Is Gay Culture Dead?
HBO’s Looking and the end of an era

Jon Catlin

“Sometimes I think homosexuality is wasted on gay people.”
—David Halperin, How to Be Gay

In a 1982 interview, the French philosopher Michel Foucault was asked to respond to a claim of American sociologist Philip Rieff: “a culture survives the assault of sheer possibility against it only so far as the members of a culture learn, through their membership, how to narrow the range of choices otherwise open.” Rieff suggests that culture and individual choice have an inverse relation; a culture only survives by restricting individual choices, and only “a culture in crisis favors the growth of individuality.”

If there is anything to be said about our culture today, it is that it operates under the banner of individualism. We want to be able to do what we want, when we want, with whomever we want. We still largely buy into the straightforward program of “liberation” that Foucault critiques in his response to Rieff: “The important question here, it seems to me, is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system.” Foucault’s idea of freedom (and political agenda) is not liberation from repression, for “a society without restrictions is inconceivable,” but the individual’s capacity to creatively resist it.

Rieff’s thesis could be posed with respect to any culture, but Foucault was asked about it in the specific context of gay male culture,
the subject of numerous interviews he gave for gay publications from the late seventies until his death from AIDS in 1984. (Rieff formulated his observation in reference to the trial of Oscar Wilde, one such resister who was imprisoned for sodomy.) By the time of this interview in March 1982, the gay liberation movement that had begun fifteen years earlier had already made significant progress toward public acceptance and civil rights, notably bans on employment discrimination in several states. The interview took place near the end of gay culture’s golden age, between the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the peak of the AIDS crisis in the mid-eighties.

Foucault’s interviewer seemed to preempt a question reformulated twenty years later by gay cultural theorist David Halperin in his 2012 book How to Be Gay: “And when gay liberation has done its work, what then? Will gay male culture...wither away?” For Halperin, it already has. Now that gay people are accepted into straight society more than ever before, they have less reason to maintain a culture built out of social exclusion, including pride parades, drag, and other forms of sexual subversiveness. I’ve met several gay men my age who are leaving behind this “queeny” culture entirely. It’s “not of this time.” Now that we have equal rights, what is there to be proud about?

HBO’s new series Looking has been accused of harboring just this hostile relation to gay culture, pushing an individualistic, “post-gay” approach to gay life. But while that case can certainly be made, it is ultimately a misreading that misses what makes the show such a rich social commentary on gay life today. Instead of offering an answer to the question of gay culture by promoting a particular lifestyle, especially a “boring” or “straight” one, Looking presents many different ones, new and old, in an as of yet unresolved but productive tension. Rather than pushing a forward- or backward-looking view, it celebrates cross-fertilization between the two.

Looking, which premiered in January 2014, takes us inside the admittedly ordinary lives of three gay men in present-day San Francisco. The show is a product of its time and progressive setting in that its characters are relatively free to choose how gay they want their lives to be. For Rieff, that choice also entails the decline of gay culture, and we see this play out in many ways. But as Looking ultimately makes
the case, there are plenty of aspects of gay culture worth holding onto, and some things that, despite decades of progress, have hardly changed at all. Looking testifies to the fact that gay culture, a distinctly gay way of life, isn’t going away any time soon, even if Foucault would hardly recognize it.

THE DEATH OF GAY CULTURE

First of all, can we say that there is such a thing as gay culture? Halperin’s How to Be Gay is perhaps the best attempt yet to answer this question. Its premise is simple: “Just because you happen to be a gay man doesn’t mean you don’t have to learn how to become one.” If being gay is just a matter of sexual preference (as many gay rights groups trying to “normalize” homosexuality have argued), why are so many gay men still drawn to musicals, drag, and diva worship—not to mention sexual niches like S&M and leather? How and why do gay men come to acquire something more than a shared sexual identity, “a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, a shared sense of self,” or, as Halperin borrows from Foucault, “an entire way of being”? Gay culture is so pronounced that one might even say there’s “a right way to be gay.” This is not to say that gay life is uniform, but that a common gay subjectivity seems to carry across age, place, race, and class.

How to Be Gay charts the steady decline of this culture since its peak in the seventies and eighties. Contra Rieff’s theory, however, Halperin doesn’t attribute this lapse primarily to the increased social acceptance of homosexuality—though it is a related factor. Rather, he identifies several structural causes: the gentrification of inner-city “gay ghettos,” the tremendous demographic losses from the AIDS crisis, and finally the shift of gay life to the Internet. All have hastened “gay culture’s apparent decline.” In their peak in the seventies and early eighties, the gay ghettos provided a “power base” for gay political movements, cultural institutions, newspapers, art,
and commercial infrastructure, including bars and bathhouses, but also coffeehouses and bookstores.

