

THE MIDWAY REVIEW

A Journal of Essays



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THE MIDWAY REVIEW

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THE
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The real innovation of his work is not his deviation from realistic modes but his capacity for representing the various states and sorrows of earthly life.

“My memories are just as alive as you are. They breathe, weep, laugh, but they do not die until I am ready to lead the way.”

Most of the time I find myself listening to my own head, which is often no better than a beach recording or an angry piece of Wagner.

Now that we have equal rights, what is there to be proud about?

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(Alice Bucknell)

Of Love and Other Fictions

Jake Bittle

“This is the essence of magic, which doesn’t create but calls.”

—Franz Kafka

There is a wonderful saying about Ernest Hemingway that goes something like this: half of all American writers after Hemingway have tried to write like him, and the other half have tried not to. The urge to imitate, of course, is natural: writers who read a great novel are often tempted, consciously or unconsciously, to mimic the greatness of what they have read. But this quote about Hemingway speaks to more than that. It speaks to the wonderment and originality of the world Hemingway creates in his novels, and to a thing that is true of all great novels: in the best way, they haunt us, and live inside us. Once we read them, they are with us forever. Whether or not we try to imitate them, we can never escape them.

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I have never felt the urge to imitate Ernest Hemingway, but for a long time I have tried to escape the urge to imitate Gabriel García Márquez, who passed away on April 17th of this year. It has been three years since I read García Márquez for the first time, and I remain captivated by the sweeping arcs of his novels, the colorful wildness of his individual sentences, and the enchantment that pervades his world. It was a curious feeling, in the beginning, to read *Love in the Time of Cholera* and remember that its author was alive. There was an extraordinary sense of wisdom and worldliness in that first line, which I can recall from memory even now: “It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited

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love.” It seemed too perfect, too knowing, to have been written by someone who walked the same earth as I did.

The word “canonical” should not be tossed around lightly, but if there is one recent novelist who deserves inclusion in the list of the world’s greatest writers, it is García Márquez. Before he died, I would have cited as his living peers only Haruki Murakami, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, and perhaps Cormac McCarthy, but García Márquez dwarfed them all. He can be reduced to no era or movement, has no clear predecessor, and, unlike many of our other greats, was beloved by all who read him. Now that he has ascended to heaven like his own Remedios, I feel it may be worthwhile to try to identify the things that made his work so wild and inventive, and thereby outline fully, in one place, the singular brilliance of his writing.

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE TRUE

Most readers and writers, in mentioning (and now, in Meulogizing) García Márquez, immediately attach his name to the “magical realism” of which they deem him the father. But to treat García Márquez as merely the pioneer of this “magical realism” movement (which already existed when he started writing) is to greatly misconstrue him. This misrepresentation, of García Márquez as some Daliesque pioneer of the surreal, arises, I think, when one attempts to reduce García Márquez’s body of work to his masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This understanding of García Márquez fails to apprehend his greater literary project and his complicated lifelong relationship with truth, of which the style of *One Hundred Years* is only one exponent.

Rather than seeing García Márquez as having hit a single, supreme vein with the peculiar magic of *One Hundred Years*, the best way to appreciate García Márquez’s genius is by understanding this “magical realism” as but one aspect of a larger concern that is visible throughout all of his work. In his short fiction, novels, journalism, and autobiography, García Márquez has always grappled, as many novelists have, with the boundaries between truth and fiction. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, he laid out these terms more or less explicitly: “The more I live and remember things from the past,”

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he said, “the more I think that literature and journalism are closely related.” Later on, he says that “to find probabilities out of real facts is the work of the journalist and the novelist, and it is also the work of the prophet.”¹ For Márquez, the elements of magical realism in *One Hundred Years* were just one way to evince these “probabilities” that, arguably, describe a truth that Márquez found impossible to relate otherwise. This is more or less what Salman Rushdie has said in his recent tribute to García Márquez: to wit, that in García Márquez, “imagination is used to enrich reality, not to escape from it.”²

1. “Peter H. Stone, “Gabriel García Márquez, The Art of Fiction No. 69.” *The Paris Review* 82 (Winter 1981).

2. Salman Rushdie, “Magic in Service of Truth: Gabriel García Márquez’s Work Was Rooted in the Real,” *The New York Times*, April 21 2014.

I want to add to what Rushdie has said, however, by making the (I believe) important observation that García Márquez’s deviations from reality are not always of a piece with one another. In *One Hundred Years* the “magical” elements are essentially unacknowledged by the characters, which is, in part, what makes them so enchanting to us as readers. When the self-propelled trail of blood trickles through Úrsula’s kitchen, she does not question its presence but rather seems to know immediately what it portends. No one seems to think it strange, either, that it rains yellow flowers when José Arcadio Buendía dies. This is the specific mystique of *One Hundred Years*: that its world accepts events we deem impossible as natural and hardly remarkable. Hence, “magical realism.”

In his haunting short story “A Very Old Man With Enormous

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Wings,” however, García Márquez makes the bizarre element in the story—namely, the wings—an object of fascination and spectacle for the townspeople. The object that creates the most spectacle for the characters in *One Hundred Years*, by contrast, is something totally natural: the ice that José Arcadio discovers in the first chapter. In the haunting four-page fable “The Ghosts of August,” the entire plot revolves around the (possible) presence of a ghost in a mansion the protagonists are visiting. Everybody in the town, however, already believes in the ghost. The reader has to ask, then: what is magical or even abnormal about the fact that it (maybe) appears? *Of Love and Other Demons* also employs the impossible, but does so in a manner that is again not quite the same as that of *One Hundred Years*. When the warder comes into Sierva María’s cell and finds her “dead of love” with “strands of hair [gushing] like bubbles” on her head, he is perceiving not some exotic mutation of reality but a climactic representation of the bizarre (but sincerely meant) Thomas Aquinas quote that serves as the novella’s epigraph: “For the hair, it seems, is less concerned in the resurrection than other parts of the body.” Both this and the bizarre events in *One Hundred Years* are physically impossible, but that does not mean they are doing the same work for García Márquez. In fact, García Márquez does not even always make recourse in his fiction to this fantastic element: the romantic situation in his other masterpiece, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, is improbable, certainly, but not forbidden by the laws of physics. There are, at least, no enormous wings in the story of Florentino and Fermina.

