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**JOHN BERGER, PARIS HILTON, AND THE RICH KIDS OF INSTAGRAM:
THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY OF IMAGE SHARING AND
PRODUCTION OF POWER THROUGH SELF-PROMOTION**

By

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BECHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR FRIEDLANDER
PROFESSOR MACKO**

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The young lady sits regally, perched atop a lush navy sofa. She is surrounded by wealth and glamour. The walls are painted in jewel tones with rich gold accents and ornately painted details. A chandelier hangs in the left side of the frame, creating a rich warm light and illuminating the entryway to a grand ballroom. Portraits hang on the walls, gilded ceramic figures rest on pedestals, and an antique silver dish set is displayed on a mahogany shelf. The young woman is positioned in the center of the pictorial frame, her youth and beauty on full display. She faces directly outward, meeting the viewer's gaze and enchanting them with a demure expression. Her flaxen hair flows down past her shoulders and creates a striking contrast against her textured black garment. The princess in her castle is reveling in her fortune, embracing the opulence and glamour of her everyday life. One could situate this portrait firmly within the tradition of early Baroque oil painting... if it weren't for the caption, "let them eat cake," followed by a series of crown and pastry emojis. This is not an 18th century oil painting, but an Instagram post by user *chichidigi* from July of 2014. *Chichidigi*, or Chiara DiGiallorenzo, is one of the many obscenely affluent teenagers featured on Rich Kids Of Instagram, a tumblr blog dedicated to assembling the most outrageous Instagram posts of the world's wealthiest one percent.

Why are contemporary audiences so enraptured by these ostentatious and artfully constructed displays of wealth? Why are we so obsessed with how rich teens use Instagram to broadcast their wealth? And what does this obsession indicate about contemporary American culture? The visual is incredibly effective at circulating and perpetuating systems of power and oppression. Images make up a huge portion of mediated material that is consumed in the United States and abroad. These visual images are particularly effective in carrying messages of power because the consumption of them is rarely

cognizant or intentional. The way an individual relates to an image differs vastly from how one might engage with a piece of text. Our consumption of images is automatic and is closely tied to how we form relationships between our own personal identities and the current societal climate. Images carry within them inherent social messages. They deal in signs and symbols which audiences understand subconsciously but that contribute to upholding existing power structures in a fundamental way. I aim in my thesis to articulate how this power dynamic functions within visual media. Why are images so effective in conveying status and in construction of idealized identities? How has this process developed historically and how has it evolved with the evolution of current social technologies?

In order to frame my argument, I use John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, published in 1973, and attempt to update it into the 21st century. Berger's work centered around the idea that images, whatever the medium, all function to distribute the same messages and that these messages have scarcely changed in centuries. He looks back to the invention and popularization of oil painting in the 15th century in Europe and draws concrete parallels between that artistic tradition and the photography of magazine advertisements in the mid 20th century. Berger argued that while mechanisms of creation and distribution have changed, the messages inherent in these images have not. His theory of how images perpetuate existing systems of power becomes increasingly complicated when applied to current use of visual social networking sites like Instagram and to contemporary obsessions with American celebrity and fan culture. Despite current theories on the democratizing power of new media and web 2.0 platforms, these tools, at least visually, are still used to perpetuate personal status and to enforce existing economic hierarchies. The intentions

behind the creation and distribution of images have remained almost completely stagnant despite the massive technological developments, and it would be a mistake to assume that the current methods of image making result in different types of visually encoded messages. Contemporary Instagram users are still preoccupied with the same aspirations and ambitions surrounding wealth and luxury that people were in the 15th century. Through coupling Berger's theories with more current scholarly work surrounding American celebrity culture and self-promotional tactics, this lack of progress becomes clear. I will highlight how Instagram users, particularly those of an extremely affluent background, are distributing messages about fame and power through composition of images. That is not to say, however, that the popularization of social media has left the politics of image sharing unchanged. There is a definite development happening that can be evidenced through historical comparisons, but this development remains grounded in the same central motivations of improving social status. I am also profoundly interested in how the rest of society responds to these images and invests in the assertion of superiority being enacted by the Rich Kids of Instagram. I will look at the historical developments in artistic mediums and image making in order to assess the mechanisms by which particular messages become visually encoded. This process is complicated by analyzing the shift towards online image sharing and self-promotion in the age of social media. I will also update the societal definition of "status" and ask how our aristocracy has evolved into what we now consider celebrity culture. I will look at how individuals situate themselves within this social hierarchy, of which fame is at the center, and will lay out how the various paths to stardom can be achieved through the production of luxury and glamour through art.

