

## Space and Culture

### Regimes of visibility: hanging out in Brussels' public spaces

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## Regimes of visibility: hanging out in Brussels' public spaces

**Abstract:** Visibility is an important characteristic of public space. According to Brighenti (2007: 323) control and recognition can be understood as two opposing outcomes of visibility. These two modes are studied empirically through the use of data from a research project with young people in Brussels. This article zooms in on young people's appropriation of a space for themselves and their negotiation of control, and investigates what role (in)visibility plays in the micro-politics of these practices. It concludes that these regimes of visibility can be easily found in young people's behaviour in public space. However, they are not mutually exclusive: they easily transform into the other or present themselves simultaneously.

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### 1. Introduction

In the last four to five decades, quite some scholars have reflected on the specificity of public space. Criteria such as accessibility, diversity or control have been advanced as key components for defining it.<sup>1</sup> Only some have focused on the specific role that is played by *visibility*, as a social category and as a driver in public space interactions. Arendt (1998: 50), for instance, argues that publicness can only be achieved if there is 'inter-visibility' and 'appearance':

It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality.

Micro-sociologists such as Goffman (1963) and Lofland (1998) have collected evidence about the importance of visibility, and specifically the glance, in regulating stranger interaction: "the eye has a uniquely sociological function: the union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances" (Goffman, 1963: 93). Probably the most comprehensive work in investigating and conceptualising visibility has been undertaken by Andrea Brighenti (2007, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). It has been his endeavour to describe both the actual phenomena of visibility in public space and the characteristics of visibility as a workable category in the social sciences.

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3 In this article I will take up the challenge formulated by Brighenti (2007), regarding  
4 the study of actual phenomena of visibility plays, firstly by discussing other recent  
5 work on the topic and secondly by bringing original data from fieldwork in Brussels  
6 to the table. In order to structure the data and the state of the art, I will follow  
7 Brighenti's (2007) useful suggestion that visibility presents itself in two outcomes:  
8 recognition and control. The former refers to acts of resistance and empowerment  
9 by minority groups against the mainstream, for instance how they claim a space to  
10 make themselves visible. The social can be perceived as a continuum between lower  
11 and upper thresholds of 'fair visibility'. Below the lower threshold one is socially  
12 excluded (invisible). In the latter presentation, visibility relates to control: "[t]he  
13 mere fact of being aware of one's own visibility status—and not the fact of being  
14 under actual control—effectively influences one's behaviour" (Brighenti, 2007: 336).  
15 Although the author does not reiterate that claim in later work, Brighenti (2007: 323)  
16 states that "recognition and control are understood and explained as two opposing  
17 outcomes of visibility." In this article, I will argue that control and recognition are  
18 heavily intertwined, that they can happen simultaneously and that one can  
19 transform into the other.

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Visibility-as-control of course plays a crucial role in Foucault's (1977) idea of panoptic  
surveillance. The major effect of the panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state  
of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of  
power" (1977: 201). Here modes of visibility are produced by power in order to  
control society. But, as Gordon (2002) argues, the inverse is also true: "the very  
same power that produces visibility is concomitantly dependent upon it" (p. 125).  
Also relevant in this regard is the work of Newman (1972) and others on  
architectural crime prevention strategies and, for instance, the use of street lighting  
(to make visible). Particularly in surveillance studies, the concept of visibility has  
received much attention (Koskela, 2000). We can refer in this regard to Cook and  
Whowell's (2011) study of public space policing and Coaffee *et al.*'s (2009) article on  
the role of subtle visibility techniques in counter-terrorism measures. Finally, both in  
the development of communication media (Thompson, 2005) and of the Internet  
and its virtual spaces (Hatuka and Toch, 2016) situations of asymmetrical visibility

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3 are produced that are increasingly perceived as 'normal': "the idea of urban public  
4 space as a place that provides relative anonymity is shrinking" (Hatuka & Toch,  
5 2016: 13). In Allen's (2006) study of public space management in commercial areas,  
6 finally, an analysis is presented that focuses on "the quieter, more impalpable [and  
7 less visible; MDB] registers of power" (p. 454).