If García Márquez really were a one-trick pony, a career distorter and surrealist, I suspect he would not have been such an accomplished journalist. He genuinely believed that journalism, commonly regarded as the relation of objective facts, could express a truth more complicated and more significant than these facts. Nor, I propose, would he have written an autobiography—*Living to Tell the Tale*—so preoccupied with the quest to remember and represent things as they actually happened. I like comparing *Living to Tell the Tale* with Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov frequently bends, breaks, or utterly disregards the facts of his life. The efforts of Nabokov and García Márquez in their respective autobiographies seem to me substantially opposed: in the epigraph to *Living* García Márquez admits that, though he is going to

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try his best to render his experiences accurately, “life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.” The book that follows is one unbroken avalanche (the chapters are around seventy pages each) of García Márquez’s detailed memories. These memories are often curiously specific: he remembers calibers of pistols from his adolescence and inscriptions above the doors of homes from his childhood. The epigraph warns us that García Márquez may be erring in some places, but the exactitude of his recollections intimates to us that he is desperately trying to tell the truth. Nabokov, on the other hand, haughtily suggests in the preface to *Speak* that his book makes only the barest attempts to reach actual truth and may quite frequently lie to its readers.

García Márquez’s stated commitment to truth in his nonfiction is quite illuminating when compared with the miracles in much of his fiction. What he always seems to be after is the expression of something real; sometimes he chooses to express it through fantasy and myth, and sometimes through documentation and recollection. It is not easy, then, to figure out what is true in García Márquez’s work, and what is merely factual. All works of fiction are untrue: what makes Úrsula’s biblical lifespan any more fictional than the confined “realities” of a Tolstoy novel? The “magical realism” in *One Hundred Years* is just one way in which García Márquez addressed this problem, but his body of work seems to be more interested in the act of telling truth than in the fantastic shapes a told truth can take.

THE AGONY (AND ECSTASY) OF IMAGES

As I have said, this “magical realism” is what most people identify as what brought García Márquez’s fiction onto the world’s stage. But the particular beauty of Márquez’s work is more grounded within the human than in the fantastical. Márquez is at his most beautiful when he brings us into the peculiar and often perverse space of his emotional world: there we encounter the qualities that make his fiction immediately recognizable—its lushness, its lovesickness, and its morbidity. The real innovation of García Márquez’s work is, I think, not his deviation from realistic modes but his capacity for representing the various states and sorrows of earthly life. Even if García Márquez had never dipped his toe into the waters of magical

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realism, he would still be an unparalleled writer.

His emotional palette is vibrant and unpredictable, his relationship with death sagely and trenchant. The moods and images in his prose mix and smear against one another until one has a hard time telling if what one is reading is supposed to be hilarious, depressing, or both. Take, for example, one of the most memorable scenes in *Love in the Time of Cholera*: during her marriage to Juvenal Urbino, the heroine Fermina Daza exhibits a startlingly powerful sense of smell. When her child gets lost in the midst of a crowded marketplace, she finds him in a matter of minutes by following “the smell of caca.” Half a page later, she smells the scent of another woman on her husband’s clothes and discovers that he has been unfaithful to her, which turns her bitterly against him for the rest of the chapter. No one else, except maybe Proust, can so deftly and so beautifully capture such ambivalent relationships.

The novels and stories of García Márquez abound with such moments; these moments saturate each text to the point of overflow,

and when they can find no room to breathe on the page they make their home in the reader’s mind. The most powerful of these moments, invariably, are about the two things in which García Márquez shows the most wisdom: death and love. It

is for his attention to these human realities on each page, or even within a single sentence, that García Márquez deserves the everlasting reverence he is sure to receive.



I prithee
now, ungird
thy strange-
ness.

One Hundred Years, in particular, is obsessed with death. García Márquez seems to have found, over the course of five hundred pages, at least five hundred ways in which a person can die. José Arcadio Buendía,

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who lives long past the age of one hundred, spends a huge swath of the novel tied to a tree, slowly dehydrating and going delirious. Colonel Aureliano Buendía's seventeen sons, all of whom are also named Aureliano, are assassinated on the same night. The novel begins with the image of Aureliano facing a firing squad, but the only character actually killed by a firing squad is Arcadio, the Buendía patriarch's idiotic grandson. In one of the novel's most bitterly funny moments, Arcadio goes out screaming, "Bastards! Long live the Liberal Party!" Seventy-five pages later, the Liberal Party is long gone.

Love in the Time of Cholera, predictably, is the best place to find García Márquez grappling with love, which for him is, in many ways, intricately related to death. Over the course of his fifty-year pursuit of his beloved Fermina Daza, the novel's Florentino Ariza finds himself in a myriad of romantic situations. The rainbow of women Florentino meets during the novel spans García Márquez's romantic genius at its most irresistible: we can encounter, sometimes in the same chapter, both the wild ecstasy of romantic anticipation and the tragic clumsiness of lust. Listen, for example, to the way he describes Florentino's infatuation with one of his beloveds, Rosalba: "[He] clung to the illusion that sooner or later she would betray herself, if only with a gesture. He even observed the changes in her breathing, watching the reliquary that hung on her batiste blouse as he looked at her without dissimulation over the book he pretended to read, and he committed the calculated impertinence of changing his seat in the dining room so that he would face her." Now, listen to one of the novel's most grotesquely tragic moments, in which Florentino accidentally dooms one of his flames, Olimpia: "In a sudden inspiration, Florentino Ariza opened a can of red paint that was within reach of the bunk, wet his index finger, and painted the pubis of the beautiful pigeon fancier with an arrow of blood pointing south, and on her belly the words: This pussy is mine." That night, when Olimpia returns home to her husband with the words still on her stomach, he slits her throat.

