THE NEW GAY LONELINESS? DESIRE AND URBAN GAY MALE CULTURES

In the documentary *Do I Sound Gay?* (2014), filmmaker David Thorpe is frustrated with the fact that he is single and questions whether that might be because of how his voice *sounds*. His rather "effeminate" or "gay" voice, he suggests, does not appeal to other men, to other potential mates. The unattractiveness of his voice is thus the source of his singleness and, by implication, the cause of his loneliness. In one telling scene, Thorpe mentions that gay marriage has just been legalized in New York and that the Sunday papers are full of ads for weddings with fabulously attractive gay couples. Jokingly, he wishes that those couples were secretly miserable and cheating on each other.

Thorpe is rather precise in pinpointing the cause of his loneliness: his feminine voice which renders him "unmanly" and thus undesirable. For many others who are searching for a partner, for a relationship of whatever kind, it might not be so easy to precisely find fault with one aspect of themselves and make a documentary about it. Indeed, following his onscreen antics, Thorpe is anything but lonely, enjoying the company of many like-minded friends and acquaintances. What makes him "lonely" is the fact that he is not romantically involved with anybody. It is this *new gay loneliness* in urban gay cultures that I want to explore and problematize in this chapter.

A cursory reading of the vast amount of literature published about gay and lesbian teens, the process of coming out, sexual compulsion, and so on, reveals the frequent use of the term "loneliness." The fact that many queer youth must "unveil" themselves to their families or their peers, what is generally referred to as "coming out of the closet," can be a traumatic experience. Many studies highlight that those individuals who have not disclosed their sexual orientation to others are at particular risk of isolation because they may not feel completely a part of any community (Chaney & Dew, 2003; Guigliamo, 2006). These

feelings of isolation, suggests Chaney and Burns-Wortham, "put some men at particular risk for engaging in compulsive sexual behaviour to regulate the feelings of isolation and loneliness" (2015, p. 74). A report by the charity Stonewall, moreover, found that older gay and bisexual men are at more risk of loneliness and isolation than their heterosexual counterparts, highlighting that they are three times more likely to be single than heterosexual men (Doward, 2011). Interviewees from the report include Michael, 60, who suggests: "As a single gay man, I feel sad about my prospects of finding emotional comfort and support" (Doward, 2011). This is the generation that survived the worst horrors of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and thus now find that many of their friends are dead and feel that they are no longer welcome in a youth-obsessed urban gay culture. Another interviewee Paul, 59, highlights the disconnect many feel with their families: "My gayness makes me less connected to my biological family who would otherwise look out for me" (Doward, 2011). The Stonewall report frames the issue in terms of a housing and health crisis.

In this chapter I am not particularly concerned with the isolation and associated loneliness that can correspond with being a gay teenager or an older gay or bisexual man. I am interested, rather, in tracing a wider, far-reaching narrative, from childhood to old-age. It tells the story of the new urban gay man who has seemingly assimilated into the urban landscape of large, cosmopolitan cities. It is the gay men that we can see on our TV screens in shows like HBO's *Looking* (2014), which follows the lives of three gay men in present day San Francisco; or the token "gay" in any number of TV series or films that seemingly puts the new urban gay man past politics. As David Wenger in *The New Yorker* points out, however, these characters "can't believe that politics are unnecessary when self-acceptance hasn't been wrought" (2015). The effect of shows like *Looking* (and other similar series) is not "to show straight audiences that gay people deserve to be citizens. It is to show that being a citizen only gets you so far when you have never thought of yourself as one" (2015). This is

what Wenger calls the new gay sadness. My aim is to question whether this can also be considered the new gay loneliness.

In examining Yorgos Lanthimos's film *The Lobster* (2015) and Alan Down's self-help book *The Velvet Rage* (2012), my aim is to start a conversation with myself and my own personal, autobiographical experience. Although my own personal narrative is not necessarily indicative of the wider experience of urban gay men, my hope is that my own personal story is a compelling instance of the urban gay male experience that highlights how traces of loneliness stemming from our teenage selves remain as powerful, and sometimes oppressive, forces in our adulthood.

