Perfect lives: Lifestyle magazines and utopian impulses in contemporary British society

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore and uncover the ideological and stylistic elements that typify the ways in which contemporary male and female lifestyle magazines present the world to the reader. Focusing on two of the most popular British examples – *FHM* and *Red* – it analyses the language used, the images portrayed, as well as the structures of the two texts. Throughout it engages with the burgeoning literature on utopianism, and in particular with the 'utopic' approaches advocated by theorists such as Louis Marin and Frederic Jameson, in order to trace the common tropes and rules that run throughout both male and female lifestyle magazines. Finally, in light of these findings, it asks what role these texts play in contemporary culture and society.

Keywords: identity, lifestyles, magazines, utopia, utopics

The purpose of this article is to explore the way in which contemporary male and female lifestyle magazines produce distinctive representations of everyday life. Centred on fanatical-consumption and glamorized-reproduction, these magazines typically provide their readers with guidance on what to buy, wear, eat, as well as offering advice on relationships, work and other major life-choices. Conflating clothes and products, as well as postures and actions, with predefined meanings and characteristics, they encourage people to use everyday life decisions to identify themselves and others around them (Chaney, 1996: 12). The aim in this article is to look at how this message, this worldview, is held together by a specific set of practices and conventions; analysing the language used, the images portrayed, the layout of the pages and the ordering of the features. While there has been a tremendous amount of literature produced in recent years in relation to contemporary lifestyle magazines, most of it has tended to focus on either the male or the female versions of the genre (Edwards, 2006; Nixon, 1996). Much of this work has been devoted to analysing the ways in which gendered identities have been represented, challenged and reconfigured through these texts (Ballaster et al., 1991; Crewe, 2003; Gauntlett, 2002). A great deal of interest has also been shown in exploring the links between the lifestyle magazine and contemporary consumerist culture (Grossberg et al., 2006; Mort, 1996). In contrast, this article is interested in the discursive and narrative structure of the lifestyle magazine, and

sets out to discover and uncover the ideological and stylistic features that are present in both the male and female forms of this genre. Throughout, I adopt what can be loosely defined as a 'discourse-analysis perspective', with the language and imagery of each text treated as social processes and practices in their own right (Parker, 1992). I also treat the lifestyle magazine as textual unit in its own right, thinking about how the different articles, adverts and features interact with one another.

The analysis in this article is based upon a critical reading of the October–November 2009 edition of two of the most popular texts from the British lifestyle magazine market – *FHM* and Red. In the context of this article, a 'lifestyle magazine' is understood to be one that seeks to provide its readers with features on the whole range of products and activities that are perceived to be important to the way that they (aspire to) live and identify themselves. For example, *FHM*, perhaps the pre-eminent example of what John Benyon (2004) has referred to as the 'new lad mag', provides a heady mixture of fashion features, 'soft-core' pornographic images, sports news, film and computer game reviews, articles on the latest cars and 'gadgets', and interviews with famous (male and female) celebrities. With a readership of 235,027 it is by far and away the most popular male lifestyle magazine in the UK.[1] *Red* is a relative newcomer to the heavily saturated women's market but has been phenomenally successful in recent years, with a readership that has now reached over 225,000. In the words of its editor, Sam Baker, '*Red* is for women who have grown out of Glamour and Cosmopolitan but are never going to be old enough for Good Housekeeping' (Saner, 2009). Offering advice and articles on fashion, the home, food, shopping, beauty and holidays, its target demographic is the mid-20s to 40s market, with a readership that is 'educated, around 50 per cent have children, most have a career' (Wallace, 2009).