John Berger

Berger's writings exposed a crucial flaw in how our culture studies images, particularly those of a certain cultural cachet. He asserted that pinup models and advertising photos were constructed almost identically to the famous works of Western European art history and insisted that these vastly different mediums and contexts served near identical societal functions. Images exist to publically establish personal wealth and power. This practice has become increasingly public and increasingly accessible through the creation of Instagram, a social network devoted entirely to construction of identity through visual images and that seems to focus almost entirely on the conflation of material possessions and personal worth. Instagram, while technically accessible to anyone with an iPhone, breeds a particular type of outrageous and ostentatious consumptive behavior, which seems to function as a way of solidifying personal social status. In this thesis, I hope to look closely at this new platform and the associated practices, while grounding my analysis in looking dynamics of the Western European artistic tradition. The visual is powerful. It propagates existing economic and social inequalities and privileges certain individuals over others. Visual images make up a huge part of how messages disseminate in contemporary culture and it is crucial to look critically at current practices of image production in order to dismantle myths surrounding the path to wealth, fame, and power.

The Rich Kids of Instagram is a tumblr blog which chronicles the Instagram posts of wealthy teens, and which has gained a significant amount of popular and critical attention. The blog has been around since 2012, and Instagram itself is only a couple years older. However, the visual documentation of wealth and status that is being executed in each of these featured posts is not unique to the platform. Wealthy families and individuals

have been chronicling their status through glamorous images for much longer than Instagram has been around and have done so through a number of mediums. In his book, *Ways Of Seeing*, Berger points to the popularization of oil painting in 15th century Europe as the origin of this practice. He cites oil painting in particular as when display of material status became a primary objective of privately commissioned works of art. A painting needed to be more than just beautiful to look at; it needed to show the world a favorable image of the owner, which helped solidify his or her social status. As Berger describes it, “oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth—which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money. Thus, the painting itself had to be able to demonstrate the desirability of what money could buy.”¹ The switch from water-based tempera paints to oil-based pigments enabled the artist to render objects and textures much more accurately. With tempera paints, one must paint quickly, completing a work in a single sitting and causing the artist to focus more on overall composition than on the detail and accuracy of particular objects. With oil paints, the artist could return to a piece several times and layer new colors over the old, continuing to blend and build. This created a much more richly detailed surface and presented new opportunities for experimentation with texture. Oil paints could capture the shiny smooth surface of a silver platter or the embroidered velvet of a curtain in a way that was not previously available. Oil paint finally allowed artists to do these luxurious materials justice and to render them in a visually distinct way. Not unlike how Instagram offers a variety of photo filters to enhance the aesthetic of iPhone photos and highlight the subjects depicted, oil paint created a unique aesthetic that centered on consumerism and commercialism. This new medium invested in

¹ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1973. Page 90.

the idea that material objects contribute to constructions of personal identity and that these objects should be a part of visual self-promotional practices. The ability of oil paints to capture the texture of material objects in a realistic way emphasized the importance of particular physical status symbols in visual representations of the self.

Like Instagram posts, these commissioned oil paintings were created with particular social and economic aspirations on the part of the patron. They were created with the intention of constructing a glamorous persona and emphasizing their wealth through visual signs and symbols. Berger describes how oil paintings functioned as more than just art, articulating how their value extended beyond pure aesthetics and into the realm of self-promotion. “Such a painting is a demonstration of more than just the virtuosity of the artist. It confirms the owner’s wealth and habitual style of living.”² Fur capes, expensive jewels, lush fabrics, foreign delicacies, exotic animals, and souvenirs from distant travels became important aspects of both still life painting and portraiture. Still life painting focused entirely on objects and their political, economic, and cultural significance. Additionally, these objects became the focus of many portraits, blurring the lines between the two genres and visually associating possessions with personal identity. Often, the visual aspects of still life painting would be incorporated into a portrait through positioning and composition. If an artist were positioning a young noblewoman for a sitting, she would be placed in her finest clothes and jewels and be arranged among her nicest furniture, often in front of a table or shelf that showcased a number of impressive objects. This combining of the two pictorial genres implies a larger conflation between personal identity and material possessions. As Berger describes it, “oil painting, before it

² Berger, John. Page 99.

was anything else, was a celebration of private property. As an art-form it derived from the principle that you are what you have.”³ This attitude has persisted through history and evolved into what we now consider American consumerism. “What [American consumers] acquire and own is tightly bound to their personal identity. Driving a certain type of car, wearing particular designer labels, living in a certain kind of home, and ordering the right bottle of wine create and support a particular image of themselves to present to the world.”⁴ Commercial products have become an essential part of how personal identity is constructed and broadcast visually.

