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Arcades and space invasion. Moroccan-Dutch young people negotiating digital spatial power relations

Passagen und die Invasion des Raumes. Wie marokkanisch-niederländische Jugendliche digitale räumliche Machtverhältnisse überwinden

Koen Leurs

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht digitale räumliche Machtverhältnisse anhand der Nutzung von Internetplattformen durch marokkanisch-niederländische Jugendliche. Der dominanten utopischen Vorstellung von den digitalen medialen Möglichkeiten wird ein Fokus auf digitale räumliche Vorurteile und ihre Subversion gegenübergestellt. Digitale Plattformen sind hierarchische Territorien, ungleiche Geographien, die durch Symbole und diskursive Grenzen markiert sind. Für diese digitalen Räume sind bestimmte Idealtypen und Mehrheitsmeinungen kennzeichnend. Es stellt sich die Frage, wie Personen, die sich auf der falschen Seite dieser Schablonen und kollaborativ entwickelten Normen befinden, diese Räume besetzen und von innen transformieren. Genauer diskutiert werden fünf Strategien der Invasion: das Anfechten der Ablehnung im Offline-Raum, das digitale Nachahmen des Niederländisch-Seins, das Abstecken eines eigenen Raumes, das Mobilisieren des Kapitals einer hybriden Jugendkultur sowie die öffentliche Verbreitung des distribuierten hypertextuellen Selbst.

Der digitale Raum bildet den Erklärungsrahmen für meine Ausführungen zu einem neuen Weg, wie über digitale räumliche Hierarchien und ihre Subversion nachgedacht werden kann. Grundlage ist meine empirische Erforschung der Identitätskonstruktion marokkanisch-niederländischer Jugendlicher mit Hilfe digitaler Räume wie Internetforen, Instant Messaging, sozialen Netzwerken und Video-Portalen. Die Argumentation ist folgendermaßen strukturiert: Ich werde eine Analogie zwischen Passagen um 1850, wie sie von Walter Benjamin beschrieben werden, und Internetapplikationen des frühen 21. Jahrhunderts wie YouTube und Facebook herstellen, um die ungleich verteilten Möglichkeiten für die gemeinschaftliche Produktion von nutzergenerierten Inhalten zu kritisieren. In der Folge übertrage ich das Konzept der „Rauminvasoren“ – ursprünglich entwickelt von Nirmal Purwar (2004) –, um zu hinterfragen, was passiert, wenn Angehörige von Minderheiten in Räume eindringen, die nicht für sie entworfen worden sind oder Positionen enthalten, denen sie nicht entsprechen.

Die Felderhebungen wurden im Kontext von *Wired Up* durchgeführt, einem kollaborativen, internationalen Forschungsprojekt, das an der Schnittstelle zwischen Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften arbeitet und darauf abzielt, die facettenreichen Implikationen des Gebrauchs digitaler Medien unter jugendlichen Migrantinnen und Migranten zu verstehen. Wir kombinieren eine groß angelegte Fragebogenstudie mit von der Ethnographie beeinflusster Feldforschung, die Online- und Offline-Räume überspannt und halbstrukturierte persönliche Interviews, Tiefeninterviews und das Sammeln digitaler Daten beinhaltet. Auf diese Weise verbinden wir unterschiedlich lokalisierte und situierte, aber komplementäre ‚partielle Blickwinkel‘ (Haraway 1991, S. 183). Für dieses

Projekt wurde eine groß angelegte Untersuchung entwickelt. Insgesamt haben 1.408 junge Personen, die durch sieben Sekundarschulen in fünf niederländischen Städten kontaktiert wurden, in Klassenzimmern oder Computerräumen den Fragebogen ausgefüllt. In diesem Beitrag werden Daten von 344 marokkanisch-niederländischen Schülerinnen und Schülern berücksichtigt, die sich an der Untersuchung beteiligt haben; diese Gruppe besteht aus 181 Mädchen und 163 Jungen. 30 ausgewählte Schülerinnen und Schüler im Alter zwischen 12 und 16 wurden dazu eingeladen, an der zweiten Studie teilzunehmen, die aus Tiefeninterviews bestand. Um auch 17- und 18-Jährige einzuschließen und die Gruppe der Informanten breiter zu fächern, wurden mit Schneeballmethoden 13 marokkanisch-niederländische Jugendliche kontaktiert. Insgesamt wurden 43 Tiefeninterviews mit 43 marokkanisch-niederländischen Personen durchgeführt, davon 21 Mädchen und 22 Jungen im Alter zwischen 12 und 18 Jahren.