“And if you wanted to get laid, in those days,” Halperin writes, “you had to leave the house.” Before the Internet, gay people depended on physical gay spaces to meet other gay men and experience drag and leather. “In order to find sexual partners, you had to attach yourself to one of the institutions of gay male social life,” from gay choruses, to publications, to professional associations. This necessity invigorated gay life: who you met “wasn’t up to you…You had to deal with a wide range of people of different social backgrounds, physical types, appearances, gender styles, social classes, sexual tastes and practices, and…different races.” Gay men didn’t have much choice: they were brothers (and sisters) thrown together “in all their beautiful, dreary, fabulous, sleazy variety.”

For better or worse, Halperin explains that this “social experiment proved to be short lived.” The gay population dispersed, and “the entire infrastructure of gay male life gradually deteriorated.” The local gay press, once a hub for political activism, was replaced with delocalized and increasingly commercial “gay glossies.” Then came gay dating sites, and eventually Grindr, the GPS proximity-based smartphone app for gay meet-ups, which rendered gay bars all but obsolete. To meet other gay people, one no longer had to live in a gay neighborhood, which “was no longer very gay and which you
couldn’t afford anyway.” The Internet finished what gentrification and AIDS had begun. In 2007, Entrepreneur put gay bars on its list of “businesses facing extinction, along with record stores and pay phones.” The number of gay bars in major cities has plummeted—in San Francisco, from 118 in 1973 to 33 today.

More than centers of culture, gay ghettos were pressure cookers for radical “militant, uncompromising, anti-homophobic, anti-heterosexist” political attitudes. People who moved to them were bound to have “their assumptions, values, and pictures of the right way to live, of how to be gay, seriously challenged.” Following Foucault, Halperin defends gay life as an ethics, a way one should live, and a corresponding utopian politics whose aim is to debate that very question. The idea behind Halperin’s book is that revisiting this period in gay history might help revive gay culture today.

No longer concentrated in ghettos, gay people today are concerned with “access to mainstream social forms.” The aim of gay liberation, by contrast, was to free gay people from heteronormative ideals and to allow them invent new ways of living. So shouldn’t the fulfillment of the movement’s political goals have eroded the ideological grip of heterosexual ways of life? On the contrary. “Gay people, in their determination to integrate themselves into the larger society, and to demonstrate their essential normality, are rushing to embrace heterosexual forms of life, including heterosexual norms. In so doing, they are accepting the terms in which heterosexual dominance is articulated, and they are positively promoting them.” Instead of a proud embrace of gay difference, the original thrust behind gay pride, Halperin writes that “we are witnessing the rise of a new and vehement cult of gay ordinariness.” “We are trying to beat heterosexuals at their own game.”

**OUR “POST-GAY” TIMES**

Entering Looking, a word that usually appears on Grindr followed by a question mark. Initially labeled a version of HBO’s refreshing sitcom Girls for gay men, the show soon came into its own. Tasked with portraying what’s left of gay culture in our era of hyper-individualism, Looking has faced high stakes and a tough challenge.
To appeal to a gay audience, you have to somehow remain truthful to gay experience; to appeal to everyone else, you can’t be too gay. Being on HBO gave director Andrew Haigh the liberty to strike a balance. “It’s always hard when you make a show about gay people because you just cannot—no matter how hard you try—represent every gay person in the world,” Haigh says. “Because there’s so little out there, everyone wants it to reflect their own experiences. All you can do is focus on a set of characters and who they are.”

This is what Looking does well. We get to know Looking’s characters through their authentic but everyday concerns and choices. Patrick, a twenty-nine-year-old video game designer, though stable and smart, is lost when it comes to relationships and also fairly insecure about being gay. Agustin, his former roommate at Berkeley, is an artist who doesn’t make art, stuck in tug of war between his ego and his relationship with his boyfriend Frank. Then there’s Dom, a thirty-nine-year-old former hookup of Patrick’s looking to open his own restaurant but stuck waiting tables and chasing guys half his age. Their problems could be anyone’s.