Although most current visual documentation of the self is conducted online, the use of objects as indicators of wealth and status can be evidenced in much earlier platforms. Early oil paintings relied heavily on a number of visual indicators or “status symbols” that were understood to signify certain economic status. Symbols like those used in the Western European Renaissance are still incredibly prevalent in current visual culture and are a crucial aspect of how images are read and understood. Symbolic objects in portraiture had previously been used to identify religious icons. For example, The Virgin Mary would be shown with a lily, and John the Baptist always clothed in a lion skin. These indicated a particular symbolic significance that could be easily comprehended by viewers. Certain symbolic objects were shown as stand-ins for more complex and abstract ideas that cannot be easily shown on a canvas. Virginity as a trait is near impossible to paint, whereas a small white flower like an Easter lily carries the same symbolic weight and is easily incorporated. Even after these symbols of humility and purity were replaced with symbols

³ Berger, John. Page 139.

⁴ Schor, Juliet B. *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. 1st Harper Perennial Edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.

of economic status, the messages inherent in each object were clear. For example, the ermine cape of white furs with small black tips became associated with royalty, curiosity cabinets were evidence of the wealth necessary to fund expeditions, and exotic plants were used to show the widespread reach of a ruler's land ownership. The symbols have changed and evolved, as has the mechanism by which the images are shared. However, this particular method of injecting meaning into symbolic images has always been intricately tied to social status and class politics.

Instagram posts of the extremely wealthy also trade in this visual language. Each image is artfully staged and edited to appear as glamorous as possible. Filters are added, locations are geotagged, and any aspects of the situation that are less than dazzling are simply left out. Images carry within them an intentional ambiguity that presents an illusion of a particular lifestyle while obscuring the less opulent aspects and highlighting others. The specific status symbols that are produced, distributed, and consumed among the Rich Kids of Instagram (RKOI) differ from those used in the 15th century but operate in much the same way. When visually analyzing these images and breaking them down into categories, a couple of particular symbols stand out. Through the RKOI blog, we see the same symbolic objects repeated over and over by a variety of different users. Like in 15th century oil painting, there is an established visual language of particular material possessions indicating social and economic status that comes into play on Instagram. Instead of fur capes and curiosity cabinets, we see private jets and bottles of Dom Perignon as the frequent subjects of these images. Outrageous bar receipts from trendy European clubs, silver sports cars with suicide doors, elaborate brunches served by an army of caterers, wrists weighed down by Rolex watches, and bedrooms filled with orange Hermes

shopping bags. The symbolically significant objects have shifted and yet this use of visual language to convey wealth and status has evolved out of the oil painting tradition in Western art.

Not unlike current theories on the idealization of the self online, the subjects of commissioned portraits presented to the world their best, most elegant selves. They utilized the newly developing visual language of objects as indications of identity to inflate their own image. Artists and patrons attempted all sorts of tricks to appear wealthier and higher in status on canvas than they might be in reality, and oil painting as a medium facilitated this deception. An image does not contain within it any concrete factual information, yet presents itself as true to the actual subject, when often that subject is shown as taller, younger, more beautiful, and more financially successful. “Painting, Berger argued, had not on the whole been about presenting the truth, but about advertising the lifestyle of the rich as fantastic and powerful.”⁵ When viewing an image, all that is available to us is the impression of that image, one that highlights glamour and eliminates any flaws; an idealized self rather than one that remains true to the real. There is a very intentional exclusion happening in the posting practices of Instagram users. Only those images that exemplify the poster’s desired persona will be featured on their account. This selectivity creates an idealized self, as it exists on social platforms like Instagram. This idealized self is presented as a truthful representation of the real, an authentic visual depiction of the user. However, the Instagramed self is at least slightly removed from the realm of the actual. It exists in a space that is not entirely representational, or what Baudrillard would

⁵ Davis, Ben. “Ways of Seeing Instagram: Instagram and Art Theory.” *Artnet News*, June 24, 2014. <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/ways-of-seeing-instagram-37635>.

refer to as the stage of the hyperreal.⁶ This distinction between truth and representation is important when analyzing the role of visual status symbols in perpetuating class disparity and in understanding the tension between mediated personas and their physical referents.

Idealization of the documented self, conveyance of personality through symbolic material possessions, and glorification of an outrageously lavish lifestyle are aspects of visual culture that seem to be universal. Those with the means to live as aristocrats have always documented their superiority through visual images and it is through these images that power is exercised. Through visual comparisons between Rich Kids of Instagram and their Western European ancestors, it becomes clear that images play a large role in the solidification of class in society. Images are consumed and circulated widely, as are the messages inherent within them, making visual art a crucial tool for upholding systems of inequality and oppression. The Rich Kids of Instagram are the closest thing we have to modern-day American aristocrats; a fact that they are fully aware of and make reference to on occasion (as we saw in *chichidigi's* Marie Antoinette comment.) They avidly and ardently broadcast their lives through visual images, sharing snapshots of their glamorous over-the-top lifestyles. However, they also borrow the visual language of a different type of royalty: the American celebrity. Unlike the framed paintings of the European aristocracy, which would have only been seen by friends and houseguests of the patron, the Rich Kids of Instagram post their images to the general public. They present their lives, not exclusively to one another but to those of a lower social status, those who can only imagine living the type of life depicted and who view the images as a part of an escapist fantasy.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Internet-based platforms like Instagram extend the reach of these images, fundamentally changing the dynamic between subjects, artists, and viewers.