Mit einer Gesamtzahl von 355.883 Personen machen Menschen marokkanisch-niederländischer Herkunft 2,1 Prozent der niederländischen Gesamtbevölkerung (16,6 Millionen) aus. In den 1960er Jahren als Gastarbeiter gekommen, besteht die marokkanisch-niederländische Gemeinde nun zur Hälfte aus Personen, die in den Niederlanden geboren wurden. Marokkanisch-niederländischen Jugendlichen wird in der Medienberichterstattung, in den politischen Entscheidungen der Regierung und in der Forschung große Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Sie werden systematisch stigmatisiert und von rechten Journalisten und Politikern ‚übersichtbar‘ gemacht, indem sie als Anti-Bürger und Bedrohung der niederländischen Gesellschaft dargestellt werden. Frühere wissenschaftliche Forschung fokussierte vor allem auf abweichendes und nicht normgerechtes Verhalten. Die vorliegende Studie wendet sich von dieser früheren Forschung ab, indem die Alltagserfahrungen der marokkanisch-niederländischen Jugend berücksichtigt werden.

Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts kamen unter anderem in Brüssel, Bologna und Paris Arkaden oder Fußgängerpassagen auf (frz. ‚passages‘). Historisch betrachtet referiert der Begriff Passagen auf Korridore, die für Fußgänger zwei Straßen miteinander verbinden. Anders als öffentliche Räume sind diese Passagen, mit einem Glas-, Eisen- oder Ziegeldach versehen, an beiden Enden offen und versammeln eine Reihe von kommerziellen Einrichtungen (Geschäfte, Cafés, Restaurants) auf engem Raum. Internetplattformen können als eine gegenwärtige Parallele zu diesen Einkaufspassagen gesehen werden.

Die Rolle der Passage ist doppeldeutig, wie Benjamin erläutert: “during sudden rainshowers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unprepared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade – one from which the merchants also benefit” (1999, S. 31). Auf ähnliche Weise haben Theoretiker der kritischen Medienwissenschaft und des Feminismus für eine mittlere Position zwischen den Perspektiven utopischer Träume und dystopischer Albträume plädiert, die in den Arbeiten über digitales Embodiment und digitale Identifikation dominant waren. Ich schlage vor, die Identitätsperformativität als an sozio-technologische, materiell-verkörpernte und imaginiert-diskursive räumliche Relationen gebunden, aber nicht völlig durch diese Relationen determiniert zu betrachten. Da Applikationen des Web 2.0 bzw. der sozialen Medien mehr Nutzerinnen und Nutzern ermöglichen, online präsent zu sein und aktive Vertreter ihrer eigenen Repräsentationen zu werden, zielt diese Mittelposition darauf ab, Ungleichheiten im Beitrag verschiedener Menschen zur digitalen Kultur zu erkennen.

Die Ergebnisse der Feldstudie illustrieren, dass digitale Räume sowohl durch Algorithmen als auch von durchschnittlichen niederländischen Nutzerinnen und Nutzern als präskriptive, normative Räume konstruiert werden. Zum Beispiel zeigen die Vorschläge der Autovervollständigung bei Suchen über Google zum holländischen Wort für *Marokkaner* („Marokkanen“), dass marokka-

nisch-niederländische Jungen als der westlichen Gesellschaft fremd und als potenziell gefährliche islamistische Fundamentalisten, Straßenterroristen oder Diebe abgelehnt werden, während besonders Mädchen, die ein Kopftuch tragen, als entweder unemanzipiert, rückständig oder durch die muslimische Kultur unterdrückt konstruiert werden. Auch die Bildsuche setzt diese dominanten Stereotype einer aggressiven maskulinen Straßenkultur der marokkanisch-niederländischen Jungen fort. Die Informanten schreiben durchschnittlichen weißen niederländischen Nutzerinnen und Nutzern zu, dass diese bestimmte Normen und Erwartungen konstruieren und ethnisch und religiös andersartige Menschen z.B. durch diskriminierende Kommentare zu YouTube-Videos oder auf Profilen in sozialen Netzwerken ausschließen.

