuhn, thirdly and finally, also shows that bodies can sometimes make love without their occupants, as it were, consciously being aware of it. This is the second meaning my title alludes to, namely that it is at times rather the bodies than the minds of actresses and actors that turn them into lovers. Several of my interviewees emphasize such moments when they were

\(^2\) Mr. Kuhn, int. 1, seq. 182.
\(^3\) For an analysis of MSM and gay identity politics in China see Hongwei Bao: Queering/Querying Cosmopolitanism: Queer Spaces in Shanghai, in: Culture Unbound 4 (2012), 97-120.
experiencing bodily arousals or attractions that they could neither clearly express nor explain and that more or less unwillingly propelled them to perform certain intimate gestures. They sensed that something about them was not quite right or simply different, but they could not really name it. They simply lacked the language. Mr. Kuhn describes such an experience when he talks about a tutor 20 years his senior whom he had met during a three week long vocational training away from his home in 1956, when he was 18 years old. After returning he somehow sensed that he was longing for this man. „I was a-a-awfully confused, (.) because I didn’t really know w-what happened to me. […] when I recall this now, er, I have, er, I think, well, that w-., well, that was t-the, that was very clear, but back then I was u-utterly confused […] because I was not at all able to (.) sort out my feelings. I think then I (.) didn’t really know yet that I, that I, that I am gay.”

In this paper I want to argue that histories of emotions need to take into account both dimensions of feeling that I just mentioned, i.e. their socio-cultural structuredness according to certain rules as well as their visceral spontaneity and their indeterminate ambiguity that can move actresses and actors to experience emotions and perform practices that go against the emotional standards and moral norms of the societies in which they live. In the following section I will briefly sketch two different strands of research, each of which underlines one of these dimensions, namely the constructionist approach emphasizing the structuredness of feelings and the affect theoretical one highlighting their spontaneity instead. Against the background of this antagonism I will ultimately argue for following approaches that allow for considering the structured and the spontaneous dimension of feelings simultaneously. Focusing on spaces and on bodies, as I will demonstrate in the second and third section of this paper respectively, lends itself perfectly to a research strategy that aims for offering vistas on precisely these middling grounds, as it were, between the expectable and the inexplicable. By way of conclusion, I will indicate what such a perspective on spaces, bodies and emotions implies for our understanding of the history of homosexualities in the 20th century.

Between constructionist structuredness and affect theoretical spontaneity

Histories of emotions have so far often emphasized constructionist positions, thereby focusing on emotional standards and following the lead of anthropological works that highlighted the cultural particularity of emotional patterns and practices. This approach is often intimately

---

5 Mr. Kuhn, int. 1, seq. 6.
intertwined with a cognitive bias that highlights the evaluative character of emotional phenomena and employs notions from psychological appraisal theories. In contradistinction to beliefs that long dominated Western thought, this approach does not oppose emotions to rational deliberations, but rather views them as a specific kind of thinking that contains value judgments about the world. This cognitivist and constructionist bias of historical emotion research is understandable for at least two reasons. Firstly, defining emotions as in a way rational was a necessary precondition for bringing them within the purview of academic history writing. It ennobled feelings and turned them into an object that serious historians could legitimately study. Secondly, the constructionist stance allowed scholars to enquire into how specific social, economic and cultural conditions shaped emotional patterns and practices. Thus, it was possible to link histories of emotion with broader developments and to explain emotional changes as a function of wider historical shifts.

Along these lines, I have argued that the de-criminalization of consensual sex between adult men in West Germany in 1969 triggered or contributed to shifts in emotional behaviors within a homosexual context. These changes, I would claim, unfolded around at least three dimensions: falling in love patterns shifted from an emphasis on inexplicable suddenness to one on a comprehensible step-by-step process, intergenerational and hierarchical relationship models were replaced by egalitarian ones, and shame driven attempts at hiding one’s homosexuality gave way to public displays of gay pride. Yet as intriguing and important as such accounts are, they can also be considered one-sided and simplifying. Does a mere change in the law suffice to initiate such wide-ranging shifts in emotional patterns and practices? And do emotions themselves not play a major part in bringing about such legal and socio-cultural changes? In other words: Is the story actually not much more complicated?