Web 2.0

The question of intended audience is an important one and one that complicates the lineage of this type of visual image sharing, connecting it to the more recent development of celebrity publicity practices. According to Berger, “the state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.”⁷ The way these images are shared creates a dynamic of jealousy to which the individuals who post within this group cater their posts. One of *Chichidigi*'s contemporaries, *Thetimothydrake*, in an article for the LA Times, hypothesizes why this jealousy captivates followers:

"People are very much interested in the 1% lifestyle. It's almost like they don't like us, but they love to hate us."⁸ He goes on to explain that, “Western society in general is pretty amused and absorbed in this lifestyle that might seem so glamorous that they don't have and might seem unattainable to them.”⁹ Drake's perceived audience much more resembles that of a Hollywood starlet than an aristocrat. It is intentional in its addressing of the general populace and in asking to be noticed. As Berger writes, “You are observed with interest but you do not observe with interest- if you do, you will become less enviable. In this respect the envied are like bureaucrats; the more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power. The power of the glamorous resides

⁷ Berger, John. Page 131.

⁸ Rodriguez, Salvador. “On Instagram, Rich Kids Find a Following.” Los Angeles Times, March 11, 2014. <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/11/business/la-fi-instagram-rich-kids-20140312>.

⁹ Rodriguez, Salvador.

in their supposed happiness: the power of the bureaucrat is his supposed authority”¹⁰ This theory does not seem to include contemporary practices of celebrity and suggests that since Berger’s writing in the 1970s, the construction of glamour has evolved. It is no longer acceptable for a celebrity to take a passive role in the distribution and consumption of their image. Celebrities must now take an active role in broadcasting their daily activities, offering fans a glimpse behind the curtain of celebrity and sharing images that contain within them an air of intimacy. “Celebrity culture is looped back into the everyday life when the world of glamour and power, otherwise distant from us, acquires an unusual familiarity.”¹¹ Self-promotion has become crucial to maintaining celebrity status and often now film stars spend more time publicizing a film than making it.

The popularization of celebrity talk shows marked one early shift in how glamour is distributed and consumed societally. These shows presented the now prevalent contradiction of celebrity as both accessible best friend and unattainable goddess; an artificial construction of identity which capitalizes on both affective feelings of familiarity and jealous awe. Pramod Nayar studies this concept in his book, *Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society, and Celebrity Culture*, and analyzes the current expectation for celebrities to be both exotic and accessible. The intimate talk show format causes, “the celebrity to shift slightly across the boundary that separates her or him from us. It makes the celebrity ordinary, one of us, but all the while emphasizing their uniqueness too. We might call it a hyper-mediated setting, one that is carefully choreographed and made visible through the

¹⁰ Berger, John. Page 133.

¹¹ Nayar, Pramod K. *Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society, and Celebrity Culture*. New Delhi ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2009. Page 175.

media, even as the media become self-effacing and invisible.”¹² The expectation for stars to be “just like us” is a relatively recent development and one that results in new paradoxes in visual distribution of celebrity bodies.

This illusion of familiarity, when coupled with outrageous behavior and over the top luxury, has thrived with the invention and implementation of web 2.0 technologies, further breaking down the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary. Web 2.0 refers to a new wave of Internet platforms and systems of use which incorporate more two-way and participatory communication. It marks the shift from the web as a broadcast medium to one which facilitates conversations and interactions between multitudes of users simultaneously. This shift partially eliminated the top-down structure of image distribution, replacing it with a more collaborative system. “The internet, especially Web 2.0 phenomena such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook—collaborative, participatory sites where users are increasingly involved in creating web content as well as consuming it—has rapidly changed the dynamics of celebrity culture.”¹³ Now, instead of a few gossip sites reporting on the lives and dramas of Hollywood celebrities, we have new opportunities for self-promotion. Berger’s definition of glamour as reliant on the disinterest of the celebrity in those who watch, becomes complicated in the world of online social media. Celebrities now have entire teams responsible for managing their social media personas and spend a significant amount of energy cultivating their various platforms, creating content which maintains the air of accessibility while asserting their superiority over fans then measuring the response. Accessibility, or at least the illusion of

¹² Nayar, Pramod K. Page 53.