Digitale Räume sind also nicht bloß stumme, neutrale und externe Kulissen der Identitätsbildung, sondern distinktive expressive Kulturen, die voll von Ideologien, Hierarchien und Politik sind. Wenn sich Angehörige von Minderheiten gegen den Mainstream durchsetzen müssen, werden sie zu „Rauminvasoren“ (Puwar 2004) von Online-Territorien. In der Folge werden fünf Strategien der Rauminvasion beschrieben. Die erste Strategie bezieht sich auf eine Website (www.geweigerd.nl, für verweigerten Eintritt), auf der Jugendliche aus ethnischen Minderheiten Geschichten über die diskriminierenden Taktiken von Clubs und Diskotheken publizieren konnten. Die Website wurde populär, nachdem ein marokkanisch-niederländischer Rapper einen Song über sie schrieb. Die zweite Invasionsstrategie betrifft Aktivitäten, die durch die Imitation der weißen niederländischen Mehrheitskultur erworben werden. Während unseres Interviews erläuterte der 15-jährige Ryan, dass er beim Computerspielen und auf seiner persönlichen Profilseite in einem sozialen Netzwerk als niederländischer Junge durchgeht. Das dritte Beispiel betrifft die Aneignung einer persönlichen digitalen Nische online. Forendiskussionsseiten wie www.Marokko.nl ermöglichen es marokkanisch-niederländischen Jugendlichen, zur Mehrheit zu werden. Auf solchen Seiten können sie ungestört familiäre, religiöse und neoliberale Erwartungen der niederländischen Jugendkultur der Mehrheitsgesellschaft abhandeln. Interkulturelle Begegnungen widerspiegelnd, geht es in der vierten Strategie um die Hybridisierung verschiedener Loyalitäten. Beispielsweise demonstrieren die angezeigten Namen in Systemen für Instant Messaging, wie globale Hip-Hop-Jugendkultur verwendet wird, um eine Affinität zu Marokko auszudrücken. Die fünfte und letzte Invasionsstrategie betrifft die Artikulation eines hypertextuellen Selbst. Durch die Mitgliedschaft in Gruppen im niederländischen sozialen Netzwerk *Hyves* kann man verschiedene kleine Visualisierungen auf seiner persönlichen Seite publizieren. Das besprochene Beispiel zeigt die Vielfalt der persönlichen kulturellen Bewegungen von Midia, einem 13-jährigen Mädchen. Anstatt die migrantischen Kulturen geradlinig fortzusetzen, transformiert sie diese aktiv im Kontext der dominanten Jugendkultur, in der sie aufwächst.

Alles in allem vermittelt dieser Beitrag, dass digitale Räume am besten als Teil der alltäglichen, realen, ungleichen Machtverhältnisse betrachtet werden, wo Offline- und Online-Sphären einander Bedeutung einflößen. Die Optik der Passagen und Rauminvasoren wurden weiterentwickelt, um räumliche Voreingenommenheiten und ihre Subversion empirisch aufzuspüren und theoretisch aufzuarbeiten. Dies ist dringend notwendig, um die dominante utopische Vorstellung von den Möglichkeiten der digitalen Medien zu durchkreuzen.

Introduction

“These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 32)

Taking digital space as an explanatory focus, in this chapter I explore new ways of thinking about digital spatial hierarchies and their subversion by drawing on my empirical research on Moroccan-Dutch youths’ identity construction across digital spaces such as Internet forums, instant messaging, social networking sites and video sharing platforms. The argument is structured as follows. I will draw an analogy between mid 19th century pedestrian passageways as described by Walter Benjamin and early 21st century Internet applications like YouTube and Facebook to criticize uneven opportunities for peer-production. Subsequently I translate the concept of “space invaders” developed by Nirmal Purwar (2004) to scrutinize what happens when minority subjects enter spaces that have not been designed for them or that hold positions that they do not meet. This will be done by reflecting on how digital hierarchies are installed through the sociotechnical and algorithmic cultures of Google search auto-suggestions and elaborating how user majorities can serve to exclude ethnic minority subjects. In the final section I present examples of how Moroccan-Dutch youth can become “space invaders”.

The context of the Netherlands

Consisting of 355.883 people, those of Moroccan-Dutch descent make up some 2.1 percent of the total Dutch population of 16.6 million. Of this group, 47 percent migrated to the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards as guest workers, while the other 53 per cent were born in the Netherlands, after their parents had migrated (CBS, 2011). The majority of guest workers who arrived in the Netherlands originate from the Rif area in northern Morocco. They come from places like Al Hoceima, Berkane, Nador and Oujda and their surroundings where a Berber language is spoken. Currently, 75% of Dutch people of Moroccan decent have ties with the Rif area. The Moroccan-Dutch population consists of Moroccan Berbers and non-Berbers, speaking a combination of a Berber language and/or French and/or Moroccan-Arabic and/or Dutch. While the first language of their children, born in the Netherlands, primarily is Dutch (Gazzah, 2010, p. 311).

Moroccan-Dutch youth receive a lot of attention in media reporting, governmental policy-making and scholarly research. They are systematically stigmatized and made hyper-visible by right-wing journalists and politicians, who frame them as anti-citizens posing a threat to Dutch society (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012). Prior academic research has predominantly focused on particular behavior such as juvenile delinquency, radicalization, mental health problems and early school leaving. Bringing these four themes together, Jurgens speaks of “the

Moroccan drama” (2007). These issues are undeniably important and significant, but these foci single out a narrow slice of their experiences. Things are going well for the majority of Moroccan-Dutch youth, but their realities remain largely invisible in contemporary debates (Verhaagen, 2010). The present study intervenes in prior scholarship by considering mundane, everyday experiences of Moroccan-Dutch youth.