Utopia, lifestyle choices and management of the self

The concept of 'utopia' provides a useful and informative framework through which to analyse the discursive make-up of the lifestyle magazine. It is broad enough to bridge the gender divide between the male and female versions of the genre, yet prescriptive enough

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[1] Figures courtesy of the January–June 2009 Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) Readership Survey (http://www.accessabc.com).

to enable specific and definable features to be identified. Conceptually, it unites many of the values expressed by the lifestyle magazine: the striving for an ideal, newness, excitement, the promise of a better life, an escape from reality, etc. Indeed, the fact that is has not previously been used to analyse the genre of the lifestyle magazine is perhaps less a reflection of its usefulness as an analytical tool than to do with the confusion that has seemingly accompanied the term throughout its history. For too long utopian texts were simply seen as little more than fictionalized accounts of perfect societies in far-off lands – amusing but irrelevant asides to contemporary events (Suvin, 1973: 123). Likewise, its appropriation by some of the 20th century's most despotic rulers and political movements has meant that the notion of utopia has, for many, been irreparably tainted (Levitas, 2003: 3). As Jameson puts it:

> Utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects. (2005: xi)

Despite these difficulties, however, there is, in my opinion, still much to be gained from approaching popular and contemporary texts – such as lifestyle magazines – from a utopian perspective. Indeed, as Jay Winter has recently argued, there is 'a pressing need to "cleanse" the term; to reclaim it as an analytical category after the age of extremes' (2009: 1).

The main advantage of using a term such as 'utopia' is that it can function as both a noun and an adjective; as both a specific type of writing and as a mode of thought. In this respect, my thinking is very much in line with theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Ernst Bloch and Louis Marin, who have argued that utopia should be understood as a process and way of thinking; simultaneously a specific kind of representational act as well as particular way of conceptualizing the world (Wegner, 2002: xvii). Looking at the process of utopian writing/thinking (rather than just the end product – the 'utopia' itself), this more holistic approach brings into play a whole host of 'obscure yet omnipresent utopian impulses that find their way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices' (Jameson, 2005: 3). Bloch (2000: 3–4), for example, has insisted that the longings and desires that lie behind and underpin the 'utopian impulse' represent an intrinsic part of what it means to be

human, providing each one of us with private and personal pleasures. Similarly, Jay Winter has coined the phrase 'minor utopians' to describe those people 'who configured limited and sanguinary plans for partial transformation of the world' (2006: 3). Such an outlook has not only allowed us to move out of that negative impasse in which every utopian project was viewed as the misguided projection of some(one's) personal fantasy, it has also encouraged academics to cast their net of inquiry much wider, producing works that have uncovered utopian desires within everything from buildings, to fairy tales, to music; locating the 'utopian impulse' firmly in the realm everyday popular culture.

This article pursues this line of enquiry into the domain of the lifestyle magazine, adding a new perspective to the limited body of work on the discursive structure of the contemporary lifestyle magazine (Cook, 1992; Hanke, 1989; Jackson et al., 1999; Machin and Leeuwen, 2005). Moreover, it seems particularly pertinent to apply a utopian perspective to a genre that is so focused on self-improvement. After all, asks Ruth Levitas (1990: 8), what is the urge to improve one's self if not the expression of a desire for a better way of living? The wider relevance of these insights should not be lost either, given that we seem to be living through a moment in which, in the words of Nikolas Rose: 'freedom is understood as autonomy, the capacity to realize one's desires in one's secular life, to fulfil one's potential through one's own endeavours, to determine the course of one's own existence through acts of choice' (1999: 84). More and more we seem to inhabit a world in which so much of our time is spent negotiating our way through the maze of opportunities, products and possibilities that are laid out in front of us by multinational corporations and neoliberal regimes. Giddens (1991), for example, has famously characterized 'late' modernity as an era of 'reflexive selfhood', whereby each individual's identity, each self, becomes transformed into an ongoing project that the subject must continuously work upon through the absorption and application of 'expert knowledges' (typically in the form of 'self-help' guides). Similarly, Beck (1992) has outlined the idea of a 'risk society' in which individuals are obliged to manage and protect themselves from the ever-increasing number of potential risks that confront them (illness, crime, natural disasters, pollution, etc.).