¹³ Gamson, Joshua. “The Unwatched Life Is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary in Celebrity Culture.” PMLA 126, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 1061–69. Page 1065.

accessibility is now an essential part of building celebrity. This does not mean that we have left behind our societal obsession with visual representations of exclusivity and privilege, rather that the requirements necessary to gain entrance into the realm of celebrity have expanded to include the forging of an imagined relationship with one's audience.

In addition to the imagined accessibility being perpetuated through images, there is also a more concrete type of access which has become newly available and which marks the most critical change from oil painting to Instagram. This is the phenomenon of the self-made celebrity. "The web has generated a sort of bottom-up, do-it-yourself celebrity production process that is partly autonomous from its predecessors, since the digital tools of self-publicity are increasingly available to ordinary people."¹⁴ There now exists an opportunity to emulate those in positions of power, those that are watched and admired. Now anyone can post images that seek to copy those of the Rich Kids or of other mainstream celebrities. Within the oil painting tradition, a certain number of resources must exist in order to produce an image. An artist must be hired to paint a portrait and a significant chunk of time must be set aside for its production. With Instagram, the manufacturing process of artistic representation of the self is nearly instantaneous and no outside involvement is required. Because of this, "the internet drastically widens the pool of potential celebrities by lowering the entrance barriers."¹⁵ Fame becomes a code of behavior that can be imitated, sometimes to great success. At their core, the Rich Kids of Instagram are doing just this, emulating celebrities and leveraging the accessibility of promotion. "Self-publicity has become technologically easy, and the revelation of the ordinary self in everyday activity becomes a mechanism of attention getting—nothing else

¹⁴ Gamson, Joshua. Page 1065.

¹⁵ Gamson, Joshua. Page 1065.

is needed.”¹⁶ However, it is not the “regular” users who are benefitting from this accessibility. It helps those who already have an economic advantage because the popular subject matter of Instagram posts revolves around opulence and luxury, which are not at all accessible. There is a clearly skewed amount of attention paid towards those users who already have a tangible economic advantage. It seems that rather than completely opening up the paths from obscurity to celebrity, these web 2.0 technologies are creating a more horizontal path, providing an avenue for the extremely wealthy to also become extremely famous.

Paris Hilton

While she is rarely considered a pioneer, Paris Hilton paved the way for these Rich Kids of Instagram and for using wealth as an avenue to fame. She presented the idea that being wealthy could be a reason for being famous. She is also thought of as someone “famous for being famous” and rose to celebrity status despite her lack of any discernable talent. She was young, rich and pretty. When these traits were coupled with her sheer determination to be noticed, Hilton paved the way for a new type of celebrity. “She’s tried singing, acting, modeling, even writing a book but, in the end, she’s most famous for being famous. She seems to glide through a glamorous world of prestige and privilege, where the usual rules don’t apply.”¹⁷ Paris Hilton is famous for being famous. Her celebrity status is not tied to any particular skill or trade. She exists in the public sphere simply because people will pay attention to her. “So Paris is a socialite in that she has no discernable

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 1067.

¹⁷ Pinsky, Drew. *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism Is Seducing America*. 1st ed. New York: Harper, 2009. Page 1.

talent. But she behaves more like a Hollywood starlet. She combined two archetypes into a monstrous new hybrid.”¹⁸ Our society is increasingly shifting towards a sort of attention economy wherein celebrity is measured through audience exclusively. “One need only to look as far as Paris Hilton...to see that the modern celebrity system has the wherewithal, incentives, and tendency to value visibility in and of itself.”¹⁹ Hilton is famous for being famous, a notion that barely existed before she burst onto the scene. Often dubbed the “celebutante,” new additions to the A-list scene like Hilton presented a new path to celebrity, one that the Rich Kids are visually emulating online. “Before Paris, socialites (bar a few exceptions like Edie Sedgwick, Andy Warhol’s infamous sidekick who died of a drug overdose) were well-behaved young ladies. But Paris was the trailblazer of high society as we know it now.”²⁰ She gained access to the world of Hollywood starlets through her family’s wealth. However, it was her behavior that solidified her status as a starlet. “Celebrity has become uncoupled from talent or performance; today, being famous seems like a game anyone can play.”²¹ She portrayed herself as a star, thus becoming one. She was “exploring a new formula for fame,”²² where the luxury and elitism of her aristocratic status was coupled with the outrageous and meticulously chronicled exploits of a celebrity. In our current social economy, fame is often deemed more desirable than wealth, so it is unsurprising that some might attempt to leverage their existing wealth for fame through the use of social networks, in particular social networks like Instagram that rely on visual images.