As a teenager growing up in suburban Sydney in the 1990s, I can attest that being in the closet was an isolating experience despite the fact that I had many friends and family members who loved me. There is a part of you that feels that their love is predicated on you being like them: "normal" and heterosexual. Your "unveiling," or your "coming out" will test that love and that feeling of always being on the brink of rejection is emotionally isolating. As the years pass, you mature both emotionally and intellectually. You come out to one friend, then another. You are accepted. You realise that those isolating walls you built around yourself were not as stable as you had once imagined. They come crumbling down and you go on to become a normal teenager. Or sort of. Although I was no longer isolated I still felt lonely. My loneliness was caused by the absence of any hope of romantic involvement. I would read queer themed novels, watch queer films, and come to the same conclusion: a gay life was a life of fleeting moments of desire. Nowhere did I find a representation of a healthy same-sex relationship. I felt lonely because I knew that I would never have a normal, loving, relationship. I was convinced that I was condemned to grow old like Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (1912) – obsessing, never loving. My objects of desire seemed distant and ephemeral.

In his infamous book *The Velvet Rage* (2012), clinical psychologist Alan Downs names this phenomenon "shame." My own narrative of coming to terms with my sexuality as a teenager fits in with the experience of a long line of gay men and their case histories discussed in his book. I was a bit taken aback, however, by Downs's insistence that shame had marked my personhood and that that scar could be traced back to my formative years. If homophobia is the fear of being gay, Downs argues that shame "is the fear of being unlovable" (p. xii). According to Downs, in contemporary society most gay males believe that they are "done with the ravages of shame over their sexual orientation" (p. xi). Out of the closet, no longer isolated, living for the most part open and fulfilling lives, gay men today have no memory of having felt "shame." But Downs insists:

> For the majority of gay men who are out of the closet, shame is no longer *felt*. What was once a feeling has become something deeper and more sinister in our psyches – it is a deeply and rigidly held belief in our own unworthiness for love. We were taught by the experience of shame during those tender and formative years of adolescence that there was something about us that was flawed, in essence unlovable, and that we must go about the business of making ourselves lovable if we are to survive. (2012, p. xi)

In creating a documentary about how gay his voice sounds, does David Thorpe feel "shame" about his feminine voice? By trying to masculinize his voice is Thorpe trying to make himself lovable? If Alan Downs's theory in *The Velvet Rage* is correct, then there is a causative link between Thorpe's feeling of shame and his loneliness. He may not recognize that he feels shame but his desire to perfect a masculine voice stems from what Downs calls his feeling of being unworthy of love.

The Velvet Rage struck a chord with many gay men who, despite having attained a veneer of success are, to use Downs's words, "love-starved creatures" (p. 9). There is a deep-rooted angst in gay men that propels them to search for validation in others. Gay men are not naturally creative, witty or high-achieving, argues Downs. Instead, the dearth of love in their lives, this sense of "unlovableness," is what drives gay men to not only overachieve in every aspect of their lives but to be sexually promiscuous and overly focused on sculpting their bodies into an Adonis-like image. After diagnosing the cause of the modern gay man's frustration with himself, Downs then goes on to provide useful tips to escape this mad, self-made, hell. Although *The Velvet Rage* is ostensibly a self-help book, it is difficult not to agree with most of his sound advice despite the arguably moralistic tone the book takes. Loneliness, argues Downs, is probably "top on the list" of the distressing emotions that can induce a gay man to seek out sex (p. 96). It seems one cannot be sexually promiscuous or enjoy recreational drugs purely for pleasure's sake: *you like to fuck around? It's because you believe nobody will ever love you…* Downs did, however, make me question my own personal narrative and I am still coming to terms with the role that "shame," as a theoretical concept, has played in my life.

Whether feeling unworthy of love is a particularly gay male phenomenon I cannot for certain say. There is no doubt, however, that many gay men have identified themselves in the pages of *The Velvet Rage*. After all, don't most parents of queer children worry about their children's future happiness? – *I can accept that you are gay but I don't want you to end up alone*… Gay men are forced to think about the prospect of loneliness from the moment they begin to realise that they are attracted to the same sex. I very much doubt that my very straight brother ever thought that he might one day end up alone. The prospect of loneliness was mine and mine alone.