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12 Visibility-as-recognition refers to the claiming and appropriation of space by  
13 subaltern groups. Such appropriations, as acts of resistance against a dominant  
14 order, are seldom simply tolerated (Frers and Meier, 2017). Cancellieri and Ostanel  
15 (2015) find that migrants in Italy are being accused of surpassing the "upper  
16 threshold of correct visibility" (p. 499). In their study of people's perceptions of and  
17 opinions on street drinking in Lancaster (UK), Dixon *et al.* (2006) find that  
18 respondents say drunkards in public space distort the private/public distinction,  
19 which limits access to and free use of public space for other citizens. This mode of  
20 visibility is also a daily reality for many women who, when entering public space,  
21 subject themselves to the male gaze (Massey, 1994: 234). The main reason for  
22 women's feelings of insecurity is exactly their "exaggerated visibility" (Brown, 1998:  
23 218). Similarly, to wear religious symbols or to cover one's body is an (often inverse)  
24 expression of visibility as recognition (Göle, 2002; Göle, 2011). In many studies of  
25 homophobic violence it is indicated that public space is governed by moral  
26 statements about overt, i.e. visible, 'homosexual conduct' such as handholding as  
27 being reproachable (Millbank, 2002). This often results in practices of hiding among  
28 homosexuals and lesbians (Valentine, 1995). However, in some cases lesbians  
29 expressly mix in a heterogeneous public space in order to be visible to each other.  
30 This somewhat deconstructs the common link between overt visibility and  
31 recognition and political legitimacy (Podmore, 2001). Of course, when considering  
32 the general nature of public space, also *invisibility* plays a crucial role in the  
33 principles of stranger interaction (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1998), as urban  
34 ethnographers will find while doing covert observation and *dérives* in public space  
35 (Lofland *et al.*, 2006). Many urban undesirables, such as homeless people, will (try  
36 to) benefit from the possibility to remain invisible in public space (Langegger and  
37 Koester, 2016).  
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3 This brings us to the heart of this special issue. The two modes of visibility  
4 (recognition and control) proposed by Brighenti (2007) are necessary to better  
5 understand what takes place in public space and why. 'Publicness' is an on-going  
6 process, a creation of practices rather than a pre-established frame (Göle, 2002). In  
7 this frame, visibility is an important angle through which to look at mundane and  
8 everyday acts of political, cultural, symbolic and social agency. Many small acts are  
9 micro-political, in the sense that they may be covert, tacit, innocuous, or  
10 unintentional, but they still are an expression of a political stance and a practice of  
11 protest.  
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14 In this article I will engage with data from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in  
15 Brussels, in order to study two youth practices: the appropriation of a space for  
16 oneself and the negotiation of control infrastructures and practices. This brings me  
17 to the following research questions: (1) how do young people appropriate spaces for  
18 themselves in public space, (2) how do they negotiate control infrastructures and  
19 practices, (3) and what role does (in)visibility play in the micropolitics of  
20 appropriation and control negotiation?  
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## 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 **2. Methodology and case study**

34 The fieldwork on which this article draws took place in five neighbourhoods in  
35 Brussels between 2013 and 2016. It involved countless hours of observation in  
36 various public spaces, as well as loosely structured interviews and focus groups in  
37 which 48 young people between 11 and 25 years old were interviewed. In addition,  
38 time was spent with young people in the context of youth club activities, youth  
39 camps, as well as during walks in their neighbourhoods. Some of the fieldwork  
40 activities were documented by a filmmaker, which led to the documentary *La Ville,*  
41 *Mon Espace.*  
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44 Brussels is by far the biggest and most dense city of Belgium. In the hierarchies of  
45 both poorest and wealthiest municipalities in the country Brussels' municipalities  
46 score high. This is indicative of an enormous abyss between rich and poor within the  
47 same city region. Brussels is not only socially but also spatially divided following  
48 topographic lines with wealthier areas literally rising above poorer neighbourhoods  
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3 (Corijn & Vloeberghs, 2009). The defining demographic figure of the city is the  
4 crescent shape in the northwest side of the city. In it are those neighbourhoods that  
5 can be distinguished by the concentration of poverty, unemployment, high density,  
6 high ethnic diversity, low income, little education, low quality housing and public  
7 investments, large and young families, etc.

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12 The fieldwork for this research took place in the Jacht-Jourdan, Chicago, Kuregem,  
13 Sint-Guido and Peterbos neighbourhoods. These areas were not necessarily chosen  
14 with the aim of truly comparative research, rather, the objective was to give an  
15 insight in the life-world of young urbanites and their experiences, emotions, actions,  
16 habits and movements cutting through the various demographic differences. Jacht-  
17 Jourdan is a lower middle-class area with an average income just below the Brussels  
18 Region's average. It is rather diverse, in terms of ethnicity, but has lower  
19 proportions of North-Africans compared to areas such as Kuregem or Historisch  
20 Molenbeek. The Chicago area consists of two very dense neighbourhoods on both  
21 sides of the Canal. The area is characterised by a relatively low education level, high  
22 unemployment (40%)<sup>ii</sup> and an economic standstill. Moroccans are the largest  
23 minority in the area. In terms of housing, the situation is dire. The neighbourhood  
24 has rather large families living in small and old houses.

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35 Kuregem is similar to the Chicago neighbourhood. It has 40% unemployment and  
36 55% youth unemployment. Family size is highest in Kuregem, compared to the  
37 whole city region. And together with the Chicago area the population is the  
38 youngest in the region. Kuregem is an area that houses many Moroccan inhabitants  
39 but there is also a large presence of sub-Saharan Africans. With its small houses,  
40 little public space and high density, the situation in Kuregem for young people is  
41 dramatic.

