

Blue Light's, Red Light's and The Red Light District. Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Introduction

It is estimated that approximately 20 million tourists visit The Netherlands annually (Statista, 2021). Amsterdam, the country's capital, remains a popular tourist destination and millions descend upon the capital each year, many seeking a release from more conservative homelands. Amsterdam has become renowned for its liberal attitudes towards marijuana, pornography and sex work (Aalbers and Sabat, 2012). In the heart of Amsterdam lies De Wallen, home to the 'Red Light District'. Despite having three 'red light districts', it is the one in the centre of the old town that is the most popular. The 'Red Light District' gets its name from the illuminous red lights that hang in every window which houses a female sex worker, on display for passers-by to view. The Red Light District is a popular place for those seeking to engage in live sex shows, peep shows, pornography theatres and to pay for sex. RedLightDistrictAmsterdamTours.com (2020) claim that there are approximately 400 sex workers operating within the area on a daily basis, many occupying one of the nearly 300 individual windows located within an area of 17 different streets and alleys. Furthermore, it is estimated that around 15% of sex workers within the 'Red Light District' are transgender. Whilst transgender sex workers are able to work anywhere, most can be found within Bloedstraat, which is well known for its availability of transgender sex workers. Despite being considered a place of liberal values, arguably, such a place does not come without an accompanying dark side.

Liberal Values, Dark Destination?

The Netherlands legalised sex work in 2000 in an attempt to 'counter human trafficking in the sex industry' (Verhoeven and van Gestel, 2017: 112). Sex workers in The Netherlands are therefore recognised as independent workers who are required to register with the Chamber of Commerce and pay income tax. Additionally, brothel owners must be licensed before they offer workspaces to sex workers (Verhoeven and van Gestel, 2017). There exists a multitude of debates around the benefits of decriminalisation¹ and legalisation² of sex work (Lutnick and Cohan, 2009). Despite The Netherlands best intentions, Verhoeven and van Gestel (2017) argue that exploitation and trafficking still occur within the sex industry, with a number of criminal cases taking place in which suspected traffickers have been prosecuted and sentenced (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2013).

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in all of the various debates surrounding sex work, one of the core contentions when

¹ Decriminalisation refers to the removal of all sex-work specific legislation.

² Legalisation refers to the regulation and control of sex work by the government.

assessing sex work relates to the level of autonomy sex workers have in entering sex work (Sanders *et al.*, 2009). Some have conceptualised sex work as a forced activity characterised by exploitation (Marshall, 2016), whilst others have acknowledged it being a career choice, and therefore in need of a rights-based approach. Stoops (2016) has argued that sex work is not in and of itself dangerous, rather, that some sections of sex work can be. Others have also noted high rates of violence against sex workers and the impact criminalisation has on their engagement with the criminal justice system after such events (Corteen and Stoops, 2016). However, scholars have argued that this dichotomous approach to understanding sex work is too simplistic, and does not appreciate the complexity associated with navigating sex work (Sanders *et al.*, 2009).

Despite many academic debates around the harms of sex work, this is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, this chapter seeks to address a concern outside of the practicalities of sex work, and considers the symbolic othering, and fetishisation of transgender sex workers within the 'Red Light District'.

Blue Light's and the Fetishisation of Transgender Women

Research has investigated the fear of fetishisation that transgender people may experience and the consequent impact this may have on transgender people's confidence in pursuing sexual and/or romantic relationships (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017). The fetishisation of transgender women has been noted across mainstream media (Fink and Miller, 2013; Tsai, 2010), gaming (Colliver, 2020) and social media (Colliver *et al.*, 2019). Whilst this fear may not be as present for transgender women working within the 'Red Light District', due to the nature of the space, the marking of transgender sex workers as the 'other', through the use of a blue light, contributes to the fetishisation of transgender women. Whilst many transgender people are involved in sex work, in some spaces, sex work is the only profession available to them as a result of the many prejudices that transgender women may face (Ditmore, 2006).

Whilst the argument can be made that the public display of sex workers is fetishizing for all those involved, in this chapter I focus on the implications of fetishizing transgender women. Tompkins (2014) has argued that measuring desirability solely on the basis of an individual's transgender identity is fetishizing, whilst simultaneously, suggesting a transgender person's identity is irrelevant does not appreciate transgender embodiment. However, in the context of sex work, and the very public display of transgender sex workers 'transness' in the 'Red Light District' contributes to the fetishisation of transgender women. This is also reinforced through the online advertisement of the 'Red Light District', and Amsterdam Guide (2018a) provides tips on 'how to find ladyboys, shemales and transvestites in the Red Light District'. Whilst acknowledging that these are terms often

used by sex-workers, the inclusion of these terms in the headline, which are commonly used to describe pornography involving transgender women reinforces the fetishisation and sexualisation of transgender women.