In his *Trouble for Paradise* (2014), Slavoj Žižek provocatively asks:

What if, in our postmodern world of ordained transgression, in which the marital commitment is perceived as ridiculously out of time, those who cling to it are the true subversives? What if, today, straight marriage is 'the most dark and daring of all transgressions'? (2014, p. 3)

In 2016, at least in advanced late-capitalist societies, we could argue that gay marriage has become banalized. In just a few decades homosexuality shifted from illegality to the commonplace. As David Wenger puts it: "the bathhouse has been razed and the single-family home has been built in its place" (2015). Where once there was a dark, mystic aura surrounding same-sex love and relationships because of its very *unspokenness* (witness the homoerotic overtones of an E. M. Forster novel), we have now arrived to the point where queer has been robbed of its queerness, prompting Žižek to declare that it is now "straight" marriage that is daring in its subversiveness.

Even before the march towards marriage equality, the banalization of the "queer" world was readily apparent. Back in 2002 Perry Brass wrote: "The old world of gay and lesbian culture was, for the most part, shaped by hiding, by secret cues and passwords, and by naming and labelling. Today it seems out of touch with a new generation of queer kids […] These young people find the old gay and lesbian culture quaint at best and irrelevant at worst" (2002, p. 44). Indeed, leaving aside the fact that homosexuality is still illegal in 79 countries, same-sex relationships have arguably never been so accepted. Gay marriage is legal in fifteen countries and television and film are peppered with an assortment of queer characters. Gone are the days when the career of Rupert Everett was halted in its tracks because he was an openly gay actor. In 2016 there is an increasing number of "out" actors and sportspeople whose coming out process is generally met with a sigh and a yawn. So on the surface, Alan Downs's argument that modern gay men are riddled with shame and hence feel that they are unworthy of love is spurious at best. That might have been true for an elder

generation of gay men who lurked in the shadows but these days young gay men are open about their sexuality from a very early age and gay role models are everywhere. There is thus no reason that gay men, as a segment of the general population, should be any lonelier than anybody else.

Downs is quick to knock this argument down: "While social acceptance of gay men, gay rights, and gay marriage is critically important to the well-being of gay men, these things are not sufficient to inspire us to do the deeper work of healing the tight grip of shame on our lives […] It is a struggle to live authentically, without the need to compensate for our inadequacies or to escape the pain of our emotions through addictions" (p. xiii-xiv). Is there, then, a new gay sadness? Is there an inherent sense of shame that gay men must overcome in order to lead fulfilling lives? If gay men don't abnegate that shame are they condemned to live a life of loneliness?

If we were living thirty years ago and we had to think of a defining issue of the future I dare say nobody would suggest that it would be loneliness. In 1986, on the cusp of the age of information and globalization, the network society it would be safe to assume, would inevitably bring us all closer together. George Monbiot, writing in *The Guardian*, confronts this question:

> What do we call this time? It's not the information age: the collapse of popular education movements left a void filled by marketing and conspiracy theories. Like the stone age, iron age and space age, the digital age says plenty about our artefacts but little about society. The anthropocene, in which humans exert a major impact on the biosphere, fails to distinguish this century from the previous 20. What clear social change marks out our time from those that precede it? To me it's obvious. This is the Age of Loneliness. (2014)

Monbiot continues by highlighting the "epidemic" of loneliness in the digital age, just as problematic for the young as it is for the elderly, and it is only set to become worse. If we are living in the Age of Loneliness, it is no wonder that we seek escapism in entertainment where loneliness is virtually non-existent. Netflix's *Sense8* (2015) follows the stories of eight disparate characters scattered around the world who have suddenly become mentally linked. The characters are diverse in their multicultural, multiethnic, queer and (somewhat) pansexual characteristics. Yet their very interconnectedness, the fact that they are a "Sense8," is what makes them a threat to the established order and thus need to be hunted down. It is telling that in 2016 to be "subversive" is to be "connected" to others on a number of levels. What is fascinating about *Sense8* is the process in which the characters discover their emotional, and even sexual, connectedness (one infamous scene can be readily googled) and how their "vision" is manifoldly augmented in surprising ways. *Sense8* is the logical conclusion of the new globalized world order where although we may be, as Monbiot suggests, living in the Age of Loneliness, that is juxtaposed against a craving for intimacy that disturbs the smooth operation of global capitalist networks.