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47 Sint-Guido, officially termed Anderlecht-Centrum-Wayez, has an average income  
48 that ranks only slightly higher than the very poor Kuregem and Chicago areas, but  
49 has better housing. Peterbos, finally, is a lower middle-class residential area. Central  
50 in the neighbourhood is a series of high-rise social housing blocks on which my  
51 fieldwork focused for this project. In many interviews it was indicated that the  
52 Peterbos, Chicago and Kuregem neighbourhoods share a strong sense of  
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3 community among the inhabitants.

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5 Eventually, 48 young people were interviewed, either in the context of one-on-one  
6 interviews or in focus groups. These encounters took place as a result of  
7 ethnographic work in two youth clubs, which I joined as a researcher and volunteer  
8 youth worker, and workshops in a secondary school. I also went on two youth camps  
9 as a cook and logistics helper, in which context I met young people with whom I  
10 didn't do formal interviews but had many informal chats. In the research I focused  
11 on young people between 10 to 25 years old, an age spread that is not uncommon in  
12 youth research (see Travlou, 2003).  
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19 In terms of methodology, I developed a scenario consisting of the following  
20 elements: (1) exploratory observation including the mapping of youth spaces and of  
21 control infrastructures, (2) ethnographic fieldwork with a local partner (youth club or  
22 secondary school), (3) focus groups, (4) mental maps drawn by the participants  
23 (inspired by Lynch, 1981), (5) individual interviews, (6) a neighbourhood walk where  
24 participants showed their favourite places in the neighbourhood, (7) longer  
25 observations undertaken by myself in a *dérive* style (Debord, 1958; Coverley, 2010).  
26 This sequence, obviously, was dependent on the circumstances of fieldwork in every  
27 case study, as well as the different agendas of the local actors involved.  
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### 38 **3. Control as a regime of visibility**

