

Dries Verhoeven – WANNA PLAY? (Love in the Age of Grindr)

The internet is well on its way to becoming the most obvious place to meet. We already spend more time looking at our phone display than we do looking at what's around us. In the gay world this has developed at a dizzying tempo. Popular smartphone apps like Grindr, Scruff and GayRomeo let us organize men by their geographical distance; the closest guy is the first one shown on the screen.

Apps have slowly been supplanting gay bars, parties and cruising areas. Some people believe that this is giving rise to a new so-called “closet”; the gay world is once again becoming invisible to the heteronormative outside world. Is gay liberation suffering a setback due to all of this, or has the smartphone made that liberation superfluous?

Alone in his home, the modern gay man can go on the prowl for someone to satisfy his urges, and, as often happens in the anonymity of the internet, the forbidden, prurient fantasy takes the upper hand over his more vulnerable longings. Our imagination shifts to porn. It begs the question: Once people are only meeting online, can these apps also be used to look for love? Or are intimacy and affection the new taboos in dating land?

In his latest project “Wanna Play?”, Dries Verhoeven is looking for answers. For 15 days he's shutting himself away from public life. His new domicile is a glass container at Heinrichplatz in Berlin's Kreuzberg. His only contact with the outside world will take place through Grindr and other such apps. The men that he meets there will be invited into the container in order to mutually fulfill non-sexual longings.

In the following text he gives us a view onto his own experiences and describes what he hopes to accomplish with this project.

A Confession

I'm 38 years old, an artist and a more or less care-free practicing homosexual. I harbor a great love for adventure. When I don't happen to be in a relationship, I passionately delve into new developments in the field of flirtation and sex. So for the last few years I've also been regularly active on Grindr and other apps for gay sex dating. My first experiences with this app were simply amazing. I felt like I was a kid in a candy store. I scrolled through the photos of gay men in my area; sometimes I blocked the Asian, effeminate and chubbier boys, leaving only the Mediterranean-looking, well-built guys. In no time at all, decidedly attractive men were sitting on the edge of my bed, men who wanted nothing more than to satisfy my sexual fantasies and then afterwards – in a flash – go back home. Easy as that. No embarrassing explanations that you're able to project your sexual fantasies on someone, but can't actually imagine going to the movies together or bringing him home to the family at Christmas.

It was just as exciting as my first trip to a porno video booth and as easy as a quick trip to the supermarket. On top of that it was a big boost to my self-esteem. Okay, it was disappointing that the best-built and younger guys didn't always react to my messages, but in general I was fairly popular. I – or rather: the collection of selfies that I had carefully selected in combination with a series of not all too profound catchy statements – often seemed to serve as the projection surface for their fantasies. Sometimes my interest in a man even went further than the surface of his body. A short of feeling of happiness set in. A second hook up with the same person was exceptional.

Grindr became part of my everyday life. It conquered a place in my “social administration”. In the lost moments in the underground, in the queue at the supermarket or waiting on a date in a café, I worked through the whole range of social networks, answering messages on Facebook, WhatsApp, Grindr, Scruff and GayRomeo. (And after a spate of answering

starting a new round, since in the meantime I'd received new messages.) The initial thrill of the adventure faded with time, but the excitement remained. I filled any boring moment with the promise of a possible real life contact. Even on my bicycle I kept texting away, with one eye on the traffic and the other on one of the little icons on my mobile phone.

Something began to gnaw at me. By then it was fifteen years since I'd come out. For the first time in years, I once again had the feeling that I was keeping something secret from my friends. Was it the promiscuity that I was ashamed of, or the version of myself that I was showing? For an international artist, my profile was in fact pretty infantile and not very original. I realized that many times it wasn't sex that I was looking for, but more the affirmation that I got from the sex. The sounds of the various apps had the effect of a slap on the back, an incoming message meant interest. I felt like a teenager who needs the approval of his classmates and so conforms to their rules and their jargon. In less than half a year my

texts had been reduced to simple headlines like "Hey there" and "Whats up?", my photos did not show the man that I was, but rather a bad imitation of the typical torso photos. Dries Verhoeven meets Justin Timberlake meets Jeff Stryker. Anyone who uses the app more than a week will know this tendency. It's virtually impossible not to present yourself as a carefree "no strings attached guy" once you discover that you rouse much more interest with that than with a more complex version of yourself.