In a starkly different approach, Yorgos Lanthimos's film *The Lobster* (2015) treads similar ground in its exploration of intimacy, relationships, solitude and loneliness in late-capitalist society. In Lanthimos's absurd universe he offers, according to *The Village Voice*'s Nick Schager, "a dystopian sci-fi scenario that's almost as off-the-wall wackadoo as it is unnervingly cool, droll, and melancholy" (2015). In the film's near dystopian future, single people, according to the laws of The City, are taken to The Hotel, where they are obliged to find a romantic partner in forty-five days or else they are transformed into an animal of their choice and sent off into The Woods. It is a biting satire on our society and functions according to Schager, "as a mind-bogglingly weird, deadpan commentary on the fallacy of monogamous unions as a sure-fire means of staving off loneliness" (2015). In The Woods,

however, roam a group of outcasts who resist conforming to The City's laws, instead disavowing any intimacy of any kind and expressly forbidding falling in love. In *The Lobster*'s universe, to be subversive is to live in The Woods, but even there the world is riddled by unwritten codes and rules that the protagonists must circumvent in order to stave off their loneliness.

The absurd narrative spun by *The Lobster* reminds me of how central the desire for romantic connectedness, and its reciprocal disavowal, is in contemporary urban gay cultures. Urban gay men have, in a sense, one foot in The Hotel and another in The Woods. The Hotel represents the societal pressure for gay men to conform to their newly gained "straight" narrative. That is, urban gay men have finally won their privilege to aver – *we are just like you! We can get married, have children and a single-family home too!* But with that hard-won privilege comes the realisation that there is a banal ordinariness to the whole enterprise. And even if the urban gay man accepts the challenge to be just like his straight brother, the pressure is immense for him to find a partner and settle down. Like the laws of The City, the urban gay man feels he has his "forty-five days" to find a mate before he is turned into a beast and let loose into The Woods. God forbid you have a gay voice!

And what of The Woods? There remains a dark allure to those pockets of urban gay culture that refuse to conform to The City's laws. Unabashed, a decadent array of outlets, from sex-on-premises venues to "dating" apps such as *Grindr* and *Scruff*, provide urban gay men with the immediacy of sexual release. Why bother with The Hotel when you have newness within reach in The Woods? In his article about HBO's *Looking*, David Wenger was perhaps prescient with his insight that it is a myth that urban gay men are post-politics. The new gay sadness is the fact that they still have one foot in The Hotel and another in The Woods. Living in limbo, it is no wonder that they haven't really thought of themselves as realised citizens. Is it shame or the new gay loneliness?

As Žižek is wont to do, he subverts the political assumptions we are confronted with today. In his juxtaposition of cynical conformism and radical emancipatory engagement, he argues that our goal should be the latter:

> Cynical conformism tells us that emancipatory ideas of more equality, democracy and solidarity are boring and even dangerous, leading to a grey, overregulated society, and that our true and only paradise is the existing 'corrupted' capitalist universe. Radical emancipatory engagement starts from the premise that it is the capitalist dynamics which are boring, offering more of the same in the guise of constant change, and that the struggle for emancipation is still the most daring of all ventures. Our goal is to argue for this second option. (2014, p. 4)

It is perhaps understandable that for many of us, the goals of equality, democracy and solidarity have become "boring." How else can we explain the inexplicable rise of figures such as Donald Trump in the United States and myriad others like him in Europe and beyond? They sell the message that emancipatory ideas are dangerous, disturbing the order of things that we have become comfortable with. Even with the devastating effects of austerity, which arguably has contributed profoundly to the loneliness epidemic, there is still something sexy about brash capitalism. The Spanish film *Techo y Comida* (2015) viscerally paints a bleak picture of the real effects of the Spanish economic crisis. María, a single mother who has to raise her young son alone has been unemployed for years and her isolation and loneliness is palpable. Yet Spanish society continues to revel in an orgy of mass-mediated consumption. The existing corrupted capitalist system becomes, as Žižek posits, our true paradise. To be truly radical, therefore, he argues that we have to demonstrate that it is capitalism itself which is boring. But how can he, or other radical thinkers, sell the idea to the common person that the struggle for emancipation is still the most daring of all ventures?