Methodological considerations

The fieldwork was conducted in the context of *Wired Up*, a collaborative, international research project operating at the interface of the humanities and social sciences, aimed at understanding the multifarious implications of digital media use among migrant youth. A large-scale survey was developed for the purpose of the project. A total of 1,408 young people, contacted through seven secondary schools in five Dutch cities, completed the questionnaire in classrooms or computer labs. This chapter principally considers data from the group of 344 Moroccan-Dutch students who participated in the questionnaire; this group consists of 181 girls and 163 boys. On average they are 14.5 years ($SD=1.7$) old, and when prompted 98.5% describe themselves as Muslim. More than three-quarters (76.2%) of these young people speak Dutch at home with their parents. Two thirds do this in combination with a Berber language (66.9%) and half with Moroccan-Arabic (52.6%). Survey findings will be used throughout this article to provide a general impression of digital media use frequencies, attachments to applications and online self-presentation practices.

From those young people that participated in the survey, a selected group of 30 students aged 12-16 was invited to join the second phase of the study, which consisted of in-depth interviews. In order to include 17- and 18-year olds and diversify the group of informants further, 13 Moroccan-Dutch youth were contacted using snowballing methods in three cities. In total, in-depth interviews were carried out with a group of 43 Moroccan-Dutch individuals, 21 girls and 22 boys, between the ages of 12 and 18 years, their average age was 15 years. Except for four informants who migrated themselves, the majority of the interviewees was born in the Netherlands from parents who had migrated to the Netherlands as guest-workers. In the third and final phase, digital media texts, images and videos circulating in online forums, instant messaging, social networking sites and YouTube were gathered with the use of online participant observation. By combining large-scale questionnaires with ethnographically inspired fieldwork across online/offline spaces including semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews and digital data gathering, we join differently located and situated, but complimentary “partial views” (Haraway, 1991, p. 183).

Internet platforms as arcades

In the mid 19th century arcades or pedestrian passageways (‘passages’ in French) emerged in Brussels, Bologna and Paris among other places. Historically, the term arcade refers to a pedestrian passageway that links two streets. Unlike public space, this glass, iron or brick roofed

passage is open at both ends and concentrates a row of commercial establishments (shops, cafés, restaurants) in a small space. In the words of Walter Benjamin, arcades are “the most important architecture of the nineteenth century” (1999, p. 834). I would not go as far as saying Internet applications are the most important but it can similarly be argued that they nowadays play an increasingly fundamental role in the daily lives of millions of people. Benjamin recognized that commercial corridors carried an ambivalent meaning, as objects of history they simultaneously contained a “dream- and wish-image of the collective”. On the one hand, the arcades offered pleasure and excitement, and Benjamin quotes Marx to argue they embodied “the imaginative expression of a new world”. On the other hand, passages also fostered a consumption ideology and commodity fetishism (1999, pp. 637, 939, 943).

Commercial pedestrian corridors brought together “a world in miniature” as Benjamin noted, not only were they spaces where commodities were exchanged but they were also setup as comfortable urban environments where people could find shelter from bad weather, observe others, do window-shopping, stroll around and spend their time in an enjoyable way. Internet platforms can be seen as a 21st century parallel to the shopping arcades. They offer its users enjoyable miniature worlds that at times may function as shelters from undesired external (face-to-face) circumstances and they can be used to observe others and do (window) shopping. However, they too are created for purposes of profit. Encouraged by unrivalled financial opportunities, the market economy expands its weight and reach across the Web. Internet applications are increasingly setup and controlled by private enterprise transforming more and more patches of digital space into “walled gardens” (Zittrain, 2008). As digitized passageways, Internet applications offer advertisers a chance to market their products and monitor consumer preferences.

The role of the arcade is double-faced, as Benjamin exemplifies: “during sudden rainshowers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unprepared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade – one from which the merchants also benefit” (1999, p. 31). Neither skepticism nor evangelism captures the dynamics of passages completely, and Benjamin argued for a consideration of its “constellation saturated of tensions” (1999, p. 475). Similarly, critical media and feminist theorists have argued for a middle-ground between the utopian dreams and dystopian nightmare perspectives that were dominant in writings on digital embodiment, identity, activism, knowledge production etc. I propose to view identity performativity as bound but not fully determined by everyday socio-technological, material-embodied and imagined-discursive spatial relations. As so-called Web 2.0 social media applications allow more people to have a presence online, promising users to become active agents over their own representations, this middle-ground perspective aims to acknowledge unevenness in people’s contribution to digital culture, and to take into account the feelings of agency, joy and empowerment these very users experience.