This in turn leads to another criticism. In his review, “Why Is Looking so Boring?” Bryan Lowder argues that, reading positive responses to the show from gay men, one gets the sense that “we are desperately seeking ‘real’ images of ourselves, and Looking promises to be the place to find them.” Though Looking couldn’t possibly reflect all gay life today, it seems to be a response to that demand. Yet for Lowder it fails miserably at this task: “Looking is, after all, gay without any of the hard parts (dick included), gay that’s polite and comfortable and maybe a little titillating but definitely not all up in your face about it.” And as a show speaking to the gay community, “Looking cannot just be a show about a specific circle of gay men; it is also unavoidably a PSA for how the mainstream increasingly expects gayness to look—butch enough, politically apathetic, generally boring.”

This view merits some context. As one critic sarcastically notes, “Gay men have largely been depicted in television and movies as either extremely fun and funny (Will & Grace; The Birdcage) or starkly sad and depressing (Philadelphia; Angels in America) so perhaps it’s time for a Hollywood portrayal of gay life as normal, tedious, and bland.”
Will & Grace succeeded because it made gay people likeable. Taking this message to the extreme, the Emmy-winning series Modern Family formed the model domestic gay couple with Cameron and Mitchell, while Glee-creator Ryan Murphy’s copycat The New Normal failed and was canceled after just one season. The U.S. version of Queer as Folk and The L Word took gay drama seriously, but both came off as soapy and portrayed deviant sexualities as revolutionary, dealing with issues like homophobia and the trials of coming out. In Looking, by contrast, sexuality is simply one “part of who these characters are, how they live, and where they live. Its stories are informed by the fact that its characters are gay, but not dictated by it.”

Problems more central to Looking are how to evaluate a profile picture for attractiveness and how soon to introduce your boyfriend to your family. HBO marketed Looking as a response to these changing times, and its three gay male lead characters represent three distinct but interrelated gay lifestyles. Its success has been representing those characters as identifiable types without them ever becoming clichés, as epitomized by the binary Will & Grace constructed between the fickle and flamboyant Jack and the straight-acting professional Will. But some prefer this way. As one critic puts it, Will and Jack, unlike Patrick, had “already passed Gay 101—they were struggling and fumbling and stumbling along, trying to figure out what being a person meant.”

Looking illustrates and defends Foucault’s argument that passing Gay 101 shouldn’t be our goal—that one never “graduates” from the complex mess that is sexuality. In other words, portraying a consistent gay “identity” is not only boring, but also squanders the unique potential for inventiveness that having an alternative sexuality holds. Why destabilize a culture to simply replace it with fixed identities that are equally calcified and limiting? Foucault’s contrary vision of gay life is one of instability and invention. Rather than returning to some “natural” gay identity, he argues, “we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are.” Foucault returns to an imaginative naiveté apart from straight models of what a relationship should be: “As a matter of existence,” he asks, in an interview originally published in the French magazine Gai Pied, “how is it possible for men to be together?” And

he concludes: “To be ‘gay’...is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.”

At first glance, the allegedly boring Looking seems anything but this kind of gay. But as we will see, Looking’s main characters respond to the conflicts of gay life they are faced with in highly imaginative ways. They endlessly working out, and failing at, and inventing, what it means to be gay. Rather than constricting the characters to fixed gay identities as earlier gay shows have, Looking keeps them open, unpredictable, and, yes, gay.

PATRICK’S “STRAIGHT ACTING”

Patrick is the primary target of the accusations of Looking’s boringness. We see him idealistically and awkwardly navigating the dating scene in an era when instant gratification through dating platforms like OKCupid and Grindr has clouded out the dream of bumping into the love of your life on the street. Patrick’s concerns essentially reflect those of straight dating culture. He's bitter that last man who dumped him is now happily engaged—a problem quite new to the gay community, but a boring one.

In the first episode, Patrick goes on a terrible OKCupid first date that comes to embody everything that’s wrong with the dating world—gay and straight alike. His date’s first question is whether Patrick is “drug and disease free,” after which he dismisses Patrick’s career as a video game designer as a bunch of kids playing around. Patrick laughs, thinking he can’t be serious, but he quickly realizes that his date is: “I feel like I’m having a physical!” When Patrick laughingly shares that he
went cruising for sex the previous day, the date asks him, cringing in disapproval, “So you’re looking just to hook up?” They split the check before even ordering dinner.