Can we not think about the new gay loneliness in similar terms? Real emancipation we are told is dangerous and thus the true and only paradise for urban gay men is to assimilate into the heterosexual lifestyle. After all, isn't that what the struggle has been about all along? But if we return to Alan Downs's central premise in *The Velvet Rage*, the question becomes – is the worst thing about getting what you want, actually getting it? If gay men have an innate sense of shame, an inherent feeling that they are unworthy of love, is that then a real emancipation? One foot in The Hotel, another in The Woods, urban gay men find themselves at a narrative impasse. The most daring of all ventures for the urban gay man is to therefore self-realize as a citizen on his own terms.

Relating Downs's argument in *The Velvet Rage* to my own personal narrative I wonder to what extent my experience as an adult gay male is characterized by a shame that stems from feelings of loneliness in my teenage years. I have come a long way from the self-doubting teenager who was afraid to pronounce his sexuality lest he be judged and rejected. It is true that my fears of ending up alone and unloved have dissipated. If anything, my adulthood has been defined by serial monogamy. As I write these words I have been in a long-term, loving relationship for over five years. My partner and I are "out of the closet," we have many friends and a bustling social life. We work, run a business, travel, write, study, cook… There are never enough hours in the day to do everything we want to do. He proposed to me on a Greek island. I said yes. That was two years ago. Somehow we are content with the fact that we have made that commitment to each other. But we haven't really seriously spoken about actually going through with the wedding. Talking philosophically about whether we would celebrate a wedding or not, we realised that there was a lot to think about. Many of our friends and acquaintances want the experience of having attended a "gay wedding." By not going through with the wedding we are denying them that novelty. Our family's expectations (or non-expectations) are another drama. Deep down we can't escape

the odd feeling that there is some kind of performance involved in a gay wedding that we feel uncomfortable with. As much as we love each other there is a little part of us that feels exposed.

When I question my personal narrative I realize that I am also in that space between The Hotel and The Woods. Do I feel that getting married is entering some kind of queer banality? Why does a rite such as marriage, which should be associated with celebration, instead stirs up feelings of potential rejection? Marriage equality somehow still does not feel equal. When it comes down to it, I have no choice but to recognize that the shame and loneliness that I felt as a teenager remain as a faint trace in my personal narrative, a trace that challenges the idea that urban gay men are finally post-politics. How can one erase such a deep, hidden feeling? In her review of *The Lobster*, Sheila O'Malley (2016) aptly points out that Lanthimos is interested in the sometimes pathological human need for systems:

> Why wait for a totalitarian government to institute rules from the top-down when human beings submit to atomization of every aspect of their lives all on their own? If this "need" is wired into the human race, then where does that leave the individual? An individual who doesn't "go along" becomes a renegade, an outlaw, an unwelcome reminder that the system doesn't work for everyone.

My own experience suggests that although urban gay males are not necessarily renegades and outlaws, we do operate in that space between submitting to human atomization on the one hand and desiring to not "go along" with the system on the other.

Of course not all urban gay men necessarily experience loneliness. And indeed not all urban gay men want or desire a romantic relationship. The point, rather, is that urban gay men are hindered by their over-compensation, by their yearning to make themselves lovable. At a time of fluid identities, when sexual orientation is increasingly just one more aspect of

our selfish journey, perhaps it is "shame" that links urban gay men into an "imaginary tribe" that has an extraordinary emotive capacity and affective appeal. We are linked by the knowledge that we are crippled by our self-consciousness. Our loneliness does not stem from isolation; it stems from the fact that we have gained entry into *their* world yet we still feel apart from it. It stems from our own disgust that we desire entry into that world. We want to be loved but can't love ourselves.

The new gay loneliness is, then, a kind of feeling that the post-politics world that urban gay men inhabit is full of messy categories that do not always fit well together. For centuries, same-sex love was hidden in the shadows and was therefore uncomplicated in its unspokenness. Perhaps that's why many now feel nostalgia for that simpler time. With emancipation came all the messy negotiation that comes along with living an open life. But if you are born into shame those messy categories become murkier.

The new gay loneliness, isn't then, particularly new. Living in Monbiot's Age of Loneliness urban gay men have struggled with loneliness since they were first aware that they were attracted to the same sex. On the surface it may appear as if they have overcome that struggle. But it is a personal and internal conflict that rears its ugly head at inopportune times to remind us of the frailty of our self-identification as citizens. But there's no need for us to be downcast. To paraphrase John Steinbeck in *East of Eden* (1952) – All great and precious things are a little bit lonely. Let's accept it and go back to being fabulous.

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