



***Portlandia* in Portland: Curated Life in the Utopian City**

Jeff London

*Popular among educated creatives, hipsters, foodies, and other crunchy urbanites, the US television show *Portlandia* revels in pointing out the absurdity of earnest living and lifestyles in the postindustrial city through the lives of Portland's quirky characters. In this review essay, Jeff London, who has done research on the city, discusses how the series depicts tensions between the "ideal" and "real" versions of life in Portland.*

Spoiler alert: this article reveals hidden-in-plain-sight facts about the series (seasons 1–4).

*The television series *Portlandia* is set against the mythologized contemporary Portland, Oregon. The city has rarely been featured in this manner, although *Drugstore Cowboy*¹ and a few television series have been filmed here before. The coincidence of the city getting its first leading role in a television or film series in this show at this historical moment is serendipitous. The city has become an internationally known representation of the creative lifestyle, music economies, and youth pilgrimage. The "Dream of the Nineties," the theme song of the opening sequence, announces the city to the seekers of that decade's slow, rock-music-centered, lifestyle culture; a place where one can ride a bike, be involved in city decision-making, and express one's right to say just how things should be. However, from the comic roles created here on screen, it appears that the ideals governed by rules and "in-the-know" routines are ties that bind in Portland but often fall short of the larger ideals they set out to champion. In the gap between ideal and real culture, the comic cleverness of Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein take hold. The dysfunction in the city is depicted as hilarious, self-righteous, hip in-group progressivism. There are topical omissions that could further extend the mission of the show as a critical satire, but in leaving no obsessive, rule-driven Portland stone unturned, they break the rules of private, provincial Portland and let a broad audience in on a local joke.*

The conformity of non-conformity

The backdrop for the show is the idea of a utopian self-governing city with progressive citizens vying for their "thing" to be the central agenda of an ethically planned city. In an interview on *Vita.mn* (Harper 2014), Fred Armisen admits that the rock and roll scene and the self-curated lifestyle culture of people in Minneapolis inspired him to think about making this show. This suggests the ethos of rock culture and self-made communities exist in enclaves throughout the country. Although Portland might have a particular quality, it is a phenomenon that is nothing new. The curated life is represented by the episode in which Fred and Carrie suggest that to make things feel "creative," you only need to "put a bird on it." The only caveat, and a running theme throughout the comic tenor of the show, is that, if we all follow this single-note creativity, we are inadvertently branding the creative city in the most reductionist and conformist of ways.

¹ See : www.imdb.com/title/tt0097240.

In the episodes about the Deuce hotel and the arrival of the fake rock band *Echo Echo*, it is the nonchalance of notoriety that gives character to the cool artisanal hotel. Yet hotel employees can't relax in the presence of "rock stars." The parody is again of the culture of the city that is supposedly cool beyond reproach and above self-obsession, but can't stop looking at itself in the mirror. This narcissistic motif repeats itself in the episode where the parents at a school protest the lack of indie and reverential music choices in the school library; hipster parents demand curated indie environments everywhere they occupy.

The snags of idealism

In the series Fred and Carrie touch base with the mayor, loosely based on former mayor Sam Adams, who asks them whether they should have a baseball stadium. Again, the fantasy of citizen accountability is almost overwhelming to them. Sometimes, they wish that government would take care of some things itself. There is an ironic longing for a parental large-scale, top-down urban plan of development, which is the flip side of what the show portrays. Carrie Brownstein, in an interview with *Portland Monthly* (Scott and Dawn 2011), spoke about the insider culture of rules in Portland, including recycling, urban cooperation, and bike awareness. She is drawn to this enlightened order even as she sees the comic potentiality in its imperfect application. As a longtime resident and a major figure in the '90s music scene, she brings the detail-oriented exactitude to the depiction of this reality.

This self-referential culture is satirized to warn against an unreflective bohemian utopian nostalgia. Some of the series' best moments occur when the main characters, most of whom are over-the-top caricatures of political hipness, experience ambivalence over their lifestyle culture when facing actual pressure to get things done. In one instance, in episode 5 of season 4, Spike, the full-lobe-pierced cyclist, is forced by his delivery job to get a car. When he sees the political actions of the Critical Mass bicyclists' movement and their stopping of traffic to protest car-centric streets, he turns on them. His girlfriend then catches him agitating for the other side. In this way the show manages to leave no sacred stone unturned in its pursuit of satirizing the politics of urban bike planning.