Digital arcades for whom?

Across digital space, templates, norms and interface decisions reserve certain dominant consumer, national, gendered, ethnic and racial positions. These socio-technical processes have geographically uneven effects, both online and offline. Edward Said recognized that “just as none of us is beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography”, adding that the struggle “is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (Said, 1994, p. 7) The struggle over digital geographies clearly is a struggle over representation and imagination. For example, figure 1 displays the dominant positions that the Google Netherlands search engine associates with ‘Marokkanen’ (the Dutch word for Moroccans). The auto-complete search query suggestions that Google provides appear automatically upon typing Marokkanen in the search box. The auto-complete algorithm offers query suggestions in a drop-down list, predicting behavior based on queries typed previously by Google users as well as generating items on the basis of traffic, page visits and recently crawled websites.

The search query suggestions reveal some of the ways Moroccan-Dutch youths are allocated particular narrow gendered and racialized positions in digital space. From top to bottom they can be translated from Dutch as follows: “Moroccan jokes”, “Moroccans must die” and “Moroccans and Polish people”. The suggestions on Moroccan jokes provide results of websites

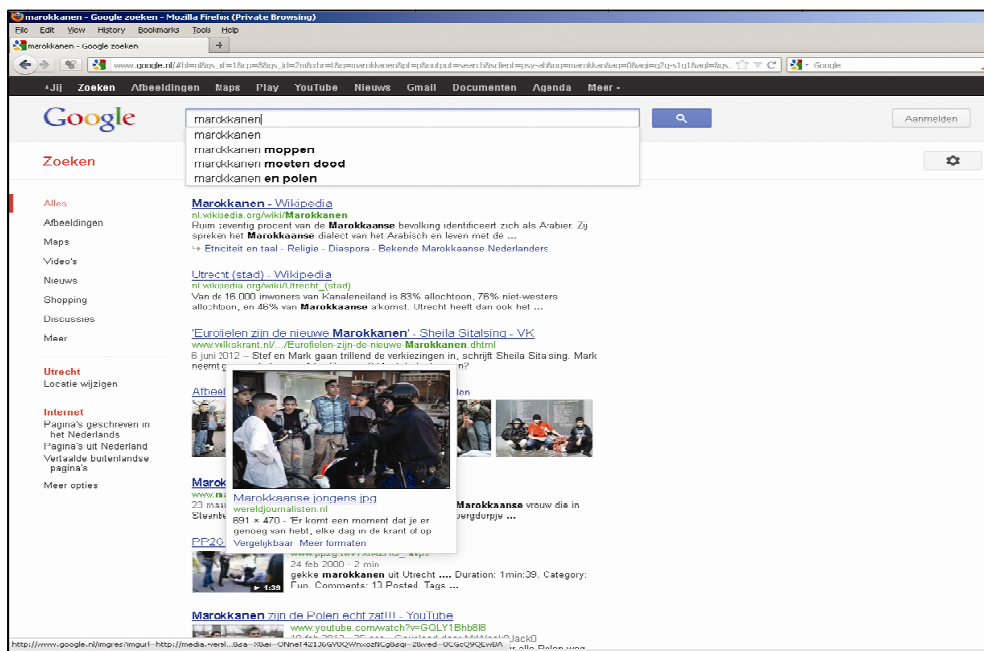


Figure 1: Google.nl search “Marokkanen” (June 28, 2012)

that host offensive anti-immigration, anti-Islam and racist jokes. The second suggestion points the Google user towards websites – mostly discussion forums – where white, right-wing extremist Dutch people discriminate against Moroccan-Dutch people. For example the third result directs the user towards a forum posting where the following comments are published in relation to Moroccan-Dutch youths “Those rotten bastards must die!!!!!!! Dirty, cowardly, disgusting, stinking cancer goats” (my translation) (Wilders, 2005, np). The third suggestion equates Moroccan-Dutch people with a more recent group of guest workers, Polish people. Simultaneously, without having pressed the search button, results are shown, including Google Image Search results. The four image suggestions are all stereotypical representations of aggressive masculine street culture representing Moroccan-Dutch youths as dangerous loiterers and the inclusion of a policeman emphasizes Moroccan-Dutch boys as troublemakers.