Marking transgender women as transgender in this way heightens the visibility of transgender people within the sex industry. This heightened visibility may be harmful, as transgender people do not receive such visibility in mainstream media (Billard, 2016; Capuzza and Spencer, 2018). Consequently, a significant amount of transgender representation and visibility is centred on sex which reduces transgender identities down to sexual desirability and does not reflect the wider realities of being transgender. This is important, as it contributes to the delegitimisation and dehumanisation of transgender people, which arguably contributes to a culture of 'transmisogyny' (Serano, 2007).

This has implications for the everyday lives of transgender people and the positioning of transgender women as seductive and hypersexual constructs them purely in terms of their sexual value (Serano, 2007; 2009). Transitioning may also be eroticised, in which transgender women who have not undergone gender reassignment surgery are frequently objectified. Whilst transgender women working within the 'Red Light District' who have undergone gender reassignment surgery may work within a 'red window', the demarcation of transgender women who have not undergone gender reassignment surgery with a blue light exacerbates this fetishisation. Findings by Ellis *et al.* (2016) suggest that nearly half of transgender people experienced fear of being fetishized and objectified. The use of a blue light not only contributes to the fetishisation of transgender women, rather, it is dualistic, in that it also contributes to the 'othering' of transgender women, signifying to the wider population that they are 'different'.

Blue Light's, Red Light's, Othering and 'Deception'

Not only may the use of a blue light to indicate that a sex worker is transgender contribute to the fetishisation of transgender women, but it is also a strong, public indication that these individuals are 'different'. It has been argued that transgender people are often either fetishized, or alternatively, constructed as undesirable (Mortimer *et al.*, 2019). The use of a blue light symbolically positions transgender women as 'not real women', and in need of additional symbolic descriptors. Research has indicated that transgender people who experience sexual violence recognise their experiences as being explicitly as a result of their gender identity, because they were visible as a transgender person and because of transphobic verbal abuse that often accompanied sexual violence (Motmans *et al.*, 2015).

This narrative is also reinforced through online tourist guides for the 'Red Light District'. Amsterdam Guide (2018b) provides information for visitors on 'how to avoid accidentally sleeping with a man in Amsterdam's Red Light District'. The online guide draws upon a number of harmful

stereotypes and narratives about transgender women that contribute to the 'othering' they may experience. The guide suggests that anyone who is drunk or stoned may not realise and may find themselves sleeping with a man. This not only delegitimises transgender women as inauthentic, it also constructs transgender women as undesirable, only to be sexually engaged with by mistake or under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

On the other hand, as there is no legal requirement for transgender sex workers to work with a blue light, some transgender women may work with a red light. Amsterdam Guide (2018b) notes that some transgender sex workers may utilise a red light, and rely upon obscuring the presence of a smaller blue light with a curtain, or may simply try to disguise the fact that they are transgender. The choice of a blue light or red light are both problematic. Working with a blue light may result in a transgender sex worker being 'othered', or seen as undesirable. Whereas, working with a red light may lead to accusations of deception. It has been argued that the stereotype of deception 'has been perhaps the most historically consistent and successful idiom through which transgender rights are abrogated and transgender lives are pathologized, demeaned, or cut short' (Fischel, 2019:99).

It is here within the 'Red Light District' that we see the material, physical manifestation of this dichotomy in which transgender people are constructed as either hyper-sexualised or undesirable. This creates a culture in which it is easy to blame transgender people for their own victimisation. For example, the use of a blue light to distinguish transgender sex workers as the 'other', contributes to the delegitimation of transgender women, positioning them as 'less-than' cisgender women. This creates a culture of hostility where transgender women become legitimate targets for violence. On the other hand, if a transgender worker works under a red light, they may be considered to be deceptive, which provides a 'justification' for those who enact violence against them. This has real life implications for transgender women's experiences of violence and transphobic narratives influence international protective legislation. For example, the 'trans panic' defence is still a legal defence which perpetrators can draw upon to justify the murder of transgender women in the United States (Jamel, 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the dualistic nature of blue and red lights within the 'Red Light District'. The use of blue lights simultaneously fetishize transgender women, whilst symbolically marking them as the 'other'. On the other hand, if transgender women operate under a red light, they can be held accountable for their own victimisation. Utilising Amsterdam as a case study is vital, due to the international nature of Amsterdam and the high level of tourist visitors. The symbolism of the lights in Amsterdam may

therefore have global influence on the positioning and conceptualisation of transgender people.

Whilst increasing visibility of transgender people is positive, such sexualised visibility may lead to a sensationalist conception and understanding of what it means to be transgender and marginalises transgender people as sexual objects. In a time when violence against transgender people, particularly transgender women, is rising globally (Turner *et al.*, 2009), it is important to challenge such reductive representations. Whilst this may not necessarily be the responsibility of Amsterdam, it does highlight the need for better access and inclusion of transgender people within the workforce outside of sex work. Additionally, it also highlights the need for wider non-erotic representation of transgender people within mainstream media, to address issues of the hyper-sexualisation and fetishisation of transgender bodies and people.

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