What is evident from these insights, then, is the realization that the self and questions of individual identity – concerns that are prevalent throughout lifestyle magazines – have increasingly become the nuclei around which so many of the present modes of control and

practices of government operate (Johnson, 1993). It would not be surprising, therefore, to also find the utopian impulse within this realm; to see it shift from questions of how to reform the social body to ideas about how to reform the individual body? Zygmunt Bauman (2003) has put forward just such a thesis in a recent article, suggesting that the 'transfixing' fantasies of previous utopian thinkers, in which the perfect society was always territorially defined as a better somewhere, in our globalized and fluid present have been superseded by 'privatized' desires for a succession of personal happy moments and experiences that need not be confined to any one space. As John Carey observes, for these 'solitary utopians' the idea that happiness can be achieved through better social arrangements is rejected and replaced by a pursuit for personal and mental stimulation (1999: xix–xx). In this article, therefore, I ask whether, in our age of fluid boundaries and shifting realities, the locus of the utopian impulse has now shifted to realm of selfhood and, if this is the case, whether the contemporary lifestyle magazine (which is, after all, essentially a manual on self-management) now functions as a present-day utopian medium.

Dislocation: utopian travellers

One of the generic characteristics of utopian narratives is their ability to dislocate the reader from the present and transport them to some 'other' place, offering an escape from 'the mundane reality of everyday life into dreamworlds filled with the possibility of new and exciting experiences' (Gunster, 2007: 212). Moore's phrase itself of course has this double meaning; being the good place (eutopia) that is simultaneously the 'no place' (outopia). Necessarily, then, the first stage in any utopia is that of the journey – the process of dislocation – from the present to this 'other' place (Marin, 1993: 414). In Moore's Utopia this takes the form of the storm that steers Raphael off course, in Bellamy's Looking Backward (1996 [1890]) it takes the form of a 100-year slumber. In both cases it requires something dramatic to throw the traveller off course and dislocate them from the present. In many ways a similar process is at work on the front covers of both *Red* and *FHM*. The sheer amount of information displayed is remarkable considering the comparatively small size of each cover. Featured alongside the seductive and scantily clad model on the cover of *FHM*, for example, are promises of 'pet snakes', 'fitness drugs', 'holy diets', 'free sex',

'smashed eggs', 'dolphins', 'werewolves' and 'vampire fashion', all set against a vibrant red backdrop. It is a design meant to stop the passing stranger in their tracks, dislocating them from the mundane hustle and flow of the street as they stop and stare (Sennett, 1994). It holds out the promise of a radically different world in which the rules that govern the everyday no longer apply. Yet access is only provided to those who (literally) dissociate themselves from the world around them by immersing themselves in its pages and imaginatively relocating to the 'good place'.[2]

Typically, the utopian narrative also provides some means or technique to enable the reader to trace the route to this other/good place. We see this most obviously in the number of maps that are to be found at the start of so many utopian fictions (Goodey, 1970: 15–18). In the contemporary lifestyle magazine the contents page assumes this role. In both *Red* and *FHM* it not only informs what is on what page, it also categorizes each feature under separate sub-headings. Thus, if a *Red* reader wants to perfect their home, they know which pages to turn to (rather than having to flick through the bewildering array of products on offer). *FHM* is more abstract, being split into three sections: 'Access', 'Filter' and 'Upgrade'. Each category relates to a specific area of the reader's (imagined) lifestyle. 'Upgrade', for example, is about 'style, sport, sex, and expensive audio equipment…rammed with info that'll genuinely enrich our readers' lives' (*FHM*, 2009: 4). Again, it orders, categorizes, and defines products and activities in order to guide the reader through the text; laying out a narrative path for the traveller to follow (with the lure of genuine enrichment at the end).