If one takes these objections seriously, one soon realizes that it does not suffice to show that social and cultural conditions impact emotional patterns and practices. It is rather paramount to also take into account, firstly, how emotions can trigger socio-cultural changes and, secondly, that viewing feelings as mere reproductions of linguistic models and cultural patterns strips the phenomenon of some of its most exciting aspects. These very aspects have been foregrounded by affect theoretic approaches that emphasize the bodily, unruly and non-conscious character...
of affective streams that run, as it were, through individual bodies, thereby potentially sweeping them into unintended directions and beyond the normative grid of socially approved behaviors.\footnote{Brian Massumi: Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Durham: Duke University Press 2002.\footnote{Eve-Kosofsky Sedgwick: Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, Durham: Duke University Press 2003.}}

This view doubts not only the cognitivist rationality of emotions, but also the constructionist claim that they are comprehensively structured by societal standards and rules. At the same time it allows for grasping those moments in the narratives of my interviewees where they describe their confused and inarticulate feelings, their sensing that something strange was going on, although they did not have an appropriate formula at their disposal to explain what that exactly was. From this vantage point not yet clearly verbalizable „structures of feeling“ or non-conforming „affect aliens“ can be viewed as disrupting the given order and enabling the emergence of unintended and unforeseeable alternatives.\footnote{Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003 [1977], 128-135. Sara Ahmed: Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects), in: Scholar and Feminist Online, http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm, 2010 (accessed on 14 May 2015).}

This version of an affect theoretical perspective already paves the way for an approach that navigates the opposition between an emphasis on spontaneity and one on structuredness, as it places the unexpected and inexplicable affect in between two different systems of intelligibility. Indeterminate feelings thus facilitate escapes from an established emotional regime and can simultaneously contribute to the emergence of new emotional styles. Mr. Kuhn’s unclear feelings of longing for another man can accordingly be considered as indicators or catalysts of his developing a new form of gay identity. This interpretation thus largely corresponds to the claim that emotions are neither independent of linguistic and cultural patterns nor completely reducible to them.\footnote{Deborah C. Gould: On Affect and Protest, in: Ann Cvetkovich et al. (eds.): Political Emotions, London: Routledge 2010, 18-44.}

It also fits the assumption that the experience and the articulation of feelings are linked by ongoing feedback loops that always hold the potential of unforeseen outcomes.\footnote{William M. Reddy: The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 63-111.} It is exactly at this intersection between structuredness and spontaneity, I claim, where this session’s focus on spaces and bodies proves to be most fruitful and productive.

Regulating and enabling dimensions of spaces

Within the literature on spaces and emotions one can also discern constructionist from affect theoretical approaches. The former claim that particular feeling rules are enforced in different
settings, e.g. in work or in leisure places, or that some environments are specifically designed to elicit certain feelings. In more general terms such approaches assume that actresses and actors adopt specific emotional styles when they move through or inhabit certain spaces. In this sense the distinction between public and private realms has for a long time been and still is absolutely crucial when it comes to the question where love can be expressed in which ways – not only, but especially within a homosexual context. For this reason the publicity of the entrée to the opera house in Amsterdam was a decisive factor that turned the passionate kiss on Mr. Kuhn’s lips into such a shocking experience for him. And even though one can argue that public displays of same-sex affection have come to be more and more common over the last couple of decades – at least in certain parts of most Western countries –, the private realm is still considered the privileged space for more bodily expressions of love by most gay men. In this vein, Mr. Pohl who was born in 1956 and lives together with his partner in a small village since 1977 stresses that he and his partner had „always behaved discreetly“. „We do not sit here in front of the house on the bench snogging each other, but neither do our neighbors do this“, he says. Entirely comme il faut these people hide their intimate gestures in the privacy of their homes.

