

'YOU ONLY LIKE THE BEGINNINGS' Ordinariness of Sex and Marriage in *Looking*

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: to seem to be something especially because of appearance¹

In season four of AMC's *Mad Men* (2007), Faye, one of Don Draper's discarded playthings utters: "I hope she knows you only like the beginnings of things" (Henderson 2014). The scathing one-liner exposes the underlying selfishness of Don Draper and the kind of man he represents. Draper's fondness for "newness," for new playthings, feeds an unending spiral of reckless consumption for men like himself who can have something new, anytime, anyplace, whenever and wherever they may desire it. The mysterious, handsome and debonair Don Draper, encapsulates the brilliant, driven ad man, in a seeming 1950s and 1960s male utopia, where the supply of women willing and able to have sex with him is endless. Much has been written about the season four finale of *Mad Men* where Draper unexpectedly proposes to Megan, a secretary whose character until that episode was barely fleshed out. The shock to viewers was not that Draper dared propose to a pretty secretary they knew almost nothing about, but

that by proposing to Megan, he had completely discarded Faye, a brilliant professional woman who was Draper's intellectual equal. Viewers are left to ponder what a relationship between Don and Faye would have entailed. Instead, Draper opts for the new, and we see him absolutely smitten with his new love. So when Faye cuts him down with "I hope she knows you only like the beginnings of things" we are forewarned that even the glamorous Megan will too, one day, no longer be new.

Mad Men's audience implicitly knows that not all men can be Don Draper. Don Draper is the pivotal centre of a male-driven universe where he, and only he, has the luxury of being able to like "only the beginnings of things." What would a world look like where every man is Don Draper? Look no further than the gay male universe created by Andrew Haigh and Michael Lannon in HBO's gay dramedy *Looking*. In *Looking* there is not *one* Don Draper upon which the sexual drama hinges. Instead, *everybody* is Don Draper. *Looking* is a light-hearted series that explores the lives of three gay men, Patrick (Jonathon Groff), Agustín (Frankie J. Alvarez) and Dom (Murray Bartlett) in present day San Francisco. The series premiered on January 19, 2014, and was cancelled after the completion of its second

¹ All definitions of *look* are taken from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

season (a total of 18 episodes) as the series struggled to pull in a large and broad audience. The show's producers have, however, promised one final special episode to close out the various storylines. I do not claim to have the answer as to *why* the show was cancelled so quickly but early reviews of the series were rather ominous. In Eric Henderson's review of the series for *Slant Magazine*, he writes, "*Looking* emerges as a dramedy exploring how gay men clumsily negotiate the appropriate distance to place between the words 'friends' and 'benefits,' but like many of the relationships it details, it gets sex out in the open and out of the way as the first order of business... and too frequently the last order of business as well" (2014).

The sexual negotiation that occurs in the San Francisco of *Looking* could easily be supplanted to any large metropolis in the world where a significant part of gay men have newness within reach. Whether it is in the now old-fashioned cruising areas in parks, nude beaches and public toilets, or in saunas, gyms, cinemas and sex clubs, bars and discos, chat sites or mobile phone applications such as Grindr and Scruff, gay men in large cities have an almost endless supply of avenues to find a sexual partner. And once they do find that sexual partner there is not much incentive to keep him when you can just repeat the process and find someone new. After all, the next one might be just a tad more handsome, a bit musclier, and more well-endowed. Or he might have a more prestigious job, better looking friends and earn more money. Why keep this one when the next one could have *more*?

Once you slip into this pattern of experiencing newness on an almost daily basis what incentive do you have to give up the addiction, to settle into a routine of sameness? The only solution for many gay couples is to have their cake and eat it too: to have an open relationship in order to not have to forsake the pleasure of the new. Like a drug, gay men need their fix of newness. In *Looking*, Henderson argues, all three gay men are verbally

secure in their sexuality, but experience "the beginnings of things" as the given, and very rarely as something to cherish (2014). Of course not all gay men are the same and fit into the generalised schemata above. But by watching *Looking* it makes me wonder if the curse of big city living in the large gay capitals is the dearth of love.