Another common utopian trait is to provide the reader with a character that essentially functions as a guide to these strange new worlds – answering questions and offering suggestions of things to see (Marin, 1984: 233–41) In Moore's Utopia this role is assumed by Raphael Hythloday; the explorer who outlines the political and social arrangements of the island of Utopia to Moore and his companion Peter Giles. Likewise in B.F. Skinner's often overlooked Walden Two (1948) the role is enthusiastically adopted by the utopian protagonist T.E. Frazier. A similar role is performed by the editor of the contemporary lifestyle magazine, who prefaces each edition with an opening or introductory feature in the style of a letter. In *Red* Sam Baker (the editor-in-chief) offers a short and personal piece,

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[2] Thanks to the number of 'sample' fragrances and colognes that are featured in each magazine the actual process of opening up the magazine to read now also transports the reader to a world of new nasal delights.

which explains why she is embracing growing older. The initial pronouns are singular ('me', 'I', 'I'm') but by the end have changed to the plural 'we' (Red, 2009: 7). Her advice on what 'pages to turn to' thus seem to apply equally for the reader. Situated in the midst of a series of perfume adverts (each featuring a dazzling yet haunting and intimidatingly beautiful model), her editorial piece (with its soft-focus image of her in a relaxed pose) offers the reader a reassuring point of entry or passage into this other world. Likewise, Chris Mooney, the general editor of *FHM*, promises to let the reader know 'what you can expect' and encourages them to get in contact if they have any queries, reminding them that 'we do always listen' (*FHM*, 2009: 4).

Indeed, this dialogue between reader and editor, between the one who knows and the one who wants to know, continues throughout the lifestyle magazine, holding the narrative together whenever it threatens to disintegrate. The classic example of this process is the 'letters section', or 'your say' section, where dialogue between reader and editor is very literally brought to the surface of the text. Typically the (often anonymous) letters and emails will take the form of an 'inspirational story', revealing how, by applying the advice of the magazine, the life on the reader has been generally enriched (Oates, 1997). In Red, for example, one reader describes how a recent article about positive thinking 'encouraged me to do something about it [her unhappy life]. Many thanks Red' (2009: 20). In a similar vein, the 'Access' section of *FHM* is presented so that it gives the appearance of being structured by the concerns and aspirations of the reader, fostering a sense of collective solidarity among the readership (Benwell, 2001: 20). An article on 'aphrodisiac food', for example, which features a model in lingerie indulging in a host of decadent foods, is prefaced by a text-message from one reader that reads: 'Dear *FHM* – I'm a seriously crap cook. What should I serve to get ladies in the "mood"?' (*FHM*, 2009: 28). As with the figure of the utopian traveller, the role of the *FHM* editor is to function as a guide to this strange world, outlining in a series of stages how the fantastic possibilities of this utopian projection came to be realized (describing how to prepare each meal and recording the effects it had on the model). Assuming the role of 'experts', the editors and columnists in each magazine operate as mediums between one world and the next, filling the void between the mundane reality of the reader and the utopian world of the text, outlining the route to the 'good place' (Marin, 1977: 40–2). What is in evidence, then, is an example of the process by which the

'utopian impulse' is structured into language, transfigured into a text that functions like a map or travel guide, transporting the reader to the good place (Wilson, 2005: 268).

Constructing the good/other place

The need for such an intermediate figure as the editor is in many ways reflective of the ambivalent nature of the relationship that all Utopias have with the real worlds against which they are contrasted. Even though they are always detached from the present they can never be completely separated from it. As Kumar puts it: 'utopia cannot descend into the realm of the fantastic; there has to be a certain relation to reality, a certain understanding of what might be possible in the given conditions' (2003: 65). Edward Bellamy famously articulated this tension in the postscript to his 1888 classic text Looking Backward, claiming that: 'although in form a fanciful romance, [the book] is intended, in all seriousness, as a forecast, in accordance with the principles of evolution, of the next stage in the industrial and social development of humanity' (1996 [1890]: 163). This need to make the unbelievable believable, to explain convincingly how this other place came to be and is able to function, is perhaps the key feature which distinguishes utopian writing/thought from other, more 'fictional', narrative processes and styles. It is also, of course, a defining feature of the lifestyle magazine. Indeed, the goal of such 'aspirational' texts as *FHM* and *Red* is to portray wonderful worlds of beauty and bountiful consumption in such a way that the reader will believe it is possible for them to achieve or acquire such delights for themselves (Machin and Leeuwen, 2005: 578). In other words, like the utopian text the lifestyle magazine must project a vision of a fabulous 'other' place that must nonetheless remain firmly grounded in the reader's present; offering them a conceivable vision of the inconceivable.