What more could I add to such a moment by discussing its dark, heartbreaking ironies? The person who wrote those sentences possessed a mind familiar with all the crannies and mutations of the human heart and mind: García Márquez knew in equal measure

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the holy (see the convent in *Of Love and Other Demons*) and the profane (see the whorehouse in *Love in the Time of Cholera*). His wisdom, more so than his fantasy, is the reason we should revere him. There are few, if any, other authors who could, over the space of two pages, give us Florentino Ariza's "six months of furious lovemaking with the Widow Nazaret" and Fermina Daza "sprawling on the bathroom floor, her hair loose, smoking her first mule drivers' cigarette." There is an intimacy with color and shape in García Márquez's prose that makes his debauched tyrants and heartbreaking tragedies especially indelible: when Aureliano Buendía "[puts] the blanket over his head like a cowl, [brushes] his dripping mustache with his fingers, and [goes] to urinate in the courtyard," and sees his father "still dozing under the shelter of palm fronds that had been rotted by the rain," we are in García Márquez's world and no one else's: darkly funny, bitterly unfulfilled, almost nauseatingly colorful, and ultimately filled with deep, jaded wisdom. It takes tremendous compassion and understanding to render life so, and García Márquez had them.

A SENSE OF PLACE (OR PLACELESSNESS)

The most powerful image I have encountered in any of García Márquez's work, and I think one of the most important indicators of his greatness, is an expository passage at the beginning of *Love in the Time of Cholera* describing the novel's unnamed Caribbean port town in vivid detail. As an example of verbal style it is formidable, but it also speaks to a talent of García Márquez that is perhaps what makes his work universal: in it, his descriptions of place lend themselves to startling particularity but also to dreamlike mobility.

"The streets," he writes, "were full of paper garlands, music, flowers, and girls with colored parasols and muslin ruffles who watched the celebration from their balconies." Later, he tells us that in the ghettos of the town "everything looked wretched and desolate, but out of the sordid taverns came the thunder of riotous music, the godless drunken celebration of Pentecost by the poor." In the harbor, under the "furious La Manga sun," Juvenal Urbino likes "to see the wooden paddles of the riverboats with their shining lights, purifying the stagnant garbage heap of the bay with the wake of their music."

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In the aforementioned interview with *The Paris Review*, García Márquez joked that the problem with writing about the Caribbean “is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination,” but the description he gives of the port town is about as convincing as prose can get. It is obviously beautiful, but it is beautiful in a way that is both locatable and untraceable. The geometries of death, love, and emotion that we find in *One Hundred Years*, as time gilds the book with the admiration of future generations, will become more than striking or unforgettable: they will become myths. In aping magical tropes of folk tales, Biblical stories, and Ovidian parables, García Márquez infused his writing with a quality of grandeur from which writers in future ages will draw to lend their own stories a quality of age and time-tested wisdom. His works of fiction present us with more than just spellbinding heroes, grotesque lusts, and rich images: they are also documents that teach us, in their own strange way, how to live as human beings, and how to write as them.

I like to challenge readers of Shakespeare to find one page that has nothing poetic, funny, or thought provoking in it, and I would make no hesitations in issuing that challenge about García Márquez’s books and short stories as well. The platitude about Shakespeare is that he fenced in all of human nature in thirty-seven plays—perhaps everything one needs to know about how to live (and how not to) can also be found within the work of Gabriel García Márquez. That hilariously effusive William Kennedy quote printed on the back of most editions of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, namely that it is “the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race,” might not be such a great exaggeration. His novels, especially *One Hundred Years*, are panoplies, pastiches, picaresques; he can fit more wisdom—more patriarchs tied to chestnut trees, more warriors who survive lethal doses of poison, more tyrannical banana corporations—onto one page than a lesser writer could fit into an entire novel.



What, ho, I say! peace in this prison!

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This is a wisdom gained through intimate encounters with the worst and best that life has to offer; it is akin to the wisdom of the Latin proverb *solvitur ambulando*: it is solved by walking, by experience and movement. We “learn” less from García Márquez’s fiction than we do from a cookbook, as Thomas De Quincey said of *Paradise Lost*. Such wisdom is neither dogmatic nor instructive, but a powerful, poetic, and unforgettable sense of what it is to be human. García Márquez’s characters, rough and flawed like the characters in folk tales and stories passed down through oral traditions, are not quite examples for us, and yet in the “frantic hammers” of José Arcadio Segundo, carving an impossible channel from Macondo to the sea, or in Meme’s drinking of “a chicken broth that landed in her stomach like an elixir of resurrection,” we see a reflection of our world whose sadness and foolishness are the same as our own.

Halfway through *One Hundred Years*, it starts raining and does not stop. The rain affects everything, even the machines that have come to Macondo, causing them to “have flowers popping out among their gears if they were not oiled every three years.” Half a page after this sentence, García Márquez tells us of the matriarch Úrsula, who has suffered much and is close to death, waking up with her back “paved with leeches.” Santa Sofía de la Piedad, a quiet and servile woman, picks them off of Úrsula silently and “crush[es] them with a firebrand.” Where else can we find such piercing insight, with such diversity and range of subject and spirit, as we find even in this one passage? Through the fantastic and impossible, but also—and especially—through the repulsive and mundane, García Márquez always manages to enchant us. My favorite quote of his, immortalized in Gerald Martin’s biography, was his remark that “everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life.”³ In all of his works, he touched deeply, with wit and passion, on one or all of these three lives. If that is not magic—not magical realism, but magic—then I do not know what is.

3. Gerald Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 198.

The Four Who Watch

One night's discussion on an Iraqi mountain

Matthew Schweitzer

One thousand feet above the small Kurdish city of Dohuk in northern Iraq is a mountaintop world. Here, four militiamen stand around a jumping white fire, Kalashnikovs slung across their shoulders, holding bare hands to the heat. The smoke and shadows across their outpost's shrapnel-marked concrete walls sway in rhythm. There are bullet holes from "countless wars" in this stone, one of the men says, "each one different but the same."

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I am stuck here with my friend, Nadhim, for the evening. The road into Dohuk, huddled in the valley below, is closed. "Too dangerous, you must stay here, no questions. I have something hot to drink for you," Younis, the officer in charge, grumbles. He speaks in Kurdish, which my friend translates into Arabic for me. He hands me a small glass, rimmed with gold, of sweet amber tea poured from a battered silver kettle. It cuts the sharp smells of smoke, iron, and dust.