: to direct your eyes in a particular direction

In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out how the ability of many queer people in childhood:

to attach intently to a few cultural objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. (1994, 3)

As a young teenager, I remember listening to George Michael's *Listen without Prejudice* before his unceremonious "coming out" with its oblique references to the loss of a queer love; reading over and over again Arthur Rimbaud's poetry and romanticising his relationship with Paul Verlaine; watching *My Own Private Idaho* in darkness with my parents in the next room. Each individual has their own cultural objects whose mysterious excess grabbed them and in which they invested their fascination and love. It is in that brief moment in time when you are discovering your sexuality, when your childhood curiosity tells you that no, the meanings don't line up tidily with each other that you yearn for representation in the cultural objects within your reach.

In my case, my “process” of queer cultural objectification occurred in the early 1990s in suburban Sydney. It was a time when I had no cable television or internet, and the books and films I consumed were limited to what was available in commercial mainstream bookshops and my school library. There was only so many times I could watch Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, though like many other gay boys my age, I was good at “queering” and objectifying the representation of those muscly heroes in those supposedly straight-male films. I was incredibly lucky, however, that I had SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) in my home. SBS is a government television network which caters to Australia’s ethnic minorities. And it was thanks to SBS that I was exposed to European art-house cinema, my first taste of seeing male to male physical contact on a screen, probably in some French or Swedish film, in a world that was titillatingly foreign and romantic in its mystic darkness. It was such a stark contrast to my suburban life in my sun-baked country whose light was a constant glare.

I mention this because it would be interesting to consider whether such a “queer” attachment to cultural objects still exists, at least in advanced capitalist societies. I ask myself, are the queer youth of today losing the ability of “becoming a perverse reader”? Or the more pertinent question is: do they even need that ability in the first place? In 2015, a queer child discovering their sexuality has a myriad of possibilities open to them, from internet porn and social network sites, to increasingly more rounded representations of queer characters in film and television. What would my own childhood have been like if twenty-five years ago I could download an episode of *Looking* in 42 seconds and watch the representation of “queers” on my laptop? Would I have been re-reading Rimbaud’s poems incessantly while listening to George Michael’s veiled lyrics? *Looking* does away with that romantic notion of reading texts queerly, of “becoming a perverse reader.”

In the introduction to the edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner asks the question: “What do queers want?” (1993, vii). He suggests that the goals of queers and their politics extend beyond the sexual arena and that “queer experience and politics might be taken as starting points rather than footnotes” (vii). In short, queers want acknowledgement of their lives, struggles, and complete existence (Cohen 1997, 444). Do the gay trio in *Looking* not have that acknowledgement? In the *Looking* universe where is that “imaginary chorus that taunts ‘queer!’” (Butler 1993, 18). Moreover, *Looking* does away with Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument that a culturally central concept like public/private is organized “so as to preserve for heterosexuality the unproblematicness, the apparent naturalness, of its *discretionary* choice between display and concealment” (1994, 10). In *Looking*, same-sex couples no longer must always conceal their sexuality. As *Looking*’s critics point out, in 2015, the mass-mediated representation of homosexuality need not be heralded as a revolution. But where *Looking* does pose a challenge is not in its representation of ordinariness, but in how its characters negotiate sex and love *within* that ordinariness.

: to have an appearance that is suitable for (something)

The universe that a show like *Looking* creates is a specific kind of universe that of course does not reflect the wider experience in the contemporary United States. *Looking* does not have much to say about the American “queer” experience in suburbia or small rural towns. Nor can it comment on the non-Western “queer” experience. Indeed a television show shouldn’t have to. But there does seem to be an onus on cultural products that represent “queer” characters or other minorities to be “representative,” though representative of what is usually unclear. But *Looking* does represent

a sort of gay male cosmopolitanism that transcends borders and thus gives the impression that it is made for a cosmopolitan, global, audience. The cosmopolitanism represented in *Looking*, however, is not necessarily multi-ethnic and transnational. But in the imagined universe of the series, Patrick, Agustín and Dom probably have much more in common with other gay men who live in the urban centres of similarly large cosmopolitan cities such as London, Barcelona, Sydney, Berlin or Amsterdam, than with people with different “lifestyles” who live on the fringes of their own city. *Looking* thus attempts to explore the shared experiences of “gay men” in these large urban centres. As such, *Looking* can be read as a particular cosmopolitan gay male experience, of a certain kind of gay male that is both recognisable, but at the same time, safe and non-threatening.