The 'celebrity features' in both magazines offer graphic examples of how such impulses are translated into textual form. An interview with model and actress Amber Valletta in Red, for example, begins by setting out the scene for the interview: 'a small coffee shop on a rather ordinary-looking street … at a slightly rickety table on a banal sidewalk' (Red, 2009: 62). From the off, then, an effort is made to 'normalize' the world of the celebrity by shifting the scene to a location which is entirely comprehensible to the reader, a space both familiar and

accessible. The same principle underlies the decision by so many utopian writers who deal with questions of time travel to locate their stories in big cities that will instantly be familiar and recognizable to the reader. Moreover, the whole tone of the *Red* interview is structured so as to convince the reader that the person they are reading about lives a life as banal and uneventful as they do (a message somewhat undermined by the accompanying pictures of Amber partying with Naomi Campbell and Donatella Versace). It repeatedly makes reference to how 'normal' she is, how 'her life is in balance', her 'down-to-earth way', her lack of make-up, while at the same time charting her remarkable rise through the twin worlds of fashion and film (Red, 2009: 64–6). In a slightly different vein, but with similar aims, the interview with comedian Ben Miller in *FHM* adopts the light and jocular style of the conventional 'lad's mag', which, as Bethan Benwell puts it, is 'ironic, humorous, anti-heroic, and explicitly interpersonal, emulating the processes of social male bonding … normalizing a reader's sense of himself' (2001: 20). As such, Miller is asked about his teenage years, what he does with his 'mates', his gambling habits and his favourite drinks (*FHM*, 2009: 95). His answers are equally self-deprecating; describing his youth for example he states: 'there were no girls … I went to a mixed school but there wasn't a lot of action' – reminding the reader that even the rich and successful sometimes find it hard to find love (2009: 95; see also Attwood, 2005: 91). Like the *Red* piece, therefore, the way the interview is structured is designed to translate the hedonistic and idealized world of the celebrity into terms and forms that (the magazine assumes) the reader will be able to comprehend. It is a process whereby the good/other place is made amenable to the imaginative powers of the reader, reminding us of Marin's description of the utopia as 'the infinite work of the imagination's power of figuration' (1993: 413).

This process, whereby the outlandish is rendered normative, is also strongly at work in the sections of the two magazines that offer the reader advice on what products they should be buying. In both *FHM* and *Red* the question of whether or not one wants or can afford a certain product is bypassed, the assumption being that one must of course need it and it is a merely a case of selecting a certain brand, style or variety. It is a similar kind of bullish confidence that one finds in the utopian impulse, with the emphasis being more on the practical elements of a system (how it functions, who does what, etc.) than with the ethical or moral foundations of that system (Carey, 1999: xv). In *Red* we see this process in

operation in the 'Smart Buys' section, which divides the featured products into subcategories so that, whatever your taste, 'there's a perfect fit for your style' (Red, 2009: 34). This can result in products being categorized by price or style or, as is often the case, in terms of time and daily routines, so that 'you can work seven days' worth of finishing touches' (2009: 36). Likewise, in *FHM* a section on supplement snacks is split into five sections – 'for gym rats', 'for runners', 'for footballers', 'for contact sports' and 'for couch potatoes' – offering a set of options to match any lifestyle (*FHM*, 2009: 84–5). Of course, such categorizations not only impose a normative framework over lifestyle choices, they also implicitly suggest that anyone who does not fit into one of these prescribed groups is inherently 'weird' or 'other' (Benwell, 2001: 31). Positioned in the midst of pages of adverts for similar products, these style guides essentially function as guidebooks for the reader, translating the over-stylized and glamorous images of the perfume and clothes adverts into texts that the reader will be able to understand, clarifying how each product is to fit in with their lives. Without such guides the adverts in the lifestyle magazines would remain in the realm of the fantasy, shimmering and untouchable images in the distance: it is only the normalizing elements of the lifestyle magazine, the utopian textual practices, which hold out the promise of making such dreams a reality (Carey, 1999: 407).