Below, night is rising up the cliffs. The darkness lingers on the ground even as the sky turns yellow. The ridges catch fire with the last glow of a winter sun until a frozen wind sweeps away the last light. To the south, a train of headlights snakes onto the Plains of Nineveh, bound for Mosul, where the city's lights flicker on and off in the distance. The earth is a deep purple. A dark grey mist rises from Saddam Hussein's famous reservoir on the valley floor.

These four men stand guard above a valley in which history began. A professor, a poet, a student, and the last, nothing in particular,

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“nothing special,” as Younis says of himself, chuckling. But now they fight as members of the Kurdish militia, the Peshmerga, whose name means “those who face death”—small people with great thoughts and immense bravery in a vast territory that scarcely notices their passage.

“Perhaps,” Fouad, the poet, mumbles to nobody in particular, “the people in Mosul do not have electricity tonight.”

His friend, Mustafa, looks out to the water. He is silent for a while, and then speaks: “I remember when the regime built that dam to make electricity, flooded the valley. There was an ancient castle there. As a child I played in the ruins.”



Perpend,
my
princess,
and give
ear.

As a professor at Mosul University, he studied the ruins, too. Now he stands, wrapped not in the scholar’s robes but in Kevlar, wool, darkness, and ammunition. “That history was replaced,” he says, with a faint smile that lingers around the corners of his eyes for a moment. There is no mirth in it.

Ali, a recent college graduate and the youngest member of the group, interjects with forced enthusiasm: “Here we are in our own castle, our own history.” Mustafa looks away.

Younis stares at his boots. “I am very cold,” he sighs, “warmth is far. So far away.”

It is dark now. The only light in our small room, an uncertain glow, comes from the fire that is fading with the night and the stars. The Tigris winds in the distance, its source “just over those hills,” Younis says, pointing—past Jonah’s tomb, the ancient Assyrian capital in

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Nineveh, the battlefield at Gaugamela where Alexander conquered the Persian Empire, through Mosul, which *The Guardian* recently called the world's "most dangerous" city¹, and next to the village "with a dozen names" where Fouad's parents are buried. "My father died in the [Kurdish] civil war in the 1990s," Younis says, "and my mother of a crushed heart."

1. Jonathan Steele, "Iraq: Al Qaeda Intensifies its Stranglehold in the World's Most Dangerous City," *The Guardian*, September 14 2008.

"What brings you together to fight with guns?" I ask.

This simple question throws them. They do not answer straight away. Fouad keeps looking across the plains to Mosul, muttering about the electricity. Younis laughs; his high-pitched staccato startles Mustafa and Ali. They glance up, expecting an answer from their leader, but he does not oblige them with one. Ali, noticing his shivering commander, kicks a branch into the fire, sending a shower of sparks into Mustafa's face. "Oh my God! You are an idiot!" he glowers, fingering the trigger on his rifle with one hand as he brushes the embers off his coat and mustache with the other. He is not very clean, and the brushing conjures most of the day's dust to flight.

Mustafa curses Ali for being "so damn reckless with the fire. He could have burned me!" He strikes a match, lights a cigarette with grey, chalky hands, and sulks. The dust settles down again. We sit quietly for a minute, witnesses to an absurd sort of comedy.

Finally, Ali speaks up. His voice cracks into a high-pitched squeak, but he clears his throat and starts again. "I think, perhaps, we are here as fighters because we are not sure what else we can do," he says, slowly gaining confidence as he goes. "Everything that happens here is so much—overwhelming. I prefer to stand on this mountain with my friends and my cold Kalashnikov and watch."

Mustafa lets out a long whistle. Younis clicks his tongue like a schoolteacher. Fouad keeps his silence, but his wide eyes and heavy breaths are visible in the icy air. His tears gleam white against the firelight.

"But you are a soldier," I reply. "You are in the middle of all that is going on. How can you say such a thing?" These men fight in the Kurdish militia, which acts as a de facto army in the Kurdistan region

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of Iraq, headquartered in Erbil's eight-thousand-year-old city center. The bullet holes in the concrete cannot be accidental. At the outpost we stand above, but not away, from the violent drama playing out in the most grotesque theatre of all: their home.

"I think you misunderstand," Ali sighs. He speaks slowly now, staring at Mustafa, who is smoking with closed eyes. "By watching, I am in the center of whatever happens. Watching is the action. Is not a witness the protagonist? I do not consider myself a bystander. I am surely a soldier—I have been given a gun and a uniform, what more do I need? Yet I do not think shooting, killing, fighting, and dying are remarkable in any way, as an action or a series of actions. They do not imply agency, one or all. As a soldier, I do them because I have to. I have orders," he says, looking, with a sly smile, at Younis, who nods approvingly, "and I must also preserve my life if it is threatened. This is a responsibility, not a choice. Of course, because I am alive, I must breathe and eat and drink water, too. I do not fear dying, yet it is best not to rush that. But to watch is more powerful. I stand guard because this is what I am told to do. I stand witness because I choose to do so. I watch, and remember, and fight—in that order.

"When people think of Iraq, they think of the soldier, the gun, the bomb, the wars, the militias, and the dying. When I see the country from here, I cannot but think of its beauty. Just watch, and you will see what I mean to say." He warms his hands over the fire. The mud, blood, and grease under the nails appear as drops of dirty gold in the light.

The valley has finally shed its purple for a deep, pulsating black, profoundly alive. As the temperature drops, slow vortices of mist spin across the earth, stirred up by the winds sweeping up the plains from Baghdad. We sit in a silent world. Bright, fluorescent checkpoints on the highway penetrate the deepness, marking a long constellation of militarized fear across the desert floor. The heavens reach to the horizon, beckoning with a million points of light for the cold ground to join its infinite embrace. The sky is a shroud of stars, which the land's occupants have gazed upon for eight thousand years. Our outpost has no roof. We stand, undefended, under the naked enormity. Fouad whispers, "Praise God."