39 In this section I will explore Brussels' young people's negotiation of and opinions  
40 about control. I will first pay attention to the more overt forms of control, such as  
41 police practices and CCTV cameras, after which I will discuss control exerted  
42 through ordinary objects such as fences, benches, etc. I will make three points: (1)  
43 contrary to some other commentators, I found that young people in Brussels are not  
44 particularly preoccupied with hiding from plain sight. Sometimes on the contrary:  
45 hanging out is often an extremely social activity that takes place in the middle of the  
46 street activity. (2) A large majority of Brussels youngsters is surprisingly tolerant  
47 towards control. This, however, is not the case for those young people who are  
48 controlled on a daily basis. They feel targeted, stigmatised and harassed by the  
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3 authorities. (3) It would be wrong to phrase control only in terms of visibility. We  
4 could probably view control as a spectrum with surveillance and police practices on  
5 the one end and much less visible forms of control on the other. Such less visible  
6 controls still have an important effect on behaviour in public space, but this is  
7 usually felt rather than understood.  
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12 In the beginning of my research project I engaged in an exploratory mapping  
13 exercise. I compared Kuregem, an area that has been framed in national media as a  
14 no-go area with a very high density and a population dominated by North- and Sub-  
15 Saharan-Africans, with Jacht-Jourdan, which is an ethnically mixed lower middle-  
16 class area in the vicinity of the European Institutions. The aim of the exercise was to  
17 see if youth geographies and control geographies tend to be different or if they  
18 overlap. For this purpose, I mapped popular youth spaces in those neighbourhoods  
19 and the locations of CCTV-cameras.  
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26 While one would expect that young people avoid control, this proved not to be the  
27 case. The Jourdan square in Jacht-Jourdan, which has countless (often privately-  
28 operated) security cameras, is also quite a popular hanging spot for teenagers in the  
29 area. Similarly, the Lemmens Square in Kuregem is often used by young people  
30 hanging out, while several cameras are directed straight at the square and police  
31 patrols often drive by. The same goes for the vicinity of the European Parliament,  
32 where young people do not mind hanging out in an intensely surveilled  
33 environment, including an overt police and private security presence. My findings  
34 suggest that young people do not mind putting themselves squarely in the field of  
35 visibility and "assume responsibility for the constraints of power," as Foucault (1977:  
36 202-3) puts it. To be in public space implies to be subjected to control. Young people  
37 take this for granted and inscribe these power relations in their behaviour.  
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47 Also in the interviews, a large majority of the participants express a favourable  
48 opinion on CCTV cameras. They stress the preventive efficacy of the devices, for  
49 instance. Meryem (13, f): "I think it is normal that there are cameras. For pickpockets  
50 or burglars." Many also say that these technologies don't affect their behaviour at  
51 all. Monifa (18, f): "I don't really care. I don't act differently when there are  
52 cameras." Although some see the limits to this technology:  
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3 Chaimaa (21, f): They do not tackle the problem. Wrongdoers would simply  
4 go to another place. They spend money on them and it doesn't change  
5 offenders' attitudes. It would not make them think. It will only teach them  
6 that that's not a place they ought to be and that they have to go elsewhere.  
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10 In general girls and young women are more in favour of cameras due to issues of  
11 security. But they are also less concerned about control because, contrary to boys,  
12 they are not inclined to "mess around."  
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16 Nouhaila (19, f): Girls do not hang out in the street; we move from A to B. But  
17 I can imagine that for boys, when there is a camera in a place where they  
18 hang out, it isn't agreeable.  
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21 Faiza and Elizabeth (both 18, f) make an interesting point. They say "cameras won't  
22 make a difference because we are already constantly controlled". In other words,  
23 these girls think that young people are tolerant towards control because they are  
24 used to being controlled in most areas of their lives anyway.  
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28 However, I think the opposite is true. Young people with a more critical (or straight-  
29 out angry) viewpoint on the matter usually experience control, harassment and  
30 intimidation by the police on a daily basis. They are frequently subjected to 'stop-  
31 and-search' practices, identity cards and backpacks are routinely checked in the  
32 street, they are put against the walls and frisked, sometimes they are taken to the  
33 police station without an explanation. These practices happen much more often in  
34 areas termed 'problem neighbourhoods' and with some boys who happen to have a  
35 darker skin colour.  
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43 7 out of 48 participants talk about these police practices: all are male and all are  
44 (North-) African. These boys and young men are probably targeted because of their  
45 gender and ethnicity (both ostensibly *visible* identity categories). Although police  
46 practices are largely invisible in the public debate, they contribute to the lived  
47 experience of young urbanites to such an extent that riots and other violent  
48 eruptions should be understood against this backdrop (Fassin, 2013; Schneider,  
49 2015). In fact, quite some participants from these 'problem' neighbourhoods refer to  
50 the behaviour of 'cowboy' policemen from special units, or to those policemen  