Indeed, this tension between text and image, the endless need to juxtapose one against the other, is one of the most striking features of the lifestyle magazine. As with utopian texts, it constantly tries to bring visions that taken alone seem unbelievable into the realm of the possible. As Jameson (2005: 11) stresses, utopic thought must always develop in response to the problems and contradictions of the society and culture in which it is produced, typically positing a series of (apparently feasible) solutions. *FHM*, for example, features a section entitled 'Train like Wolverine', which promises to reveal how to get a 'real-life superhero body' (2009: 78). This fusion of fiction and reality, of the make-believe with the practical, is a classic example of how the lifestyle magazine negotiates the divide between the mundane and the fantastic. As with utopian texts, it offers the possibility of actually transcending this great chasm, holding out the promise of 'entry into phantasmagorical dreamworlds' (Gunster, 2007: 215). Likewise, in *Red* there is a feature-spread entitled '10 Ways to Hotel Style', which reveals the top ten ways to bring a bit of the 'hotel glamour' into your own home (2009: 222). Again, the photographs of the plush interiors, which are themselves

suggestive of a certain utopic impulse (devoid of people, depicting the rooms in a pristine state, dislocated from day-to-day pressures, 'relocated to a kind of no-place by the camera'), are in essence deconstructed by the accompanying text, which sets out to reveal the stages and processes by which such spaces came to be (Wilson, 2005: 267–8). Once again, therefore, this blurring of the domestic and the commercial, the private and the public, that we see in both *Red* and *FHM*, demonstrates the presence of a discourse that is too imaginative to be factual yet too grounded to be entirely fictional. It continually straddles that divide between the sober and the chimerical, constantly seeking ways to bridge the divide between the two, and, as with utopia, must always fulfil the dual role of outlining wonderful visions of the 'good place' that must simultaneously remain entirely achievable (Kumar, 2003: 70).

Neutralization: the utopic process

Discussing the ambivalence that is at the heart of the lifestyle magazine's narrative discourse brings us to the central element of Louis Marin's theory of utopic practice: namely, that all utopias occupy what he defines as a 'neutral zone' (1984: 7–30). While there is neither time nor space to properly extrapolate the full complexity of this concept, and while Marin (1977: 49) has himself warned readers against approaching texts with preconceived theoretical approaches already in mind, it is, in my opinion, nonetheless both revealing and helpful to use his theory of the neutral as a starting point and a sounding board for considering the utopian elements of the lifestyle magazine genre. In simplified terms, then, through the idea of 'the neutral', Marin aims to get at that sense of contradiction that lies at the heart of all utopias; the notion of 'neither one nor the other' that defines all utopian narratives and gives them their unique character (Marin, 1984: 7). Indeed, his refusal to see utopian thought as a static practice represents one of the obstacles to overcome when attempting to utilize his approach, as he refuses to constrain its limitless potential for conflict and is content 'simply to restore play to the utopic text' (1984: xvi–xx). For him all utopias occupy the space that exists between two (seemingly) irresolvable contraries, holding out the promise of providing some way of resolving or flattening out the differences between them (1984: 6–10). Moore's utopian island itself

offers a simple example of this process, existing as it does somewhere between the continents of America and Europe, between the freedom and potential of the newly discovered continent and the stability of the old order (Marin, 1993: 411). Utopia thus exists in those gaps that open up in-between contradictory meanings and terms in social and cultural discourses, allowing us to observe both at work at the same time by neutralizing the differences between them (1993: 404).

