



Television's Mid-Life Crisis Moderate Minimalism and Middle-Aged Masculinity in *In Treatment* and *Louie*

Though frequently bemoaned for allegedly having threatened the survival of the traditional screen media of film and television, the so-called digital revolution has, in fact, fostered rich new economies of production and perception. Of primary interest is the way in which these recent screen artists exploit the possibilities of digital media while relying on an indie-style film aesthetic and ethic, particularly those who do so in order to ponder the emotional intricacies and material realities of contemporary American sexual mores and romantic lives. What *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott calls a “neo-neo-realist” mode of locally produced, micro-budgeted everyday stories striving for truthful, socially conscious authenticity—the converse to hundred-million-dollar-plus, CGI-outsourced, merchandizing-friendly fantasy franchises—constitutes digital technology’s other momentous offering to twenty-first-century screen culture, and not merely by allowing affordability and accessibility to far greater numbers of creative media-makers (“Neo-Neo Realism,” n. pag.). In coining the term “neo-neo-realism,” Scott was also singling out what he perceived to be the promising re-emergence of films using “lived-in locations and non-professional actors and their explorations of work, neighborhood and family life, all hallmarks of the neo-realist impulse,” helped along by millennial developments in independent production, marketing, and distribution tactics (“A.O. Scott Responds,” n. pag.). In recent years, what I would call “moderate minimalism” has been resuscitated cinematically, which is no coincidence, but rather one manifestation in wider cultural movements for environmental sustainability and compassionate capitalism movements, pitted against excess waste, outsourced manufacturing, and deficit financing. Sizing up American society in the decade following 9/11, Scott observes that “magical thinking has

been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle,” and suggests that neo-realism’s “engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy” (“Neo-Neo Realism,” n. pag.). Tracing the neo-realist impulse’s global movement since its origins in post-World War II Italy, Scott ventures that neo-realism “might be thought of less as a style or genre than as an ethic” (“Neo-Neo Realism,” n. pag.). With Hollywood spinning \$100+ million yarns of escapist denial or (occasionally) self-aggrandizing heroism, and Must-See TV continuing to dish out formulaic sitcoms and legal procedurals while premium cable indulges in mere titillation more than genuine transgression, refusing to swallow these wish-fulfilment fantasies and escapist extravaganzas becomes an ethical imperative.

Scott’s proclamations provoked *New Yorker* film blogger Richard Brody to protest, “[w]hat Scotts praises is, in effect, granola cinema, abstemious films that are made to look good for you but are no less sweetened than mass-market products, that cut off a wide range of aesthetic possibilities and experiences on ostensible grounds of virtue” (“About,” n. pag.). Where Scott praises *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) and *Goodbye Solo* (2008), Brody prefers *Frownland* (2007) and defends *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), leading Scott to retort in a follow-up response, “[i]t’s clear enough that Mr. Brody and I have different tastes: one man’s granola is another man’s meat, after all (“A.O. Scott Responds,” n. pag.). Because Scott’s and Brody’s differing viewpoints are both supported readily by recent filmic exemplars of their respective compendia, perhaps the most valuable insight of their somewhat vexed debate seems to be in noting just how alive indie-style cinema remains—and in reminding us how unfortunately infrequent such debates in contemporary film criticism have become. Their struggle is seemingly more a

result of conflicting sensibilities between formalist Brody and humanist Scott, for they appear to agree on the existence of a contemporary aesthetic trend that encompasses both those films that Brody praises for their “audaciously expressive images, coming through but not staying with realism” alongside what he attests that Scott favours: “a restrained camera style, without risking provocative minimalism or overtly fragmentary compositions” (“About,” n. pag.).

What critic Susan Morrison, also writing about twenty-first century art cinema, names “slow film” perhaps gets closest to the mode and mood of what Brody and Scott collectively describe:

[Slow film] refers to a type of art film that, while seemingly minimalist, in fact requires intense audience concentration and effort to produce meaning. By this neologism, I mean to draw an analogy between the recent phenomenon in cooking (and eating) habits termed the “Slow Food” movement wherein time functions as an arbiter and guarantor of good taste, with those films that work off similar emphases of duration, films that reject the flashier aspects of Hollywood filmmaking . . . short takes, rapid editing, continuously moving camera and action, etc. . . . substituting instead a much slower approach to crafting a film. (*Slow Film*, n. pag.)