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3 cruising through the neighbourhood never leaving their vans. So, young people who  
4 are more sceptical about control are also those that are confronted on a regular  
5 (almost daily) basis with control, stigma and ethnic profiling. Conversely, young  
6 people with more relaxed or positive attitudes towards surveillance, like those  
7 sitting in the busy Jourdan square, are probably seldom confronted with the effects  
8 of stigmatisation and everyday control.  
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14 In order to understand the total range of control infrastructures we should also pay  
15 attention to ordinary objects such as street furniture, fences, benches, etc. Here,  
16 visibility plays a different role: these objects are of course visible, literally, but the  
17 ambiances they produce exert an invisible power on passers-by which may be  
18 repelling or seductive (Allen, 2006). The effects of these atmospheres are often felt  
19 rather than consciously registered. These ordinary objects, however, shape  
20 behaviour and interactions in public space. In terms of formal control, we cannot call  
21 Brussels a 'militarised city' (Davis, 1992), but it is home to a jungle of fences, signs,  
22 barriers, poles and bollards, to shuttered windows in dilapidated houses, to  
23 improvised interventions by residents and to graffiti-clad street furniture. 'Ordinary'  
24 objects produce atmospheres, like shadows cast onto passers-by, which may trigger  
25 affects such as belonging or threat (Kärrholm, 2007). They have an impact on  
26 people's movement, interaction and activities (e.g. Duff, 2010). Atmospheres of  
27 familiarity among acquaintances, for instance, have an impact on the development  
28 of intercultural tolerance (Wise, 2016).  
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40 For example, fences are usually erected in order to keep intruders out. This seems to  
41 be the case in the childcare facility in Kuregem on the Lemmens Square. Here,  
42 fences, barbed wire and CCTV-cameras target the 'delinquent youth' and their  
43 alleged drug-trade in the square. However, with these fences the owners or  
44 managers of the facility are not only preventing people from coming in, they also  
45 convey a message. As James (2015: 62) puts it in a study of a youth club in East  
46 London being fenced off and consequently being the object of vandalism: "the real  
47 purpose of the fence was not to physically prevent entrance to the site but—like the  
48 gated community—to make a statement of force, construct a threat and locate a  
49 moral territory," like a shadow cast outside the borders of the premises and into the  
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5 Fences play another role in and around the high-rise estate of Peterbos.  
6 Interestingly, the young participants from that neighbourhood are positive about  
7 the presence of these artefacts. One would assume that these barriers would  
8 symbolise a restriction to young people's movement away from the neighbourhood,  
9 like the bars to a cage. However, they talk about fences as objects protecting them  
10 from the outside world. Thus, barriers can generate feelings of cosiness and safety;  
11 they can become place-making agents.  
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17 At the same time, by fencing off and closing down large empty spaces—which could  
18 of course be an asset to young people in dense environments—bits and pieces are  
19 torn from their personal, physical or symbolic geographies. Temporary barriers  
20 become definitive, while physical boundaries become mental boundaries (Lynch,  
21 1981). The same goes for the benches that were removed, “and not because they  
22 were worn out” (Alae, 18, m). It was an act directly aimed at limiting the leisure  
23 options of local youth. With the removal of these benches, not only physical  
24 infrastructure but also an affective and social function is removed from their local  
25 ecology.  
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33 Considering the space shortage in Brussels on the one hand and the legion closed  
34 off or vacant lots on the other, one would expect young people fighting for a place  
35 of their own, to be appalled or angry. That is not the case. With the exception of the  
36 story told by two 11 year olds seeking a secret spot for themselves, not one  
37 teenager or young adult talks about trespassing or disrespecting property and  
38 fencing. One reason might lie in the fact that fences, benches and many other  
39 ordinary objects, while being ostensibly part of an ambient power regime, are felt  
40 rather than understood. Their power is invisible but tangible. Another reason might  
41 lie in the role of social expectation, as it oozes from home, school and other milieus  
42 of socialisation right into public space. As Franck and Stevens (2006: 11) put it:  
43 “[p]hysical barriers and locks provide the most obvious controls on the use of space,  
44 but an individual's behavior is also constrained by what they think is appropriate,  
45 admissible, or possible.”  
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56 The same goes for some other ordinary objects, such as prickly bushes planted next  
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3 to the first-floor windows of the Peterbos primary school, street-level windows that  
4 are shuttered, or entrances that are boarded with plywood in Kuregem. Also graffiti  
5 is mentioned. To write graffiti is an act of appropriation, a temporary act of  
6 privatising something that is public. Alae (18, m) argues: "we have never destroyed  
7 (... anything in the neighbourhood. It's *our* neighbourhood, so what would be the  
8 point in doing that?" While vandalising one's own neighbourhood clearly is  
9 ridiculous to these boys, to tag and write initials in the halls of the apartment  
10 buildings is something entirely different. That is a micro-political expression of  
11 ownership and belonging, which is in many cases directed towards those others  
12 who are to feel unwelcome. Boys in the Peterbos and Chicago areas, for instance,  
13 also talk about nicknames and postal codes sprayed against walls in the city, as  
14 advanced signifiers of the actual territorial border of their own neighbourhood.