The auto-complete algorithm (which is partly based on the search-term popularity among previous users) exemplifies sedimented ideas that emphasize particular associations and stereotypes of Moroccan-Dutch people – particularly those voiced by former Member of Parliament Geert Wilders and his ‘Freedom Party’ PVV – rather than others. Spearheaded by anti-Islamic Geert Wilders and sensationalist press, young people of Moroccan migrant descent are often seen as a problem. Moroccan-Dutch boys are dismissed as strangers to Western society, possibly dangerous Islamic fundamentalists, street-terrorists or thieves while especially head-scarf wearing girls are constructed as either un-emancipated and backward or oppressed by Muslim culture. The example given in figure 1 is not a temporary glitch, a similar English-language search query on March 15, 2013 for “Muslims are” resulted in the following suggestions: “Muslims are stupid”, “Muslims are evil” and “Muslims are the favorite scapegoats of this time”.

In the context of the United States, danah boyd similarly describes that when for instance searching for the name “Mohammed” Google auto-complete suggestions provide suggestions related to Islamic extremism and terrorism. She defines this process as a form of “guilt through algorithmic association”, as the search suggestions for Mohammed exemplify how people can be “algorithmically associated with practices, organizations, and concepts that paint them in a problematic light” (boyd, 2011, n.p.). The auto-complete example reminds us that digital space is not neutral but power-ridden. A platform on the “Internet hails its audiences”, in a way that is similar to how non-digital environments are intended for particular groups of people (Nakamura & Lovink, 2005, p. 61).

The examples discussed above attest to how these ideologies may be perpetuated through commercial algorithms, but participants of digital culture also constitute them themselves. During my fieldwork, many informants shared frustrations and anger with ignorance, discrimination and hate-speech they encountered in their engagement with Internet platforms. 16-year-old Naoul’s¹ statements were for instance harsh reminders of the politics of difference on YouTube. Naoul said that the comment sections for videos pertaining to Morocco sometimes fill up

¹ The names of interviewees used in this chapter are pseudonyms, mostly suggested by the informants themselves.

with verbal abuse and hostility: “when you watch a video on YouTube, they [referring to white, ethnic majority Dutch people] shout cunt-Moroccans and this and that about Moroccans”. Exclusionary majority user norms were for instance also apparent in Dutch computer game culture, where Islam is equated with terrorism. A fan of the game *Counter Strike*, 15-year-old Oussema shared that he had bad experiences after he disclosed his ethnic and religious background: “When saying I am Moroccan, I am a Muslim, I get called a terrorist.” Eighteen-year-old Safae told me after her friend who covers her hair uploaded a picture on the Dutch social networking site *Hyves*, somebody sent her a message typing ‘we live in 2010, a headscarf is out-dated, and it’s something of the past’. Thus, digital spaces are not mere mute, neutral and external backdrops of identity formation, but distinct expressive cultures filled with ideologies, hierarchies and politics. However, informants added they enjoy to spend a lot of their time on these platforms, and one way to keep it enjoyable is by pushing back at the negativities they encounter.

Once inside, the informants actively work against being othered and struggle to acquire a desired position. Focusing on offline spatial relations, Nirmal Puwar argues that British institutions such as the parliament, judiciary, civil service and academia are territories that hold historically “reserved” privileged positions. Recognizing that including and excluding mechanisms operate around corporeal specificity; those who enter spaces of authoritative power are measured against the dominant template of “white male bodies of a specific habitus”. Those who do not meet the normative expectations are rendered out of place; they become “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004, pp. 141–144). Puwar developed the concept of space invaders to understand how ethnic minorities can feel out of place in institutionalized spaces. Stretching the concept, I wonder how hierarchies are constructed and impact upon digital practices of minority subjects. Following Puwar, the question arises what happens when Moroccan-Dutch youths take up privileged positions which have not been reserved for them across digital space. When having to assert themselves against the grain, non-mainstream users become invaders of online territories. Having mapped out how digital spaces are constructed as prescriptive, normative spaces; the question arises how they can be subverted, invaded or transformed by the contributions of subaltern subjects, as they create diversity in spaces that were previously defined as neutral and universal. Below, five examples of everyday acts of space invasion will be discussed.

Strategy 1: contesting offline exclusion online

In the year 2000, Moroccan-Dutch digital media enthusiast Abdelilah Amraoui initiated a movement in the Netherlands called *Geweigerd.nl* (in English: Denied.nl) in direct response to the discrimination among owners of club venues and discotheques who required bouncers to refuse people entrance based on their ethnicity, race or skin color. As he noted in our interview, Amraoui started the website because he feels “you can now create media yourself in case you cannot find it elsewhere”. The site invited young people who felt they were wrongfully refused entry to a venue to submit their stories of being refused access. The topbanner of the *Geweigerd.nl* website consists of logos combining (in)famous Dutch nightclubs with stop-signs and an

animation which shows the “top five of bouncer excuses” such as “this is not a multicultural event” and “there are already plenty of your sort inside”. Personal experiences of being wrongfully denied access were published online. Collecting personal stories of mainly frustrated Dutch migrant youths, Amraoui engaged in dialogue with those places of entertainment that were often mentioned by site visitors in order to re-negotiate their admission policies. His initiative took off; as unfair and discriminating admission policies received wider attention after Amraoui collaborated with the nationally famous Moroccan-Dutch rapper Ali B. with a song similarly titled *Geweigerd.nl*.