Often I saw men who seemed to be roaming about on the app with no apparent goal. They were interested, but at the same time not. At the last moment they would back out or write that they were just "bored". Time and again I had the feeling that they couldn't find the words for what they were looking for, if they even knew.

The men that I met then were the trophies of my digital hunt. The more their outward appearance fit my ideal image, the higher their value in the imaginary ranking that I kept of them and of my own accomplishments. The sex was not the final goal, but it was a pleasant occupation while maintaining our Grindr market value. The only thing missing was a friendly e-mail from the organization asking to rank the man after the sexual act. (The last taboo in dating land. It probably won't be long before somebody introduces this.)

Grindr brought me more sex than ever before, but the app was untouched by any form of intimacy, we maintained a silent agreement that we could enact our porno fantasies on one another. I felt like a superficial illustration of myself, a man that could fulfill many sexual fantasies, but who rarely went to the movies with a stranger. I hadn't brought anyone home to the

family for Christmas in years. Grindr kept me from dealing with my single life. A feeble surrogate, but good enough not to feel lonely. I decided to delete the various apps from my mobile phone.

A New Closet?

I returned to my old gay life, to the bars and parties where I had gone looking for my tête-à-têtes a couple of years before. Here it dawned on me that I wasn't the only one who was addicted to Grindr. In Amsterdam I saw how the gay world had dwindled. Several bars had closed by now, and there were fewer and fewer gay parties being organized. Acquaintances told me that they didn't go out anymore, since it was easier to find a guy at home over the iPhone. You no longer needed to drink beer the whole evening before approaching someone. Grindr had simplified flirting and made it cheaper. Showing interest was easier than ever before, getting rejected was less painful.

In gay bars I saw guys covertly checking their Grindr messages in a corner. The place was full of men, but approaching their digital counterparts entailed less risks than the analogue version. Was it my imagination, or was there less flirting going on in the gay world? Did men suddenly lose their nerve? Had their mobile phone made it so that the only place they could show their sexual preferences was in the world of the internet? I found myself confronted with a generation of gay men that were once again keeping their lust a secret in public, panicking slightly that someone else might hear the ping of their app. And I wondered: Are we hiding ourselves away again in a new closet, in a new secrecy? Are we ashamed in front of our heterosexual friends and family of our new way of meeting? Weren't our bars also a way to make ourselves visible for a long time in the heteronormative world? Since the '80s the so-called Gay Village had carved out a public space for being different, creating awareness amongst our heterosexual neighbours. Was it a setback in gay liberation, that we were now once again satisfying our sexual urges in invisibility? Was there an analogy with the parking lot as a meeting point for miserable married men who hadn't yet accepted their inclinations? Or did the new invisibility in fact mean that liberation has been completed, that we no longer needed to distinguish ourselves from the masses with a lot of rigamarole, that our inclinations were something that only affected our behaviour in the bedroom? I had no clear answer to these questions at hand. But I knew that at the time of my coming out it was an important physical act for me to cross the threshold of a gay bar. Back then I showed myself, the people in the street and the men in the bar that I was part of their community. Enough with 18 years of shame and cautious behaviour. The young, homosexual person today can keep his inclinations secret for longer by using apps like Grindr. Will he find a community on his smartphone that welcomes him, provides him with self-confidence, a place where he can also be vulnerable? I doubt it: My own behaviour and that of others has been focussed on the most efficient means of finding a quick fuck.

My Dystopia

I was overcome with a frightening idea: an image of gay men who were now only capable of satisfying their mutual hunger for sexual affirmation, but who were no longer capable of intimacy. Surrendered to a tool that drove them to present themselves as carefree porno stars. I saw millions of men with my mental eye, frantically occupied with creating an image, carefully constructed according to the symbols and rules of Grindr. The desire for love seemed absurd. Disappointment didn't exist in this world ("No interest? No worries"). I saw untouchable men before me, men who could perfectly maintain themselves, but who were no longer able to connect with anyone else. This doesn't sound very sexy, but I believe that you can only show intimacy when you're not being judged. It exists through the grace of devotion. How can you be devoted if 200 new opportunities are waiting for you on your mobile phone? Here, I think, is where we see the painful boundaries of this medium.

