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### Social Perfection: Lifestyle Blogs as (Non) Evolved Utopias

Meet Sarah Vickers. Vickers is an entrepreneur, fashion accessories designer, and blogger. All three activities coalesce in her blog, “Classy Girls Wear Pearls,” an oft-updated fashion and lifestyle blog that is heavy on colorful, well-arranged photographs and light on written content. As the name suggests, the blog focuses on ideals of femininity and status, particularly as upper-middle-class-New England performs them. The business owned by Vickers and her fiancé, Kiel James Patrick (his name), specializes in nautical bracelets, belts, and ties. The company’s website, as well as both of their blogs, Facebook pages, and Instagram accounts, pump out photographs of their incredibly curated life, attended by a group of matching friends, who appear simultaneously as KJP models and employees. The unclear distinction between arenas of life is a hallmark of Vickers and Patrick’s personas. The obvious artifice of their photographs—knots of jovial-looking friends in Sperrys and plaid, a roaring fire, a deer head, antlers strung with Christmas ornaments—is troublingly never addressed. Lifestyle blogging is a relatively new and enormously popular development of the Internet, and though these blogs insist on their individualism and reality, the advertised perfection of successful lifestyle blogs problematically sustain inherited tropes of social power. The artificial and thereby flawed flawlessness of “Classy Girls Wear Pearls” may be viewed as the modern evolution of utopian literature: a new iteration of improbable social perfection maintainable only through undisturbed isolation.

Lifestyle blogs viewed through the lens of utopian literature reveals a rich historical heritage behind the current phenomenon. Blogs such as CGWP exhibit an idyllic perfection, unable to withstand inquiry, and the intense disagreement that results between the real and the ideal echoes features of formative utopian literature. ‘Utopia’ may be defined as an imagined community whose society is intended to remedy, recast, or reinvent the sociopolitical reality of its creator. The presence of the creator in his or her utopia constantly informs the imagined community’s reality, and all the events that occur within the text. Since Thomas More’s seminal *Utopia* (which, significantly, can be translated from the Greek as either “good place” or “no place”), the written creation of utopian communities have allowed authors and readers to explore the possibilities extant in designing a perfect community. In utopian texts by More and Francis Bacon the authors work to disguise their status as creators by distancing their voices from the explanatory voices that do most of the narrative legwork. The authors are at pains to establish themselves as third parties: disconnected, and therefore unbiased. Margaret Cavendish explodes this utopian technique in *The Blazing World* by placing herself, or, more correctly, her disembodied soul, as a central character in the narrative. Despite this divergence, the generally fraught relationship between the author and the text in utopian literature points to a key feature of the genre’s goals. The role of author must be handled deftly in utopian narratives in order that the social ideals of their utopia may be seen as outdistancing the purposes of the author. Five centuries since More published, these threads of utopian thought have resurfaced in the dubious idealism and, importantly, the camouflaged authorship of Vickers’ blog.

Vickers’ betrays the classist intent behind CGWP in her attempt to obscure the authority she holds over her published image. The construction that creates the blog is conclusively denied: the photographs have no photographer. Even those posts whose photographs admittedly

come from a fashion shoot are concealed by the implied relationship between Kiel James Patrick and the collaborating brand, which also serves to elevate the event from consumerism. The utopian author's ultimately political end goals (More's moral separatism, Bacon's technological dominion, Cavendish's absolute monarchy) are injured if they are seen as tied up in, and thereby limited, by authorial personal interest. Again, Cavendish complicates this hypothesis by the deliberate self-centeredness of her *Blazing World*. She repeatedly states that her community is built around her own ideals. But though the particularities of Cavendish's utopia align with self-interest, it is clear that her overarching argument in support of aristocratic rights is designed to appeal to a larger audience. Her case for monarchy as the natural and correct form of rule takes on a calm and deductive tone, filled with illustrative, even folkloric language intended to resonate with the uneducated class: "It was natural for one body to have but one head... [or else it] was like a monster with many heads: besides, said they, a monarchy is a divine form of government, and agrees most with our religion" (134). Cavendish's real-world material comfort, as a duchess during England's Civil War, was dependent on public accord with hereditary rights. The *Blazing World* is explicitly Cavendish's own, but the government that she espouses is not similarly limited. Cavendish and Vickers both intend to persuade individuals to conform to a social system that does not benefit them, the latter by disseminating an attractive ideal of American aristocracy to readers who are able to share only voyeuristically in her privilege. Utopian authors, and bloggers, attempt to convince readers of the value of their preferred systems by leaving the possibility open that those outside of the system may eventually enjoy its advantages.