¹⁸ Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. *Starstruck: The Business of Celebrity*. 1st ed. New York: Faber and Faber, 2010. Page 27.

¹⁹ Gamson, Joshua. Page 1063.

²⁰ Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. Page 27.

²¹ Pinsky, Drew. Page 59.

²² Pinsky, Drew. Page 27.

The Rich Kids use the visual language of oil painting and aristocrats but they also follow Paris Hilton's legacy by using their wealth to act out celebrity behaviors. The success of these Instagram users evidences how successful this combination of wealth and promotion can be in cultivating attention. From a psychological standpoint, these posters seem to participate in what Dr. Drew Pinsky refers to as the "mirror effect," or the idea that because celebrity behavior is constantly being circulated as visual images, that type of outrageousness has been normalized within our culture and teens feel as if they can "try on" this type of celebrity behavior as something healthy and even positive. Once Paris Hilton changed the game for talentless celebrities, bad behavior and outrageous wealth became worthy of recognition. "Tweens, teens, and young adults are drawn to the self-indulgent fantasy and high drama of the celebrity lifestyle, and they are highly inclined to emulate the behavior exhibited by their favorite stars."²³ This trying on of celebrity identity relates back to another theme of 15th century oil painting that Berger discussed in his book: the allegorical or mythological painting, which enabled nobles to step into the persona of a god or goddess, highlights their most valued traits. "Their purpose was not to transport their spectator-owners into new experience, but to embellish such experience as they already possessed...the idealized appearances he found in the painting were an aid, a support, to his own view of himself. In those appearances he found the guise of his own nobility."²⁴ He goes on to say, "Sometimes the whole mythological scene functions like a garment held out for the spectator-owner to put his arms into and wear. The fact that the scene is substantial, and yet, behind its substantiality, empty, facilitates the wearing of

²³ Ibid. Page 185.

²⁴ Berger, John. Page 101.

it.”²⁵ In this sense, Instagram users can present themselves as celebrities through the use of web 2.0 technologies and self-promotion. They try on a celebrity persona and, if they are successful in their visual depictions then they can become gods or goddesses. “Websites like YouTube and MySpace have encouraged millions of people to launch their own online pseudo-selves, to promote their own personal dramas until they seem as compelling as any played out in Hollywood.”²⁶ This trying on of celebrity persona incorporates a sort of fake-it-till-you-make-it strategy of achieving fame and recognition. “One need only to look as far as Paris Hilton...to see that the modern celebrity system has the wherewithal, incentives, and tendency to value visibility in and of itself.”²⁷ The images of wealth, luxury, and celebrity are more important than the reality behind them. It is the visually perfected public persona that we respond to and the substance behind the broadcast image is nearly irrelevant in constructing fame and superiority. As evidenced by Paris Hilton’s rise to fame, this type of attention cultivation works, both online and off.

By acting like celebrities and documenting their lives in a visually similar way, these Rich Kids are able to actually become celebrities, transitioning offline and into the real world. The fans and followers being accumulated on Instagram indicate how convincing these visually chronicled personas are. “In the digital age, anyone can game the system, create and brand an identity, become a star.”²⁸ These idealized celebrity selves are constructed through visual signs assembled to enact a particular persona. They imitate stardom and are made real through the audience’s investment and through the eventual transition offline. If celebrity is defined simply by being deemed worthy of attention, then

²⁵ Ibid. Page 102.

²⁶ Pinsky, Drew. Page 14.

²⁷ Gamson, Joshua. Page 1063.

²⁸ Gamson, Joshua. Page 1065.

in a sense anyone can be a celebrity. It is no longer attached to a specific talent or trade. Instead, celebrity status is tied entirely to people's willingness to pay attention. Essentially, the Rich Kids have become so skilled at emulating the visual distribution of celebrity glamour that they have been elevated into that sphere themselves. Their deceptive profiles and collections of images are so effective, so compelling, that they can create celebrity. Like Paris Hilton, their determination to be noticed, as enabled by their wealth, can function as a perfectly legitimate path to fame. Many of the Instagram posters featured on the Rich Kids blog get hundreds of likes on a single picture and have thousands of followers. This fame is also not necessarily being confined to the realm of the virtual.