This encounter illustrates Halperin’s argument that gay life has become much more individualistic, but also more serious. You can now filter (on Grindr, literally) the kind of pre-approved gay people you want to meet: you can “hang on to your unliberated, heterosexist, macho prejudices, your denial, your fear, and you can find other people who share them with you.” And, as we see in Patrick’s online dating preferences, “You can continue to subscribe to your ideal model of a good homosexual: someone virtuous, virile, self-respecting, dignified, ‘non-scene,’ non-promiscuous, with a conventional outlook and a solid attachment to traditional values—a proper citizen and an upstanding member of (straight) society.”

Far from liberating, the freedom that gay life in post-DOMA San Francisco affords Patrick actually becomes a source of anxiety. His sister’s wedding serves as a topic of worry and expectation. “I don’t know if she really wanted to get married or just felt pressure from everyone else to,” he says. Patrick has never even had a serious boyfriend before, but he’s already shaping his life around the marriage his mother expects of him: “She wants everything to be normal. Even if I were getting married to a guy, it would still make me just like everybody else.” As one critic describes Patrick’s mindset, “Desire barely gets a foot in the door. Allowed choices previous generations only dreamed of, Patrick has no idea what he wants or how to get it. If gay life is now supposed to end in gay marriage, does the dating scene have to be as ghastly as it is for straight people? Apparently so.”

Pushing back against this side of Patrick, the one most critics have called out as boring, Haigh says that he wanted Looking to overcome stereotypes about gay couples: “Just because now gay people can get married, it doesn’t mean they want to get married. It’s important that we look at all the different ways people can have relationships and the ways they can make things work.” At the end of his sister’s wedding, Patrick’s father complains, “Forty grand for this. You’re not gonna want one of these, are you?” At a point of thrilling disorientation on this question, all Patrick can do is grin.

By episode six, we start to see the downsides of the relationship model Patrick had been pursuing with Richie, a Latino guy he met on the subway. For a slow-moving show, things simply move too fast. The first time Patrick first introduces Richie as his boyfriend, we sense trouble; he’s trying to make him and Richie something they’re not. Judging by Agustin’s hostile reaction to Patrick using the word “boyfriend,” this designation has arguably higher stakes in gay relationships, which for Agustin can and should remain less defined for a longer period than straight ones. Patrick is acutely aware of the fact that he and Richie are from totally different social backgrounds and is terrified of what his mother will think when she finds out her Berkeley-educated son is in a relationship with someone who is happy cutting hair. When Patrick eventually snaps under this pressure, Richie bails as his wedding date, and Patrick realizes the downsides of the expectations of traditional relationships.

Yet the sharpest contrast to this comes from Patrick himself. The very first episode of Looking opens with Patrick cruising for sex in a San Francisco park, as was popular in gay ghettos in the seventies and eighties. It’s far from a glorified or sexy encounter, involving cold hands and a cell phone going off. Dom and Agustin, who organize the outing, almost ironically want to see if old gay culture still exists in San Francisco. It is a playful experiment, a diversion from the seriousness gay romantic life has acquired. Putting pressure on Patrick’s conformism, Agustin and Dom act as necessary tormentors, urging him to experiment while he’s still young. “My friends think I’m just this boy from Colorado who’s fresh off the bus. But I’m not that guy,” Patrick tells Richie at a bar on their first date. But they push him too far at times: “I have had sex before! I can do it! I will do it! I could do it right now in the toilet!” As Lannan puts it, Patrick “begins the show with the idea that you can either have sex in the woods or settle down and get married. As the show goes on, he realizes that those aren’t the only two choices—that there’s this whole world of options.” Patrick laughs off his first time cruising, but Agustin thinks of it as a serious lesson for him. “I’m proud of you! Come on, you’re a pervert now: you’ve gotta wear those colors with pride!”

Aside from his conventional views on relationships, Patrick also subscribes to conventional notions of masculinity, to the point that
Dom, Agustin, and Richie each point out his defensiveness about coming off as gay to strangers. He insists that his voicemail greeting doesn’t sound gay, which is met with a sarcastic comment from Agustin: “Guys, hey—Paddy’s voicemail is not gay. It’s just that he spends all his time pretending to be a power top because that’s what all men are supposed to do!” When Patrick and Richie later debate who are the “Ross” and the “Rachel” (from Friends) in terms of sexual positions in their relationship, Richie accuses Patrick of “bottom shame.” When Patrick denies it, Richie presses, “Do you think you’d be embarrassed if your parents thought you were a bottom?” and his point gets across. When Patrick puts the same question to Richie, Richie refuses to label himself: “Those terms are for people on websites. How do you know what you’re into until you’re sexually intimate with a guy? You’ve gotta be adaptable, otherwise you’re gonna miss out.” By the end of the season, Patrick overcomes this shame on camera with his new boss, Kevin. However, most critics have found Looking to reinforce an ideal of the masculine gay top, and argue that there is a real danger in idolizing the “straight-acting” gay man who’s afraid to be perceived as a bottom or “effeminate” in any way; it blocks out more colorful varieties of gay expression, which are the foundation of gay culture. For Halperin, a fear of effeminacy hides a deeper fear of being gay as such.