In the opening scene of *Looking*'s very first episode, Patrick is cruising in a park and although he has hooked up with someone he breaks the silent code of anonymity by asking “what’s your name?” His phone then rings abruptly ending his “two-second hand-job” in the dark bushes. Later, when he’s recounting his experience to his friends he says: “The minute my phone rang and it was you guys calling me I immediately thought it was my mom. Like she somehow knew where I was and she was calling to stop me from becoming one of those gays who hooks up with people in a park.” Agustín, who seemingly is *one of those gays* tells him: “Come on, I’m proud of you. You’re a pervert now, you gotta wear those colours with pride.” If the opening scene wasn’t enough to show viewers that *Looking*'s protagonist Patrick is not one of those wanting gays who fumble in bushes – not that there’s anything wrong with that! – the rest of the episode sets up what kind of gays *Looking*'s trio, Patrick, Agustín and Dom, are.

Patrick is nervous about going to his ex’s “joint” bachelor party, a couple who are getting married just four months after meeting. His ex’s marriage plans prompts Patrick to try online dating and his first date is an utter disaster. The date begins with an exchange of business cards (oncology

vs video games) and Patrick decides to tell his date about his experience cruising in the park. “Well it was kind of a joke. I was with friends and we were in the park and we were like: do people still really do this and it turns out that they do.” His date, unimpressed, asks: “so you’re looking just to hook up?” This exchange leads to the next inevitable question: “so what was your longest relationship?” And here, Patrick and his date seem to almost be comparing penis size. Patrick is embarrassed by his (“umm... like six months I think”) which can’t compare to his date’s (5 years!). Patrick, exposed and belittled, realises that he is not making a good impression. His date cuts him down even further: “You seem like a really nice guy but when it’s working you should never try so hard. It just obviously isn’t working.”

Patrick’s apparent innocence on matters of sex is juxtaposed against Agustín and Dom’s sexual adventurousness. Agustín moves in with his boyfriend Frank and they have a threesome with another man (Frank: “So are we one of those couples now?”). And Dom with his gym-fit body gets rejected by a young man at work (“something awful happened to me today. I didn’t get to fuck someone I wanted to fuck. It’s the first time it’s ever happened to me”).

Looking thus divides love and sex along a particular axis: innocence on the one side, adventurousness on the other. Coupled with innocence is romance. The fact that Patrick is innocent on all matters of sex allows him to seek romance, to search for his future husband and to “settle down.” Coupled with adventurousness is a stark matter-of-factness. The sexual adventurousness of Dom and Agustín, in particular, are devoid of romance. Over two seasons, *Looking* plays with this dividing axis, sometimes to surprising results. In season two, for example, Patrick’s quest for love and romance brings him face to face with the matter-of-factness of negotiating sex and marriage (see below); whereas Agustín’s sexual adventurousness unexpectedly brings him a touch of romance with Eddie, a HIV+ bear.

J. Bryan Lowder in *Slate* asks: “How can a show so conservative in sensibility be lauded by critics as a progressive step forward in gay representation on television? [...] How can a gay man watch a gay show this boring in 2014 and call it, with a straight face, “shocking?” (2014). *Looking*, he argues, is post-gay with a “nothing-unique-going-on-here ethos.” If the mission is to prove that gay people are just as unremarkable as everybody else, Lowder points out, then the time to state such an obvious truth was surely at least twenty years ago. Lowder:

the greatest irony of *Looking* may be that a show that is the apotheosis of the post-gay ethos has brought us characters about whom the *only* thing vaguely interesting is their homosexuality. Ask yourself honestly: If they were straight, would characters as thin and tedious as Patrick and Agustín still be on HBO? In attempting to escape the dreaded “stereotype,” *Looking* has run headlong into something worse – cynical tokenism, a gay minstrelsy of another kind. (2014)

Perhaps Lowder is being overly harsh. After all, *Looking* has been celebrated by many viewers because of its insight into the modern gay male experience. And you could argue that the “straight” characters in HBO’s other dramedy *Girls* are just as thin and tedious. In a way there is something revolutionary about *Looking* and that is that *Looking* does not have to destroy or challenge heteronormativity. It is not a site of resistance.