While constructionist approaches tend to stress these regulating features of spaces, their affect theoretical counterparts rather emphasize the enabling potential of spatial constellations. They view the latter as transsubjective forces and energies „that are visceral“ and that can „propel bodies“ in unintended ways, thus allowing for the unexpected to happen and for new structures of feeling to emerge. In Mr. Kuhn’s narrative a gay bar or club in a nearby large city constituted such an enabling space. He first visited it when he was around 20 years old. This place, he says, „has SOMEhow magically attracted me“ and „i was MYSELF shocked“ because of this attraction. But while „others went on holidays with their, er, girl friends“, „i drove secretly to d. and went into that bar, after having walked past it a couple of times at previous occasions, and entered with my heart quickening, because i wanted to know what actually happens in there“.

---

16 Joseph Chytry: Walt Disney and the Creation of Emotional Environments: Interpreting Walt Disney’s Oeuvre from the Disney Studios to Disneyland, CalArts, and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), in: Rethinking History 16 (2012), 2, 259-78.
19 Mr. Pohl, int. 1, seq. 166.
20 Mr. Pohl, int. 2, seq. 652.
22 Mr. Kuhn, int. 1, seq. 260.
In Mr. Pohl’s narrative a gay disco that he visited in his early twens in the late 1970s took on the role of such an enabling space. With its assemblage of bodies and things as well as with its visual, auditory, tactual and olfactory qualities this spatial constellation enabled him to experience feelings that he had hitherto not known. „there were at least 100 gay men in this space, dancing, great music, fantastic atmosphere […] and i thought: that’s absolutely fabulous here […] it was like a window opening up […] and i thought: amazing that there is so many of us“.”23 It was in this disco – back then a relatively recent form of a gay-only space – that Mr. Pohl for the first time experienced a sense of belonging to a gay community and enjoyed his queerness. There he also met his later partner and fell in love with him. Thus, the intimate public of the disco space indeed facilitated feelings that common societal standards hindered or even prohibited.

Yet again this is not the whole story. For such spaces not only enabled the transgression of societal norms, but they simultaneously also contributed to the establishment of alternative emotional rules and patterns. Thus, the feeling of being part of a larger community as well as the different modes of flirting with other men that Mr. Pohl practiced or trained in the disco were actually part and parcel of a broader gay identity politics and a wide-spread gay life-style that emerged in West Germany in the 1970s. In this vein, spaces can indeed enable unforeseen emotional experiences, yet they partake in the business of shaping these new feelings in specific ways at the same time. Thus, focusing on emotions and spaces actually allows for gaining access to the middling grounds between constructionist and affect theoretical perspectives.24

Bodies between openings and closures

Similar vistas can be generated when one puts bodies center stage. On the one hand, the crucial role that unclear bodily and visceral sensations – like Mr. Kuhn’s longing for his tutor – play in various narratives as generators of unforeseeable outcomes supports the affect theoretical claim that indeterminate feelings hold an enabling potential and allow for the transgression of given emotional regimes or moral norms. Yet at the same time the body is by no means always resisting societal expectations. To the contrary and more along constructionist lines, by complying with certain ideal types and by practicing a specific habitus or an established pattern of comportment bodies are equally involved in the stabilization and the reproduction of social and cultural order. Therefore several scholars have tried to develop ways in which both dimensions – the non-conforming and the restraining capacities of the body – can be aligned with each other.25

23 Mr. Pohl, int. 1, seq. 176.
24 For a similar perspective see Margrit Pernau: Space and Emotion: Building to Feel, in: History Compass 12 (2014), 7, 541-49.
That bodies did indeed follow certain historically specific prescriptions can for example be inferred from the images and the lonely-heart ads published in magazines addressing a male homosexual audience in West Germany from the 1950s through to the 1990s. The earlier decades saw primarily depictions of slim adolescents – often following ancient models – and of muscular young bodies that emulated the physique culture thriving in the US in these years. Simultaneously, as especially the self-descriptions contained in the personal ads show, the bodily appearance of a decent and inconspicuous masculinity was highly popular. After 1970 the hypermasculinity of the gay macho and gender-non-conforming images of the bearded fairy came to the fore instead. This development went hand in hand with a proliferation of multi-faceted self-designations in the ads, ranging from chaps with moustaches to affectionate boys.