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“What is your problem tonight, my dear friend?” Mustafa says, addressing him. “Surely Ali’s speech roused your spirits?” He tries to measure Fouad’s gaze, acting as the scientist he was trained to be.

“He speaks of being a witness,” Fouad responds. “How can we be protagonists in something we cannot control? I stand shivering on this godforsaken pile of dirt every night because I must.” He has dry eyes now. His right hand trembles. “We are too small to think such big thoughts. How many men have stood in this place, looked across the valley, and thought that they, too, were important? Kings, generals, great travelers, surely.”

“Why are they any different from us?” Ali asks. With his thumb he flicks open, then closed, then open, the small cardboard matchbox he carries in the front of his vest, in the pocket above his machine-gun magazines. A few thin matches fall out. Mustafa leans over to pick them up, but Ali is oblivious.

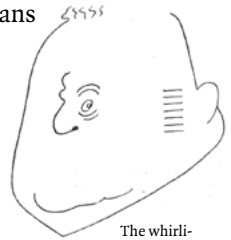
“We watch, but these great men, they choose what we see.” Fouad replies. “You might think that by remembering these visions you are preserving some sort of reality that is your own.”

“Surely, I am,” Ali says.

Fouad laughs, but he does not smile. “Unfortunately, you are too young to understand that it does not matter at all what memories you hold. Not in this country. Memories are too dangerous. It is not important what has happened, because it will always have been better an hour, a day, a year before. Why remember these good times? You will lose control of the present, you will long for something that can never be again, as much as we try and speak of renewal.”

Mustafa watches the exchange, smoking. “I have plenty of memories,” he says. “They can be beautiful. I can relive them; they are not stuck in my past, but swim through my life now when I wish. My memories are just as alive as you are. They breathe, weep, laugh, but they do not die until I am ready to lead the way.”

Ali is quiet. Fouad sighs. Younis stares. The fire cackles, mocking



The whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

THE FOUR WHO WATCH

us with its light.

Mustafa pays no attention. “I remember the days when this valley was not flooded. I studied the ruins there,” he says, pointing to the dark waters near Mosul. “When I see this valley, I see at once visions lost to our so-called history, and the visions I am meant to see today. They are all one: like a calm bend in a river, the waters double back, mix, spiral, and roll in the depths.”

“Perhaps your memories flow like a river,” Fouad growls. “Mine fall like a thousand-year rain, never ending, pounding forever on the inside of my mind until I am drowned. Is that when my body dies? I do not know if that makes me insane, or merely Iraqi.”

Younis, sitting quietly, seems to glance at the safety on his companion’s Kalashnikov. I follow his gaze nervously. Fouad is unperturbed: “When I sleep, I feel my memories drop, painfully. They feel like they are crawling inside, dripping. When I wake, I must shake off the suffocating dreams. But the residue stays. I am swept across the landscape of my life, suspended by the floodwaters of my thoughts. I have no rolling visions. No spiraling comfort in my memory. No memories at all. Only nightmares.”

“Fouad, you are afraid,” Mustafa interrupts. “Who can blame you? A life of sadness is a terrible thing to have play, over again, in one’s mind. Terror, grief, frustration, and guilt are each a flood of their own. But you must not let your fear command your memory or define the way you understand your life. What about your mother...?”

“She is dead,” Fouad snaps.

Mustafa pauses for a moment, then continues: “Perhaps now she is dead, and so is your father. We can see their graves from where we stand this night. But they were not always dead, and you should not have their story remembered by its end. Is it truly over, anyway? Our histories are not linear, and they are not tied to our bodies or even our own lifetimes. They are networks of moments without any logical form. We share memories. When you try to fit them into a line, to understand their beginning and end, you will become afraid because this is an impossible task. You will apply your own insecurities and

MATTHEW SCHWEITZER

fear, when you do such an action as forcing your memories into a mold that is too small.

“But this is only because you will have attempted to put boundaries on something that spreads farther than you know. If I may continue with my river metaphor: I stand on the shore, at a bend, and watch the memories move past me. Some meander and wander by. Others are caught in a strong current, spiraling, spiraling until they roll away. I choose what I see, but I cannot stop the flow. These thoughts continue around the bend of my mind, past my vantage point toward unknown conclusions. And I cannot see their source. They come from far away, but it is not my turn to ask where the spring lies. These are peaceful memories because I accept them, but I am not their slave like you seem to be.”

Ali, flicking his envelope of matches again, wears a grimace on his face. “There is surely an end to one’s life, and of course there is a beginning as well. I was born, twenty-five years ago, and that is the moment my story begins: the source for my thoughts. I think my memories, which are few in comparison to those swimming through your head, are like the stars. They are points of light in a space I do not understand. Together they create beauty. Each, alone, is a faraway sun. My pasts live there, too distant for me to examine individually, orbiting around these lights on a million worlds. Like the heavens, my memories are beautiful when I look at them together; they do not move, only flicker, as if they rely on an uncertain electrical current.”

Mustafa takes a deep breath, readying an answer. “I think we agree. This space is infinity—” But Fouad interrupts: “You speak of rivers and stars. These are pretty words that make lovely poetry. Life is not poetic; it has no order or harmony or rhythm. We men are too small for anything we do, anything we think, to matter. You, Mustafa, taught archeology in Mosul. You spent your life filling your mind with memories of ancient castles in the desert. And what of those thoughts now? Saddam filled your valley with water, and your ruins were flooded. What use is your memory now? This is no river, no point of light. This is an end. Memories are collected conclusions, things you will never retrieve but always pine for until your mind dies. The sadness is the flood I cannot escape.”

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I am eager to hear more, but a slight rustling down the slope interrupts the men's thoughts. Younis, who had been sitting quietly before the fire, jumps to his feet. He is the most ready soldier here. His are practical memories. His life marches in order to a shouted command; now his mind is crouching, remembering the "countless wars" it has fought here.

He pulls a pistol from his waist and fires four times across the plains of Nineveh. Tensed, listening, we sit in the darkness. The men peer down over the concrete wall. My friend and I sit behind. The soldiers' backs are straight and their knuckles white around rusted steel assault weapons. Ali shivers. Fouad and Mustafa flip the safeties on their Kalashnikovs. On the mountain across and behind from the one where our drama is being written, small cooking fires glow in the night. They are stars on the mountain, around which families crouch for comfort in the unknowing darkness. Ali is watching this other heaven with me. Voices carry in the bitter air, as shimmering whispers. Mustafa declares a false alarm.