If *to look* is to have an appearance suitable (for something) we may well ask, what is *Looking* suitable for, if not for resistance? I would dare suggest that *Looking* reads like a kind of gay manual aimed at queer men who no longer have, or require, the skill to be a perverse reader. If I think back to my own queer childhood where there was a dearth of mainstream texts exploring queer love, a series like *Looking* probably helps to sort out the untidy meanings of queer men relating to one another in the big city. What the series ultimately says about those untidy meanings may be

problematic for many, but the very fact it puts *resistance* to one side is, in a way, surprisingly refreshing.

: to exercise the power of vision upon

In *The New Yorker*, David Wenger wrote: “Among the kind of men portrayed in *Looking*, the opportunity to marry is now settled. The question is no longer whether they are allowed to love but whether they will find the kind of love they seek” (2015). As viewers, we are on board to follow Patrick, the all-American gay boy, in his search for love. Patrick is one of those gays who wants to settle down and get married. Over the course of two seasons of *Looking* we follow Patrick’s on-again off-again relationship with Richie, perhaps the only character on the show that does not conform to some kind of gay paradigm, and then with his boss Kevin who is in a relationship with someone else. When Kevin finally leaves his boyfriend to start a new relationship with Patrick, Patrick takes it as a sign of true love. Patrick’s long-suffering search has seemingly come to an end and the two swiftly move in together. But as Wenger points out, in the San Francisco of *Looking* “the contusions of casual sex are pitted against the banalities of steady dating, and the romantic weather is always bad” (2015).

The modern apartment in which they move in together is almost oppressive in its clinical austerity. When Patrick spots Kevin’s framed poster of Kevin Costner’s *Field of Dreams* as they are unpacking he is reminded how little the two really know about each other. After “christening” the new apartment the pair are invited by their new neighbours to their place for a Christmas drink. At the party later that night, where “everyone is white” and there is “not one ugly person” Patrick and Kevin realise that the affair is some kind of sex party: they are told that “new meat is of interest” with promise of things getting “a little bit wild” as the night progresses. Later, Patrick

approaches some guests who are comparing Grindr profiles. Mention of Rompford, who has no pic and no profile and who is the closest person to them, sparks Patrick to realise that it belongs to Kevin, as Rompford is the place where he grew up. The revelation that Kevin keeps his Grindr profile because “who doesn’t want to know what other homos are lurking in the shadows?” shatters Patrick’s fantasy of domestic bliss.

At first Patrick is content with the argument that Agustín offers: “everybody has the app on their phones it’s what you do with it that matters.” But his curiosity gets the better of him and he asks Kevin whether he was hooking up with other people (apart from himself) while with his ex-boyfriend. Kevin admits to “a few things happened a few times,” little things like “a little tug in the steam room at the gym.” The confrontation causes Kevin to open up about what he truly wants. He admits to lying and feeling guilty in his relationship with his ex. Although he does not necessarily want an open relationship with Patrick, Kevin questions the logic of Patrick’s assumption of monogamy and argues that it is a grey area: “if something happens, it doesn’t have to be the end of the world as long as we talk about it.” The confrontation leads Patrick to surmise that Kevin’s heart works one way and his another: “Deep down I’ve always known that and I’ve just ignored it because I just wanted this so much, I wanted to be in love, and be in a relationship and prove to myself, and my friends, and my family, and fuck, to prove to the entire world, that I was capable of being in one.”

It is only when Patrick exercises the true power of vision upon his relationship with Kevin does he realise that the axis dividing romance and matter-of-factness has unmasked the messy negotiation of love and sex in his relationship with Kevin. Daniel Wenger surmises: “Born in the mid-eighties, [Patrick] is from the earliest wave of the post-Stonewall, post-plague, post-activist generation – too old to have brought a boy to the prom and too young to have nursed a fantasy of running away to an

urban gay utopia” (2015). Patrick yearns for a husband and for him the romance implicit in marriage rests in the familiarity of sameness. Kevin, seemingly wants the same thing, but at the same time wants the freedom to experience newness if it may present itself. How can Patrick fight against the desire of experiencing something new? His discussion with Kevin made him question if he, too, is like Megan in *Mad Men*, cursed to be disposed of by a man who “only likes the beginnings of things.” *Looking* as a “gay manual” does not provide any easy answers to this dilemma. By exercising the power of vision upon the sexual negotiation that occurs in queer relationships, *Looking’s* imagined universe leads us to an impasse.