These different bodily ideal types corresponded with specific models of same-sex love. The adolescents and young athletes depicted in the 1950s and 1960s for example referred to an intergenerational relationship model – supposedly inherited from Greek antiquity – that had been prominent within transnational homophile circles since the late 19th century. Thus, whichever of these body images an individual employed, it thereby also bought into a specific emotional pattern that privileged certain feelings and discouraged others. Mr. Kuhn clearly attended to the rules of a decent and inconspicuous masculinity and it was precisely this habitus that made him believe that kissing another man was disgusting and impossible for him. Yet while he was thus embodying the heteronormative prescriptions of his environment, he was still sensing on a bodily level those strange feelings of longing for another man that he could neither deny nor express. It is exactly this double-sided nature of the corporeal between foreclosing and opening-up certain possibilities that an emotional history of the body needs to attend to.

Bodies and Spaces as agents of emotional change

Having shown that bodies as well as spaces can contribute to both, the stabilization and the transformation of emotional standards and regimes, the question why unclear visceral sensations and enabling spatial constellations trigger the emergence of new structures of feeling at certain historical moments, still remains to be answered. If bodies and spatial settings are continuously interacting with socio-cultural norms and conditions in a mutual and dynamic fashion, why does this interplay only sometimes generate larger-scale political and societal effects?


It is certainly no coincidence that the shocking kiss that Mr. Kuhn received in Amsterdam and the visit to a gay disco that served as Mr. Pohl’s eye-opener, that both these events took place by and large around 1970. Around this time, I would argue, different developments helped creating an over-all constellation that allowed the singular experiences of Mr. Kuhn and Mr. Pohl to become parts of a larger shift that ultimately resulted in the establishment of a new gay identity and emotionality which was in turn partaking in a broader caesura in the history of sexualities. 27

Among the factors that enabled this change I would count pertinent events like the so-called sex-wave of the 1960s and the de-criminalization of consensual sex between adult men in 1969 as well as the establishment and the consecutive crisis of the welfare-state and the impacts of the student and the second feminist movement.

This all-too brief overview already indicates that the time around 1970 was predominantly a caesura in the Western history of sexualities that actually owed a certain share of its impact to transnational interactions between developments in the US, where sexual dissidents took to rioting in New York’s Christopher Street in 1969, in France, where the front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire was founded in 1971, and in West Germany where the radical gay movement formed in the early 1970s as well. These gay liberation movements contributed decisively to the creation of new spaces like the gay disco where Mr. Pohl enjoyed his queerness for the very first time. They also increased the likelihood of public same-sex kisses like the one that happened to Mr. Kuhn in Amsterdam. Broader political and social developments thus furthered the emergence of new structures of feeling. Yet, I would argue, these movements were in turn pushed and propelled by the fact that a critical mass of people came across enabling spaces and were challenged by indeterminate bodily sensations at the same time. It was precisely this interplay between bodies, spaces and wider societal processes that initiated a major emotional change among men loving men around 1970.

This change entailed – at least in the self-portrayal of the gay liberation movement that often tends to paint its homophile precursors in rather dark colors – a shift from shame to pride, from humiliation to anger, from intergenerational to egalitarian relationship models and from hasty sexual encounters in filthy spaces to passionate kisses in public. The perspective I propose brings exactly these emotional dimensions into view that characterized the caesura in the history of homosexualities around 1970. It furthermore also demonstrates that this change was not only triggered by political and societal developments, but also depended on their interacting in decisive ways with bodies and spaces.