At the opening of the season, Patrick is, to use Richie’s phrase, undoubtedly missing out, which is exactly why he needs Dom and Agustin in his life. In Looking, Haigh says, “All the characters are from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different ethnicities—that can happen a lot more readily in the gay community. What you connect to initially is your sexuality, not your age or where you’ve been to school.” While Patrick remains planted in normalcy, his friends are always working to change that, fulfilling in miniature the effect of meeting people different from oneself in the gay ghettos.

DOM’S DEFENSE OF SEX

Dom is the proud sexual subject Patrick is too afraid to be. A textbook “macho” type with the classic mustache and leather jacket, he is referred to as a sexual “institution” in the Castro, San Francisco’s gay neighborhood, and previously slept with both his
roommate Doris and Patrick. Affectionately referred to as “Daddy” by Patrick and Agustin, Dom’s major concern is his impending birthday: “At forty, Grindr emails you a death certificate,” he jokes. Worried about meeting his newly successful ex-boyfriend after he’s been waiting tables for the past decade, he sighs, “I just need to get laid.” We soon realize he’s not joking. After sex with a guy in his building quickly found on Grindr, Dom admits to Doris, “I’m such a cliché, thinking that sex will make me feel better. I mean it does, but still.”

This open sexuality pushes back against the desexualized image of gay life Halperin sees many young gay men presenting today. In a poll conducted about Grindr, sixty-seven percent of users reported using the app primarily “to make friends”—a claim we can hardly take seriously when well over that proportion of users aren’t wearing shirts in their profile pictures. Halperin sees this as a new kind of shame; in downplaying their sexuality, gay men have sold out to the homophobes and prudes who will judge them anyways.

Dom puts the sex back in homosexuality, and it’s no accident that he’s closer in age to Halperin and Foucault’s generation than Patrick’s. *Looking* sets the old gay way of life, when sex was all one could look forward to, in tension with the new prospect of gay marriage, which, as we learn from Patrick’s horrible date and Dom’s frustration with aging, seems to have imposed a new benchmark that it’s now possible to fall short of. In this new world, *Modern Family*’s Cam and Mitchell have become the homosexual ideal that *Looking*’s young and discovering men can’t match. But their failures are full of spontaneous and genuine acts of self-discovery—including, of course, a healthy amount of sex.

In one notable scene, we see Dom in a gay bathhouse effectively choosing between two guys. An older yet attractive man named Lynn, around sixty, whom Dom has been flirting with in the sauna, encourages Dom to pursue a teenage guy who’s been eyeing him, and then, as Dom swaggers out, agrees to meet with Lynn for lunch some
time, as if they had just met fully clothed on a bus or in a cafe. This remarkable nonchalance about sex, the camaraderie in accepting that the guy you want to do wants to go do someone else, and refusing to reject or even judge him as a result of it, seems particular to gay men and is a standout moment in the series. And it’s no mistake that it happens in a gay bathhouse.

Foucault had a word for this kind of relationship: friendship, the way of life that best resisted the dominant form of straight relationships. He says in a 1978 interview:

> It is strategically important to live in the most explicit way possible, with someone you love, who can be a boy if it's a boy, a man if it’s a man, an old man if it's an old man. It’s strategically important, when you meet a boy in the street, to kiss him and possibly make love to him, even in the back seat of a car, if you want. In the same way, I’m saying it’s important for there to be places like baths where, without being imprisoned or pinned in your own identity, in your legal status, your past, your name, your face, and so on, you can meet the people who are there, and who are for you—as you are for them—nothing more than bodies, with whom the most unexpected combinations and fabrications of pleasures are possible. This is absolutely an important part of erotic experiences, and it is, I would say, politically important that sexuality can function in this way.12

Cruising allows one to “desubjectivize” oneself, and thus to “desubjugate” oneself from the pressures of social life. As the queer theorist Leo Bersani rightly suggests here, “a deliberate avoidance of relationships might be crucial in initiating, or at least clearing the ground for, a new relationality.”13 As the provocative gay male character Glen from Haigh’s 2012 indie film Weekend explains, “You know what it’s like when you first sleep with someone you don’t know? You, like, become this blank canvas, and it gives you an opportunity to project onto that canvas who you want to be.” His conversant is impressed: “All this from talking about sex?” As Foucault put it, “Sex is not a fatality: it is a possibility for creative life.”