A political objective can be inferred whenever an individual who benefits from a social structure denies having authority in its propagation. The unsettling non-authorship of Vicker's

blog is strongly indicative of sociopolitical opinion, and yet Vickers is at constant pains to isolate the life demonstrated on her blog from ongoing reality. There are no cues to position the blog in its social and temporal context. However CGWP's careful avoidance of revealing any sociopolitical stance often accomplishes the reverse of Vickers' intentions. The mononymous Katherine of the fashion blog "Feather Factor" interviewed Vickers in 2012, soon after the launch of CGWP. Vickers is the exponentially more well-known and successful blogger of the two, and the interview takes on a predictably admiring and non-questioning tone, even when Vickers indeterminate responses become alarming. When asked to respond to the "misconceptions" or "stereotypes" surrounding her preppy New England style, Vickers abruptly declares to be "pleading the fifth" (Katherine). In a court of law, pleading the fifth would suggest to any judge that the speaker is guilty as charged. By not responding Vickers underlines the question's importance. The notoriously closed community of New England's upper class has established codes of behavior that are understood as signifying membership, and clothing plays a major part. The silence of Vickers' response firstly implies that if Katherine were conversant in Vickers' social dialect, which includes her clothes, she would not have to ask, and secondly that the stereotypes Katherine is referring to are not only true, but are strategically used to inform reader perception about Vickers' lifestyle.

CGWP pleads the fifth in numerous ways, and the awesome enigma of Vickers' blog lies in the understated and unexplained. The utopia of "Classy Girls Wear Pearls" and Kiel James Patrick is founded on the modern landscape of social media, yet their explicitly stated values strive for an old fashioned lifestyle. Their brand of Americana is expertly disseminated via the Internet, and yet there is never a direct reference to the blogging, networking, posting, Tweeting, and Instagraming that generates it. Not only are all the modern devices required to create their

world kept completely out of sight, but if we are to believe that the objects *mise-en-scène* represent the actual accouterments of their life, they make do with only the most picturesque of semi-archaic technology—gramophones, Polaroids. The fabrication of CGWP’s “reality” might be acceptable as fashion photography if the blog acknowledged its construction. But it does the opposite, requiring readers to suspend their disbelief that the lifestyle espoused through Vickers and Patrick’s virtual empire could be possible in the year 2014. In a keen and timely article for *Bitch* magazine, Holly Hilgenberg, a communications educator and writer, suggests that “both the appeal and the unease of lifestyle blogs are centered on the fact that, unlike more traditional forms of media... blogs are supposed to be real” (Hilgenberg). In order to incorporate Vickers’ clearly fabricated lifestyle into the anticipated genuineness of lifestyle blogging, blog readers must engage in some creative truth-telling of their own. Readers take up the utopian narrative Vickers initiates, and propagate for themselves the myth that not only is Vickers’ lifestyle attainable, but that the America Vickers and Patrick appear to live in is itself still alive. The direct inspiration behind the CGWP aesthetic is as politically utopian as America can get: the Kennedy years.

Vickers and Patrick’s conscious restoration of a lost Americana draws on the Camelot legacy that Jackie Kennedy effectively propagated after her husband’s death. The mythic stature of that period derives power from its photographic documentation, its brevity, and perhaps even America’s collective decision to accept a media narrative as reality. Vickers and Patrick take inspiration from the idyllic photography of Kennedy’s photographer during the White House years, Cecil W. Stoughton, as well as Slim Aarons, a famed socialite photographer of the same era. The haunting perfection in Stoughton’s and Aarons’ photography exposes America’s continued fascination with its own unattainable ideals. Their photographic style is characterized

by a non-candid candidness that is also emblematic of CGWP and Kiel James Patrick. The presence of a camera occludes natural behavior, which the photograph's subjects, consciously or otherwise, must then re-create. The "reality" ostensibly captured by the photograph is therefore a form of fiction that the photographer, the photographed, and the viewer all agree to identify as fact.