The localism promoted by the Slow Food movement intrinsically characterizes the production, distribution, and exhibition networks of the films Scott and Brody describe, as well as signaling temporality’s crucial importance to their narratives for the way intensity and duration enhance everyday understandings of character and story. Characterizing this particular aesthetic as “moderate minimalism” signals the approach most vividly employed by filmmakers like Richard Linklater or the “mumblecore” directors I discuss elsewhere while also accommodating the less dialogue-driven, more stylized films of Sofia Coppola, Kelly Reichardt, and Gus Van Sant (San Filippo 2010). The term could equally be extended to include European art film ingénues such as Andrea Arnold, Radu Muntean, Joachim Trier, and Cristian Mungiu. Ultimately, moderate minimalism also has seeped into, or concurrently developed within, two similarly styled twenty-first century television series of note: *In Treatment* (2008–2010) and *Louie* (2010–).

Television’s identity crisis in the post-television era yields a corollary to cinema’s blockbuster/indie dichotomy in its polarization between the edgy extravagance of pay-cable series and the reversion by broadcast networks to formulaic, low-cost, reality-style fare. These two recent and highly unique shows, *In Treatment* and *Louie*, take their lead instead from the moderate minimalist aesthetic of slow film

as well as that of online digital media such as *YouTube* and web series, all aesthetically and ethically favoured by Millennials and their middle-aged confreres who make up the majority of viewers subscribing to HBO (or piggy-backing on their parents’ HBO GO subscriptions among other, more illicit means of content acquisition) and tuning in to basic cable channel FX (or watching recent episodes online). Formally and narratively innovative, yet organically

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rooted in televisual style and seriality, these series indicate ways in which digital technologies are preserving not just the Hollywood-style spectacular, but also an artisanal indie aesthetic. These shows are pushed increasingly to the cinematic margins, whose real time, dialogue-driven, micro dramas—filmed in close-up compositions and with handheld cinematography—are ideally suited to modern viewers’ ways of seeing intimately, actively, and obsessively (often on personal viewing devices such as laptops). Moreover, these two singular shows engage formally as well as narratively with middle-aged masculinity in a way that could also be described as moderately minimalist. They depart from fictional television’s prevailing pattern of using sensationalist melodrama and celebrated machismo to represent middle-aged men in crisis, still on display in shows such as *Californication* (2007–), *Hung* (2009–2011), *Rescue Me* (2004–2011), and *Shameless* (2011–).

In *Treatment*’s psychiatrist Dr. Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne), and the eponymous “Louie” C.K., a New York-based comic playing a version of himself, serve less as representatives of the newfangled cultural mentality that “50 is the new 30” and more as confirmations of what Patricia Cohen, author of *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*, names as that identity construction’s chief emphasis: “loss—the end of fertility, decreased stamina, the absence of youth” (n. pag.). As such, Paul and Louie endure quotidian trials and muted tribulations aimed at authentically depicting age-related negotiations of profession, finances, divorce, parenting, friendship, health, and sex. Both shows’ adherence to naturalistic plot and performance, low-budget production, and slow-build revelations conjoins the voyeuristic intimacy, real time flow, and DIY authorship of web content with television’s contemporary trend of single-camera docu-comedies such as *The Office* (2005–2013) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–). Exceptional instances of treating



middle-aged American masculinity seriously, *In Treatment* and *Louie* are also noteworthy for negotiating television's changing landscape by successfully blending aspects of the classic soap opera and sitcom with the contemporary dramedy, of observational documentary with reality television, and of cinematic neo-realism with *YouTube* exhibitionism.

In Treatment ran on HBO from 2008-2010. In its first two seasons, it hemmed closely to the acclaimed Israeli series *BeTipul* (2005-2008) from which it was adapted—airing five episodes per week with a format that echoed that of the daytime television soap opera. Each half hour features a different patient in conversation with Paul and then concludes with his own session with former mentor now therapist Dr. Gina Toll (Dianne Wiest). Following his divorce, he relocates from Baltimore to Brooklyn where he begins anew with another therapist, Dr. Adele Brouse (Amy Ryan). The third and final season to date, with an original script and new showrunner, scaled back to four episodes per week; as of now, plans for the show's revival as a web series have been reported but are still unrealized. Notably, the first season is bookended with Paul in conversation with Gina—indeed, they could be said to constitute the show's central coupling—in which his embittered dissatisfaction with his aging body and flagging professional commitment is punctuated by the anticipatory, then deflating impact of his prospective affair with younger female patient Laura (Melissa George). In the transition between their first and second exchanges below, appearing in adjacent season one episodes, Gina coaxes Paul into a wary recognition of his older, but wiser self-worth without resorting to the pat solutions and

positive thinking of so many approaches to contemporary psychotherapy and conventional serial television.