IS GAY CULTURE DEAD?

Take Dom’s relationship with Lynn, which is by any standard untraditional. For starters, Lynn is twenty years older than Dom, and when Dom asks Lynn out, supposedly to get his advice on opening a restaurant, it’s unclear whether it’s a date or a business meeting, or both. The standard scripts and ready-made formulas acted out by straight couples are not available to them. As Foucault asked in *Gai Pied*: “Two men of different ages—what code would allow them to communicate? They face each other without terms or convenient words...They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure.” Dom and Lynn fit this bill; they are drawn to each other in ways we can’t ever pin down. While spaces for gay sexual experimentation and inventive relationality may seem to be disappearing, *Looking* reminds us that the practices themselves continue to flourish.

Critics are worried about whether *Looking* accurately portrays gay men today, but shouldn’t we instead look to what it could invent for gay life, or inspire in it? In initiating this discussion, it has already succeeded in stretching those limitations—ironically, largely through nostalgia for a time that prized creative ways of living. As Foucault wrote of his own work, “I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that the truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth.”

Even if *Looking* misses the mark of gay “reality” (whatever that would mean), it reorients our attention from simply what we are toward the potential for new forms of life.

AGUSTIN’S CRITIQUE OF MONOGAMY

Agustin is the least discussed of *Looking*’s three characters, probably because he’s so unlikeable. But his character is remarkably genuine for someone so lost in himself and who seems not to understand what he wants in life or to have any real aspirations. Compared to Patrick and Dom, who fit identifiable types in the history of gay culture I have laid out, Agustin is remarkably fluid, and probably the most “liberated” of the three characters. Traditional labels don’t seem to have a grip on him. For example, the same day as
Patrick’s blind date, Agustin and his boyfriend Frank decide they’re going to live together. But what seems like a move toward domesticity is disturbed when Agustin makes out with a new coworker right in front of Frank, after just a brief look of what he takes to be hesitant approval, and Frank soon joins in himself.

When Patrick mocks Agustin’s new “domestic” lifestyle for moving in with Frank, Agustin challenges him, “Would you call a three-way an act of domesticity?” When Patrick says he could only imagine having a three-way with strangers, not a boyfriend, Agustin pushes back: “Well why not?” Patrick’s admission is telling: “Because I get jealous. Does that make me a prude?” Agustin lives outside of these binaries; domesticity and promiscuity, as we see, are not mutually exclusive to him. Yet, as Foucault famously wrote in The History of Sexuality, “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power.”

Promiscuity doesn’t solve all his problems either.

At one point, Agustin delivers a rant against monogamy, about separating sex and intimacy. “All relationships end up opening in the end, whether you like it or not, so why not be honest about it instead of cheating?” Patrick is doubtful: “All of them?” Although Agustin can give numerous examples, Patrick resists his cynicism, “That doesn’t mean all, it just means everyone we know.” “People usually cheat!” Agustin says, and his conclusion sinks in: “Guys are guys.”

While Patrick has been grooming his OKCupid profile, Agustin tells him to join him at the Folsom Street Fair, an annual leather and BDSM festival, but Patrick dismisses him. “You never know, you could meet the love of your life here today!” Agustin says, genuinely optimistic. Patrick glares at him, unmoved—“I doubt that very much”—not having learned from his failed date earlier in the season.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously said that “there is no sexual relationship,” that sexual pleasures are always subjectively one’s own. Sex does not simply unite us with others; it also makes us aware of our fundamental isolation. Agustin embodies this view in what can be seen as either his cynical or empowered approach to intimacy. After his first three-way, he flirts with the idea of becoming a sex worker after meeting one in a coffee shop. He then hires the man to sleep with Frank for an “art project” while he films,
which is their second three-way in one season. Some combination of these sexual explorations and Agustin’s personal issues leads his relationship with Frank to collapse by the end of the season, leaving him single, unemployed, and depressed. He’s certainly not the poster child the folks at the Human Rights Campaign use to defend LGBT rights. But Agustin sees the world through a radically expansive queer lens; even in this low place, he never takes an easy way out.