In my worst dystopia, this kind of tool had caused the gay world to change from a community into a supermarket. Men only viewed each other as reciprocal competitors and consumers of their sexual potential. As Michel Houellebecq already stated ten years ago, sexual connection was no longer the highest value, but stood in the service of something higher: obtaining a perfect image, dying with the conviction that you are the most desirable man in the world.

I don't have any problem whatsoever with free sex. I think that the brothel, the darkroom and the cruising area have liberated us from a sexual morality that certainly did not come from us gays. It is fantastic that there are places in the world where we're allowed first and foremost to be sexual beings (I think it does a great service to world peace). My dystopia was more about sex date apps coming to monopolise the daily lives of gay men. That our search

for a deeper form of contact could only take place through this medium, like a darkroom in which men weren't looking for sex, but were veiling their desire for love. I think something has gone wrong when gays trust each other enough to admit their desire to have a fist up their butts, but can no longer dare to invite one another to dinner.

Cut the crap

But hold on a minute! That can't be the case! We all liberated ourselves long ago from the norms of a world that was not ours. Surely we wouldn't just conform our identities to some new format? We didn't claim to be hetero for 18 years only now to perform a new act (standing in front of the mirror, iPhone in hand, indifferently staring at ourselves on the display)? Every new invention, from the printing press to the television, has always involved a bit of griping about lost values; there are always cultural pessimists among us. And if it's already the case that gays now hide behind a prescribed image en masse, won't a new balance develop in a few years, one more in keeping with our human needs? We didn't all become socially retarded, did we?

I decided to send out a signal, a counterproposal to my own dystopia. In a city that has not yet entirely succumbed to the Grindr virus: Berlin. By now 90,000 gay men have a Grindr profile here (for comparison: London has 350,000). There's a standstill in new gay parties, but in contrast to many other European cities, gay life still also plays out on the streets and in the bars. Together with the men who are online here, I would like to propose a future for the internet date. Can we get our smartphones to reflect the variety of desires that we might have, or must we submissively give in to their codes?

The Project

"Wanna Play?" is a social experiment. For 15 days my life will only take place online. I will contact men in my vicinity and attempt to induce them into visiting me to satisfy my nonsexual needs. In return, I offer the same. I will play chess with them, have breakfast, make pancakes, trim nails, we'll shave one another or read to one another from our favourite books. I see this container as a research laboratory in which I will investigate the degree to which the internet can serve as a new meeting point. We will put Grindr to a real test. Can we free ourselves from the existing templates and come up with new strategies for meeting with a man who is nearby? Or will I simply be blocked by the men in my vicinity?

I see the glass container as a materialized chat box. The screen of my smartphone will be visible on a large LED panel. To avoid immediately bringing on the wrath of a whole community, the men's faces will be unrecognizable, but the conversations can be followed word for word.

The rest of my daily life will also be visible to the whole city. Perhaps the container will show the feeling of isolation that creeps over you when your only exchanges with other people are online. For some people, this project will be their first encounter with this phenomenon, they will be able to gaze into a world that had previously been hidden from them. This also raises the question of the visibility of gays in public. Do Berlin gays feel comfortable with the online conversations, and do they foster the image that have created of themselves, or would they rather keep their search for contact away from the public eye? Is it even still relevant to distinguish between internet and public space, or are they becoming more and more intertwined?

Does the project only apply to the gay world? I hope not. I'm using my own situation to ask questions about a development that is also taking place in the hetero world. Also the perfect world of Facebook is not devoid of a certain narcissism. Now

there's Tinder, where also heterosexuals can find a sex date on the quick. The communication, however, is somewhat less direct and the app has also not yet managed to bring the whole hetero world under its spell.

Maybe someday the streets and the cafés will lose their function as a meeting point. The public would then just be a transfer zone, a place where we are randomly together for a moment, but where there is no longer any contact with strangers. For winking at someone you'll have to go online. Would that be so bad? I'm happy to leave the answer to the passer by who casts a glance into my chat box.