Gina: You seem antsy.

Paul: I just keep thinking I need to go to the bathroom.

Gina: Oh, you remember where it is—the door on your right [*gestures behind her*].

Paul: No, I mean all the time. [*Sheepish*] It's a urinary thing.

Gina: [*sympathetically*] Oh, I see. Have you seen a doctor?

Paul: Yeah, getting better. But it's still a terrible sensation. You got to the bathroom, you stand there, you will it to happen, and nothing. Not a drop.

Gina: So uncomfortable. This, and the stress you're under.

Paul [*looks at her sharply*]: Jesus. You think it's psychosomatic.

Gina: No, not at all.

Paul: A symbolic urinary infection.

Gina: Symbolic how?

Paul: My head's telling me one thing, my body's telling me another. My precise issue manifesting itself as a physical malfunction of the...

Gina: Yes?

Paul: Shit... did you say it was on the right?

(“Paul and Gina: Week Nine”)

Paul: [Laura] said that what I was doing was that I was using her to bail myself out of my own life, that actually I was having a ‘mid-life crisis.’ [*Laughs bitterly*] Hilarious description. That's your theory, isn't it?

Gina: No. But that doesn't matter now... it doesn't matter. What matters, Paul, is that you did the right thing for you, and for your patient.

Paul: She could be the last love of my life... and I let her go. What's left for me now, Gina?

Gina: We'll have to talk about that.

(“Paul and Gina: Week Nine”)

As this dialogue-driven exchange, ranging from the banal to the melodramatic to the ultimately anticlimactic, represents, *In Treatment's* formal and tonal structures, despite their inherent televisuality, are nonetheless unparalleled in television drama. The hypnotic pacing and intense immersion, required by the show's painstaking self-reflection and reliance on cumulative knowledge, engages more gaze than glance, befitting the intimacy and immediacy of contemporary spectatorship's personal, mobile screens and time-shifted, compulsive viewing. While this degree of minimalism is traditionally standard in certain televisual modes that foreground confessional conversation, namely the interview show and the daytime soap opera, the infotainment-izing of the former has left PBS's Charlie Rose as virtually the last man standing while after decades on air, stalwart soaps like *The Guiding Light* (1952-2009) and *All My Children* (1970-2011) are calling it a day. *In Treatment* hardly ever ventures outside Paul's office, nor does almost anyone save his recurring patients venture in. Not only do viewers bear witness to the labour of psychotherapy, they are also shown the minutiae of Paul's everyday life—ranging from mundane tasks such as unclogging his toilet and filling out paperwork to bickering with his wife and attempting to overcome his alienation from his children. Despite being played by the soulful Gabriel Byrne, Paul is portrayed as an aging sad sack lacking the skirt-chasing virility and bad boy charm that his middle-aged cohort—namely Ray Drecker (Thomas Jane) in *Hung* and Hank Moody (David Duchovny) in *Californication*—dispense with ease. After nearly breaching professionalism in his encounter with Laura during the first season, Paul is rendered impotent by a panic attack that leaves him humiliated and abandoned, though potentially more self-aware and open to therapy. Yet his next romantic relationship with a yoga teacher waits until season three to commence, *in medias res*, keeps her largely off-screen, and ends with her subdued surrender to his lack of investment and emotional reclusiveness. Surely, then, Paul's most fraught psychosexual entanglements are with his two female therapists, Gina and Adele, who have him vehemently denying and pursuing the erotic transference he projects onto each woman in turn. On top of this, his relationship with his estranged wife and children remains rocky. In her work on the contemporary experience of middle age, Patricia Cohen cites research that suggests more hopeful associa-



tions with the middle decades are being forged by reporting of greater happiness and fulfilment, a sense of purpose and good judgment, personal growth, and psychological resilience. Perhaps *In Treatment's* most radical move, then, was in concluding on such a resoundingly bleak note, with Paul alienated from family and friends, concerned over his manifesting possible symptoms of Parkinson's disease, and resigned to ending both his practice and his treatment.