WHAT BEYOND GAY RIGHTS?

If what we want to do is create a new way of life, then the question of individual rights is not pertinent,” Foucault once said.17 This line captures Foucault’s complicated relationship to the gay liberation and rights movements and why we might follow him in looking for answers beyond them today. Foucault does not disparage gay rights (which he refers to as “important...human rights”), but says that we should consider this battle “an episode that cannot be the final stage.” Acceptance of any kind of difference means more than legal action; it means appreciation for that difference as different. “It’s not only a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into pre-existing cultures; it’s a matter of constructing cultural forms.”

When same-sex marriage was legalized in New York in 2011, New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn reported that the decision “would change everything for her and her partner.” But more exciting for them than their new rights was that they would finally get to start deciding what the flower girl at their wedding would wear. “Is this moment...really the one we have all been so urgently waiting for?” Halperin asks. “Is this the glorious culmination of a century and a half of political struggle for gay freedom and gay pride? And how is this new and ‘totally different day,’ which sounds a lot like heterosexual business-as-usual, actually all that different from the day that went before it?” Halperin worries that such ideals entail an “inelasticity that can be suffocating.” Just like heterosexual married couples, gay people may lose their inventiveness and begin to live by a book written by somebody else. Quinn’s remark indicates to Halperin that even a total end of discrimination and rectification of social injustice for sexual minorities “would not be the same thing as the end of the
cultural dominance of heterosexuality.” It would not “enable us to attain a queerer world more in line with our desires, our wishes, and our fantasies.” And that is a shame.

Yet despite its alleged ongoing normalization, the fact remains for Halperin that “gay life does not easily accord with the basic premises of heteronormativity.” Being born different in a fundamental way, “gay men cannot take their world for granted in the same way that straight people can.” Thus, “self-invention is not a luxury or a pastime for lesbians and gay men: it is a necessity.” Taking their sexuality to be self-evident “prevents heterosexuals from thinking of heterosexuality as a profound enigma that calls for painstaking investigation...Indeed it discourages them from inquiring into social forms in general.” But gay men, as Sartre noted, “avail themselves simultaneously of two different systems of reference.”

*Looking* reminds us that this alienated perspective is something worth preserving, for straight people as well as gays. As Halperin writes in the conclusion of *How to Be Gay*, “How otherwise would they stay honest? Without the benefits of various queer cultures... how would heterosexuals acquire an understanding of the protocols and priorities of the heteronormative world in which they remain immersed?” This leads to a final paradox: “It may be heterosexuals, nowadays, who appreciate, and who need, gay male culture more than gay men do themselves.” Once exposed to gay forms of life, Foucault similarly says, “we will see that nonhomosexual people can enrich their lives by changing their own schema of relations” as well.

Gay culture has a special role to play in challenging and enriching mainstream culture, and it is about time this happened on television. But in outright submitting to straight culture, this potential is squandered. As Halperin facetiously puts it, “homosexuality is wasted on gay people.” While *Looking*’s characters are in some respects guilty of this charge, they hold promise for the future of gay ways of life. Even in *Looking*’s San Francisco, the most accepting of straight worlds, gay people continue to invent new forms of life and disturb the status quo—from Patrick’s hand job in the park, to Dom’s formless friendships, to Agustin’s domesticity without monogamy. The question is whether they will eventually run out of steam.
As Glen from *Weekend* says, “Straight people like us as long as we conform and behave by their little rules.” But there’s no rule that they always have to, so why not provoke a little? Like Agustin, Glen values the color of gay life and stands up for it when he sees it being rejected out of shame. “We have a chance to make up our own shit! We can grow our own garden and put little flowers and pansies and gay gnomes and water features...but no, everybody wants to concrete the fucker over and get a gas barbecue. Why would you want concrete when you can have whatever you want?” Through all its tensions, *Looking* gives us important glimpses of a dynamic gay culture that is being paved over as we speak, and shows us what is at stake in this transformation. But rather than looking backward out of nostalgia, as Halperin often seems to, *Looking* takes smart, imaginative, and entertaining stabs at how we might continue to invent gay ways of life for a future that’s as colorful as ever.