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16 To conclude this section, it is clear that control, as a regime of visibility, plays an  
17 important role in the behaviour of and interactions in public space. However, on the  
18 basis of the findings about youth in Brussels' public spaces, we cannot  
19 underestimate the role played by rules and codes, by social expectation and by the  
20 ambience exerted by ordinary objects. These latter forms of control are much less  
21 visible. And even though they might work on an unconscious and invisible level,  
22 they are at least as effective. This nuances the importance of visibility as it is  
23 sometimes treated in surveillance and control studies. Although we clearly and  
24 increasingly live in a visual world, affective forces that are largely invisible remain  
25 important in influencing our behaviour in public space (and elsewhere).

#### 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 **4. Recognition as a regime of visibility**

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46 Young people overtly appropriate public space—by claiming a hanging spot or  
47 tagging initials on walls and benches—and even engage in their own forms of  
48 exerting control. Young people's claim of spaces of their own is often described in  
49 overtly political terms such as 'resistance', 'protest' and 'empowerment'. In  
50 Brighenti's (2007) terminology we can refer to visibility as 'recognition'—the will of  
51 youngsters to claim their place, the claim of the right to the city and the production  
52 of a set of rules and codes of their own making. Here, I want to argue that we need

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3 to move beyond an idealised account of young people negotiating top-down, adult-  
4 and state-controlled regimes. They use their visibility as a means to exert power and  
5 produce control of their own. To make this point I will discuss the micro-political  
6 behaviour taking place in hanging spots.  
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10 Contrary to some public space scholars, I would like to argue that young people do  
11 not necessarily prefer to sit outside of the adult gaze. Often on the contrary. It  
12 seems that young people want to claim spots that are also frequented by adults: to  
13 be in such a central meeting point means that youngsters are not only visible *in*  
14 public, but rather, that they *are* the public. It is no coincidence that in the process of  
15 growing up public space occupies a special place: due to the relative freedom and  
16 high diversity youngsters will experience there, it is an excellent locus for  
17 experiment, for the invention and negotiation of their own rules, and for developing  
18 what Cahill (2000) calls "street literacy".  
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26 At the same time, they prefer to distance themselves from other users, particularly  
27 from other age groups (the older teenagers in the skate park, the elderly in the Sint-  
28 Antonius square or the young families in Hap Park), either spatially or temporally.  
29 Put in another way, although they like to be in the middle of the excitement, it  
30 seems young people, and especially boys, prefer to dominate the places they are  
31 occupying. In such instances, transgression is not a guerrilla-like tactic against the  
32 dominant mode of control; it *is* the dominant mode: "[o]ne of the central ironies of  
33 routine transgression is that its agents tend to be the ones who feel they have  
34 power within—perhaps even dominate—their chosen geography of play and  
35 resistance" (Bonnett, 1996: 29). Luckily for them, other users usually make no fuss  
36 about this: "when we sit there, we want to be left alone. The park is big enough;  
37 they will not necessarily come sit next to us" (Jihane, 17, f).  
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47 In this appropriated space, young people engage in theatrical behaviour towards  
48 other users and passers-by (Goffman, 1963; 1971). This theatre is micro-political,  
49 since they are defending their right to be in public—the right of presence, use,  
50 action, and modification (Lynch, 1981)—and the framework of rules of their own  
51 device. Often the message of ownership is symbolically conveyed through loud  
52 conversation and ostentatious behaviour. In general this type of interaction is rather  
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3 peaceful: young people avoid contact and conflict as a rule of thumb.  
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5 The football pitch near the leper tram stop in the Chicago neighbourhood is the  
6 result of an actual political stance undertaken by local youth. Some years ago, the  
7 city council decided to transform it into a basketball field, which was received by the  
8 youngsters as a declaration of war. None of them were into basketball and as a  
9 football field it was very popular, so why change it? The decision was interpreted as  
10 a gesture of discrimination, one that seemed to signal the city council's aversion  
11 against Arab or Maghreb kids playing in the neighbourhood. After much protest, the  
12 situation was restored. The place became literally a space of representation and  
13 contestation in their geographies. In a remarkable inversion, also the act of  
14 *abandoning* a popular hanging spot can be micro-political. After the Sint-Antonius  
15 square in Jacht-Jourdan was refurbished, young people decided to hang out  
16 elsewhere as if to signal that a hanging spot does not let itself be designed by  
17 municipal councils.  
18

19 Interesting are also those spaces we would ordinarily call quasi- or semi-public.  
20 Hicham and Cheb Khaled (both 18, m) like to go to the local snack bar because they  
21 know the owner. This place is rendered more 'public', because young people are  
22 allowed to hang out under the canopy without consumption being mandatory. But  
23 such quasi-public spaces are not easily claimed, adapted or contested, which is why  
24 some young people avoid commercial areas. Hicham (18, m), for instance, draws  
25 attention to the presence of private security in such places. Several others mention  
26 the fact that shopping streets or malls are simply places to act functionally; no place  
27 for social behaviour or loitering.  
28

29 In the micro-politics of the hanging spot the functionality of these places' design is  
30 transformed to better serve their needs. Since adults initiate the design and  
31 maintenance of public space, young people's improper use of such places can be, or  
32 perhaps is by definition, an act of defiance or protest. In Jacht-Jourdan, between  
33 two entrances of the train station on the esplanade in front of the European  
34 Parliament, young people transform a bike depot into a hammock; others sit with  
35 their backs against the shiny glass of the train station. They lie or sit there as if  
36 mocking the glimmering symbols of state authority around them, as an  
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3 ostentatious gesture towards policemen, security guards and CCTV cameras. The  
4 environment of the European Parliament is heavily regulated, surveilled and  
5 policed, but it turns out these young people do not mind at all.  
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8 The micro-politics of hanging out also imply that publicness is effectively  
9 transformed. A group of young people produces a bubble of familiarity with a strong  
10 binary nature: it is welcoming for those inside the bubble but it is also exclusionary  
11 for those outside. The space being claimed is no longer accessible for others. In  
12 order to be in public or to be part of the public, publicness itself is obliterated.  
13 Rather than powerless victims, young people are active users of power in their  
14 'territorial tactics', as Kärholm (2007) calls it (see also de Certeau, 1984). This  
15 exposes the paradoxical nature of publicness to the fullest. In order to be truly  
16 social, young people need to be asocial: establishing a territory goes hand in hand  
17 with the erection of boundaries and the exclusion of others. As Németh (2012: 813)  
18 puts it: "publicness is always subjective: whereas some might feel a space full of  
19 homeless persons is 'truly public', this sight might drive other users away."  
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29 Much of the hanging behaviour of young people is innocuous. But the fact remains  
30 that their gathering of bodies affects the feelings of passers-by, residents or  
31 outsiders, and potentially also alters their behaviour. In neighbourhoods with a  
32 strong ambience of familiarity the same phenomenon occurs on a larger scale. For  
33 instance, several young people report they feel uneasy in neighbourhoods where  
34 they don't know anybody, where they feel out-of-place. "Those in *Molem* are crazy,"  
35 Souhail (17, m) says about the inhabitants of another neighbourhood.  
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42 This becomes very tangible when discussing the gendered patterns of public space  
43 behaviour among Brussels youth. Girls and young women explain that they have  
44 limited spatial freedom or say that they prefer to stay at home much more often  
45 than boys and young men. Once outside, there is another difference between these  
46 genders. As Faiza (18, f) puts it: "girls *do something* when they leave the house,  
47 where boys do nothing and hang out." Often this translates in girls leaving the  
48 neighbourhood entirely, in order to go shopping with friends. Curiously, most young  
49 men are largely unaware of this gender pattern.  
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56 Anneke<sup>iii</sup>: Do you have the feeling that girls are allowed the same as boys?  
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3 Kamal (18, m): How do you mean "allowed"?