We can see something of this neutralizing process within the pages of *Red* in the way that the narrative continually threatens to undermine itself through the unending play and juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible elements. Halfway through the magazine, for example, there is an article entitled 'The Best Things in Life are Free', which sets out to divulge the top seven ways 'to live – as opposed to merely existing – without going bankrupt' (Red, 2009: 89). It offers the reader advice on such things as to how to 'revamp' their home on a limited budget and how to keep up with the latest high-street fashion trends on 'the cheap' (2009: 88–92). The irony of course is that interspersed throughout the article are adverts promoting the very latest handbags, shoes, clothes and makeup from some of the biggest high-street fashion retailers. Equally paradoxical is the fact that all of the preceding and proceeding shopping and style guides actively encourage the reader to go out and spend their money in the latest 'must have' beauty products, wines, foods, clothes, items for the home and so forth. Likewise, a similar sort of self-negation is at work in *FHM*, in that it too is able to encourage excessive consumption while simultaneously making a virtue out of concerted thriftiness. One of the features, for example, shows the reader how to 'pimp their desk' with opulent products such as solid gold paperweights, even though on the front cover it proudly states that this month's issue is 'just £2.50' (as if a saving of 50 pence would matter to someone who would buy a lump of gold just to stop their papers blowing away!) (*FHM*, 2009: 73). Of course, on one level this could be seen as little more than a concessionary gesture to those who, for differing reasons, have been alienated and excluded from the flows of contemporary consumer culture, allowing them some form of participation in the consumption-based world of the lifestyle magazine at least (Featherstone, 2007: 135–43; Slater, 1997: 151–4; Wacquant and Wilson, 1989: 8–25). Yet the tactics somehow seem too blatant, too self-evident, for this to be the explanation. It is not simply the case that these contradictory elements represent a tacit acknowledgement

on the behalf of the editors that not everyone will be able to afford the lifestyle they are promoting. Instead, they openly promote the virtues of thriftiness alongside the joys of rampant consumerism; it is almost as if the magazine were purposefully trying to undermine itself.

This tension comes through once again in another revealing article in *Red* entitled 'Why can't we just be?', which suggests that 'ditching the myth of 24/7 happiness is the first step to balance [in life]' (2009: 103). Again, the words of the author, who advises us that we need not feel any obligation to be happy all the time, are somewhat undermined by the fact that the article is located within a lifestyle magazine; a magazine expressly devoted to showing you how to make every facet of your life more enjoyable, saturated with adverts depicting beautiful young women revelling in the pleasures that the advertised product has given them. What is in evidence is a kind of endless movement, a constant instability, that is inherent within the narrative of the lifestyle magazine – as soon as it offers advice on how to 'live well', a path to the 'good place', it must instantly undermine and destabilize it. A similar drive can be seen at work in utopian narratives, in that they always seem to resist confining themselves to a static and immobilized vision of the utopias they describe, preferring 'to hold the future open instead of closing it off in some endogenous inevitabilism' (Osborne, 2003: 129). It is why all utopias exist in a 'no place', for were they to be static they would also be locatable. Furthermore, it offers one more reason why we should treat utopia as a process rather than an objective, a way of thinking about the world rather than an attempt to create a static 'other place'. As with lifestyle magazines, then, utopic practice operates by, in the words of Marin, 'permitting placeless contradiction in discourse to have limitless force', opening a space of unlimited movement that can be defined as 'the neutral' (1984: 7).

While such a neutralizing process inevitably produces a certain ambivalence in the message emanating from the text, it does allow for the possibility for flattening out, for negotiating around, contradictions and conflicts that otherwise would be irreconcilable (1984: 36). Thus, both *Red* and *FHM* can advocate a lifestyle that simultaneously fuses together frugality and opulence, healthy living and hard drinking, groundedness and extravagance, laziness and activeness, yet is constrained by neither option. For example, the workout guide in *FHM* – in which a professional National Football League coach offers his training and fitness tips – is