Strategy 2: digital mimicry of Dutchness

During our interview, 15-year-old Ryan explains that he is accepted as a gamer, because he argues he does “not look like a Moroccan” online, in the sense that he is seen as “very different from what normal Moroccan youths” do. He “mostly only plays games on the computer”, and he says gaming is more white “Dutch culture” as it is mostly white “Dutch kids who play games”. He is accepted, as he backgrounds Moroccan affiliations during in-game interaction using voice-chat programs like Skype or Teamspeak: “when I talk I do not appear to be Moroccan”. On his personal profile page on the Dutch social networking Hyves, he also subverts the dominant image of Moroccan-Dutch youths: “when someone sees me there, they say I do not look like a Moroccan, but obviously I am one, but I do not let it show”. Masking his Moroccanness, Ryan passes as an ethnic majority Dutch boy. The ambivalence of passing is described by Homi Bhabha, who recognizes processes of passing as “mimicry”. Mimicry offers camouflage and can become a site of resistance and transgression. The other achieves “partial presence” by passing for something one is not and “becoming a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (1994, pp. 122–133). Ryan does so by strategically employing dominant cultural repertoires and making less visible the ways he diverts from majority norms while emphasizing resemblances. Ryan’s act of passing acts offers self-protection but also reflects his desires to be accepted by the majority group. Nakamura notes that “racial impersonation” is a form of passing that “reveals a great deal about how people ‘do’ race online”. However, she argues that passing does keep the foundations of dominant exclusionary, white national identities intact (2002, pp. xvi, 37).

Strategy 3: a space of one’s own

“It is a sort of support. As a process of feeding [your emotions], by sort of reacting to each other. You’ll have everyone who backs you up. It’s like everyone is on the same side. You kind of become more sure of yourself. You just know, yes look we are not the only ones who think this way and so on.” (Ilham, 13 years old)

Wired Up survey findings indicate a distinct preference for engaging with discussion boards among ethnic minorities in the Netherlands: Moroccan-Dutch youths report to visit online

discussion boards more than ethnic majority Dutch youths. For example one in every five Moroccan-Dutch survey participants reports visiting online discussion boards for at least four days per week, while only one in every ten white Dutch student who participated in the survey report doing so (*Wired Up*, 2012). During the interviews I learned discussion boards like *Marokko.nl*, *Chaima.nl* and *Maroc.nl* are felt as safe spaces to connect with fellow Moroccan-Dutch youths. As 15-year-old SouSou states: “Marokko.nl is a website where especially Moroccans come so to say”. As Naoul, a 16-year-old girl notes: *Marokko.nl* is a community, “it is your own circle, with all those Moroccan things” that are discussed, and “the people there are like you, that’s nice”. As a corner of their own these sites are taken up to create a space where Moroccan-Dutch youths become the majority group. Boundary markers such as Moroccan images and symbols that include photos taken in Morocco, Arabic typing as well as visual references to the Islam like a minaret and the Quran, as well as photos of veiled women are circulated. Furthermore, in the discussion, users can reframe dominant stereotypical views circulating in news media. Sixteen-year-old Nevra finds that “different stories” are shared on Internet forums, where “there is often negative talk about Moroccan youths [in the news media], I find that youths there can say what they want, showing it is not all bad”. Dara Byrne describes message boards frequented by ethnic minorities, such as *AsianAvenue.com*, *MiGente.com*, and *BlackPlanet.com*, that “fly well below the mainstream radar” as extremely valuable “public spheres” for minority groups. Because such spaces are relatively free from influences of members of majority groups, they are successfully employed to circulate insider knowledge, develop stronger “group cohesion” and a shared sense of belonging (2008).

Strategy 4: hybridization as youth-cultural capital

Another more common strategy I observed is the hybridization of affiliations. Inzaf for instance logged in to MSN Messenger using the display name “El Hoceima is the bom, that’s the place where I come from so just tell everyone that’s the city number ONE”. Explaining its significance during our interview, she shared: El Hoceima “means a lot to me because that is the town in Morocco where I am from, I was not born there but my father was and I want to show that I am proud of it”. She added that “it rhymes in English” and it is “nicer to say it in English than in Dutch”. Through hybridization, different loyalties can be combined. She signals transnational affiliations with the city of El Hoceima in Morocco but she uses the vocabulary of English-language global hip-hop youth culture as well as Internetspeak. The nickname is a way to emphasize her individuality, but also to connect with her peers. Such acts of hybridization reflect active intercultural encounters. Ayhan Kaya for instance argues that young Turkish-Germans in Berlin use hip-hop youth culture to mingle in the mainstream cultural field. These youngsters tap into global symbolisms such as rap, cool looks, graffiti and dance to mark a social, cultural and political space in the urban landscape. In their appropriation and recirculation of hip-hop youth culture, migrant youths may combine their “aesthetics of diaspora” and “global transcultural capital”. Hip-hop as such is a mechanism that enables ethnic minority youths to assert themselves into global youth culture (2002, p. 45).