Rich Kids of Instagram

The transition from social media celebrity to actual celebrity is one that has proved quite accessible to those in the RKOI community. Our *Chichidigi*, can be used as an example of this phenomenon. Her "let them eat cake" post was chosen based purely on its aesthetic similarities to oil portraits and was used simply to prove a point about visual representation. Upon further inspection, it became clear that through her lavish Instagram lifestyle, Chiara DiGiallorenzo has developed very tangible ties to offline celebrity culture. She was dating a Ralph Lauren model and became implicated in a tabloid scandal when her boyfriend allegedly cheated on her with Lindsay Lohan. Through this connection, she has, at least to some degree, breached the barrier between famous person and wealthy person. She has successfully risen to the status of one who is written about. The gossip site

PerezHilton.com documented this drama²⁹, thus elevating Chiara DiGiallorenzo into the cultural canon of celebrity. She originally crafted an audience for herself through self-promotion. She broadcast her own activities and dramas through Instagram and eventually became worthy enough of attention that others began paying attention to her in more traditional top-down mechanisms. This exemplifies how Instagram users hope to mirror celebrity behaviors through online image sharing. In a sense, by trying on a celebrity persona, these users can receive all of the perks an actress or musician might.

Many young and wealthy celebrity hopefuls have followed in this grassroots *celebutante* path to fame and have become full-fledged A-listers. Kim Kardashian stands out as one of the most successful “rich kids” to ever make this transition and she did so by using reality television as a mechanism for her transition into the offline. Dorothy Wang and Morgan Stewart provide another example of this newly available avenue to fame. Both girls, best friends and Beverly Hills residents, have extensively cultivated Instagram followings. They have both been featured regularly on the RKOI site and clearly engage in the use of status symbols in visual representations of wealth we have previously discussed. They post using all of the established signs of American aristocracy. Shopping sprees on Rodeo Drive, expensive brunches in trendy neighborhoods, and champagne-soaked yacht parties are all prominently displayed. The symbols prevalent in their visually constructed personas play on the tradition of western art to establish these two girls as worthy of admiration and attention. The two friends are also prime examples of how wealthy Instagram users can tap into the visual language of status and celebrity. Wang and Stewart were offered their own reality show on the E! Network based on their immense online

²⁹ “Lindsay Lohan Is A ‘Totally Drunk’ Boyfriend Stealer!.” Accessed December 9, 2014. <http://perez Hilton.com/2013-11-06-lindsay-lohan-alcohol-relapse-stealing-boyfriends-cheat>.

popularity in January of 2014.³⁰ The show, “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills,” is currently filming for a third season. It centers around their opulent and luxurious lives but does so from a perspective carefully crafted to appeal to an Instagram savvy audience. Often social media posts, and particularly images posted to Instagram, are fodder for drama on the show and entire scenes sometimes revolve around decisions of what to post and when. Wang and Stewart also offer advice on the show where they educate viewers about how to emulate their Instagram personas. They give lessons on “How to take the best selfie” instructing individuals on the importance of lighting, angles, facial expressions, filters, and captions. Through these instructional sequences, the show lays out the visual framework of luxury and how particular images carry messages of wealth and status. Particular angles and filters contribute to Wang’s and Stewart’s construction of celebrity.

Like in the western oil painting tradition, Instagram images are constructed based on a formula of material objects and signifiers, which can be enacted and replicated. Celebrities, like aristocrats, are visually constructed through this type of language and through this show’s format, audiences are given a breakdown of exactly how this meaning is visually composed. Wang and Stewart demonstrate an expert understanding of how wealth is circulated visually and have used web 2.0 distribution platforms to solidify their own fame. The two stars are Instagram celebrities who have gained importance in multiple mediums due to their mastery of the visual language of wealth. The show makes an extremely literal reference to Wang’s and Stewart’s RKOI status by titling the show “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills” and by including hashtags in the title sequence. Celebrities and pseudo-celebrities like Wang and Stewart trade in visual images that exploit the tension

³⁰ “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills,” January 1, 2014.

between familiarity and fantasy. There is an expectation of accessibility, which contrasts with their desire to shock and awe. “Rich Kids of Instagram is an example of how to translate Keeping up with the Kardashians for the internet audience: bite-sized posts showing a life few of us will experience, posted with casual hashtags the hoi polloi might attach to a compact Honda or a well-made salad.”³¹ For Wang and Stewart, this seems to have worked out well. They call themselves celebrities and emulate the visual techniques used by celebrities (particularly those who are not dependent on a specific talent or skill such as Paris and Kim) and thus are treated as such.

It is important to establish how broadcast media and documentation continue to play a crucial role in the establishment of celebrity and how a number of crucial barriers still exist on Instagram. Wang and Stewart made the transition from Rich Kids to reality TV stars and are now regularly featured on the E Network and other celebrity news shows. Likewise, Kim Kardashian’s fame, while existing extensively through online image sharing, is legitimized through traditional avenues of celebrity promotion and distribution. Her Instagram boasts 23 million followers. However, her social capital extends far beyond the limits of the Instagram platform. Kim is a regular staple of celebrity news outlets and gossip sites that follow a more traditional format. She often graces the cover of tabloid magazines and was even featured in a coveted cover spot in the March 2014 issue of Vogue Magazine with her current husband, musician Kanye West.³² Like any other film star, musician, or cultural icon, the social media maven attracts a lot of attention from

³¹ Robertson, Adi. “Public Lives, Necessary Secrets, and the Rich Kids of Instagram.” The Verge. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.theverge.com/2012/8/14/3239394/zach-dell-public-lives-rich-kids-of-instagram>.