Even those in power fall short in the quest for perfection in a politically correct urban culture that is handcuffed by technological details. In season 3, episode 6, the show begins with Portland banning plastic bags and declaring that the world is now clean. They cut to fish decrying the loss of bags as building materials. The mayor is then sitting in bed with Carrie and Fred asking them for advice on making a "banned" wagon where people throw their banned items. While the mayor is playing the role of perfect civic conservationist, a journalist calls to inform the mayor he is the city's top energy hog. Fred, Carrie and the mayor go on a search and finally figure out that the mayor has a printer, named Prince, running continuously at his apartment. He didn't want to stop it because it said, "Do not interrupt." "The printer, formerly known as Prince, will no longer be in my employ," the Mayor proclaims. When he throws it off the bridge he makes the people even angrier. The mayor then flees to live the simple life, now seen in an Amish beard, killing a chicken with a hatchet. The next mayor, a temp, plans to make Portland a "real" city.

Figure 1. The mayor after he has gone “off the grid” – season 3, episode 6



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The fable of gentrification

The episode featuring the main characters as rats underscores the desire to find undiscovered neighborhoods and gets nostalgic in doing so. Episode 10 in season 3 features the rats that are gentrified out of their neighborhood because no one throws garbage on the ground anymore. They then go on a journey through different neighborhoods that are still unknown but disheveled enough for rats, with free loose garbage. They are looking for normal ethnic restaurants, “nothing hybrid.” They find an undiscovered neighborhood, garbage strewn and unkempt, and proceed to try and name it with one of the hybridized location names that have besieged lower Manhattan and become a trend in Portland as well. One former hangout, the lower Burnside area at the bottom of a hill by the river, and once a haven for strip bars and heroin junkies, is now LoBu and houses the posh white and neon-lit Jupiter Hotel with the attached Doug Fir Lounge and music venue. The fact that animated cartoon rats were used further separates this episode from others where Fred and Carrie were kitschy and costumed. The whole process of displacement and cultural urban renewal is taken up here, and, as in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, it is done with anthropomorphic animated animals – rats in this case – to serve as an allegory that draws you in to the gravity of the tale while at the same time lightening it with childlike characters speaking on issues of major consequence. This tale of the dispossessed is haunting in its power to unnerve the viewer who may be experiencing the search for home while being priced out of the culture of a changing community.

Figure 2. The rats looking for a new neighborhood – season 3, episode 10



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The political weakness of counterculture

Gender is also problematized and made difficult to achieve on the show. In season 3, episode 8, Fred is supposed to be the cover story in *Portland Monthly's* "The Man Issue," but it turns out that he is a fake furniture-maker and is playing the character to appear cool, but his furniture is pathetic. In the bookstore "Women and Women First" (standing in for the actual bookstore "In Other Words"), the rules that should govern gender politics are voiced and represent the lightly mined comic treasure chest of sexual politics and political correctness. In one episode, the feminist bookstore takes people on an all-women's weekend getaway, and they don't let the bus driver, a man, take them on the road, until he tells them he was raised by aunts and strong women. He then gets repeatedly silenced and undercut for helping throughout the trip.

Figure 3. Fred Armisen as Spike, writing "over" in a bar window – season 1, episode 5



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Anger rises to the forefront when Fred, often as Spike, is defending his cultural turf, as in the episode where Fred sees yuppies in bars and points inside them and says, "This place is over." Yet he can't control the rising tide of corporatization and incorporation by staying in the past with his beard and his refusalist attitude. Politics here are limited and relatively non-confrontational, and involve random outbursts of contestation and frustration. In season 2, episode 4, neon-clad eco-terrorists put their banner on a corporate wall and make their statement in such a way as to not disrupt anyone. They turn to protesting some kid's mom who wants him to clean his room, and they get a job doing kids' birthdays.

The show keeps its head above the water of *biting* satire, since the creators have a fondness for the town and the community that participates in the show's creation. As a time capsule of this moment in Portland's history, the radicalized notion of a utopian activist city is put to a tough satirical test. Kiran Herbert suggests that the show as pop culture is political in that it attempts to unravel the progressive orthodoxies that become obsessions, even though the focus on these obsessions can overshadow "real-world concerns" such as racial inequality (Herbert, 2013). However, this satire of "Portland" characters, both through and beyond sketch comedy, has captured the cultural attention span with this hip city in the fun-house mirror.

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Further reading

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