situated around adverts for different brands of beer (2009: 80). In Red, too, one finds pictures of virtually anorexic models indulging in platefuls of tempting cakes and chocolates (see Strahan et al., 2006: 212). In a similar vein, the female centrefolds in *FHM* are exhibited in incredibly over-stylized and artificial shots, 'shown in the best poses, lighting, and most flattering lingerie', while simultaneously being presented in the accompanying interviews as inherently mundane and 'down-to-earth', thus elevating them to the seraphic while concurrently making them obtainable (Boynton, 1999: 450). In many ways these airbrushed images fit in with Baudrillard's (1988) notion of 'hyperreality', whereby the boundaries between the artificial and the real are broken down to produce the illusion of 'naturalness'. It is as if the contradictions inherent within our social and cultural systems cease to matter; as if the difficult day-to-day lifestyle choices that we all consciously and unconsciously make are somehow negated. For example, in neither magazine is it anywhere explained how the reader could possibly enjoy the full range of products and activities promoted, as – leaving to one side the question of cost – this would consume so much time that the reader would literally be unable to work. Thus, any sense of 'either/or' – to buy this or that, to indulge or be restrained, to relax or to work – is essentially erased in the narrative practice that the lifestyle magazine employs (Jameson, 1977: 5). In other words, by continually refusing to settle on one solution, by always occupying a neutral space, the lifestyle magazine, like the utopic text, exists in a state of near-constant flux and movement, yet it is simultaneously this very instability that gives it its force and which allows it to conjure up such alluring and tempting depictions of the 'good place'.

Conclusion

Although this article has been concerned with uncovering points of convergence between the genres of the lifestyle magazine and the utopian text, it is important not to overplay the links between the two. Clearly, *Red* and *FHM* are of a different ilk from texts such as New Atlantis or Looking Backward. What I have been trying to get at is the sense that, in the production of the lifestyle magazine, a similar narrative process is undertaken to that of the utopian text, and that, as such, in the lifestyle magazine we can see traces of what recent theorists have termed 'the utopian impulse'. That is, the lifestyle magazine, like the utopian

text, seeks to disconnect the reader from their present and, through certain narrative processes, guide them to some other/good place in which a happy life is possible (Levitas, 2003: 3). The significance of this lies not only in what it has to say about the nature of the contemporary lifestyle magazine as a literary genre, but also what it suggests about the nature of utopianism in contemporary society. While many have suggested that in our postmodern age – with its fluid boundaries, fragmented cultures and multiple truths – it is no longer possible to practise utopian thought, the presence of this impulse in a format such as the lifestyle magazine suggests that these predictions may have been premature (Levitas, 2000). Instead, what we can perhaps see emerging is a situation in which the utopian impulse has shifted from the realm of the social, and the accompanying desire to create and define a territorially fixed good place, to the individual and the fulfilment of their own personal desires and fantasies (Bauman, 2003: 22). In other words, if we are to think about the role that the concept of utopia plays in the present, perhaps we need to shift our attention away from the social body and pay more attention to the different ways in which the individual body has (quite literally) become the subject through which and upon which the utopian impulse is to be performed.

As something of a parting remark, I want to consider briefly some of the consequences that may result from such a shift. On one level, of course, this narcissistic turn away from society and its ills only serves to reinforce the arguments of those who have followed Heidegger in lamenting the breakdown of 'civic society' (in itself a somewhat utopian concept) (see Sennett, 1977). It reflects the fact that happiness has become a private affair, to be pursued and consumed individually (Bauman, 2003: 23). Yet, more than this, there seems to be something else particularly disquieting about adopting utopian practices in the pursuit of these self-serving goals. Georges Perec once claimed that 'all utopias are depressing', and, as we have seen so many times, utopia can very quickly descend into dystopia (Levitas, 2003: 16). As Carey puts it: 'a dystopia is merely a utopia from another point of view' (1999: xii). Moreover, the very nature of all utopias, the fact that they always occupy a 'no place', means that they are necessarily always impossible to reach. Yet whereas utopian novels and films made no pretence about hiding their utopian credentials the same cannot be said for the lifestyle magazine, which seems to adopt and apply them in a much more discreet fashion. As such, it is difficult to know how the majority of readers interpret the messages

they promote (Hodgetts and Chamberlain, 2003). Do they view the world of the lifestyle magazine as a utopic projection or as an attainable goal? Do those multitudes of eager shoppers we find on every high street, those exhausted joggers and gym-goers, and those women and men undergoing excruciating cosmetic surgery know where they are going, or are they striving to arrive at a place – the 'good place' – that can, by its nature, never be found?

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