4 Anneke: To go out in the weekend, to meet with friends, to go outside...

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6 Kamal: I think so, yes.  
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8 The gendered use of public space can be partly understood as the result of  
9 ambiances of familiarity that are effectively and affectively produced by boys and  
10 men present in public space. This translates into separate effects: control (towards  
11 women) and belonging (for men). The following discussion is enlightening:  
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15 Bérénice (18, f): Boys don't like leaving the neighbourhood. But we like to  
16 shop.  
17

18 Me: What else could be a reason for the difference? Does it have something  
19 to do with feelings of security, perhaps?  
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22 Hicham (18, m): Reputation. The reputation of the girl.  
23

24 Julia (18, f): They keep an eye on girls. We are not supposed to be in public  
25 space. That's different for boys, for them that's okay, they're just boys.  
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28 Mourad (18, m): I think girls don't like to hang around in their own  
29 neighbourhood, because the boys would see their friends.  
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32 This dialogue seems to indicate that a regime is set up to control girls and women  
33 through notions such as 'reputation' and (cultural or other) gendered prescriptions  
34 about 'acceptable' or expected behaviour. This reminds very strongly of Merry's  
35 (1984) research of gossip and 'reputational control' in the context of close-knit  
36 communities. This might have a cultural or religious component, as Nouhaila (19, f)  
37 remarks:  
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42 Parents who see their son hanging out will not mind that much, while a girl  
43 who's always outside, that is a problem. Maybe it's a cultural thing, or a  
44 religious thing, but a girl cannot hang out outside constantly. That's  
45 impossible.  
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50 But at the same time we must be aware of the 'false exceptionalism' of such a  
51 phenomenon, as social control also takes places in other ethnic communities.  
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54 The rationale behind such a dynamics of reputational control is put even more  
55 sharply in this discussion:  
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3 Me: Do you think there are families in which boys have more freedom than  
4 girls?  
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6 Ahmed (18, m): That's normal.  
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8 Bilal (25, m): But why?  
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10 Ahmed (18, m): Because when they hang out they will become a whore.  
11

12 Young men in these neighbourhoods with a vibrant street-life generally like the  
13 friendly atmosphere of familiarity; in fact they are co-creators of the ambiance. On  
14 young women this will usually have another effect. They may feel more inclined to  
15 alter their behaviour in order to avoid the male stare or avoid being in male-  
16 dominated space. Nouhaila (19, f) says she doesn't mind the presence of boys in the  
17 Chicago neighbourhood hanging out on street-corners because she knows them  
18 personally. Interestingly, Chaimaa (21, f) avoids walking through the neighbourhood  
19 because of that same reason. Angela Louis (19, f) talks about how she navigates the  
20 street, crosses it in order to avoid being talked to. Gzifa (18, f) says she listens to her  
21 mp3-player when walking between the tram stop and the church in a  
22 neighbourhood where she feels unsafe.  
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31 Among young Muslim women an extra layer can be added to the analysis. Here we  
32 can refer to the important role of visibility in the social structuring of behaviour of  
33 female Muslims, which presents an alternative view on 'public' space (Mazumdar &  
34 Mazumdar, 2001). In general, Muslim women are not expected to be in the same  
35 room as males who could be marriage candidates. In public space this prescription  
36 translates into gendered temporal and spatial patterns. Coping with this cultural  
37 reality, Muslim women may choose to cover themselves and wear a veil. This too  
38 transforms publicness, that is, an extra layer is wrapped around that person, as a  
39 'territory of the self' (Goffman, 1971). Veiling is used as a defence tactic against the  
40 male gaze, but is also an emancipatory tool. Some young women make a conscious  
41 decision to wear the veil (as opposed to their mothers and grandmothers wearing it  
42 out of tradition or habit—from the Latin root *habitus* meaning 'appearance'), which  
43 allows them to fully partake in 'western' society: to play theatre, study at university  
44 or work as a volunteer in a youth club.  
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55 For this reason, it was received with incomprehension when a secondary school in  
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3 the Chicago neighbourhood decided to ban headscarves. What is wrong with  
4 women expressing their independence and individuality, they wondered. The  
5 nonverbal, embodied communication of the veil conveys information, a micro-  
6 political act: "it disobeys both traditional and secular ways of imagining self-  
7 emancipation and becoming public" (Göle, 2002: 188). The headscarf ban is  
8 conceived as a contradiction with western values of individual expression and  
9 religious freedom. Chaimaa (21, f), reflecting on this topic, argues that rather than  
10 that these young Muslims should be asked to better integrate, it is those people  
11 who still consider Belgium as an inherently white territory that are in need of  
12 integration.