Our night passes silently. The few moments of fear have plunged my companions into their own minds, where I cannot follow them. Here, such memories are far more powerful than any attacker.

"This talk of memory is frightening. Perhaps now it is time for you to sleep," Younis suggests. I doze fitfully through the short night, never really dreaming. The men change guard every hour, shuffling softly over the bare stone.

In the calm dawn, the soldiers smoke American cigarettes, consumed, like me, by their thoughts. Only Fouad sleeps. His eyes twitch. The sun appears early in northern Iraq, and daylight creeps down the cliffs presenting the men, its audience, with another day to remember.



Go to Sleep

Harrison Smith

In the last few years, I have neither slept well nor watched sports. In a four AM haze, it occurs to me that these two things might be connected, but it is late, and hard to follow this line of thought much further. Logic is flimsy at this time of night. I remember that my television does not work, and that even if it did—or even if I turned my laptop on to search for a game’s live feed—it would be too late. Even on the West Coast the ball games must be over.

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The bird outside my window is switching to a new melody, and I am prone to distraction. This bird could, I imagine, be a cardinal, or a blue jay, or an oriole. He could have come from St. Louis, or from Toronto, or from Baltimore, though this is all unlikely, wishful thinking. For better and worse he and I seem to keep the same hours. He sings from midnight to sunrise, spending a few minutes on each melody before one of its variations develops into a new song. His voice is beautiful, though his kook-a-loos are mocking. I don’t know if he intends this, but I hate him, and would shake his tree if I could will myself out of bed and find him.

I attempted to identify this bird a few nights earlier, when I couldn’t sleep. I had checked out a field guide from the library—good reading late at night, when sleep is coming on slowly and there are few things to do—and a note on the northern cardinal said that the bird spends a good chunk of its life roosting, silent but awake. Little is known about this habit: the cardinal may be conserving energy or just hiding away. No word on why it forbears sleep.

GO TO SLEEP

My bird is probably not a cardinal, then. He makes too much noise. Still, little is known, and it is late, and I would prefer to give him some color. So I go with a cardinal, a cardinal from St. Louis.

I like to think that I do most of my assuming at night, when I can't sleep. Gaps in knowledge call for explanations, and at night—when, eyes closed, thoughts are all there is—these gaps are numerous. The bird outside my window is a cardinal; the bird is male. Maybe it's a bit of a stretch, but I'm trying to minimize my time with the field guide, and these claims seem reasonable enough.

Until recently I worked as an editor at a newspaper, a job that kept me up till sunrise once a week. This was not so bad, in itself. Mornings are nice. There's a brightness to the world, even if there's a cloudiness to thought. The cardinal-bird stops singing when the sun comes out, and it's a good time for planning, if only because it's too early for reality to get in the way. To-do lists, when I make them on such mornings, are long: I am going to read a book and start a second; I am going to go for a walk, even a ramble; I am going to pick up the dry cleaning and the groceries and the seventy-cent stamps; I am going to wipe the dust off my floors and clean out the emails in my inbox.

These lists have a way of maintaining themselves well past their due. They assume too much—most importantly, that exhaustion will not be a problem—and, for this reason, they are two to three times as long as they should be. Home from work, I'll pick up the book and make my way through only a half-dozen pages before I feel too tired to continue. Two hours of sleep may be enough, but only for a short, inch-long list, or for someone with a stronger will.

A disappointed to-do list should only be a problem for one day, if a problem at all. Exhaustion has a way of cutting off work, but it leads—naturally and even necessarily—to sleep. To a nap, at the very least, after which work can pick up again. In the last few years, however, I've developed a habit that's perpetuated this problem, a sleeplessness that's thrown off the rhythm of all the days that follow.

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I'd like to think that I'm recovering now, but I sometimes wonder if I didn't just push things too far, cut off instinct and forget how to sleep.

As a kid I listened to nature recordings when I couldn't sleep, with a radio alarm clock my mom had given me. It didn't work. I was concerned that the beach recording would be the aural equivalent of putting my hand in a glass of warm water, and I was afraid of the forest wolves that yapped on the other. I gave up on the recordings after a month or so, and started tuning the clock's dial to the FM classical station. The weeknight host, an owlish baritone, would play "Clair de Lune" fairly regularly, though the Wagner and Schoenberg that he liked never featured the piano, nor were ever played pianissimo.

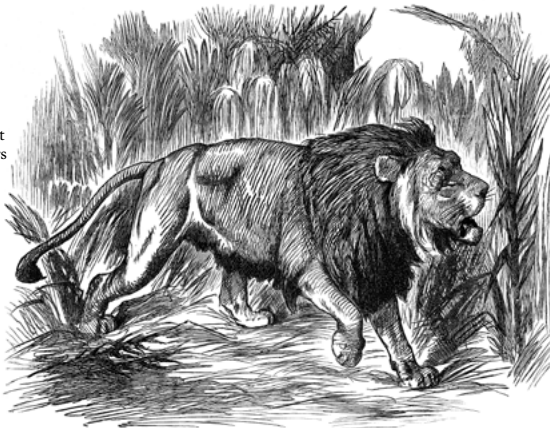
On air this host seemed sleepless, which I was sympathetic to. He was certainly more relatable than his successor in the tree. I remember one night he mentioned Beethoven's habit of counting coffee beans each morning, sixty to a cup, and that as he said this a dull sound made it onto the broadcast. A thunk of something apparently placed on his desk, next to the microphone—a cup of coffee, I assumed. Black coffee, for him and Beethoven both.