The acceptance of perfected and homogenized "reality" as fact is an odd non sequitur to present day's emphasis on the validity of diverse lifestyles. Even the Internet, our most equalizing and inclusive tool, largely echoes the social stratigraphy of the non-virtual world and is often used to propagate preexisting social and gender values. The disconnect between the predicted democracy of the Internet and the observed continuation of capitalist dominance is the subject of Minh-ha T. Pham's article "Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digital Raced Body." Pham, an Asian Studies professor at Cornell, points to the ability of Asian-American fashion blogs to renew minorities' political presence, but her findings on the sociocultural reverberations of lifestyle blogging are relevant here. Pham proposes that the variety of fashion blogs "disrupt hegemonic relations" between femininity, lifestyle, and consumption, yet most popular lifestyle blogs (CGWP is a notable example) successfully reissue hegemonic fashion symbols (10). A clear factor of this divergence is the contrasting goals of fashion blogs versus lifestyle blogs. Fashion blogs' serious take on fashion-as-art occludes life-envy on the part of followers—latex bandage dresses simply do not have the cultural connotations of boat shoes. Lifestyle blogs depend upon the cultural connotations of their fashion choices, and by extension, on the social ascension reveries of their readers. Voyeurism, perhaps even wealth tourism, is an enormous motivation towards the enjoyment of Vickers' blog, and the distance between reality and the WASP fantasy Vickers' propagates is one of its most enticing

aspects. Hilgenberg in her article “Better Homes and Bloggers” proposes that the new, creative face of blogging disguises an old and familiar media habit: it is another arena in which women are encouraged to compare themselves to an unattainable ideal and, inevitably, “come up short” (Hilgenberg). Women dominate the field of blogging, and while many work against inherited norms of social power and femininity, the majority of commercially successful blogs reproduce outdated paradigms.

The dream of American opulence Vickers offers her readers is rife with the sociopolitical implications of privilege. The overwhelming insistence of authenticity emphasizes CGWP’s fictionalization, but the blog’s followers contribute to the deception by buying into Vicker’s utopia. “Buying into” should be understood in both the figurative and literal sense. The deft funneling of readers between the numerous sites of Vickers and Patrick’s Internet utopia seeks to create consumers as well as followers. The fairly expensive, USA-made Kiel James Patrick goods depend on a preexisting language of fashion. The nautical accessories are sold to consumers eager to acquire the symbols of a lifestyle otherwise inaccessible to them. Individuals who sport KJP anchor bracelets wish to suggest that they belong to a social class whose privileges include, and whose identities rest, on expensive hobbies such as sailing. It is in the interest of Vickers and Patrick to propagate the myth that by donning the symbols of a higher social class, consumers can successfully identify themselves as members. It is in their interest because KJP sells symbols, but it is more broadly in their interest because, like Cavendish, their lifestyle depends on widespread agreement that they deserve to rule.

Blogs represent the modern evolution of the individual, an intensely American notion, now made more potentially democratic and diversified than ever before by the self-publishing capabilities of the Internet. Pham proposes that “the fashion blogger is the agent (and object) of

her own representation,” and that individual women are endowed for the first time with a power over self-image, outside of the prescription and repression of traditional communication powers (10). Despite the opportunities the Internet provides to diverge from the script of hegemonic values, the most widely read blogs are those that reaffirm through new media the inherited messages of traditional media. Lifestyle blogs offer voyeuristic entry into personal utopias that re-present gender and social values, not transformed by the freedom of the democratic Internet but rather impeccably preserved. The tension between the expected effects of blogs (perfect and comprehensive social communication) and blogs’ observed behaviors is similar to the disjuncture between the presumed goal of utopias (perfect and comprehensive social organization) and the ultimate finding that utopias are irremediably flawed. The utopian ambition to create perfection is futile because utopias are built with human and imperfect instruments. As social media becomes ever more enmeshed in daily life, the evolving relationship between social ideals and social reality may become increasingly, and problematically, apparent.

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