13  
14 At the same time, several young Muslim women acknowledge, wearing a veil can  
15 expose them and can actually attract gazes rather than make them invisible. As  
16 Listerborn (2015) notes, such practices may cause them to stand out and become a  
17 victim of violence, which will reinforce certain spatial and social practices. As a  
18 result, these intersecting forms of oppression 'keep them in their place', which  
19 inevitably makes it much harder for young women to negotiate conformity and  
20 resistance (Ehrkamp, 2013).

## 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 **5. Conclusion**

36  
37 Many of the practices studied in this article transform the publicness of public  
38 spaces. These spaces are no longer entirely accessible, rules of stranger interaction  
39 are modified, and the diversity of users and uses is obliterated and replaced by a  
40 parochial bubble. These transformations all play with visibility and invisibility: *being*  
41 visible by appropriation or *making* visible through control. The main point in this  
42 article is that these modes of visibility are heavily intertwined, which is why the  
43 analysis takes us full circle.

44  
45 Young people deal with control in a varied way, depending on characteristics such  
46 as age, gender and ethnicity, and depending on a case history of daily control,  
47 stigma and targeted policy practices. But young people are not only victims of  
48 control. Sometimes they claim a space in a forceful way, while excluding others.

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3 This is the case in the theatrical play engaged in by young people in their hanging  
4 spot. This is also what we see when boys and young men hang out in the square of  
5 their home neighbourhood exerting an influence on passers-by. In the 'solidarity  
6 circle' (Sloterdijk, 2009) of these men, the micro-politics is one of belonging towards  
7 insiders and of exclusion towards outsiders.  
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11 This becomes clear when studying the gendered nature of public space: girls prefer  
12 to stay at home or feel they have to use certain defence tactics in order to deal with  
13 the male gaze and the reputational control exerted through informal social control  
14 and gossip. Particularly, but not only, among Muslim girls, such defence tactics may  
15 take the form of 'dressing appropriately' and veiling practices. In the dominant  
16 discourse, these pieces of textile are seen as oppressive, used to keep women in  
17 their place. However, they also allow these young women to partake in public life.  
18 Furthermore, these girls feel they make a conscious choice in distinguishing  
19 themselves both from the traditional world of their home and the secular world of  
20 the youth club, university, leisure club and job market.  
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29 To consider certain practices of young people in public space as micro-political,  
30 using visibility as a perspective, allows us to move beyond idealised, binary  
31 understandings of top-down control and bottom-up acts of resistance. The regimes  
32 of visibility treated in this article—recognition and control—are contradicted, pried  
33 open and shattered. Rather than two opposing outcomes, as Brighenti (2007) seems  
34 to suggest, I would present them as vectors in a circular motion; and the circle never  
35 stops. Some acts can be understood both as recognition or as control, one can  
36 transform into the other, or they can be both at the same time.  
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44 There is also no straightforward connection between the visibility of  
45 control/recognition and the degree in which occupants of public space are  
46 effectively controlled/recognised. Following Allen's (2006) analysis I want to  
47 advocate for a further exploration of the less visible, but ever more "impalpable"  
48 affects produced by ordinary objects and of ambiances in the street, both of which  
49 are often overlooked in surveillance and public space studies (see De Backer and  
50 Pavoni, 2018). For this we need a phenomenological eye: "[s]ince the total visible is  
51 always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only  
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3 through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself" (Merleau-Ponty,  
4 1968: 136).  
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<sup>i</sup> In the literature, definitions for 'public space' are legion. Carr *et al.* (1992) and Carmona *et al.* (2008) emphasise *accessibility* as the central characteristic of public space, while Walzer (1986) and Sennett (1970) stress the fact that within public space we are by definition among *strangers*, people who are not our relatives or friends. Lofland (1998) uses the same criterion to distinguish the public from parochial and private realms. In her seminal work on lower Manhattan, Jane Jacobs (1961) treats public space as a lively place filled with a large diversity of uses and users. For this author *diversity* is essential to constitute something truly public. Hatuka and Toch (2016), in their research on online and offline public spaces, find indications that *control* plays a crucial role in defining publicness.

<sup>ii</sup> The data on unemployment used in this section are taken from the website <http://wijkmonitoring.brussels> which collects all the latest data from the Brussels employment agency Actiris and the Belgian statistics agency Statistics Belgium. The latest unemployment data were collected in 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Colleagues Anneke and Els have helped me with some interviews in the Sint-Guido secondary school, for which I am of course very grateful.