I no longer listen to recordings as I fall asleep. Most of the time I

GO TO SLEEP

find myself listening to my own head, which is often no better than a beach recording or an angry piece of Wagner. It whirs—or worries, depending—over a thought. I think about what I've done, and about what I will have done, if I ever do it. I think, for instance, that I may make a trip. Back home, around the whole state, to bring things full circle somehow. There may be trouble on the road, so I think that before I leave I'll learn how to change a tire—again—and get the oil checked, and even refill the windshield washer fluid. I think about how this will be nice and productive, even though there's no immediate need for such a trip, and my mind will spin on this idea like a top, knocked from side to side now and again by intervening concerns. I'll need to make another, smaller trip in the morning, to the dry cleaner's, and I can't forget to say that I'd prefer they use no starch, and I can't forget to be extra polite since the man who runs the place misunderstood me last time and probably thinks I'm rude. Also, it may rain tomorrow, in which case I'll need to wear the slicker. But I've never washed or dry-cleaned the slicker, and even though I only wear it when water's coming down, I figure I may need to wash it at some point, and that I'll need to look that up before I take my trip.

Alongside these thoughts I may also think about the way the buildings looked as the sun was going down: newly washed, coated in some luminous salve as the sun hit the horizon and lit them from below. In these moments I'll think with plenty of adjectives, for nighttime—dark as it is—is liable to make things “luminous,” and to coat them with metaphorical salve.



More insidious thoughts also arise. I'll start to see my sleeplessness as true insomnia, for instance, and lying in bed with my eyes closed I'll know how things will progress from here: I'll sleep less and less each night

But
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and eventually lie down without bothering to turn off all the lights; I'll close my eyes intending only to rest my ciliary muscle for an hour or two, to meditate and try to relax without imagining that sleep will ever come; specialists will hook me up to a polysomnogram, monitor my cycles of rest and activity, and prescribe a benzodiazepine; nothing will work; I'll somehow find a way to live; I'll fight through the pain; the struggle will be character forming and psychologically freeing; I will be heroic and valiant and doughty and ballsy.

I know that common causes of insomnia include depression, anxiety, and even restless legs syndrome. Genealogy surely plays a part, and my mother does have her own troubles sleeping. More than any of these pathological causes, though, the kind of sleeplessness I've been experiencing seems to be caused by thoughtfulness. "Thoughtfulness," maybe, to distinguish this from the positive kind of thoughtfulness that is considerate and unselfish. What's really at play is the sort of incalculable, inconsequential thoughtfulness that leads from career planning to laundry planning to baseball standings. A sort of hyperactive, inertial whirring, ongoing and superabundant until—with any luck—my body flips my mind's kill switch and sleep comes on. This whirring may be directional, moving between objects even if the connections are absurd and illogical, but it can also be the sort of empty, meaningless whirring that comes from thinking about nothing much at all. Even in a torpor, I figure, the mind's doing something.

One of the more unfortunate things I've come to assume at night is an interest in sports, and in sports writing in particular. This has turned out to be not soporific, but torporific, and at four in the morning it's clear that this is a feeling I can no longer handle. I read about Dirk Nowitzki's future and Tony Romo's leadership abilities, or about NFL betting lines and the decline of the power running game, and I take on an ugly kid-in-the-candy-store aspect, spittle pooling along my lower lip. These articles can be about most anything, for it turns out that it's possible to maintain interest while remaining totally disinterested—to keep up with baseball and football and basketball without really watching, and without particularly caring.

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The analysis can be poor, the argument for argument's sake, or they can be exceptional and incisive. The former is usually more effective, though both work.

Sports had the opposite effect on me when I still played, as a kid. Machine-pitch baseball in elementary school, and Little League for a few years after that, were full of anxiety even in right field, where the ball was rarely hit. The sport is built around failure: errors are recorded assiduously, and to hit the ball only a third of the time you pick up a bat is a mark of excellence. I remember getting a hit every now and then, but mostly I remember waiting for the pitching machine to throw the ball in the dirt and send me off to first base without having to swing.

Last season, I started following baseball again, looking for something to fill my time. Unlike basketball or football, the sport is perfect for box scores, as well as for the digital play-by-play "gamecasts" that ESPN and others now produce. I could work around homework and follow games on the computer, or even on the phone, watching animated pop-ups and double plays on digital recreations of Wrigley or Fenway. I didn't need to watch the whole game, didn't need to watch any of the game. The box score gave me all the facts: every player's successes and failures, in the batting box and on the field, charted in a digestible, numerical form.

I can't say that I was particularly concerned with the substance of these facts, but they were there, and had an attractive power that was at least strong enough to draw my attention, especially at night. This was helped along by my switch, just a few weeks into the season, from box scores and play-by-plays to columns and analyses. I could follow the sport, and sports altogether, without being tethered to game times. I could also follow along without being tethered to specific teams. I had grown up as a casual fan of my hometown teams, but there's more to read when you don't care who or what you're reading about.

Not that this can even be called reading, really. Late at night, going through NBA analysis for a third hour, it's more like watching something. I move through stories at a clip, as though feeding them

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through a machine. I can't tell you how the pick and roll is properly defended, or what the NFL's CBA means for player acquisition, or how the mid-level exception works, though I've gone through thousands of words that might enlighten you on these subjects. This isn't to say that I'm uninterested—it's just that, at these moments, the subject matter is less important than its effect. When things are at their worst, I'll read, and be—generally speaking—thoughtless. After a few hours of watching the screen I'll even start to feel like an elevated, assumptive Mary, swallowing up sleep—if not, as she did, death itself—in victory.

It may actually be that I've sought out sleeplessness more than I've sought to escape it. I know this seems backward. At bottom, though, sleeplessness—the kind of sleeplessness that feeds off thoughtlessness, and doesn't even attempt to kill the lights and close the eyes—is a kind of gluttony. I'll binge not on food or booze, but on nothing, pinning my eyes to the screen without thinking or feeling. Exhaustion will evade sleep and stretch itself out in a torpor. I may read until I can no longer keep my eyes open, though this is surprisingly rarer than it sounds. More often, I'll read until my computer dies, and let the screen go black before my eyes do.