In a show of intertextual commiseration, *Louie* launched its first season in 2010 on the men-behaving-badly network FX with footage from one of his stand-up comedy routines in which Louie laments, “I’m 41, single... not really single. Just alone” (“Pilot”). He goes on to end this stand-up segment by saying “I don’t cry like a little bitch about it because I’m a man,” but as regular viewers and fans know, it is not uncommon for Louie to cry—both as his fictionalized character on the show and as himself in interviews he’s done with NPR’s Terry Gross, fellow comic Marc Maron, and others (“Pilot”). Another sad-sack divorcé, Louie is even less successful with the ladies than *In Treatment's* Paul: witness a season three promotional spot featuring testimonials in character by co-stars Parker Posey and Maria Bamford as to Louie’s lack of prowess on dates and in bed. Louie’s depiction of sex and its vicissitudes is analogous to that of *Girls* (2012-), the HBO show created by Lena Dunham, which unabashedly puts her own similarly imperfect physical form (and that of the middle-aged actors who play her parents) on unconventional display, as I

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discuss in a recent *In Media Res* essay (San Filippo 2013). As the awkward encounter during a Miami vacation between Louie and a hunky Latino lifeguard who saves him from drowning demonstrates, *Louie* is exceptional for confronting the homophobia and bro-mantic bonding that constitutes men's relationships with one another. With uncensored honesty, Louie confirms and consequently owns his abjection with regular references to chronic masturbation, sexual fantasies that range from the perverse (season one's "bag of dicks" daydream, season two's mental desecration of a virginal Christian woman), to the wistful (his tragically unrequited fixation on his cocksure pal Pamela). In this and all his erotic/romantic relationships, Louie often positions himself willingly in the submissive, emasculating, and relentlessly unrepressed position that Paul so anxiously avoids.

Formally, *Louie* is as groundbreaking as *In Treatment*—perhaps more so—for its unprecedented auteurism as a scripted television drama. *Louie* is written, directed, edited, and produced by its creator, Louis C.K., who is also its star. He shoots with the Red digital camera, uses laptop-editing software (though he ceded editing duties after the first two seasons), and retains complete creative control over the series. In the past year, C.K. has also proven the commercial viability of self-distribution by circumventing cable distributors to deliver his comedy shows directly to fans via pay-per-file Internet sales.

No matter how cutting edge and digitally savvy this mode of making, selling, and circulating content, *Louie's* stylistic experimentation also borrows from televisual conventions. The show's purposeful character discontinuity has some viewers flummoxed: the same actress played his date in one episode ("Bully") and his mother two episodes later ("God"), while his ex-wife, initially seen only as a Caucasian-appearing pair of limbs signing divorce papers in the pilot, later called by an epithet for Italians, ultimately is played by African-American actor Susan Kelechi Watson with no explanation as to her character's positioning as biological mother to two blonde, fair-skinned children. Not so radical a technique, perhaps, given such narrative discontinuity is an accepted custom of soap operas while the corresponding lack of narrative continuity (the niece

who was put in his custody at the end of season two is yet to reappear) exploits the episodic containment that sitcoms have long enjoyed, yet in *Louie* it irreverently cuts across genres and narrative modes. Similarly snagged from modes and tonalities disparate from each other and the show itself, *Louie's* moderate minimalism hybridizes art film and whimsy avant-garde flights of absurdism with the unvarnished crudeness and cringe-inducing intimacy of online media. Surely, the consummate sequence displaying *Louie's* experimental subversion of televisual convention and online amateur exhibitionism is the much-discussed long take of Louie, while driving his daughters to visit an elderly relative, singing along and air drumming to The Who's "Who Are You," which is diegetically heard playing on the radio in its three-minute-fourteen-second entirety during season two episode "Country Drive." *Louie* achieves its wry, improvisatory, everyday appeal through stylistic techniques (including handheld camera, jump cuts, long takes, improvisation, and naturalistic mise en scène) that serve as a fitting conduit considering the moderately minimalist content, its glimpse into the real world, and the real drama of middle age.

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