³² “Kim Kardashian and Kanye West: Keeping Up with Kimye.” *Vogue*, March 24, 2014. <http://www.vogue.com/865143/kim-kardashian-and-kanye-west-keeping-up-with-kimye/>.

broadcast news outlets. Kardashian has successfully convinced the general American public that she is worthy of our attention.

Obviously it was not just Kim that successfully established her career. She had managers, publicists, producers, and handlers who all contributed to the constructed persona of Kim Kardashian as a star. She is not “just like us,” as her Instagram profile seems to proclaim. Rather, her visual image has been carefully constructed to appear that way. One of *Kimkardashian*'s followers might expect to see images of the star relaxing at home, lifting weights at the gym, or getting her makeup artfully applied by a team of experts. These glimpses into her private life help to solidify an affective relationship to the starlet. Drew Pinsky refers to this type of relationship as *parasocial*, one where we develop a friendship with a carefully crafted visual persona instead of with an actual person. This creates a relationship that is profoundly intimate while being entirely one sided. We watch Kim. We care about where she goes and what she does. We invest in her insistence that she is worthy of attention. However Kim Kardashian does not watch us back. She is entirely ignorant of our existence and makes no authentic effort to return the attention being paid to her. This “intense personal connection a fan feels for a celebrity is... a voyeuristic one-way relationship in which one person knows a lot about another, but the other does not have the same knowledge.”³³ While web 2.0 technologies like Instagram distribute celebrity images through a more personal and intimate environment, a celebrity can only be truly identified as such when others promote their image and activity.

The Kardashian family is a staple of traditional print and broadcast media and it is this positioning that classifies them as celebrities. The grassroots democratizing power of

³³ Pinsky, Drew. Page 183.

Web 2.0 can only go so far. Even looking back to Berger's analysis of 15th century oil painting, the depictions of wealth and status are a type of self-promotion where patrons create and distribute a particular visual image of themselves and their wealth. However, these paintings are given attention and elevated to a higher status through impartial studies and critiques. The contemporary study of western oil painting, in particular of those portraits featuring monarchs and aristocrats surrounded by their wealth legitimizes their power in society. It is not enough to self promote and personally distribute images. In order for an individual to enter into the realm of lasting celebrity, they must be acknowledged and discussed by others. This seems an obvious statement. If you are the only person willing to talk about yourself, then obviously that cannot be called fame. Fame cannot be achieved unless others deem you worthy of attention. This process can commence online over web 2.0 technologies. However, the metric of success remains the same as it was before Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton, or the Rich Kids of Instagram came on to the scene. In order to elevate oneself to the status of American royalty, one must convince others of his or her worth, inspiring the types of *parasocial* relationships that permeate contemporary fandom. It seems that the democratizing process of accessing celebrity can only go so far.

The existence and popularity of the Rich Kids of Instagram blog indicated that the RKOI are making this transition. They are being deemed worthy of attention by a broadcast format site. The blog reposts Instagram images that its moderator finds worthy of attention and helps to elevate the posters from self-promotion to what Berger described as indifferent aristocratic glamour. The way that this blog is structured implies that these individuals are worth our attention. It presents each post like a painting, in a gilded frame.

It helps to elevate these individuals to a celebrity status because someone has bought into their self-promotion and insistence that they are celebrities. It is no longer just the individual posters, but a third party site dedicated to chronicling their lives. It gives them a wider and more involved audience. The RKOI blog makes the path from anonymous wealthy teen to celebrated cultural icon more accessible. However, this access is actually perpetuating social advantages that are already in place, maintaining existing power imbalances rather than disrupting them. The network itself has the potential to democratize the celebrity apparatus. However, the intention behind its use remains grounded in the intention of its users, users who seem almost entirely focused on asserting their own superiority. The use of this medium is in contrast with its intended use, because while the mechanism of production and distribution has changed, it is still being used like an oil painting, to document accumulation of wealth. We have come so far technologically but how far have we come in terms of social and economic equality? Everyone has access to an Instagram account and all the platform's features. Yet very few have the means to enact the outrageous and ostentatious displays which have made the Rich Kids famous. Is the portrait of *Chichidigi* really any different from a portrait of Marie Antoinette? Or is the coded message inherent in her self-promotional image still grounded in extreme elitism and excess that led to Marie Antoinette's eventual downfall? Emojis aside, has anything truly changed?



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