It occurs to me that while much of my sleeplessness has been caused by poor assumptions—late-night attempts to fill in the gaps on whatever's lacking in explanation; an interest in sportswriting that does away with the need to explain or think about anything at all—one thing I never do assume at these moments is responsibility. Not a specific responsibility like walking the dog or picking up the dry cleaning, but a fundamental, base-level responsibility, one that comes with being the only person capable of deciding, at any and every moment, what to do and what not to do. It can't be shrugged off, though lying in bed, laptop open, there's no way around the fact that I'm attempting to remain in a state of non-responsibility for as long as possible. It's a shameful place to be, spittle overflowing at the lips, though it is a comfortable one. At these moments, sleep starts to look like a dual move of resignation and expectation, better avoided than embraced, for going to sleep would mean resigning myself to

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the fact that yesterday is done and gone, that I have no more chance of doing what I would have liked to do. It would also mean looking ahead to the fact that tomorrow there will be a new list—more than a few inches long, probably, and with more than a few of the items that I never got around to doing today. Much easier to avoid all this and catch up on how the first line of the Blackhawks is playing. No action is required, and no disappointment is possible.

This base-level responsibility really plays out as triage, and may be the key to sleep. Setting aside a thought, running through impulses and motivations and desires, determining what can or can't, what should or shouldn't be done. It's something that happens all the time, or fails to happen well, and occurs in thought as well as in perception. Some nights I can hardly hear the bird at all; others I hear it like a soundtrack, part of a radio station that's broadcasting right outside my window. If the mind's inertial, a little push and pull has to occur.

There are nights, though, where it seems impossible to pull back. I'll think about everything that's left to do, about the chance of unwanted starch in the dry cleaning and of rain in the morning, and count backward from one hundred in an attempt to block things out. This is an old tactic, and liable to fail. A meditation instructor I once had—part of another, failed tactic at sleep—will come to mind before I go from eighty-nine to eighty-eight. When I visited her she would talk about what it means to feel yourself at rest, but she never wore deodorant, and this distracted me. In bed I'll try anyway, and it feels like a wave, as though something were upreaching from my toes, but thinking about this is still thinking, and I won't sleep.

One other thing that'll occasionally come to mind, interrupting my long countdown or my meditation, is the last time I went to see a baseball game. This was a few years ago. I had sat across from an elderly man, a diehard fan with a ball cap and a pencil on his ear. He would watch the game and seem to be resting his eyes, relaxing his vision, while he notched the scorecard in his lap with numbers and Ks, codes for stolen bases and pinch hits. He was wholly attentive, and the work he was doing, complicated as it was, hardly looked like work at all. Keyed-in to the game as he was, I doubt he heard any

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of the bleacher-men hawking hot dogs and beer around him. I'm sure he would have jumped to his feet if an emergency had occurred, or if the game was actually close, but as it was he was undistracted and purposive. He seemed only to be thinking; less absentminded than wholly in mind. He was peaceful, and he looked like he could have fallen asleep, and I'm sure that later in the evening—after the fireworks had gone off and he had made his way home and gotten ready for bed—he did just that, bird or no bird.



An interview with NICHOLAS EPLEY

What is your friend thinking right now? What about the person sitting in front of you? The one next to you? Across the room? Nicholas Epley's new book, *Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*, seeks to explain how we intuit what the people around us want and feel—and why we are so often wrong. *Mindwise* deals with the advanced social cognition that is the province of human relations, and why it might sometimes fail. We sat down with the author to talk about how we think we can predict others' desires, thoughts, and actions, from everyday social relationships both intimate and alien, to broader contexts of segregation and class, and ultimately to the explanatory power of philosophy itself.

Read the full interview at
midwayreview.uchicago.edu.



“A behavioral approach to ethics doesn’t tell you what’s right or wrong. It assumes you have beliefs about that already—that you have an ethical compass. Most of us happen to have the same ones. Nobody thinks killing and stealing and maiming is okay. Nobody thinks that lying under any circumstance is all right. Most of us would rather get ahead by doing well rather than by cheating. We have a lot of shared moral values, so a question for a psychologist then, is why do people with those moral values that you and I have—otherwise good people—why do they do bad things? What is it about their worlds or what could it be about our worlds that could lead good people to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their ethics, with their moral compass?”

Is Gay Culture Dead?

HBO's *Looking* and the end of an era

Jon Catlin

"Sometimes I think homosexuality is wasted on gay people."¹
—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."² 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,

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1. David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 448.

2. Michel Foucault and James O'Higgins, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Salmagundi* 58/59 (Fall 1982–Winter 1983): pp. 10–24.

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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.



Yet the note was very untunable.

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,

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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



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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 *ethos*, 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

Enter *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.

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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."³

3. Christopher Glazek, "Modern Love," *Out Magazine*, 14 Jan. 2014.

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."⁴ 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—bitch enough, politically apathetic, generally boring."

4. J. Bryan Lowder, "Why Is *Looking* so Boring?" *Slate*, 21 Jan. 2014.

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."⁵

5. Mick Stingley, "A Straight Man's Guide to HBO's *Looking*," *Esquire*, 20 Jan. 2014.

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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."⁶

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."⁷

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."⁸ 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

6. James Poniewozik, "HBO's *Looking*," *TIME* TV Weekend, 16 Jan. 2014.

7. David Toussaint, "Why HBO's *Looking* Will Keep You Searching," *The Huffington Post*, 3 Feb. 2014.

8. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 135–140.

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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



Talkest
thou
nothing
but of
ladies?

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

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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.”⁹

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.”¹⁰ 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.

9. Mary McNamera, “Review: HBO’s ‘Looking’ an authentic glimpse inside lives of gay men,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 2014.

10. Hope Reese, “HBO’s *Looking*: Not ‘the Ultimate Gay Show About All Gay People,’” *The Atlantic*, 15 Jan. 2014.

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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

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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."¹¹ 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.

¹¹. See Glazek.

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

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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.



I remember the wooing of a peascod.

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

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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.”

12. Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science,” interview with Jean Le Bitoux for *Le Gai Pied* in 1978, trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 385–403.

13. Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising,” *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 59.

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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."¹⁴ 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.

14. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, quoted and translated in David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 119.

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

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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."¹⁵ Promiscuity doesn't solve all his problems either.

15. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 157.

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.¹⁶ 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,

16. Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," p. 51.

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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."

17. Michel Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 135-140.

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

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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.

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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.



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