Strategy 5: hypertextual selves

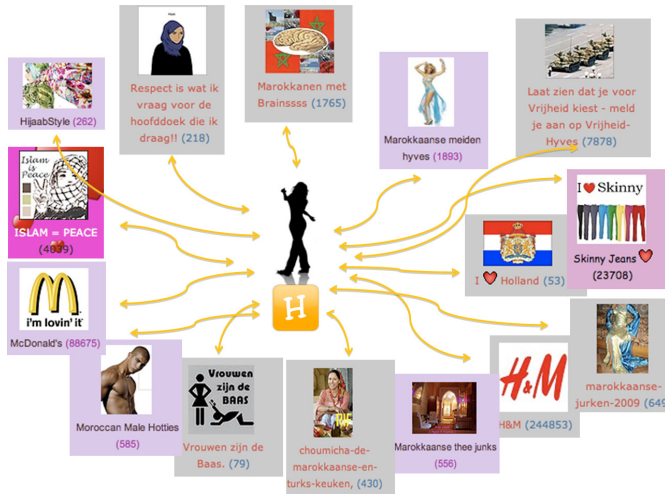


Figure 2: Hyves groups Midia links to on her Hyves profile page (April 15, 2009)

Already in the early days of the internet, feminist theorist Donna Haraway recognized “although the metaphor of hypertext insists on making connections as practice, the trope does not suggest which connections make sense for which purposes and which patches we might want to follow or avoid.” (1997, p. 126). A brief excursion through a number of profile pages on the Dutch social networking site *Hyves* set up by Moroccan-Dutch youth show that these youth individually hyperlink to and participate in many different online groups. Figure 2 displays the hyperlinks found on the *Hyves* profilepage of Midia, a 13-year-old girl. Upon joining of a *Hyves* group, a small icon appears on a personal profile page. On her page, Midia links to groups that deal with her food preferences, such as global junk food like McDonalds. She contrasts it with being a “Moroccan tea junky” and the Moroccan kitchen. A demand for “respect for wearing a headscarf” is connected with a community such as “Moroccan Male Hotties” and “Moroccans with brains”. She likes H&M and “skinny jeans” but she also shows her attachments to traditional “Moroccan dresses”. Her religious affiliations are shown by linking to groups such as “Hijab style” and “Islam = peace” and she combines this by joining “I love Holland”. And she lists the group with an image of the Tiananmen Square protests “choosing for freedom” with a group that goes by the statement “women are in charge”. From this image, one can clearly observe that cultural identification is a distributed practice. The multiplicity of her personal cultural trajectory becomes visible. These different visual statements cover a wide spectrum of interests, belongings and affiliations. The image shows unexpected coalitions of Moroccan-Dutch youths make as space invaders: Midia aligns with majority groups as she

affiliates with global youth food preferences, activism and clothing styles. Rather than a straightforward continuation of migrant cultures she actively transforms them in the context of the dominant youth cultures in which she grows up.

Conclusions

“[W]hat remains insufficiently addressed are the very real and material ways in which space constitutes a site and a medium for the enactment of cultural power” (Shome, 2003, p. 40).

In this chapter I have built on spatial concepts of Walter Benjamin and Nirmal Puwar by coupling their writings with fieldwork findings on how Moroccan-Dutch youths engage with Internet platforms. When having to assert themselves against the grain, non-mainstream users such as ethnic minorities become space invaders of digital locations. Digital spaces are thus best considered as part of everyday, real-life, uneven power relations, where offline and online spheres infuse each other with meaning. The optics of the arcade and space invaders were further developed to empirically trace and theorize digital spatial biases and their subversion, much needed to intervene in dominant utopian thinking about digital media potentialities. What these examples showcase is that digital arcades and their terrains are hierarchical territories, they are uneven geographies marked by symbols and discursive borders. Mainstream bodies participating in mainstream digital spaces produce and occupy certain ideal types and reserved positions. By exploring alternative modes of communication and forms of belonging such as appropriating a digital corner of one's own, hybridization and hyperlinking, it was explored how subjects on the wrong side of the template and peer-produced norms invade spaces and transform them from within.

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