: to have in mind as an end

Looking, argues Daniel Wenger, “is an artifact of a moment when, in the most tolerant regions of the American imagination, the bathhouse has been razed and the single-family home has been built in its place” (2015). In the scenes described above, Patrick and Kevin are “performing” their sexuality, both in their arguments and in their subversion. Negotiating an agreement of what is acceptable and *moral* in a gay male relationship in 2015 is loaded with assumptions about sexual politics. You have Patrick who might find the idea of the bathhouse titillating but nonetheless is willing to opt for the single-family home. Then you have Kevin who wants one foot in each door. But it seems to me the whole premise is fraught with a larger tension.

Looking attempts to show the unromantic negotiation that occurs in many queer relationships. In the imagined universe created in *Looking*, this modern negotiation not only looks unromantic but it is also untidy in the sense that the messy categories of romance, marriage and sex overlap and do not always fit well together. We see the potential Don Draper in each character and we see each character try to come to terms with what

comes after the beginnings of things. Creator Andrew Haigh's feature film *Weekend* (2011), which followed the brief encounter of its two leading men over the course of a weekend, perhaps had more sexual tension and romantic eroticism than the whole two seasons of *Looking*. By focusing on the "beginnings," *Weekend* did not have to enter into the messy world of domesticity, of forging a union, and with everything that that entails. *Looking*, on the other hand, does attempt to go to that place, and the result reminds me of Hannah Arendt's insights on banality. *Looking* has brought us to a place where we can even imagine "the banality of queer." Just like Eichmann, Patrick, Dom and Agustín also have their "stock phrases and self-invented clichés" (Arendt 1963, 49) they give viewers a sense that they are following some kind of unwritten "orders," floating between a cosmopolitan "gayness" and a post-Stonewall tediousness. Perhaps David Wenger is onto something when he calls it "the new gay sadness" (2015).

Wenger's most interesting insight on *Looking*, however, is his comment on the word "ready" that is dispersed across the series:

Richie, outside Patrick's apartment: "I am this close to falling in love with you ... And I don't think you're ready." Patrick, explaining his decision to date his boss, Kevin, who's left his partner after dithering for some time: "The last time someone stood on my stoop, they told me I wasn't ready. So this time I decided to go for it." Richie, in his barbershop, when Patrick comes by after discovering that Kevin has been browsing on Grindr: "You ready?" (He's referring to the therapeutic buzz cut he's about to give Patrick [...]). "I'm ready," Patrick says. It's difficult to believe him. (2015)

In a world where "queer" is becoming banal, Patrick is lost, convincing himself that he is "ready." For love? A relationship? Is he finally ready to start something serious with Richie? Patrick seemingly knows what he does want but too blind to realise who he wants it with. What does Patrick have

in mind as an end? Perhaps the new gay sadness comes from realizing that if he gets what he wants he will be settling for banality.

: to gaze in wonder or surprise

The excitement that gay men experience in a dark room or in any kind of anonymous sex, is borne from a time when queers were outlaws. Such excitement came from the real danger and risk one was taking when homosexual sex was illegal. It is no wonder then that perhaps the most exciting thing that Patrick did in two seasons of *Looking* was have a "two-second hand-job" in its opening scene. I must admit, as a man in a long-term, monogamous relationship with another man, there is some appeal to the darkness of yore, to the yearning looks in an E. M. Forster novel, where there was danger in a kiss. In the post-everything world of *Looking*, where queers are fashioned as "ordinary," everything is within reach: marriage *and* new beginnings. The fact that these don't line up tidily together is the catalyst for much of the sexual drama in *Looking*.

Perhaps there has never been such an apt title for a TV show ever. In my own cosmopolitan gay world I know a hundred Patricks mining for gold, looking but never finding, convincing themselves that they are "ready." But perhaps *Looking*'s critics miss the point. There is joy in *looking*. As the three protagonists stumble in their banal escapades I see reason for hope in the conversation. I see the potential for queers of all stripes to rediscover the meaning of love, sex and romance. In its archaic use, looking meant "to bring into a place or condition by the exercise of the power of vision." Let us all look, exercise the power of our vision, and bring into place something *new*. Don't we all just adore "newness"?

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